

**Book Review: Student Revolt in 1968: France, Italy and West Germany**

*by Ben Mercer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 268 pp., U.S. \$99.99*

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The strategic position held by the University at the heart of the 1968 movements, as a “society in miniature” where ideas and actions could be tested and mapped onto society at large, is both pivotal and well documented. Ben Mercer’s *Student Revolt in 1968*, adds to this discourse by convincingly arguing for the re-analysis of the Sixties as demonstrating the “possibilities”, rather than the “successes” or “failures” of democracy within the remit of higher education. In focusing on three case studies, the campus of Nanterre (France), the University of Trento (Italy), and the Free University of Berlin (West Germany), complex local narratives are used to demonstrate the “dilemmas of democracy” as well as the difficulties in analyzing what has often been framed as a global movement in vastly contradictory and fluctuating local contexts. By examining the “mundane” origins of revolt, the conflicting development, and fractious dissolution of events at the three universities, Mercer exposes how the competing visions of democratization played out within the confines of the University, before their redirection into social action beyond the borders of the institution.

Part I, “Education and Culture,” treads somewhat familiar ground in setting the scene for an in-depth exploration of the changes within higher education in the post-war period and the continual dialogue with interpretations of democracy. Mercer contextualizes the various understandings of the concept of the “mass university” and its reflection of wider debates around social mobility, equality, and the changing demographics of the student body. Mercer’s focus on the discipline of sociology is

particularly successful in encompassing many of the wider issues facing post-war society; the desire for a political, overtly social and self-critical discourse pitted the students against the technocratic university administrations and symbolized the beginnings of the widening gap between generations and their respective conceptualizations of democracy. Chapter 3 “Books for All” returns the reader firmly to the cultural sphere in its analysis of the “democratization” versus the “commodification of high culture” (67, 77) through the increased circulation of paperbacks. Mercer effectively interweaves a multitude of sources to demonstrate the contradictions imbued in the re-framing of the book as a status symbol of the ‘68ers, as a product of consumption, and of visual, rather than intellectual stimulation (79-80). Mercer engagingly argues that the students’ attack on the barricade of high culture undermined by the mass marketing of paperbacks “constituted the second paperback revolution of the decade” (87).

Part II, “Politics of Revolt,” follows roughly the same format by beginning with more contextual and pragmatic sections which situate the national differences in political organization. This is followed by two chapters which enrich the previous discussions in demonstrating the impact of structural organization on the students’ conception of democracy and their choice of protest methods selected to navigate their local contexts. Chapter 6 pointedly illustrates the issues that led to the dissipation of the movement; the difficulties in retaining momentum when goals, tactics and interpretations of local and global issues diverged into a myriad of disputes framed loosely in the two binaries of “revolt or reform?” Chapter 7 frames these questions and the differing interpretations through “freedom of speech” as both a means of provocation and of establishing new or reproducing “hierarchies characteristic of intellectual language” (168). Mercer demonstrates with great clarity, how general

demands such as “democratization”, “freedom of speech,” and “representation” bely intricate contestations. These terms not only contain the complex navigation of competing interests at local level, but also distort wider national and global issues, and which ultimately remained unresolved due to their inherent ambiguity.

Part III, “Crisis of the University,” is the most engaging of all sections of *Student Revolt in 1968*, as it is here that the significance of the case studies in their connection to global discursive issues of speech, space, and democracy come to the fore. Continuing themes from the previous section, Mercer successfully illustrates the paradox of the intended “democratization” of language as a largely liberating aspect of the student movement. Embedded within this liberation, was the competing need to navigate intellectual discussions with professors whilst not alienating the student cohort, or more importantly the working classes, who were not well versed in Marxist rhetoric but seen as fundamental to the success of the movement’s aims. Combined with the contradictions of freedom of the press, the silencing of professors and right-wing student groups, Mercer builds up a rich demonstration of the particular understanding of “freedom” that was demanded and intricately connected to local specifics. Mercer makes a necessary and very welcome contribution to this discourse in raising the voices of female participants in the student debates, arguing that the generational sense of isolation was re-framed and reinforced by the rise of aggressively articulate “male charismatic authority” at the expense of the “silence of others” (21, 173). Whilst significant in its current framing, the discussion of the policing and administration of spaces as a form of retaliation by university administrations would have contributed nicely to discourse around the “right to the city” and the corporal politics of occupation.

Mercer chooses to end the book with a discussion of the Critical University iterations at the three case studies “as the most coherent and developed application of

radical democratic ideas to the institutions of higher education” (3). The experiments all failed in varying degrees, and all, as Mercer argues, owing in part to the difficulty in sustaining momentum; the need for new adversaries to critique and contest and new political arenas soon highlighted that the student movement “as a political movement, [...] was ill-adapted to run a university” (284). This culmination, whilst successfully demonstrating the implantation of transnational ideals at a local context, would have benefited from a more extended analysis owing to its framing as the zenith of discussions in the previous chapters. Despite the somewhat disappointing climax of the *Critical University* its analysis nevertheless helps to demonstrate the inability of aspects of the student movement to realize their ideals when their demands moved from conflict to implementation.

Overall, Mercer’s book is a welcome addition to literature concerning both the contradictions inherent in the navigation of social unrest and the multi-faceted understandings of “democratization” during the Sixties. Despite the generalized title, *Student Revolt in 1968* attests to the complex and intricate nature of various ’68 movements and successfully demonstrates the impact of very specific local and regional contexts. Mercer highlights the contradictions within the student movement that it continually navigated, revealing succinctly the issues that the student movement ultimately failed to resolve. Mercer, for the most part, skillfully navigates the difficulty of engaging with local specifics in a comparative study of a global movement. By challenging the binaries of success and failure and through embracing and investigating contradiction, *Student Revolt in 1968* provides not only a solid basis for further comparative studies of the period, a useful resource for those working from the global to the specific and vice versa, but also demonstrates how ’68 can be simultaneously framed as a multi-local, regional, national, and transnational movement. Embracing the

open-ended nature of '68 adds further weight to an understanding of the local difficulties in realizing the aims of democratization; in highlighting its limitations, Mercer brings into focus potential lessons still to be learned for the betterment of institutions within contemporary society.