

# Was the European student movement of the 1960s a global phenomenon?

Written by Angeliki Mitropoulou

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ANGELIKI MITROPOULOU, JUL 2 2011

In order to present a holistic approach to the discussion of the student movement of the 1960s, it is very important to initiate the discussion with reference to the prior decades. Authors like Marwich (2006) have commented on the convergence between affluence and other demographic, technological, institutional, and ideological factors. This process took place between 1945 and 1975, the Trente Glorieuses as it is often called (Fourastie, 1979). One of the most noteworthy demographic factors and characteristics of the 1940s was the famous “baby boom,” the incredibly high birth rate during that period. This dramatic increase resulted in high percentages of young people in 1960s. Moreover, the 1950s in Western societies has often been characterized as conformist.

The 1960s were different and distinct from the 1940s and 1950s, in the sense that a number of transformations started to occur that shaped a different reality. Lifestyle and living standards started increasing sharply and a new phenomenon called “consumerism” started making its impact. However, maybe the most distinctive feature that marked and defined the decade was the series of intense and violent political protests and confrontations. In general, the protagonists of these events were mainly students and youngsters.

According to the vast majority of researchers and authors, 1968 was the most important year of the 1960s because it had a significant impact on generations of students. According to Marwick, (2006) the young people, but more specifically the students, who did not demonstrate any interest in politics and who were resistant to radical ideals based on Marxist theory up to that point, were in fact those that engaged in protest movements as they considered the authorities, and above all the police, to be actors that used illegitimate force. The student movements in the West could be described as collective actions against absolutism and totalitarianism, which were aimed at promoting equality at almost all levels (Flacks 1970, p. 345).

What do Mary Quant, Pop music, the Beatles, the Twist, sex & drugs, the saying “having a good time,” Pop art, Nouveau Realism, and Che Guevara all have in common? They are all elements, slogans, ideologies, and personalities that defined the youth culture and generation of the 1960s, the generation that participated in the waves of student movements all over the world.

### Going Global

Before discussing the magnitude of the student movements, it is useful to present a very brief explanation of the term “student movement.” According to Milieu Kazuko (1968, p. 430) a student movement is defined by its participants as a sustained, concerned action, exerted by a group or groups of students, opposed to the existing system or systems of power. This discussion is based on that definition of student movement because as the rest of the essay showcases, regardless of the country, students were protesting against established forms of power.

According to Flacks (1970), the phenomenon of students becoming “rebels” for various reasons started appearing internationally. During the 1960s, protesting students created serious disruptions in societies and shook political systems globally in countries as diverse as Japan, France, Mexico, West Germany, Italy, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, and the US. The magnitude of these movements in terms of global expansion is one of their most fundamental and

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predominant characteristics (Siegfried 2006, p. 61). Fifty six countries and governments had to face thousands of students acting as rebels. Even Third World countries faced movements created by rebellious youth, such as Castrism and the Maoist Cultural Revolution. Indeed, After Che Guevara's death in the late 1960s he became perhaps the ultimate symbolic figure of youth in revolt (Schildt and Siegfried 2006).

The next section showcases examples from countries that faced large student protests. In general, the movements were more intense in the developed countries of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan, but many Third World and Eastern European countries had intense movements as well.

Flacks (1970) distinguished two main features of these movements in order to justify their world-wide character. These are the simultaneity of the outbursts and the common attributes they have in terms of style and tactics. He argued that these movements were international in scope (Flacks 1970, p. 340) and he firmly believed that they were a phenomenon that did not originate in the 1960s, but existed previously during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in various countries, such as Russia, China, and in Latin-America. Moreover, it was logical for such movements to appear, in order to oppose tsars, war-lords, and dictators (Flacks 1970, p. 351). Student movements were crucial in the revolution that occurred in Central Europe in 1848. He uses a very simple, but to the point, phrase to sum it up: "the feeling that there is something new about generational revolt is not accurate in global terms" (Flacks 1970, p. 341).

An additional distinctive characteristic relevant to the appearance of the global movements was that these revolts appeared simultaneously in almost all the countries that faced this social phenomenon. This element functioned as a catalyst and motivation toward similar targets, and with common procedures and actions.

However, as Siedfried (2006, p. 61) puts it "...it is questionable whether the description of the network of the events of 1968 as a global revolution is accurate." He justifies this point of view by noting that the series of events did not have immediate and profound results in the form of changes to any economic or political systems, and that in a number of cases they did not even have an impact on existing governments. On the contrary, the brief discussion of student movements in the following countries points to different conclusions.

## USA

American student activism started growing significantly in the 1960s (Altaback and Cohen 1990). In fact, this growth was striking because it was the first time something like this had happened since the 1930s. In many states numerous institutions started participating in demonstrations, and their impact was so strong that sitting President Lyndon Johnson decided to withdraw from the procedure due to his policies regarding the war in Vietnam.

One of the most famous educational institutions that actively participated in the student movement of the 1960s was Berkeley University in California. According to Scoot and Al-Assal (1969) it had its roots in the previous decade, as did the whole American student movement. However, this specific institution is often mentioned in relation to student activism because of the Free Speech Movement of 1964.

According to formal sources (History of UC Berkeley) on the site of the American institution, students were protesting in order to support their constitutional right for free speech and to use the campus for political discussions. As a consequence, students all over the United States started demonstrating, and they were not as "silent" (Scott and Al-Assal 1969, p. 702) and obedient as many authors believed, thus the case of Berkeley University is a very good example of this turning point in the general behavior of students. Moreover, after the events at Berkeley University, it was noted that student activism became more intense in terms of the number of incidents and the degree of militancy.

Flacks (1970), in his early research, found that the student movement originated at the highest quality state institutions, private universities, and colleges with distinct prestige, and then spread to schools that did not share those characteristics at the beginning of 1970s. All in all, the American student movement started early in the 1960s, the protests then escalated around 1965 with the Vietnam war, and it reached its peak around 1969 (Rothman and

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Lichter 1978).

## Europe

In general, The European student movement had a slightly different course because even though it peaked at the same period, it emerged later than in America. In some countries, the movement was much more serious than in others (Rothman and Lichter 1978). According to Glazer (1968), Berkeley's protests had a remarkable impact on the European wave of student demonstrations, especially in France, Italy, and West Germany.

### France

"When the finger points at the moon, the IDIOT looks at the finger," this is a Chinese proverb that was written on a wall in the Paris Conservatoire de Musique in May 1968. There is perhaps no better way to understand the upheaval of those days than by looking at what was written on the walls, and the phrases protesters used to express themselves. In France, the majority of the most notable universities stopped functioning in 1968 due to a general strike in which, not only students, but also laborers, members of many communities, and groups were participating to challenge the general political system (Rothman 1978). Quattrocchi and Nairn (1998, p. 2) have phrased this argument in a more poetic way by saying that "The May revolution fought for the visible (bread) and the invisible (a new order)."

Student movements in France were violent and massive, but they also had a distinct characteristic. According to Samuelson (1968), the extent of the protests was rather surprising, and it was difficult to forecast that those events would turn into a crucial national crisis. At first, the forms of protest that were taking place in Paris were of minor importance compared to those in Berlin, and in New York at Columbia University. This shows that similar demonstrations were taking place in other countries and not only in Europe, even though the gravity of the events might not have been equal. The situation in Paris escalated very quickly as a result of governmental mistakes, one of which was the closing of Sorbonne. So, the protests turned rapidly from riots with a few students versus the police, to a massive wave of opposition against the "status-quo."

### West Germany, Denmark, and Italy

Surprising as it may sound, observers viewed the youngsters of West Germany and Denmark as conformists in the mid 1960s (Siegfried 2006). However, student protests in Germany and Italy, at the end of the decade, had a significant impact on university students, and those demonstrations were even more violent than those that occurred in the US (Stanley and Lichter 1978). The student movements in West Germany are considered part of a larger group called "new social movements," and according to researchers, they were much more intense at the end of the decade.

Also, the same argument prevails for Italy because, according to Siegfried (2006), the movement spread through the younger levels of society after 1969. This is not only the case for these two countries, but also for others. Even though numerous student movements occurred within the same broad time period, this did not signify that they had the same timeline in terms of escalation and intensity.

### Britain

Thomas (2002) distinguishes two main forms of protest that were taking place in Britain in the 1960s, and at the same time reinforces that the global context is important in order to discuss any issues related to this phenomenon. In 1968 sit-ins were prevalent among universities like LSE, Birmingham, and Leeds. However, there were also street demonstrations with a variety of themes, such as disapproval over the political decisions of John Enoch Powell,

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nuclear weapons, and perhaps the hottest issue of the era, the Vietnam War. Many of the reasons for protesting inspired many songs by the Beatles (Brabazon 2005), like the song Commonwealth which targeted Powell. However, British students participating in protests were accused of representing only a minority, and that they were strongly influenced by demonstrations that were taking place in other countries such as Germany, France, and the USA. Even if that was the case, though, this signified that the protests were not isolated events, but rather a broader phenomenon.

## Japan

Many countries, apart from those mentioned above, faced intense waves of student movements, and Japan was no exception. During the last years of the 1960s, students in Japan protested fiercely against the state, the military, and the industry (Kiyota 1971). The distinct feature about Japanese movements was a high degree of militancy, which became a cause of public discontent, and poor support by other groups. However, they had a significant impact because they underlined the need for educational and functional reforms at universities. As Kiyota (1971) mentions, the students questioned the prevailing hierarchies, the academic elite, the status-quo, the moral corruption of employees within Japanese universities, and the functioning of the Ministry of Education. The main conclusion that can be derived from this is that Japanese students were deeply disappointed and frustrated with every aspect of their universities, and that they focused on the need for urgent modification of educational policies and planning.

## Conclusion

Scott and El-Assal (1969) argued that at the end of the 1960s there were very few studies that had been conducted on a systematic basis regarding student movements. Given that student activism had been defined early as a “social problem,” it is striking that the pieces that have been written about it, and all the relevant commentaries, were not based on solid research using proper methodology and empirical data. As a consequence, the interpretation of the student movement depended on speculations and opinions. Whether the student movement of Western Europe was a global phenomenon in the 1960s also seems to be a matter of speculation and opinion. However, both the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by generation upheaval (Schildt and Siegfried 2006, p. 3) and the majority of researchers, at least in the 1960s and 1970s, seemed to agree that those movements were a global wave with various causes.

Few can deny that the events that occurred during the “long sixties” were significant, because they were representative of a revolution that had an important impact and changed the every-day life of millions of people (Schildt and Siegfried 2006, p. 43). Moreover, it has been characterized as having an “imposing historical reputation” (Altbach and Cohen 1990, p. 48). More specifically, Quattrocchi and Nairn (1998) argue that 1968 was the year that shocked the world.

By reviewing the decades before, and by looking into the events of specific countries as they were presented by various authors, the movements had a number of common characteristics, such as the elements of militancy. Maybe there was no coordination between the universities globally, but this does not mean that the movements did not have a global character. Western Europe was not the only place that had to cope with hundreds at first, and later millions, of students who were trying to prove that they wanted a better present, and a better future, and they would do anything to protest the forms of power that were an obstacle in achieving that goal. Students all over the world had common worries, a general disappointment and discontent with the prevailing status-quo, and common values, like anti-war feelings, that urged them to demonstrate.

Lastly, the main outcomes of the research appear to support the claim that the anti-conformist student movement was indeed a global phenomenon, even though there are still some sociologists that support the idea that the protests were only movements of university students, and small minorities of young people that had little to do with higher education (Siegfried 2006). “Il est interdit d’interdire. Pouvoir à l’Imagination .Soyez réalistes, demandez l’impossible” (Forbidden is forbidden. The imagination in power. Be realists, ask for the impossible). This was some of the graffiti written on Parisian walls in 1968, but its meaning is for the goals of students and young people all over

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the world. After all, even if there is no solid conclusion about those days back in the 1960s, and whether the student movement in Western Europe was a global phenomenon or not, the people back then fought for a final goal: a better life for everyone. Everything else is open for debate (Siegfried 2006).

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Written by: Angeliki Mitropoulou  
Written at: Cardiff University  
Written for: Dr Nick Parsons  
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