Introduction: History, Myth and Memory of 1968

A revolution, a mass revolt, the turning point of post-war European history (or a point of no return), the culmination of decades of social change: the events of 1968 are evoked in the most grandiose of terms. To interpret them historically is to enter a debate on the meaning of the entire post-war period and the origins of contemporary society. Yet however momentous the events, the beginnings were small. In 1965, debate erupted at the Free University of Berlin over a five-year-old ban from university grounds imposed on a journalist who had criticised the institution. The following year (in 1966), around 150 students at the Faculty of Sociology in Trento occupied their institute to protest the Italian parliament's decision to grant them degrees not in sociology but political science. Then, in 1967 students at the new campus of Nanterre on the outskirts of Paris unilaterally declared the right of female students to welcome male students into university dormitories. In 1968 these disparate protests each burst forth from the university, triggering enormous demonstrations in West Berlin, the largest strike in French history and a decade of social turmoil in Italy. How did such humdrum issues engender crises of the state? How did debates about freedom of speech, the minutiae of curricula and the regulation of dormitories generate mass movements that threatened to sweep aside the politics and societies of post-war Europe?

Interpretations of 1968 have struggled to reconcile the quotidian origins of the revolts with the explosive charge they unleashed, the revolutionary appearance of events with the seemingly meagre results. Direct consequences of the protest movements of 1968 are difficult to identify. What was achieved other than a few curricular changes and modified university regulations? Were the revolutions of 1968 merely sound and fury which, once they subsided, signified nothing? Interpretations range from the portentous to the diminutive, from the beginning of the end of capitalism, and 'the only "general" insurrection the overdeveloped world has known since World War II', to an imaginary revolution played out in the shadow

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of triumphant consumerism.[1] The image of revolution has confined much interpretation of 1968 to the task of either defending or demythologising the events. The mythos of political revolution is privileged over, or punctured by, an emphasis on transformations in youth culture. Yet the search for identifiable legislative or political consequences only obscures the nature of the conflict of the 1960s in western Europe. The struggle of the Sixties was never over narrowly political ends, but the politics of social and cultural relations in their broadest sense. The 1960s in western Europe witnessed an extended and escalating conflict over the meaning of postwar prosperity and democracy. This conflict emerged in the most mundane matters – relations between teachers and students, parents and children, forms of teaching and the limits of free speech – and in 1968 was expressed in its most politicised and confrontational form.

This book analyses the 1960s as an experimental laboratory of different visions of political, social and cultural democratisation. This approach helps to contextualise the events of 1968 in the wider social transformations of the decade and to foreground the relation between cultural and political change rather than opposing them. The sustained prosperity of postwar western Europe created a new, utopian horizon of expectations of a newly democratised society. However, democratisation held many different meanings. For some, it meant the triumph of an egalitarian and meritocratic social mobility on the back of the economic boom, for others a less praiseworthy process of social and cultural levelling – what contemporaries labelled 'mass society.' Democratisation could mean the liberation of personal autonomy from authoritarian political and social structures, or the transformation of those institutions through direct democracy. The democratisation of culture promised new realms of freedom, but also subjection to the tyranny of commodification in consumer culture. The protest movements held no single position on this spectrum. 'What do I care about Vietnam, when I have orgasm difficulties', infamously declared the West German radical Dieter Kunzelmann, emphatically prioritising personal freedoms over international politics.[2] Yet thousands

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[1] Kristen Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4. For the beginning of the end of capitalism, see Angelo Quattrocchi and Tom Nairn, *The Beginning of the End: France, May 1968* (London: Verso, 1998). Surely it was too soon to tell, as Zhou Enlai supposedly said in 1971 in reference to the 1968 revolts in France. See Rowan Callick, *The Party Forever: Inside China's Modern Communist Elite* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 232.

[2] As quoted in Dirk Moses and Elliot Neaman, 'West German generations and the *Gewaltfrage*: The conflict of the Sixty-Eighters and the Forty-Fivers', in Warren Breckman, Peter E. Gordon, A. Dirk Moses, Samuel Moyn and Elliot Neaman (eds.), *The Modernist Imagination: Intellectual History and Critical Theory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 268–295, 272. For the broad anti-authoritarian

of others perceived an innate connection between sexual and post-imperial repression. The details of democratisation proved fertile ground for social conflict. Competing ideas of democratisation undermined themselves and each other. Minimum and maximum definitions collided and reality confounded expectations as Europeans fought to secure the meaning of technological and cultural change.

This study explores these dilemmas of democratisation in the 1960s through an analysis of three university revolts in France, Italy and West Germany, based on case studies of the campus of Nanterre, the university of Trento and the Free University of Berlin (FU). While higher education was not the sole site of social conflict in the late 1960s, the university cultivated the protest movements of the 1960s. Higher education serves as an ideal locus to examine the contradictions of the protest movements, as it embodied the postwar promise of social mobility, mass education and the 'democratisation' of high culture. Each of these universities was of relatively recent vintage, incarnating a promise of democratic education. All three were centres of sociology, a newly legitimised social science heralded as the adjunct to a democratised political culture. All three incubated a student movement well before the protests expanded to other universities and broader society. Each drew on a distinct, peripheral, locale: Berlin, a divided city on the frontline of the Cold War deep inside the Communist German Democratic Republic; Nanterre, an isolated institution on the fringes of Paris – the cultural, intellectual and political capital of Western Europe; and Trento, a small, conservative Catholic town not far from the Brenner Pass. Despite the differences, in each case a student movement with a strong family resemblance emerged early and almost simultaneously. In West Berlin and Trento, two versions of a 'critical university' – the *Kritische Universität* and the *Università Critica* – rose, then fell, as the most coherent and developed application of radical democratic ideas to the institutions of higher education. These universities epitomised the tensions, triumphs and failures of democratisation in the 1960s. They reveal the revolts as an intense political and social struggle over the meaning of the democratisation thought implicit in postwar economic progress.

impulse of the 1960s, see Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On Kunzelmann, see Aribert Reimann, *Dieter Kunzelmann. Avantgardist, Protestler, Radikaler* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

Nanterre – Trento – West Berlin

The three case studies demonstrate the unity beneath the diverse origins of student revolt. While these campuses, especially Nanterre and the Free University of Berlin, have been studied before, they have never been examined together. The Free University of Berlin was founded in 1949 by dint of student pressure in opposition to Humboldt University in the Soviet Sector. With this heritage of student activism and its famous 'Berlin Model' of student representation at all levels of the university hierarchy, the FU stood as the most 'advanced' and 'modern' institution of higher education in the Federal Republic. The 'political mandate' of the Berlin students was singular in the Federal Republic, held to be democratic, 'progressive and exercised a great power of attraction'.[3] Residents of West Berlin were exempt from the requirement for military service and the city also offered the prospect of contact with students at Humboldt as well as books from the German Democratic Republic. While the university counted as a symbol of progress, West Berlin had 'an atmosphere of front city, a mix of fear, threats, stagnation, cronyism, narrow-minded arrogance and uptight individuals'.[4] One student recalled that 'the city still looked really destroyed. Many façades had bullet holes, the plaster peeled away, and whole wings of buildings were destroyed from bombs and had left large holes. Somehow the Nazi period hung in the walls, and I often had a very oppressive feeling'.[5] The Free University, in a peculiar, isolated outpost of the Federal Republic, appeared a beacon for radical democratic student politics.

The Faculty of Sociology at Trento – or the Istituto Superiore di Scienze Sociali (Higher Institute of Social Sciences) – was, like West Berlin, an experimental outpost of higher education. Opened in 1962, the Institute was the first faculty of sociology in Italy and began to operate without the degree recognised by the Italian state. The institute was founded by progressive members of the Christian Democratic Party, conceived as a motor of modernisation for both the backwater of the Trentino and Italy as a whole. The institute at Trento was the purest expression of dreams of

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[3] Jürgen Horlemann, 'Zwischen Soziologie und Politik: Rekonstruktion eines Werdegangs', in Heinz Bude and Martin Kohli (eds.), *Radikalisierte Aufklärung: Studentenbewegung und Soziologie in Berlin 1965 bis 1970* (Weinheim: Juventa Verlag, 1989), 215–238, 221.

[4] Tilman Fichter and Siegward Lönnendonker, *Kleine Geschichte des SDS: Der Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund von 1946 bis zur Selbstauflösung* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1977), 86.

[5] Ute Kätzel, *Die 68erinnen: Porträt einer rebellischen Frauengeneration* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2002), 242.

modernisation through a democratic science: entirely dedicated to soci-
ology, open to students from technical secondary schools (to whom most
university doors remained barred) and with a degree not yet recognised
by the Italian government at its opening. Students set out for Trento
from all over Italy, despite not always knowing where they were bound:
'those from the Trentino were few, three quarters came from outside. It
was the first truly national university. Like everyone else, I thought
Trento was near Trieste'.[6] Some found the distance a liberation from
family and social origin, but once again students were struck by the
contrast between the university and its hinterland. The student leader
Mauro Rostagno described Trento as this 'crazy, stagnant, closed city . . .
city of the valleys, narrow-minded, mountain dwellers, the city of the
Council, of prince bishops, the alpini. The faculty of sociology was a
delirium. Its lure drew everyone on the loose in Italy, a faculty in and of
itself self-selecting. Thus at Trento suddenly nested this colony of crazy
birds'.[7]

The campus at Nanterre, the banlieue just outside the western edge of
Paris, opened in 1964 as a Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in order
to relieve an overcrowded Sorbonne. Nanterre, like the FU and Trento,
boasted an image of modernity. The new Faculty had a liberal dean in
Pierre Grappin, an emphasis on the new disciplines of the social sciences
and, although students did not sit on its Faculty council, assistant profes-
sors did. The location did not appear propitious: 35 hectares of land
transferred from the military and bordered by a shantytown of North
African immigrants.[8] A wall topped with barbed wire recalled its military
origins and 'gave the university domain the forbidding appearance of a
penitentiary camp.'[9] The French historian of Britain François Crouzet
described the campus as

> [a] desolate no-man's land, on which stood a number of corrugated iron
> sheds. With a number of buildings under construction, it became in winter

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[6] A. Manzoni (ed.), *Facoltà Occupata. Certo eravamo arroganti, certo eravamo giovani . . . ma avevamo ragione. Sociologia, 1962–2002* (supplemento al quotidiano *Trentino*, 2002), 41–43. This is true particularly after the first two years. The percentage of students from the Trentino and Alto Adige dropped from 69.6 per cent in its first year (1962–1963) to 29.9 per cent in 1966–1967.

[7] Mauro Rostagno and Claudio Castellacci, *Macondo: La storia del 'luogo magico' di Milano, nel racconto del suo principale protagonista* (Milan: SugarCo, 1978), 62.

[8] On Nanterre, see Daniel A. Gordon, *Immigrants & Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-Racism in France* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2012).

[9] René Rémond, *La règle et le consentement: gouverner une société* (Paris: Fayard, 1979), 63.

> an ocean of mud. Surrounded by railroad tracks, factories, and large grey
> blocks of cheap apartment houses, and with the infamous shanty towns
> of Nanterre not far away, this grim and depressing neighbourhood had
> none of the amenities – the cafes, cinemas, and shops – which students
> frequented in the Latin Quarter.[10]

Pierre Grappin lamented the absence of windows in the lecture halls: 'the
builders told me . . . darkness was chosen because it aided concentration'.[11]
Students founds themselves relatively isolated at a site where 'there was no
environment, no café nor drink machine, a couscous joint a bit far away, a
shantytown which fascinated and to which some went, especially an
activist elite and left-wing Catholics in particular, and the cemetery in
the background'.[12]

In their novelty and openness, these three institutions offered a greater
space for the development of student movements and conflict over the
structure of the university than elsewhere. The establishment of new
faculties and degrees, particularly in the social sciences and especially in
sociology, acted as the calling of an Estates General about education and
society. Students arrived at the new institutions with their *cahiers de
doléance*, with further reforms promised but unelaborated. While out-
breaks could occur elsewhere – the Sorbonne exploded (or imploded) in
mid-1968 without any indication of a similar development to the struggle
at Nanterre – the lengthy development of the struggles at West Berlin,
Nanterre and Trento illuminate the origins of the conflict that crystallised
in 1968. Each campus had unique features, but all shared a rhetoric of
anti-imperialism, anti-authoritarianism, autonomy and democracy. Local
concerns were expressed alongside, and in an international lexicon that
evoked, Berkeley and Vietnam. In all instances, a broad revolt against
academic authority fed the protest movement and radicalised most quickly
under the impact of police intervention. All embarked on a politics of 'free
speech', challenged the content and function of higher education and
rejected the administration of university space by academic authorities.
Yet these common concerns expressed themselves in diverse configurations
according to context.

[10] François Crouzet, 'A university besieged: Nanterre, 1967–69', *Political Science Quarterly* 84 (1969),
328–350, 329.
[11] Pierre Grappin, *L'Île aux peupliers: de la Résistance à Mai 68: Souvenirs du Doyen de Nanterre*
(Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993), 237.
[12] Nelcya Delanoë, *Nanterre la Folie* (Saint-Amand-Montrond: Seuil, 1998), 61.

History and Myth

Any attempt to historicise the events of 1968 must be cautious. Even as the protagonists of the era fade from the scene, discussion of '68 still evokes an engagement and identification characteristic of participants. This is as true of those who seek to historicise events as those who romanticise them. Each new history of the period aims finally to consign it to the past and academics routinely call for the 'historicisation' of the period. Yet that clarion call has been made for quite some time, often sounded by the participants of the Sixties themselves. Nor is the period so easily tamed. Controversies about the meaning of the 1960s and 1968 erupt regularly. An optimistically entitled 1998 volume *1968: Vom Ereignis zum Gegenstand der Geschichtswissenschaft* (1968: from Event to Object of History) was reissued (unchanged) a decade later as *1968: vom Ereignis zum Mythos* (1968: from Event to Myth). So much for historical scholarship! The assumption that a certain distance from the events of the 1960s would naturally facilitate a dispassionate and less partisan approach to the past appears naïve. Any attempt to write the history of 1968 must grapple with the persistence of its mythical and symbolic dimension.

The events of 1968 did not become myth; they were born as myth. From their inception, critical observers sought to disassociate the events from their grandiose interpretations. As early as July 1968, Raymond Aron wrote with the objective 'to demystify, desacralise them'.[13] To do so, he measured the May events in France against the yardstick of a seizure of power by the working class: 'Since the Communist Party retained control of the working masses and had no aim of insurrection', Aron asserted, 'it consisted of psychodrama'.[14] While Aron evoked the limits of the protest movement, sympathisers and protesters emphasised that the events merely marked a beginning: *ce n'est qu'un début* – 'it's only a beginning' or *la lutte continue, la lotta continua* – 'the struggle continues'.[15] Some proclaimed the beginning of the end of capitalism, others the beginning of post-material politics or the emergence of a new revolutionary actor, interpretations which awaited their validation in a distant or not-so-distant future. All assumed that the events portended much more than was demonstrable

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[13] Raymond Aron, *La révolution introuvable: réflexions sur la révolution de mai* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), 13.

[14] Aron, *La révolution introuvable*, 35.

[15] For 1968 as a beginning from a historiographical perspective, see Odd Arne Westad, 'Was there a "global 1968"', in Chen Jian et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties* (London: Routledge, 2018).

in the immediate reality. The power of the events lay in this protean capacity. 1968 began, as Sunil Khilnani put it, as 'an interpretation in search of an event'.[16]

Beginnings are more easily perceived retrospectively than prospectively. The one now most associated with 1968 is the beginning of the end of the Soviet Bloc. Yet few in the early 1970s had the prescience of the political scientist François Fetjö who thought that 'the Czechoslovak leaders and intellectuals . . . might have helped in accelerating the slow awakening of conscience in the Soviet Union. One may hope . . . that the next Dubček will appear in the nerve centre of the system: Moscow'.[17] While there is no direct line between the events of 1968 and 1989 in Eastern Europe, Western Europe's 68 lacks even an imagined terminus.[18] Subsequent history proved unkind to proclamations of capitalism's demise. The inflated claims for the revolts of 1968 have suffered from the condescension of posterity more than demystification. Thus, three decades later, Arthur Marwick wrote in his landmark work *The Sixties* that 'the great events of 1967/1969 really had remarkably little in the way of long term consequences'.[19] Michael Seidman unfavourably compared the historical significance of May '68 to the D-Day landings of 1944.[20] Yet these are debates as much about what constitutes an event of historical importance, and how that is measured, as they are thoughtful contributions to the interpretation of history.

A historicisation of 1968 cannot simply puncture contemporaries' grandiose assessments of events. Contesting the protagonists' point of view can only with difficulty extricate itself from contemporary criticism of the protest movements. Rather, it is important to understand why such grand

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[16] Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 122. On the memory of 1968, see Ingo Cornils and Sarah Waters (eds.), *Memories of 1968: International Perspectives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*; Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Le Moment 68: une histoire contestée* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

[17] François Fetjö, *A History of the People's Democracies: Eastern Europe since Stalin* (New York: Prager, 1971), 317. On 1968 and 1989, see Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (eds.), *Eastern Europe in 1968: Responses to the Prague Spring and Warsaw Pact Invasion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2–3.

[18] With some exception for German historiography, which has at times embraced a mythology of the 'normalisation' of Germany.

[19] Arthur Marwick, 'Youth culture and the cultural revolution of the long 1960s', in Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegried (eds.), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960–1980* (New York: Berghahn, 2006), 43. See further Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[20] Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York: Berghahn, 2004), 282.

narratives of a watershed moment proved so appealing. One reason for the insistence on 1968 as a beginning was its experience as refutation of the widely promoted idea of an 'end of ideology'. The proclamation of a beginning resonated in an environment of declared endings and created the experience of caesura for participants. The gulf between the events and their extravagant interpretation grew from the failure of the reigning intellectual schema to understand them. The revolts of the 1960s appeared as harbingers of the new, and while critical voices could perceive the overstatement in the most inflated interpretations, they often judged by standards that failed to capture the new reality, registered as much irritation as insight, and sought to dismiss instead of understand.

Attempts to historicise 1968 thus need to wrestle critically with the problem that demythologisation formed part of the cultural struggle over 1968 from the beginning. A new history of the era cannot adopt the terms of this debate without question. The events of the late 1960s do not need to signify the end of capitalism or prefigure an imminent revolution to be important. Likewise, there was indeed much psychodrama in 1968, but politics is sometimes little else. Rather than seeking to identify the enduring consequences of a complex set of occurrences to confirm or deny their importance, this study views those events as a particular manifestation of long-term trends, shot through with contingency. The revolts explored here matter for the concrete ways the practical possibilities of radical democratic culture both did and did not play out in the specific circumstances of 1968.

The '68 Years and the Long 1960s

I seek to frame the events of 1968 (1967 or 1969, depending on the location) in relation to the era of the Sixties more broadly. The attempt to historicise 1968 in a wider time frame, and a consequent tension between event and process, marks much of the historiography.[21] In the shadow of mythologisation of 1968 (and especially May '68 in France), a great deal of valuable historiographical work has shown how what was imagined to have begun in '1968' can be discerned much earlier. Various French historians have elaborated the concept of the '68 years (*les années 68*).[22] Outside of

[21] Timothy Scott Brown, '1968. Transnational and global perspectives', *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 11.06.2012: DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok.2.272.v1
[22] Philippe Artières and Michelle Zancarini Fournel, *68: Une histoire collective 1962–1981* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008); Dominique Damamme et al. (eds.), *Mai–Juin 68* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier,

France, historians have usually opted for the 'long 1960s' or, increasingly, the 'global Sixties'. Yet these thoughtful attempts to reconceptualise 1968 are not without their own pitfalls.[23] The chronological reconfigurations furnish yet another way to aggrandise or diminish the most troublesome moment. The expanded geographical range provincialises national narratives in a cornucopia of Sixties and 68s that defy generalisation.

'*Les années 68*' (the '68 years) has the virtue of expanding the field of analysis beyond the year (or, for France, beyond the mere month of May). Defined as the ongoing construction of a veritable 'public sphere' of contestation',[24] the term identifies an important element of the 1960s: the ability of small minorities to achieve a political and cultural effect far beyond their size: 'the leftist "groupuscules" ... formed only limited political spaces, but these "microcosms" held the power during these "68 years" ... to find a social reception larger than their strict political influence would allow one to suppose'.[25] Such a definition wisely refrains from measuring the movements by their political influence and places at the heart of the analysis the gap between strict political and wider public influence. Yet the '1968 years' defines much of the rest of decade by its relation to '68 and the retention of the magical number belies the argument that the year 'is only a moment' of a longer process.[26] This is, rather, one moment that is allowed to stand for the whole. The most elegant solution to this problem is the one suggested by Julian Jackson, who points to '68 as a pivot which 'made "the 1968 years" that followed possible ... [and] also gave new meaning to experiences that had preceded May.'[27] While 1968 is clearly the most emphatic expression of the power of social movements to create a public sphere of contestation, understanding the events of that year requires conceptualising their relation to the rest of the decade in a manner that does not see 1968 as the decade's culmination.

While '*les années 68*' magnifies the year, drawing the decade into its orbit, the 'long 1960s' (first proposed by Arthur Marwick) dissolves it into the decade. The notion of the 'long 1960s' (roughly 1958 to 1974) rightly

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2008). In English, Julian Jackson et al. (eds.), *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[23] See also Richard Vinen, *The Long '68: Radical Protest and Its Enemies* (Allen Lane, 2018), where the definition remains vague.

[24] Robert Frank, 'Introduction', in Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand et al. (eds.), *Les années 68. Le temps de la contestation* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 2000), 18.

[25] Ibid.   [26] Ibid.

[27] Julian Jackson, 'Rethinking May 68', in Jackson et al. (eds.), *May 68*, 6. There is much to be said for this formulation. However, 'the 1968 years' is a conceptual frame limited to French historiography – something that attests to the ongoing power of May–June 1968 in France.