

1968 - The Global and the Local

Veranstalter: Anna von der Goltz, Georgetown University

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The year „1968“ has become a symbol for the period of youthful activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, characterized by frustrations with seemingly stagnant social orders and by hopes for the construction of an egalitarian, anti-authoritarian world. In her welcome to the conference, ANNA VON DER GOLTZ (Georgetown University) noted that there has been a conceptual and geographic broadening of studies of '68 in the last fifteen years. While the „global turn“ has enhanced historians' understanding of the transnational linkages which shaped activists' experiences, including greater emphasis on their anti-imperialism, this has been accompanied by a resurgence of locally-focused studies, which have drawn out the particularities of activism in a given location. In bringing together younger and more-established scholars, this conference drew out the connections between the global and the local in 1968 and assessed the historiography of this subject.

In his opening remarks, TIMOTHY BROWN (Northeastern University) interrogated the significance of „global“ and „local“ as frames for '68. Brown differentiated between the global „big“ '68, or the emancipatory and anti-authoritarian impulses which activists manifested in both virtual and concrete linkages; and the „small“ '68 of local realities. For Brown, the global served as a set of analytical frameworks through which activists understood their own experiences. Although it would be inaccurate to talk of a „general '68,“ Brown argued that many protesters shared certain universalizing impulses. In the conversation on Brown's remarks, conference participants brought to attention the importance of differentiating between global, international, and transnational facets of 1968, as well as the interconnection in the global-local binary, as the neologism „glocal“ suggests. In noting

that activists often struggled to form meaningful linkages with their counterparts in other nations, some participants questioned whether local contexts mattered more than global ones.

Interactions between the American or Soviet blocs and the global South in the 1960s have become a focus of research, as explored in a panel chaired by JAMIE MARTIN (Georgetown University). Beginning with the coining of the term by the French scholar Alfred Sauvy in 1952, CHRISTOPH KALTER (Free University, Berlin) examined the enduring popularity of the „Third World“ concept for '68ers. From its origins in the social sciences, the „Third World“ became a rallying cry largely due to Frantz Fanon's writings. In explaining the reasons behind the ubiquity of the concept, Kalter noted its malleability: the term could encompass anti-capitalism, negation of the Cold War order, and rejection of Euro-centrism, while imbuing local struggles with global significance.

Arguing against an interpretation of American Third Worldism as reactive, BEN FELDMAN (Georgetown University) analyzed the correspondence of the Marxian intellectuals Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran, who offered economic and cultural critiques of American life. Instead of being a romantic response to perceived deficiencies in the American left, the Third Worldism of Sweezy and Baran proactively constructed a toolkit for revolutionary politics from developments in decolonized states. Shifting towards „Third World“ interactions in communist states, SARAH PUGACH (California State University, LA) focused on Malian exchange students in East Germany. Although the Malian government picked students to travel to the GDR and the East German government organized them into nationality-based clubs once at the university, students turned these clubs into sites of discontent, culminating in 1970-1 sit-ins at the Malian Trade Mission in defiance of Moussa Traoré's regime.

THOM LOYD (Georgetown University) moved beyond government-level analyses of Soviet internationalism, instead analyzing how participants experienced these policies in everyday life. In Kiev, African students were given a degree of freedom in organizing

themselves, and the most common reason for activism was violence perpetrated against exchange students by locals. Meanwhile, Ukrainian dissidents viewed their status in the Soviet Union as analogous to that of Africans on the global stage, reinventing the Third World as a critique of communism. The discussion which followed these presentations touched on the indebtedness of such concepts as the Global South and tricontinentalism to the earlier Third World formulation of Sauvy; the gendered and racialized experiences of African exchange students, most of whom were male, in the Soviet bloc; and the importance of decolonization as a rhetorical tool in promoting exchange programs in the GDR and USSR.

The second panel, chaired by MICHAEL KAZIN (Georgetown University), addressed gender and sexuality in '68. CHRISTINA VON HODENBERG (Queen Mary University of London) focused on female activists in Bonn. Memory of this activism has largely faded as these women have avoided commemorations of protests which focused on the private sphere. Moreover, there remains a persistent „male gaze“ which dominates media portrayals of '68 in Germany. Following this point, von Hodenberg emphasized the importance of reinserting narratives of female activists into histories of 1968. Focusing on San Francisco, EMILY HOBSON (University of Nevada) discussed the history of radical gay and lesbian activism. Dismissing as insufficient the 1950s homophile movement, proponents of gay and lesbian liberation looked to other left-wing groups as models. Standard interpretations of the LGBT rights movement tend to understand the gay and lesbian liberation movement as a temporary development; Hobson challenged this narrative, demonstrating that the gay and lesbian liberation movement was pivotal in 1980s Central American solidarity movements. During the ensuing discussion, von Hodenberg reiterated her argument that the gendered component of West Germany's 1968 remains woefully under-represented in „master narratives“, while Hobson elaborated on the nature of gay and lesbian liberation as a left-wing movement, noting the existence of explicitly Marxist lesbian reading groups in the 1970s.

Often ignored in standard narratives of '68, conservative and libertarian activists have drawn attention from historians seeking to understand the „other side“ of political activism. In a panel moderated by MARIO DANIELS (Georgetown University), Anna von der Goltz presented on the subject of memories of 1968 among West German Christian Democratic student activists, many of whom went on to careers in government. In the 1980s, center-right figures understood their experiences in the upheavals of 1968 as part of a movement tangentially related to the story of left-wing activism, defined as „alternative '68ers“; by the 1990s, CDU activists framed themselves as „counter-'68ers.“ Following the 1998 electoral victory of a Social Democratic-Green coalition, center-right memories emphasized the political violence of the 1970s. For Christian Democrats, it has been experiences of contemporaneous politics which have proved central to the construction of memories of '68.

Focusing on the American „anarcho-capitalist“ Murray Rothbard and his intellectual successors, particularly Hans-Hermann Hoppe, QUINN SLOBODIAN (Wellesley College) traced the history of right-libertarianism from its involvement in 1968 through the rise of today's alt-right. Although Rothbard sympathized with activists' anti-authoritarian impulses, by 1972 he claimed that biological differences made equality impossible. Through such organizations as the Ludwig von Mises Institute and the Property and Freedom Society, right-libertarians have continued their „long march through the institutions“ in an effort to undermine the principle of human equality which today's far right sees as the most dangerous legacy of '68. Participants raised a variety of questions in the discussion, largely related to the relationships which the actors discussed in the two presentations had with other conservatives in the US and West Germany.

Participants reconvened on the conference's second day for a panel on anti-imperialism chaired by HANNO BALZ (Johns Hopkins University). ALEX MACARTNEY (Georgetown University) presented on Hirohito's 1971 visit to Bonn. Hirohito's visit was designed to promote an image of

a peaceful Japan, but his role in World War II, which activists referenced by naming him „Hirohitler,” complicated this. The Emperor’s visit to Bonn allowed for dialogue between West German and Japanese students around common themes of wartime memories. Such perspectives further influenced how activists understood the war in Vietnam, as they equated victims of American bombing campaigns with Jewish victims of the Holocaust and Asian victims of Japanese wartime violence.

ALEX VAZANSKY (University of Nebraska) addressed the experiences of US soldiers in West Germany. The FRG became a hotbed of antiwar activism within the army, and dissenting soldiers found common cause with the West German SDS. Activists helped establish networks for GIs looking to desert, but race and class differences rendered these linkages imperfect. Eventually, dissenters shifted their activism from desertion to internal disruption. The discussion following this panel’s presentations brought these anti-imperialist discourses into dialogue with the Third World concept. The idea of „internal colonization” of oppressed groups was central to both African American and Japanese activists’ understanding of their situation within the imperial system.

More often than not, ’68er activism took place in cities, and historians have analyzed how urban spaces shaped the local contexts of activism. In a panel chaired by ALEXANDER SEDLMAIER (University of Bangor), MAURICE JACKSON (Georgetown University) discussed the four days of rioting which occurred in Washington, DC on 4-8 April 1968. While the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. was the immediate spark for this event, Jackson highlighted longer-term trends. In 1957, Washington became the first US city with African Americans comprising a majority of the population; while the city never had Jim Crow-type legislation, informal discrimination in housing and education remained rampant. In the aftermath of the riots, white and black middle-class flight to suburban areas increased, further exacerbating urban-suburban inequality in the Washington area.

ANKE ORTLEPP (University of Kassel/German Historical Institute, Washington,

DC) traced the shifting interpretations of the ethics and aesthetics of New Brutalist architecture over the postwar period, particularly as it differed in function in the UK and the US. Conceived by the British architects Peter and Alison Smithson as a response to the elitism of modernism, New Brutalism emphasized equality and social inclusion. Over time, however, New Brutalism came to be defined by just one of its features, boxy concrete, which came to reinforce power dynamics. This panel’s discussion further developed the relationship between urban space and protest, as participants noted the development of „riot-proof” buildings on university campuses as well as highlighting examples of protest against planned reconstructions of urban spaces during the 1960s.

Continuing with the interconnection of local activism and urban spaces, DANIEL GORDON (Edge Hill University) examined debates over the feasibility of free public transportation in Paris during the 1970s. Although several French municipalities had eliminated transit fares beginning in 1971, authorities in Paris did not seriously study these programs when considering a similar policy in 1973. Rather, officials looked to a 1972 trial conducted in Rome, deemed a failure. In this case, Gordon argued that international examples could be more illustrative for major cities than domestic ones, suggesting an awareness of the applicability of urban models across national boundaries.

ANDREW DEMSHUK (American University), the conference’s final presenter, discussed the destruction of the University Church in Leipzig by East German officials in May 1968, which sparked the largest protests in East Germany between 17 June 1953 and 1989. Demshuk suggested that the destruction of Leipzig’s University Church illustrated Mary Fulbrook’s notion of „participatory dictatorship” while reinforcing Gary Bruce’s caution against normalizing Soviet-bloc states. The ensuing discussion noted that both presentations on this panel focused on „single-issue” protests in which the interaction between the state and society played a significant role and suggested the „elasticity” of ’68. Participants also debated how neatly these protests fit into the „global 1960s” framework.

Throughout the conference, participants assessed how the global turn has impacted historians' understanding of 1968. The emphasis on transnational linkages among activists has furthered scholarly awareness of activists' self-perceptions as local participants in a global struggle and has brought attention to the concrete role of what was then called the Third World in shaping protest around the world. However, these linkages were often tenuous and occasionally characterized by mistrust, as some activists found that their common anti-authoritarian impulses functioned quite differently in specific national contexts. As multiple conference participants noted, a renewed focus on smaller regional scales, whether at the level of the nation, the city, or a particular neighborhood, offers historians the possibility of understanding the promises and limitations of global mindsets. Moving forward, scholarship on 1968 should seek to understand how global and local dynamics interacted in shaping activism.

Conference Overview:

Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown): Welcome and Introduction

Timothy Brown (Northeastern): What's so Global about the Global 1968?

Christoph Kalter (Berlin): From Global to Local and Back: The Third World Concept in the Radical Sixties

Ben Feldman (Georgetown): The Monthly Review School and the Political Economy of the Third World Left

Sara Pugach (Los Angeles): Occupy the Mission: Malian Students in the GDR between Hope and Protest, 1968-1971

Thom Loyd (Georgetown): 'Thank God I am no Longer a Pawn of an International Conspiracy!': Third World Students and the Ambivalent Internationalism of Soviet Ukraine

Christina von Hodenberg (London): The Gender of '1968' in Bonn and Beyond: From the Local to the Global

Emily Hobson (Nevada): 1968 and the Formation of the Gay and Lesbian Left

Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown): Other

68ers: Memories of Center-Right Activism of the 1960s and 1970s

Quinn Slobodian (Wellesley): Anti-68ers: Right-Libertarians and the Long March against Human Equality

Alex Macartney (Georgetown): Hirohito on the Rhine: The Emperor's State Visit to West Germany and Entangled Japanese-German 1960s History

Alex Vazansky (Nebraska): I'll Bleed for Myself: Black Power and Antiwar Activism among GIs in Germany, 1968-1971

Maurice Jackson (Georgetown): April in Washington: Cherry Blossoms, Burning Buildings and Lost Opportunities

Anke Ortlepp (Kassel): Paranoid Form: New Brutalist Architecture and the Limits of Freedom in the Late 1960s

Daniel Gordon (Edge Hill): From Rome to Paris: Free Public Transport - A Post-1968 Transnational Utopia?

Andrew Demshuk (American): Leipzig in 1968: East Germany's Forgotten Protest

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