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THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL
AND THE WEST GERMAN
STUDENT MOVEMENT

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Although the Frankfurt School had a huge influence on the West German student movement, its influence was complex and contradictory. In the first place, the student movement was inspired by the Frankfurt School and in particular drew its sense of itself as an “anti-authoritarian” movement from the Frankfurt School’s wartime and post-war work on the authoritarian state and authoritarian personality. But the student movement also increasingly turned against the Frankfurt School as it radicalized after the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer in West Berlin on June 2, 1967. Eventually, it would accuse the Frankfurt School itself of “authoritarianism.” As a result, the story of the student movement and the Frankfurt School is often told as one of intellectual “patricide.”

At the same time, however, the confrontation with the student movement also exposed differences between members of the Frankfurt School – in particular, between Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, whose relationships with the student movement are explored in this chapter. In other words, while the leading figures in the Frankfurt School clashed with the student movement, they also clashed with each other. In particular, a rift opened up between Adorno, who had returned to Frankfurt and taken over from Horkheimer as the director of the Institute of Social Research in 1959, and Marcuse, who had remained in California. The two men had not resolved their differences by the time Adorno died in the summer of 1969.

The differences between the Frankfurt School and the student movement, and within the Frankfurt School itself in relation to the student movement, revolved around three key questions. First, there was the vexed question of the relationship between theory and praxis. Adorno would famously say that the students had misunderstood critical theory if
they thought they could make immediate practical use of it. In an interview with Spiegel in 1969, he said, “I developed a theoretical model. I could not have imagined that people would seek to make it a reality using Molotov cocktails” (Spiegel 1969). But here there were also differences within the Frankfurt School: it was above all on the question of theory and praxis that Adorno andMarcuse disagreed.

Second, the Frankfurt School clashed with the student movement in their analysis of the political situation in the Federal Republic and in particular on the question of the extent to which a revolutionary situation existed in West Germany in the late 1960s. Especially after the killing of Ohnesorg, the student movement saw the potential for action by a vanguard to create a revolution in West Germany. But even Marcuse, who was the most sympathetic member of the Frankfurt School towards the student movement, told Adorno that he agreed with him that the situation was not even a pre-revolutionary one, let alone revolutionary one (letter from Marcuse to Adorno, April 5, 1969), though he nevertheless remained closer to the students than Adorno.

Third, the Frankfurt School and the student movement disagreed about the relevance of the Nazi past and Holocaust to the Federal Republic and the student movement. The student movement tended to see the Federal Republic as a continuation of the Third Reich. In this, they drew on the work of the Frankfurt School and in particular Horkheimer’s dictum that “he who does not wish to speak of capitalism should also be silent about fascism” (from “The Jews in Europe,” quoted in Jay 1973: 156) and on his later work on the authoritarian state, which they sought to apply to the post-war Federal Republic. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer also came to see alarming echoes of Nazism in the student movement itself. In particular, they became increasingly troubled by the use by the student movement of the “thoughtless violence that once belonged to fascism” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, May 5, 1969).

The Emergence of the Student Movement

The student movement initially mobilized in the mid-1960s to protest against conditions at West German universities, which had grown rapidly and become overcrowded as they struggled to accommodate the post-war generation. It opposed what it perceived as the authoritarian nature of West German university system, in which a handful of Ordinarien (senior professors) determined virtually every aspect of university life – hence the famous slogan, first used by students in Hamburg in November 1967: “Unter den Talaren – Muff von tausend Jahren” (“under academic gowns – the musty smell of 1000 years”). But gradually the students’ critique of the university radicalized and broadened to include West German society as a whole.

The post-war generation gravitated towards Marxism, Norbert Elias has argued, because it was a “contrary creed” to that of their fathers and grandfathers that enabled them to distance themselves from the atrocities of the past – an “antitoxin to Hitler’s teachings” (Elias 1996: 230). Marxism was a uniquely liberating ideology for the post-war generation in Germany: by making capitalism responsible for the emergence of Nazism, Marxism also exonerated the post-war generation and its parents. Thus, Marxism was “the only ideological framework that provided them with an explanation of fascism and at the same time gave them the feeling that they had nothing to do with the past and that they were free of all guilt” (Elias 1989: 537).

The student movement was particularly drawn to the Frankfurt School’s explanation of Nazism. “They gave us the language to analyze the Nazis,” as Tilman Fichter, a leading figure in the student movement in West Berlin, put it (interview with Tilman Fichter). In particular, “anti-authoritarianism,” which became the central idea around which the student movement mobilized, was derived from the work Adorno andHorkheimer had done on the
authoritarian state and the authoritarian personality while in exile in the United States. But the radical students also wanted to develop the work of their intellectual mentors. “Our idea was to attempt to develop the Dialect of Enlightenment further, that is, we wanted to find a theoretical basis for a world beyond capitalism and also beyond socialism as it existed in the GDR,” says Detlev Claussen, a philosophy student at Frankfurt University, who had come to Frankfurt specifically to study under Adorno (interview with Detlev Claussen).

However, before this ambitious theoretical project could be completed, many of the students came to adopt a simplified, distorted version of the work of Adorno and Horkheimer. Horkheimer's work on the authoritarian state had been written with Nazism and the Soviet Union in mind. He argued that in a system of “integral étatism,” the state took on the functions of a monopoly capitalist and completely dominated society through a mixture of terror and manipulation by the mass media (Jay 1973: 166). But the students believed the theory of the authoritarian state could also be applied to the Federal Republic. “Our idea was that the Federal Republic had never freed itself from the model of the authoritarian state,” says Claussen (interview with Detlev Claussen). In other words, it was not just that authoritarian attitudes had persisted in post-war Germany, as Adorno had argued. To the students, the Federal Republic was itself also, like the Third Reich, an authoritarian state (Kraushaar 1997: 272).

In May 1965, with West Germany entering its first recession since the end of World War II, the three main political parties in parliament agreed to amend the Basic Law – the provisional West German constitution – in order to pass to the government the emergency powers for use in times of severe internal unrest which until then had been held by the Allies. In effect, the transfer of these emergency powers to the West German government was a step towards full sovereignty. But much of the left, including the most powerful trade unions such as the metalworkers’ union IG Metall, vehemently opposed the “emergency laws,” which they saw as a restriction of democratic rights. To some in the student movement, they were even reminiscent of the Enabling Law passed by the Nazis in 1933. They referred to the emergency laws, or Notstandsgesetze, as the “NS-Gesetze” (“NS” was also the abbreviation for Nationalsozialismus, or National Socialism).

From 1965 onwards, the Vietnam War also became a key issue around which the student movement mobilized. In 1966, two students at the Free University in Berlin, Jürgen Hollemann and Peter Gäng, produced an exhibition and book, entitled Vietnam – The Genesis of a Conflict, that played a major role in changing the students’ perception of the war. It was, the authors argued, not a war for freedom at all, as the Americans and the West German establishment had argued, but an imperialist war waged by the United States against an exploited Third World colony. To some it was even “genocide.” Moreover, by failing to oppose the war, the Federal Republic was complicit in it.

In 1966, Ludwig Erhard’s government collapsed and the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats agreed to form a grand coalition. The new chancellor was Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, who had been a member of the Nazi party from 1933 to 1945 and was a senior official in Josef Goebbels’s propaganda ministry. This seemed to many of the students to provide further confirmation that the Federal Republic was becoming an authoritarian state as they feared. It left almost no opposition within the Bundestag, the lower chamber of the West German parliament. From then on, the student movement increasingly saw itself as the core of an Außerparlamentarische Opposition (APO) or “extra-parliamentary opposition.”

The motor of the APO was the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (Socialist German Student League, SDS), the leading left-wing student organization in West Germany. It had been created in 1946 as the student organization of the German Social Democrat party (SPD). Students who joined the SPD were automatically members of it. However, in 1961, after the SPD moved to the centre ground of West German politics and in particular dropped
its commitment to Marxism at the Bad Godesberg conference in 1959, the SDS disaffiliated from the SPD and the SPD responded by banning its members from joining the SDS. The SDS ceased to be a mass organization. Instead, linked to the banned Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party, KPD), it saw itself as the intellectual vanguard of a socialist revolution in West Germany.

With the emergence of the new “anti-authoritarian” faction in the SDS in the late 1960s, however, a split opened up between it and the “traditionalists,” who had dominated the organization until then. The “traditionalists” took more orthodox Marxist positions and were linked to the KPD. It was above all through the new “anti-authoritarian” faction in the SDS that the Frankfurt School came to influence the student movement. But the specific influence that the Frankfurt School had on the “anti-authoritarian” faction of SDS varied from place to place. The two key centres of the movement were Frankfurt and West Berlin.

In Frankfurt itself, where the SDS had its national headquarters, Adorno was a kind of pop star. In fact, many of the students in Frankfurt had come there specifically to study under him. “We loved him,” says Arno Widmann, a philosophy student and member of the SDS in Frankfurt who later became a critic of Adorno (interview with Arno Widmann). The Frankfurt students considered themselves theoretically more sophisticated than the West Berlin students, who in turn thought the “Frankfurters” were too theoretical. “We thought they weren’t revolutionary enough and they thought we weren’t intellectually avant-garde enough,” says Tilman Fichter, a leading figure in the West Berlin SDS (interview with Tilman Fichter).

In West Berlin, where the action was, the leading figure in the “anti-authoritarian” faction was Rudi Dutschke. He had grown up in East Germany and moved to the city before the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961 – and it was at this point that he became politicized. He initially became involved with Subversive Aktion, a spin-off of the West German branch of the Situationist International, and had joined the SDS as part of a strategy of “entryism.” The charismatic and telegenic Dutschke would become the de facto leader of the student movement and its figurehead. He was largely responsible for its preoccupation with national liberation movements in the Third World and with US imperialism, and for its experimentation with new forms of direct action.

The “Dutschkists” were less interested in Adorno and Horkheimer and more interested in Marcuse – whom the Frankfurt students did not consider intellectually serious. In particular, they were drawn to his description in One-Dimensional Man (Marcuse 1964) of the way post-war capitalist society, with its increased affluence and new techniques of manipulation, particularly through the mass media, had created societies with totalitarian tendencies and without opposition – which was precisely how West Germany looked to the students after the formation of the grand coalition.

They were also attracted to Marcuse’s description of the new revolutionary vanguard of “outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” that alone could challenge the new forms of domination (Marcuse 1964: 256). Marcuse was thinking of the American students who had stood alongside African Americans in the civil rights struggle. But to students in West Germany it provided a raison d’être for their own movement. If Marcuse was right, they no longer had to defer to the proletariat as the revolutionary subject.

These marginalized groups, Marcuse suggested, offered new ways of challenging capitalism from outside:

Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force that violates the rules of the game and, in doing
so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact that marks the beginning of the end of a period.

(Ibid.)

Such opposition was radically different from traditional forms of protest, which the totalitarian tendencies of advanced industrial society had rendered ineffective and perhaps even dangerous because they created an illusion of real democracy. In other words, even protest could now be tolerated, recuperated and turned into a repressive force. It was what Marcuse, in an essay that was published in English the following year, termed “repressive tolerance.”

In his conclusion to the essay, Marcuse wrote that it was absurd to demand that marginalized groups in society protest lawfully. There was, he wrote,

a natural right of resistance for oppressed and overpowered minorities to use extralegal means if the legal ones have proved to be inadequate. Law and order are always and everywhere the law and order that protect the established hierarchy; it is nonsensical to invoke the absolute authority of this law and this order against those who suffer from it and struggle against it – not for personal advantages and revenge, but for their share of humanity. There is no judge over them than the constituted authorities, the police and their own conscience. If they use violence, they do not start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one. Since they will be punished, they know the risk, and when they are willing to take it, no third person, and least of all the educator and intellectual, has the right to preach them abstention.

(Woolf/Moore Jr./Marcuse 1965: 116–117)

“Repressive Tolerance” was published in German in 1966 and instantly became essential reading among left-wing students in West Germany. The conclusion and in particular Marcuse’s claim that minorities had a “natural right of resistance” would become a kind of manifesto for the student movement. It seemed to justify extralegal means in the students’ struggle. If they used violence, it would be, in Marxist terms, not reactionary violence but progressive violence. The essay was thus a key catalyst in the student movement’s transition from discussion to action or, to put it another way, from protest to “resistance.” As Dutschke and several other leading figures in the SDS wrote in the summer of 1967, it had

clarified our feeling of uneasiness about the fact that our constant discussions had no practical consequences. We realized that the bourgeoisie, the ruling class in every country of the “free world”, can afford to have critical minorities discussing about the problems in their own and in foreign societies, that they are prepared to allow any discussion as long as it remains theoretical.

(Bergmann/Dutschke/Lefèvre/Rabehl 1967: 73)

To the “Dutschkists,” the recession that hit in 1966 showed that West Germany’s post-war economic miracle was coming to an end and that capitalist society was on the verge of collapse. In fact, the formation of the grand coalition seemed to be “the last desperate attempt of the ruling oligarchies to resolve the structural difficulties of the system” (Bergmann/Dutschke/Lefèvre/Rabehl 1967: 88). West Germany was now in the middle of a transitional
phase of “cultural revolution” that would precede the actual revolution. In short, it was a pre-revolutionary situation. It was therefore time for the vanguard of the revolution to take the initiative, to move beyond mere protest to the “resistance” that Marcuse had talked about.

The question of what form that “resistance” should take, and in particular what role violence should play in it, would be the single biggest question for the West German left for the next decade. The orthodox Marxist–Leninist answer was that violence was to be used only during a revolutionary situation. But Marx and Lenin were not writing about a “one-dimensional society.” In this context, Dutschke advocated what he called a “strategy of escalation” (Kraushaar 2005: 41). The crucial thing was to “violate the rules of game,” thus setting up an “ever more effective dialectic between enlightenment and mass action” (Bergmann/Dutschke/Lefèvre/Rabehl 1967: 89). Through “systematic, controlled, and limited confrontation” with it, the APO could expose the West German state’s real character as a “dictatorship of violence” (ibid.: 82).

The Climax of the Student Movement

The shooting of Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer at a protest against the visit by the Shah of Iran in West Berlin on June 2, 1967 – which the SDS said showed there was now “an undeclared state of emergency” in West Germany – transformed the student movement. Suddenly, there were young people all over the Federal Republic who sympathized with the “anti-authoritarian” students’ view of the society they lived in. Until then, the West Berlin SDS had only around thirty or forty active members. Now there were suddenly several hundred, and thousands at its teach-ins. By the end of the year the SDS had 2,000 members around West Germany. Exhilarated by the surge of support, it began to think seriously about the Machtfraege or “question of power” – in other words, how they might overthrow the West German state.

After the shooting, the SDS also immediately organized a conference to debate how to respond. The conference took place directly after the burial of Ohnesorg in Hanover, his hometown, on June 9, 1967. Around 7,000 students from around West Germany attended the conference. They were joined by Jürgen Habermas, who had taken over Horkheimer’s chair in philosophy and sociology at Frankfurt University in 1964 and had been one of the most outspoken supporters of university reform among German professors. Habermas also shared the students’ anxiety about the direction in which West German democracy was heading, especially after the formation of the Grand Coalition and what he called the “legal terror” in West Berlin, where demonstrations had now been banned. Under these circumstances, the protest movement, he said, temporarily provided a much-needed opposition (Vesper 1967: 44).

At the same time, however, Habermas was troubled by the kind of direct action that Dutschke wanted the student movement to use to create a revolutionary situation. There were no signs that there was any objective prospect of a revolution in West Germany, however much the students wished it. Therefore, in the long term, Habermas worried, the students could regress into “actionism” – in other words, action for action’s sake. The students, Habermas said, were making the mistake of thinking that the revolution depended on their will alone: voluntarism. In these circumstances, to systematically provoke violence by the state as Dutschke seemed to be suggesting was to “play a game with terror that has fascistic implications” (Vesper 1967: 75).

Dutschke, who had been in Hamburg when Ohnesorg had been killed on June 2 and returned to Berlin the following morning, passionately defended the student movement’s use of provocation, which he said was not irrational at all. In advanced capitalist societies
such as the Federal Republic, he argued, the forces of production had advanced to such a point that emancipation did, in fact, depend only on the will of the vanguard. “History has always been made by men,” he said. “It all depends on the conscious will of the people to finally consciously make it, to control it, to subject it to their will” (Vesper 1967: 78). Habermas, he said, had made the classic philosopher’s mistake of merely interpreting the world and not changing it: “objectivism.” Dutschke called for students across West Germany to organize demonstrations. If the authorities would not permit them, they should undertake “Kampfaktionen” (Vesper 1967: 82). Dutschke received rapturous applause.

Habermas left. But as he drove home after midnight and turned over Dutschke’s comments in his head, he became anxious at the reaction of the audience to Dutschke’s speech, and particularly his use of the word Kampf, which seemed to confirm exactly what he feared might happen to the student movement. He returned to the conference, hoping to force Dutschke to explain his position on the use of force, but arrived just as the congress was finishing. The hall was half-empty and Dutschke had already left. To boos and whistles from what remained of the audience, Habermas attempted to clarify what he said earlier. He said Dutschke’s calls for the systematic, deliberate provocation of state violence represented a “voluntarist ideology” that in 1848 would have been called “Utopian Socialism” and now could be called Linksfaschismus, or “left-wing fascism” (Vesper 1967: 101).

In Dutschke’s absence, it was left to other members of the student movement to respond to Habermas’s accusation. One – the last to speak at the conference in Hanover – was Horst Mahler, a thirty-one-year-old lawyer who had represented members of the APO, including Dutschke himself, and was leading the students’ own investigation into the events of June 2. Mahler said there was “a right to resistance in a democracy” and that “we have to ask ourselves whether we are now in a situation in which the question of resistance seriously arises” (Vesper 1967: 104). He went on,

After 1945, people often asked what kind of accusations we could make of our parents’ generation. Was it right to hold it against them that they did not resist the fascist dictatorship? Very quickly they raised the objection that it was a dictatorship of absolute terror in which control was all encompassing, and no one could be expected to commit suicide. But perhaps we can hold it against them that they did not resist at a time when resistance was still possible and had a point.

(Ibid.)

Mahler said his generation was determined to act differently and not wait until it was too late. “And that means,” he concluded, “that in this situation we are prepared to take risks and offer resistance.” A few days later in West Berlin, Dutschke heard an audio tape of Habermas’s criticism of him. He said he was “honored” to have been accused of “voluntarism.” “Habermas does not want to grasp that it is only carefully-planned action that can prevent deaths, not only in the present but even more so in the future,” he wrote in his diary. “Organized counter-violence is the best way for us to protect ourselves” (Dutschke 1996: 45). At this point, according to Habermas, the leadership of the SDS “stopped talking openly” with him (Habermas 1981: 519 ff., quoted in Wiggershaus 1986: 687).

The clash between Dutschke and Habermas at the congress in Hanover set the tone for the estrangement between the student movement and the Frankfurt School that followed. The confrontation that took place as the students radicalized in the weeks after June 2, 1967 was epitomized by the relationship between Adorno and his doctoral student and teaching assistant, Hans-Jürgen Krah, alongside Dutschke the leading figure in the “anti-authoritarian” faction of the SDS. As an undergraduate at Göttingen University he had been influenced by Heidegger and was a member of a right-wing duelling fraternity.
Unlike Dutschke, Krah, a pale figure with a glass eye, was far from a gifted speaker, but he was considered an even more brilliant theoretician.

Adorno had initially been sympathetic to the student protests. He agreed with the students that the authoritarian and hierarchical structures that existed in Germany needed to be changed, especially within the university system. He too saw the emergency laws as a threat to democracy and had spoken at protests against them (see Adorno 1968). He was disturbed by the campaign against the protests by the right-wing press and even remarked during one of his sociology seminars that “the students have taken on something of the role of the Jews” (Kraushaar 1998: Vol. 1, 254) – a confirmation, in effect, of the way many members of the protest movement thought of themselves as the “new Jews” (Enzensberger 2006: 160).

The killing of Ohnesorg had particularly disturbed Adorno. He began his lecture on aesthetics on June 6, 1967 by asking his students to stand in memory of the dead student, “whose fate, whatever the reports, is so disproportionate to his participation in a political demonstration” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 452). Unlike Horkheimer, who thought West Germans should be grateful towards the United States because it had liberated Germany from totalitarianism, Adorno also sympathized with the protests against the Vietnam war, which which he said was proof of the persistence of the “world of torture” that had begun in Auschwitz (Müller-Doohm 2005: 451). But like Habermas, he also became increasingly alarmed by the students’ use of direct action – and at how they used the Frankfurt School’s theories to justify it. He wrote to Marcuse in California that the students’ leaders tended to “synthesize their practice with a non-existent theory, and this expresses a decisionism that evokes horrible memories” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 456).

Led by Krah, the students in Frankfurt put increasing pressure on Adorno to publicly support them. In particular, they wanted his support in the trial of Fritz Teufel, a member of Kommune 1, an experimental commune linked to the student movement. Teufel had been charged with distributing a leaflet that seemed to celebrate a recent fire at a department store in Brussels, in which 300 people had died. Kommune 1 claimed the leaflet was satire and wanted Adorno to write an affidavit in support of this claim, which he refused to do. During a lecture Adorno gave on Goethe’s play Iphigenia in Tauris at the Free University in West Berlin on July 7, 1967, a group of students marched up to the lectern and unfurled a banner that, referring to Habermas’s comments at the congress in Hanover, read: “Berlin’s left-wing fascists greet Teddy the Classicist” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 454). Adorno refused to abandon his lecture and discuss the current political situation.

Following this disruption, Adorno remained supportive of the student movement’s political demands and continued to meet with representatives of the SDS, but at the same time began to publicly distance himself from their tactics, criticizing their use of direct action and the disruption of lectures. For him, the university was not part of the “administered world” but a refuge from it. Above all, he rejected the students’ characterization of the Federal Republic as a fascist state. He warned them not to make the mistake of “attacking what was a democracy, however much in need of improvement, rather than tackling its enemy, which was already starting to stir ominously” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 456).

Marcuse, meanwhile, who would later write to Adorno that he regarded Habermas’s idea of “left-wing fascism” as a “contradiction in terms” (letter from Marcuse to Adorno, April 5, 1969), believed the student movement could function as a “catalyst of rebellion” within the population as a whole (Marcuse 1969: 80). In July 1967 – in other words, a month after the killing of Ohnesorg – he came to West Berlin to give several lectures and take part in a four-day congress on “The possibilities for the APO in the Federal Republic” at the Free University (Marcuse 1980). Yet he too disappointed the students. Dutschke had told the Spiegel shortly before Marcuse’s arrival that they wanted him to elaborate a “concrete
Utopia” (Wiggershaus 1986: 690). Instead he made clear that they were neither an oppressed minority nor a revolutionary subject and said confrontation for confrontation’s sake was irresponsible (ibid.: 691).

However, this did not deter the student movement. At the SDS congress in September 1967 – the biggest since 1958 – the “anti-authoritarian” faction had a majority for the first time and succeeded in getting a member of the faction, Karl-Dietrich Wolff, elected as chairman. At the congress, Dutschke and Krahl delivered a joint paper on the Organisationsfrage or “organization question.” Explicitly applying Horkheimer’s theory of “integral étatism” – intended to explain Nazi Germany – to post-war West Germany, they argued that in an authoritarian state like the Federal Republic in which the masses were manipulated, the opposition could no longer organize itself like a bourgeois political party. Instead, they proposed a decentralized movement of “urban guerillas.”

The so-called Organisationsreferat provided the theoretical basis for the left-wing terrorism in West Germany in the 1970s.

The student rebellion reached its climax in the spring of 1968. It had increasingly focused its activities against the Springer press, which the student movement regarded as manipulating the masses against the revolution and against them. The students felt as if the Springer press had created a “pogrom atmosphere” directed against them (Enzensberger 2006: 248). They began an “Expropriate Springer!” campaign and also sought to create a Gegenöffentlichkeit or “counter-public sphere.” (Dutschke had actually spent a year working as a reporter for the B.Z., Springer’s West Berlin tabloid, though this was not widely known within the student movement.)

On April 11 – a week after the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis – Dutschke was shot three times as he came out of the SDS headquarters on the Ku’damm. That evening, as it seemed as if Dutschke’s chances of surviving were slim, students marched on the Springer building overlooking the Berlin Wall in Kreuzberg, smashed the windows and threw Molotov cocktails. During the Easter weekend, violence swept across West Germany as students sought to prevent the delivery of Springer newspapers, leading to clashes with police on a scale that had not been seen since the street battles of the Weimar Republic. Dutschke ultimately survived the shooting but left the country soon afterwards to recuperate.

Meanwhile, inspired by the événements in Paris in May, the student movement in West Germany hoped that it could bring the country to a halt. On May 27, students at universities all over West Germany went on strike. In West Berlin, German literature students at the Free University decided to seize the “means of production” and occupied the department and renamed it the “Rosa Luxemburg Institute.” Frankfurt University was also occupied and renamed “Karl Marx University.” The students created their own “political university,” with seminars on subjects like “revolutionary theory” and “the history of right to resistance.” Two thousand students led by Krahl blockaded the main building and occupied the rector’s office. The occupation lasted for three days until the university was cleared by the police (Wiggershaus 1986: 695).

However, the decisive difference was that, unlike in France, the students received only sporadic support from the West German proletariat. The trade unions had mobilized against the emergency laws and in early May, thousands of workers joined students in demonstrations across West Germany. But after the laws were finally passed on May 30, the basis for a mass movement of students and workers disappeared – and with it the possibility of revolution in West Germany. “Democracy in Germany is at an end,” Krahl had declared in a speech in Frankfurt a few days earlier (Krahl 1971: 149). He said that the students and workers must now begin a “new phase” of resistance against “a development that could end in war and concentration camps” (Krahl 1971: 151).
The End of the Student Movement

In the winter semester of 1968, after the students returned to university, the break between the student movement and the Frankfurt School became complete. After the disappointments of 1968, the Frankfurt SDS was at a loss about what to do next and was worried about losing the support it had gained the year before. In a desperate attempt to keep the momentum going, it decided to once again attempt to stimulate revolt within the university. They organized an “active strike,” which meant disrupting lectures and preventing the university from functioning. For most of the next year, the university was in chaos, with student-led teach-ins replacing professor-led seminars.

At the Frankfurt book fair in September 1968, Krahl confronted Adorno during a panel discussion on “Authority and Revolution,” which also included Günter Grass and Jürgen Habermas. Krahl accused his intellectual mentor of having deserted the student movement – and the revolution. “On the threshold of praxis,” Krahl declared, “he retreated into theory” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 461). Günter Grass said afterwards that Adorno seemed to be afraid of his own students (Kraushaar 1998: Vol. 2, 471). Adorno replied privately to Grass that he had “nothing in common with the students’ narrow-minded direct action strategies which are already degenerating into an abominable irrationalism” but did not wish to join “the platform of the German reactionaries in their witch-hunt of the New Left” (letter from Adorno to Grass, November 4, 1968, quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005: 461).

The students, on the other hand, now became still more aggressive towards Adorno and the Frankfurt School. In December, the Institute for Social Research was itself “re-functioned.” “Critical theory,” the students’ strike committee wrote in a leaflet:

has been organised in such an authoritarian manner that its approach to sociology allows no space for the students to organise their own studies. We are fed up with letting ourselves be trained in Frankfurt to become dubious members of the political left who, once their studies are finished, can serve as the integrated alibis of the authoritarian state.

(Müller-Doohm 2005: 464)

With that, the student movement’s critique of its intellectual ancestors had come full circle: those who had developed the critique of authoritarianism on which the student movement was based were themselves now dismissed as authoritarian.

A few days later, Adorno and Habermas took part in an open discussion with a group of students in an attempt to find common ground. The more militant among the Frankfurt students had started wearing leather motorcycle jackets and became known as the “leather jacket faction.” The strike leaders called on the students to “smash the bourgeois academic machine.” Adorno and Habermas left and the dialogue was over (Müller-Doohm 2005: 464). Horkheimer noted among the students a clear “affinity to the mindset of the Nazis” and thought many of the radicals would be at home in a far-right government (Kraushaar 1998: 531).

On January 31, 1969, seventy-six students led by Krahl occupied the sociology seminar at the institute. The institute’s directors, Adorno among them, called in the police. The students were arrested but only Krahl was charged with trespassing. Adorno wrote to Marcuse that “Krahl only organized the whole stunt in order to get taken into custody, and thereby hold together the disintegrating Frankfurt sds group” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, February 14, 1969). But in his reply, Marcuse criticized Adorno’s decision to call the police. Adorno had invited Marcuse to come to Frankfurt to speak at the
Institute, but Marcuse felt he could not accept the invitation unless he also spoke with the students.

I believe that if I accept the Institute's invitation without also speaking to the students, I will identify myself with (or I will be identified with) a position that I do not share politically. To put it brutally: if the alternative is the police or left-wing students, then I am with the students – with one crucial exception, namely, if my life is threatened or if violence is threatened against my person and my friends, and that threat is a serious one. Occupation of rooms (apart from my own apartment) without such a threat of violence would not be a reason for me to call the police.

(Letter from Marcuse to Adorno, April 5, 1969)

Thus, Marcuse refused to cut his ties to the students.

We cannot abolish from the world the fact that these students are influenced by us (and certainly not least by you) – I am proud of that and am willing to come to terms with patricide, even though it hurts sometimes.

(Ibid.)

He wrote that “We know (and they know) that the situation is not a revolutionary one, not even a pre-revolutionary one” (ibid.). But he still sympathized with them. The situation, though not pre-revolutionary, was

so terrible, so suffocating and demeaning, that rebellion against it forces a biological, physiological reaction. One can bear it no longer, one is suffocating and one has to let some air in. And this fresh air is not that of a “left-wing fascism” (contradictio in adjecto!). It is the air that we (at least I) also want to breathe some day, and it is certainly not the air of the establishment.

(Ibid.)

Adorno, who had been on sabbatical during the winter semester, had resumed teaching in April 1969. His first lecture was immediately disrupted. Two students stormed the podium, shouted “Down with the informer!” and wrote on the blackboard, “If Adorno is left in peace, capitalism will never cease!” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 475). A group of three female protestors then came up to the podium, scattered rose and tulip petals on him and bared their breasts in front of him in what they called a Busenaktion or “breast action.” Adorno left embarrassed and humiliated. Students subsequently circulated a flyer that declared, “Adorno as an institution is dead.” He resumed lectures in June, but, after further disruption, cancelled them for the remainder of the semester.

The relationship between Adorno and Marcuse worsened over the next several months as they continued their correspondence and sought to make plans to meet in person to discuss their disagreements, which Adorno said required “unlimited discussions” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, May 5, 1969). Adorno said he had been “hurt” by Marcuse's last letter to him and sought to persuade Marcuse that he underestimated the threat from the student movement and had to call the police in order to protect “our old Institute” (ibid.). In a reply written from London in June, Marcuse replied that he now felt “the need to speak honestly more urgently than before” (letter from Marcuse to Adorno, June 4, 1969). He went on to criticize Adorno’s leadership of the institute and, which he said was no longer “our old Institute” because it had lost the “inner political content” it had had in the 1930s (ibid.).
A couple of weeks later, Adorno wrote to Marcuse that he was now “in a phase of extreme depression” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, June 19, 1969, quoted in Müller-Dohrmann 2005: 477). In the same letter, he rejected Marcuse’s accusation that he had depoliticized the institute. The student movement, he said, had become increasingly irrational and did not have “even the slightest chance of having any impact on society” (ibid.). Because of this, there was a chance that authoritarian attitudes could come to prevail within it. “I take the risk that the student movement may turn to fascism much more to heart than you” (ibid.). At the end of July, Adorno and his wife Gretel travelled to Switzerland, where, on August 6, he had a heart attack and died.

In a densely theoretical obituary for Adorno published in the Frankfurter Rundschau, entitled “The political contradiction of Theodor Adorno’s critical theory,” Krahnl wrote that Adorno had been unable or unwilling to apply critical theory to develop a praxis that could liberate the oppressed. Referring to Adorno’s 1959 essay, “What does working through the past mean?” he wrote that Adorno’s social theoretical insight that the continuation of National Socialism within democracy was more dangerous than the continuation of fascist tendencies against democracy led his progressive fear of a fascist stabilization of restored monopoly capital to change into a regressive fear of the forms of practical resistance against this tendency of the system.

(Krahnl 1971: 285)

However, by this time, the student movement was itself disintegrating. Some of the students, for example those who had occupied the German literature department at Frankfurt University, thought the movement had been insufficiently organized and now wanted to organize highly disciplined groups. Others felt that the movement had failed because at the decisive moment, it had failed to mobilize the masses: they now moved from the university to the factories, focusing on creating new links with the proletariat. Others still wanted to form underground cells and wage a guerrilla campaign against the West German state. Some of the traditionalists within the SDS wanted to try to enter parliament or even join the SPD and its youth organization, the Young Socialists, and “radically reform” them from within. Others still had simply become apathetic.

On February 14, 1970 – shortly after Willy Brandt had become the first Social Democrat chancellor in the history of the Federal Republic and, partly in response to the student movement, urged West Germany to “dare more democracy” – Hans-Jürgen Krahnl was killed in a car accident on an icy road near Marburg. A week later, he was buried in Hanover. After the burial, around eighty SDS delegates from around West Germany met in the café in the architecture faculty at Hanover’s Technical University and agreed to dissolve the SDS. A month later in Frankfurt, the decision was formalized at the last general meeting of what was probably the most politically important student organization in German history.

The Afterlife of the Student Movement

The story of the West German student movement and the Frankfurt School is thus a more complicated one than the idea of intellectual “patricide” suggests. Neither the student movement nor the Frankfurt School was a homogenous bloc. Rather, the fault lines in the fraught debates prompted by the events of 1967–1969 were almost as much between members of the student movement and between members of the Frankfurt School as between the student movement and the Frankfurt School. The story is complicated even further by what might be called the afterlife of the West German student movement. Over time, as the former
rebels grew older and reassessed their own actions and beliefs, some of them rediscovered, and re-engaged with, the Frankfurt School.

Perhaps the best example of this rediscovery of and re-engagement with the Frankfurt School was Joschka Fischer, who had been a member of the SDS in 1968, though he was not at that time a prominent figure within it. In the 1970s, he joined a “spontaneist” group called Revolutionary Struggle and took part in battles with the police on the streets of Frankfurt (Kraushaar 2001). But in the years after the so-called German Autumn of 1977, Jürgen Habermas – who in 1967 had accused the student movement of “left-wing fascism” – was to become an important influence on him. In particular, Dolf Sternberger’s concept of “constitutional patriotism” – popularized by Habermas – provided Fischer with a theoretical basis for a reconciling with the Federal Republic that he had once seen as an authoritarian state.

Fischer was also importantly influenced by Adorno. In Negative Dialectics – a book that, though it was published in 1966, had little influence on the student movement at the time – Adorno had written that, after Auschwitz, Man now had an obligation “to arrange one’s thoughts and actions so that it will not be repeated, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1966: 358). Fischer sought in particular to apply this imperative to German foreign policy. As a Green politician in 1985 he wrote: “Only German responsibility for Auschwitz can be the essence of West German raison d’état” (Fischer 1985). Finally, as German foreign minister during the Kosovo War in 1999, he famously declared, “I didn’t just learn ‘never again war.’ I also learned, ‘never again Auschwitz’” (Fischer 2007: 185).

References

Habermas J. (1981), Klein Politische Schriften, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

**Further Reading**