

WATER CANNONS: AGAINST WOMEN, TOO (1968)

THE STUDENT AND THE PRESS: A POLEMIC AGAINST RUDOLF AUGSTEIN AND HIS GANG

The blast that catapulted the student and extra-parliamentary opposition groups into the international as well as the local lime-light, into the greater and the lesser public eye, was triggered by the shot that killed Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin on June 2, 1967. Since then, this oppositional movement has caught the attention of the international press, and has become the stuff of conversations at the dinner table. Since then, it has been making headlines and setting off family fights.

Finally, we have generational conflicts again, conflicts between men and women, between people with different opinions, between friends and enemies. Henri Nannen's¹ attacks on Lübke are making them both look bad; *konkret* is annoyed with Rudolf Augstein² for not retracting his campaign to destroy the reputation of Nirumand though he knows he should. People are no longer just playing the roles of adversaries in order to be nice to each other again afterward. People are no longer concealing their annoyances, or sweeping conflicts under the rug, or explaining nausea as a consequence of a pill, or fighting melancholy with coffee, or stomach aches with mint tea, or depression with champagne, or vapid sobriety with schnapps.

Student actions rather than workers' struggles have set off this new irritation. They have brought the contradictions of this society to the surface. Malaparte's image of dogs with slashed bellies who don't howl because their vocal chords have also been cut is no longer totally apt. We are hearing a few howls again—at least a few.

Whether wives are the ones wailing, or sons are feeling on the verge of tears, or Rudi Dutschke is educating the public in snarling tones on the marketplaces—these activities have one thing in common: fake harmony has gone down the tubes. Cover-ups and appearances are breaking down. Conflicts are becoming visible, personal conflicts are increasingly being ascribed to social ones, or seen as an expression of social conflicts.

The murderer is not guilty; his victim is.

The situation started getting international attention on June 2. That day there were already various and different views, as we can see from the commentaries published on the events: they contain and disclose the defense mechanisms and strategies of concealment that have been implemented ever since by those who are not interested in letting social conflicts become visible. Normally, those who suffer from social conflicts are the ones who benefit from making them visible. Concealing them must be in the interests of those who benefit from them, who are well ensconced.

STRATEGY OF CONCEALMENT I: PETTY BOURGEOIS RESPECTABILITY AS A VALUE IN ITSELF

In Augstein's first commentary after June 2, entitled "Why they are demonstrating," he wrote, "As a TV viewer I do not like slogans such as 'Johnson the murderer' or 'Shah-Hitler-Ky.'³ People

who protest should consider that anyone who wants to destroy things must also offer alternatives.”

Augstein does not care if the parallels drawn between the Shah, Ky, and Hitler, or the stigma of murderer attached to Johnson are appropriate. Nor does he consider that the people using these slogans may have thought them through. Just like any man on the street in some provincial place, he is shocked at bourgeois respectability being offended. In the words of the lead article in the *Koblenzer Rheinzeitung* (June 9 and 10, 1967):

“When noisy rows replace rational argument then there is a point at which disturbance becomes anarchy.”

Augstein wrote, “Tomatoes should not be thrown at his—the Shah’s—head, and anyone who throws tomatoes at him should expect to be targeted by water cannons—women too. Those are plain rules of behavior.”

And the *Lübecker Nachrichten* commented, “The rotten eggs, tomatoes, and bags of milk used in the disturbances are not worthy instruments of debate for our younger generation of intellectuals.”

Springer’s *BZ* wrote on June 3, 1967: “Anyone who offends rules of decency and order must expect to be called to order by those who are decent.”

Wherever the issue is perceived as one of bourgeois respectability, Springer, the provincial press, and Augstein react in equally small-minded ways. They are more concerned with maintaining bourgeois reputations than with revealing truths or protesting violence. The new limitations imposed on *Stern* because of horrific images from Vietnam coincide completely with the Springer media’s engagement in Vietnam and Rudolf Augstein’s notions about public order and behavior.

STRATEGY OF CONCEALMENT 2: THE INNOCENCE OF THE SYSTEM

While the Springer media would like to simply get rid of the students, remove them completely from the scene—as the *Berliner Morgenpost* put it on June 3: “Anyone who means well for Berlin should drive these radicalized hooligans out of the temple; they are ruining Berlin’s reputation”—the more liberal press wants to protect the system, explaining that the events of June 2 are, in fact, inexplicable.

Augstein said, “A police force that beats up on women is a dehumanized gang. I just can’t understand it any other way.” (He plainly doesn’t understand it.)

Kai Hermann wrote in *Die Zeit*⁴ of June 16: “It is a senseless task to try to make sense of the senseless death of Benno Ohnesorg.”

The lead article of the *Neue Ruhr Zeitung* commented, “There is not a single argument that could ascribe any meaning whatsoever to the death of Benno Ohnesorg.” Questions about the system that spawned the police terror in Berlin, the system that prefers to beat up and kill its opposition than refuse to pay homage to the head of a police state, those questions remain taboo. Given this belief in the senselessness and inexplicability of Benno Ohnesorg’s death, and given the belief in the innocence of the system, it is only one small step to the notion of the murder victim and not the murderer being guilty. On June 3, the *BZ* in Berlin wrote, “Anyone who produces terror must expect a harsh response.” On June 4, the *Welt am Sonntag* commented, “The hooligans who provoked the bloody event . . .”

On June 10 and 11, the *Koblenzer Rhein-Zeitung* wrote, “It is easy to cry murder when a young human life is extinguished by police gunfire. But however regrettable this event is, there should

be no doubt that the moral and political responsibility lies fully with those who are now turning the tables and crying ‘Murder’ according to the old method of ‘Stop thief.’” And Thilo Koch at the *Neue Ruhrer Zeitung* came out with system-defending generalizations: “Hatred is a flame waiting to flare up in every human being. Anyone who fans hatred becomes guilty. The hatred that killed Benno Ohnesorg had two causes: the excessive provocations of a few extremist students and the excessive suppression of this provocation by the Berlin police.”

Fairy tale arguments, all of them. Augstein’s police as a dehumanized band of robbers; Kai Hermann’s “senseless death,” presumably at the hands of the bad fairy godmother; Thilo Koch’s “flaming hatred” as though surreptitiously fanned by witches, giants, and magicians—the system itself is left intact.

STRATEGY OF CONCEALMENT 3: THE ORDER OF THINGS IS IN ORDER; THE OTHERS ARE CONFUSED

If the system is under a taboo and not being discussed, then the order of things is in order, and only the devil knows who dehumanized the police. Those who set off the confusion must be the ones who confused Augstein, and must also be confused themselves. *Bild* wrote about “adolescent crazies”; *Hamburger Abendblatt*, about “dumb adolescents, confused cliques.” *Welt am Sonntag* printed: “They wave red flags and protest against everything western. They demonstrate against America at the top of their lungs, against South Vietnam, against Israel, against the Shah, against the German Chancellor, and are silent about all the human rights abuses the East commits.”

The same sort of thing was published the next day in Herr

Kapfnger's⁵ *Passauer Neue Presse*: "The Maoists wave red flags and Vietcong flags and protest against everything western. They protest at the tops of their lungs. . . . But in political terms they are blind in one eye and are silent about all the human rights abuses the East commits."

The same criticism—about the demonstrators being confused, politically blind in one eye, and unable to explain themselves—is raised by Rudolf Augstein in his long article "The Revolution and its ABC" (July 1967):

Dutschke demonstrates impressive learning and intellectual discipline but his views on a future society are unclear if not confused . . .

Overturning the existing order (Dutschke), changing society (Lefèvre)⁶: these are big objectives. But since they are obviously beyond the reach of the students, they are nothing but big words . . .

I think it is not too much to ask that the students at least clarify their objectives if they cannot explain them . . .

At the moment, all their intentions to change society are floating around in abstract space . . .

STRATEGY OF CONCEALMENT 4: ENGAGEMENT—BUT OF A DIFFERENT KIND

Anyone who sets himself up to protect the system does well, does what is necessary, to provide the system with advice about how it might improve, how it might deal with the opposition so that no more shots have to be fired, no more tomatoes hurled, so that the noise stops, the Shah is left in peace, and Johnson stops suffering insults.

When the *Hamburger Abendblatt* (June 10 and 11) was finished scolding people and had to think of something new, it said, “The young people, at least the students, do not feel completely at home in our quietly affluent society, committed to pallid good behavior. Student youth seeks engagement. But how should they orient and engage themselves?”

The *Lübecker Nachrichten* (June 30) said, “We don’t think students should keep away from political engagement. The question is not about whether they should be engaged, but about how.”

And the *Koblenzer Rhein-Zeitung* (June 10 and 11) wrote, “Our young people, students included, want engagement. It’s not as if they are mouthing slogans about affluence. On the contrary, they want to face difficult facts. Youthful willingness to get engaged is a good thing. It is a necessary thing. We just need to ask—what kind of engagement?”

DER SPIEGEL, THE PROVINCIAL PAPERS, AND THE SPRINGER PRESS

Rudolf Augstein commented, “If we had a political party that held honest discussions and made honest decisions, many of these protesting students would be involved in it.” Augstein knows no such party exists; he does not explain why this is so. The system is under a taboo. Just like the *Berliner Morgenpost* (October 21) that asked, “What does Fritz Teufel⁷ have to do with Vietnam?” And the *Rhein-Zeitung* that wondered, “What is the connection between the Vietcong and academic freedom or lack of it?”

Nor does Augstein understand the systemic connection between social justice here and an imperialist war over there, or

between the refusal to democratize the university system here and the refusal to democratize the countries of the Third World. Augstein writes, "The thankless university reforms are the only issue German students have to engage with besides abstractions in Greece, Persia, Vietnam, China—countries they know largely through printed works."

There must be some explanation for this rather disconcerting agreement between *Spiegel*, the provincial papers, and the Springer press—this concord of defense mechanisms and strategies of concealment that even a superficial analysis quickly lays bare; this lack of conceptual analysis and conceptual clarity that the provincial plagiarists, Springer writers, and even a clearly superior journalist such as Augstein display. There must be a reason why there is only a tiny difference between the liberal press and the Springer press, a difference expressed in the Springer press already calling for the students to be ghettoized and violently suppressed while the liberals are still leaning toward more pacifist methods of defense—and thereby coming into conflict with the Springer press. But is the difference between the rubber truncheons, tear gas, and martial arts troops that the Springer press wants (*BZ* February 7, 1968) and the water cannon that Augstein calls a matter of course really so great? It is true that there are big differences between the *Spiegel* and the Springer press when the topic is something other than students—such as the recognition of the GDR, the Oder-Neisse border, the grand coalition, the *Bundespräsident*, and the re-legitimation of the KPD.⁸

The liberal press, the Springer media, and the provincial press are claiming together now that the issue is not a mere change in politics under existing power relations, but a change in these very

power relations. That is what is at stake in Vietnam and in Bahman Nirumand's book on Persia, and what was at stake during the anti-Shah and the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. The press does not just draw together because they are deliberately and exclusively interested in maintaining the existing power relations, but because there is no need for them to reflect on these relations since they are doing rather well. And if there is no need for them to reflect on the existing power relations, then they cannot imagine other ones, because it is indeed very difficult to imagine that the masses who read the *Bild-Zeitung* here and the illiterate masses in Persia and the passive masses overrun by children in South America might be capable of taking their lives and fates into their own hands and organizing and representing their own interests.

But the process has started with Vietnam; it has become thinkable. The students have begun to make it known and to explain it; there is no press to help them with their task. Those who write about them seem to have succumbed to the same news boycott that has been imposed on what the students have to say.

NOTES

1. Henri Nannen (1913–1996) was a publisher who served as a long-time editor for the liberal, sometimes left-leaning weekly magazine *Stern*, a direct competitor of *Der Spiegel* (see next note).
2. Rudolf Karl Augstein (1923–2002) was a journalist and publisher who founded the influential and widely distributed weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, generally considered politically left-liberal.
3. Nguyen Cao Ky was known as the fanatically anti-Communist head of the South Vietnamese government from 1965 to 1967. As a former air force commander, he flew bombing raids over North Vietnam until 1965.
4. *Die Zeit* is an influential liberal weekly national newspaper, whose intended readership includes academics and the educated and intellectual bourgeoisie.

5. Hans K. Kapfinger was sole owner of the *Passauer Neue Presse*, a daily newspaper for the city of Passau, since 1946.
6. Wolfgang Lefevre (1941–) was one of the well-known student activists associated with Rudi Dutschke and the protest movement.
7. Fritz Teufel (1943–) was a key student activist in West Germany, and co-founder of the Kommune I, a politically motivated residential cooperative which existed between 1967 and 1969.
8. KPD stands for *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, the German Communist Party.