

COUNTER-VIOLENCE (1968)

When three hundred bully and abuse a single individual—for whatever sublime purpose—that is terror.

Then (in 1933) as now, the mystical/biological value “young” confronted the mystical/biological non-value “old.”

Terror from the Left . . . but on a supra-provincial scale is no more humane than terror from the Right.

That’s how easy it is for Rudolf Walter Leonhardt of *Die Zeit* (December 29, 1967); that’s how easy it is to speak for those who feel more unhappy than happy about what is happening at German universities at the moment.

All he needs to do is twist the demands for a rational discussion into “whatever sublime purpose” since a sublime purpose is not usually arrived at through rational discussion, and presto! you have a professor who refused to engage in discussion, lost his cool in the process, and was “bullied and abused.”

All you need to do is turn the protest against established power relations into a generational conflict; the protest against the professors’ authority, an authority that has already bullied and abused thousands of students—by fobbing off assignments that took hours of work with a mere grade instead of comments, or by offering students who are starved for learning and enlightenment ideology rather than knowledge, providing them with dogma rather than critical method—this he turns into a mere generational conflict and then quite rightly labels it “mystical/biological.”

And suddenly brown is the same as red, and oppression the same as protest against oppression. As though German fascism had not destroyed the German labor movement and NS students had only attacked old professors, as though it was not the task of German fascism to liquidate all socialist potential in Germany for decades, as though mystico-biological thinking were not the motor of fascism, its instrument, its very foundation.

All you need to do is conjure up some “supra-provincial scale,” which is much easier to do than explain what you mean by this—especially as readers of *Die Zeit* feel they aren’t provincial because they read *Die Zeit*, especially as the petty bourgeois despise no one more than the petty bourgeois—and presto! terror from the Left is the same as terror from the Right. That’s how easy it is, at least in Germany, where fascism is still seen as an episode of hooliganism, a momentary lapse in the German spirit, a misfortune of German history, a stroke of fate that had no source in society, and maybe did somehow somewhere have “a sublime purpose,” which was just pursued with the wrong methods.

When the annual opening ceremonies took place at the University of Hamburg in November (A Thousand Years of Fusty Odors from under Academic Gowns) and a few SDS students disrupted them, and when these disruptions occurred during the new rector’s speech on the topic of the economy and grew noisier and noisier, until they could no longer be ignored and became unbearable for the rector who was justifying Schiller’s economic policies and proclaiming anti-union ideas, such as the thesis of the wage-price spiral and talking about development aid as though the Third World were not being exploited; when a majority of the students in the main auditorium had eventually had

enough and could no longer just sit there and accept the reactionary lecture without protesting, could no longer be silent as working people were being insulted and German imperialism justified, there came a point when the mood was close to turning against the rector and the professors and the ceremoniousness and all the opening activities and no one could hear themselves anymore, and no microphone was strong enough, and the ceremony was on the verge of chaos. That's when the head of the AStA¹ went to the mike, the same person who had earlier provided the students with an ABC of the deplorable state of affairs at the University of Hamburg, and whom the students were willing to listen to. He said that if people wanted to hold discussions with the new rector they should do so afterward. They should let him have his say first because all this noise and uproar was not conducive to discussion. So the rector continued his speech, and the mood against him remained suppressed; people were quiet and disciplined, as was right and proper. But when the rector finished his speech, the university orchestra started up in full sound and the professors held their procession out of the hall with one of them shouting to the students that they all belonged in concentration camps, and Thielicke² telling them they should be careful they don't turn into psychiatric cases. That was the thanks they got for letting the rector finish. Helpless, they watched the rector abuse the word of the head of the AstA; he used the situation to finish his talk in peace and quiet but did not intervene when the student orchestra started right up and prevented the promised discussion from taking place. And so the ceremonies in the main auditorium of a German university were used to wish the grand coalition in Bonn all the best, present economic theses that were

everything but anti-fascist without anyone being able to raise objections, or commemorate the dead of the past year—Benno Ohnesorg for instance—and students were forced to suppress their opposition and let a rector who was using the weapons of academia against the unions and the revolutionary movements of the Third World finish his talk.

The fact that students will no longer put up with such things, that students have decided to no longer let reactionary professors finish their speeches, and that those in earlier semesters will therefore not continue to lose valuable years before they finally see through the sham but begin to study and learn in critical fashion much earlier than preceding generations—this fact does not make the university “non-functional as a center of research and learning”—as R. W. Leonhardt would have it. On the contrary, this is precisely what makes it functional. The students have learnt through bitter experience—such as the opening ceremonies of the University of Hamburg—that they cannot achieve their goals by being quiet and well-behaved. They have to be noisy and persistent. They have understood that ceremonious orderliness does not allow room for critical content or democratic discussions, and that certain professors will have to suffer some unpleasant experiences if they refuse other forms of discussion.

If certain professors feel they are being bullied and abused just because the students no longer let themselves be bullied and abused, then these professors will have to be asked to think about the positions they hold. R. W. Leonhardt does them no favor when he leads them down the path of mystical/biological irrationality. On the contrary, that is how you harden anti-democratic and anti-socialist resentments, and make those professors who react with

irrational fears to demands for rational discussion even more helpless in the face of the students. That is how you condemn students who understandably and legitimately demand rational discussions, which they themselves are quite capable of. But at the moment it seems that only noise and absolute impatience can make this clear to the professors. To label this terrorism is to overlook the self-defense aspect of the student actions, as in the example of the opening ceremonies at the University of Hamburg and at countless other German universities today.

NOTES

1. AstA, or *Allgemeiner Studentenausschuss*, is the general council of students.
2. Helmut Thielicke was a professor of theology, who also held positions as rector and dean until he retired in 1974.