

## The gender of '68

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### ABSTRACT

Gender norms were profoundly overturned during “1968.” The role of men and women changed in the short-term as the events unfolded. Masculinities were modified by youth who grew long hair and wore the same jeans as young girls, even though traditional gender roles endured among the stewards of demonstrations and groups on the far left. Demands for equal pay for men and women were made in 1966 during strikes in Herstal, Belgium, in 1968 in a Ford factory in the London suburbs, and in May-June 1968 during strikes in France. A feminist movement inspired by American women was established in numerous European countries, with the slogan of “the personal is political.” The fight for contraception and abortion led to new laws, and the right to divorce was obtained, although sometimes with a chronological time lag, for instance in Italy and Switzerland. Sexualities themselves were gradually transformed.



HIT, an International u-counter media, December 1970, cited in Antonio Benci, “Perceptions, transpositions et mémoires du Mai français en Italie,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps* 94 (2009): 39-46.

This vignette inspired by the artistic and revolutionary situationist movement, and accompanied by the commentary “the proletariat must control everything,” personifies the gender upheaval of “1968.” Post-1968 political violence, which in Europe essentially involved Germany and Italy, was the lot of both men and women, who sometimes played a major role, such as the leader of the Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorist organization, Ulrike Meinhof (1934-1976). It was a time when the social norms of the masculine and feminine were deeply called into

question.

Exploring gender can provide an account of the respective roles played by women and men in the short-term as the events of 1968 unfolded, as well as how “1968” saw the transformation (or not) of feminine and masculine identities. Taking the European dimension of “1968” into account entails examining the ideas, slogans, and repertoires of actions that fuelled the protest. The transnational dimension of the protest phenomenon highlights the mechanisms of transfer and circulation. These exchanges were facilitated by the distribution of images, including those on television, which took on a growing role in homes, along with pictures and icons.

## **Gender dissidence**

In the historical sequence of 1968, hegemonic masculinity expressed itself in both proletarian *virilities*—personified in April 1968 by the British dockers who demonstrated in support of the ultraconservative MP Enoch Powell (1912-1998), a supporter of stopping immigration—and the stewards of student movements, with the transfer of repertoires of protest action throughout Europe. However, dissident masculinities were displayed through long hair, clothing, and the rejection of social norms and hierarchies, as expressed by the marginal beatniks as they crisscrossed Europe.

At the same time, women supported demands for equality in the name of Europe. On February 16, 1966, 3,000 female labourers from the Fabrique nationale d’armes de guerre in Herstal (Belgian Wallonia) stopped working and demanded the application of the principle of *equal pay for equal work*, referring to article 119 of the Treaty of Rome from 1957. This demand—*Equal pay for women*—was also advanced in 1968 at a Ford factory in the London suburbs, as well as during the strikes of May-June 1968 in France, which called for “parity” in salaries. Women also demanded the right to have control over their bodies, and to therefore have access to contraception and abortion.

## **Masculine practices of mobilization**

These general trends cannot obscure contrasting situations in various European countries, which constructed diverse forms of masculinity and femininity. For instance, when faced with the development of nuclear weapons during the “Cold War,” the leaders of the antimilitarist campaigns held by the British Committee of 100 advocated non-violence and civil disobedience, and resorted to fasting, peaceful meetings, and marches. Anti-imperialism lashed out especially at American policy in Vietnam, as well as at the Soviet Empire and its domination of Eastern Europe. Thousands of sympathizers from across Europe met in Berlin in support of Vietnam on February 17-18, 1968, including 500 from France along with their student leaders—all men—including the two founders of the *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* (JCR), Alain Krivine (born in 1941) and Daniel Bensaid (1946-2010), the founder of the March 22 movement in Nanterre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit (born in 1945), and representatives from the left-wing of UNEF, Jean-Marcel Bouguereau (born in 1946) and Jean-Louis Péninou (born in 1942). In Berlin they admired the protest methods used by students from the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*): slogans chanted to the beating of hands and running forward to the rhythm of “Che-Che Guevara,” which were imitated in Paris in February 1968 during anti-imperialist demonstrations. These new forms of action did not prevent violent forms of mobilization that expressed a virile militant identity. French students confronted Paris police in the Latin Quarter on May 3, 1968, and riots opposing the Swedish Anti-Apartheid movement and police took place in Båstad during a Davis Cup match between Sweden and Rhodesia (Båstadskravallerna).

## **When the personal became political**

In reaction to this masculine domination and feeling cramped in the organizations of the far left, feminists throughout Europe took inspiration from their US counterparts as well as the personality and work of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). Alice Schwarzer (born in 1942), for instance, was an emblematic figure of German feminism. A journalist sent as a correspondent to France from 1969 to 1974, she met with de

Beauvoir and became her translator. She took part in general meetings at l'École des beaux-arts and demonstrations of the Parisian Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF), some of whose repertoires of protest action she transferred to her own country. Based on the French model of the Manifeste des 343, a petition which appeared in the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* in April 1971, in June she initiated a signature campaign in the newspaper *Stern* against anti-abortion laws in the FRG.

The feminist slogan “the personal is political” became the framework for reflection and action across Europe. In Italy, initially small informal groups were formed at local level. The movement was precocious, for in 1966 the Gruppo Demistificazione Autoritarismo (DEMAU) criticized the family and the authoritarianism of patriarchal power. The rejection of bureaucracy and the aspiration to power, which seemed typically masculine to feminists, was accompanied by an absence of national coordination, with each city having its own specific orientation. In Milan especially, groups for self-awareness and reflection on one's personal life were formed. Later, feminist groups took to the street to defend the law on divorce and the decriminalization of abortion. Contraception and abortion were central demands at the first congress of the Frauenbefreiungsbewegung (FBB), which was founded in Zurich in late 1968. In other Swiss cities, groups developed autonomously with the same names and demands. A movement with the same name also functioned in Italy between 1970 and 1983. In the end it was mass demonstration between 1975 and 1978 that brought about—in a country historically linked to Catholicism—changes to laws on divorce and abortion.

Finally, while the movement of May-June 1968 was not, contrary to common belief, the starting point for the sexual revolution, it was actually within its extension that the affirmation of different sexualities was emphasized. As “the personal is political,” identity and sexual orientation became politicized. 1971 saw the successive creation of FAHR (Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire), the Italian movement Fuori! (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano), and the German organization HAW (Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin). These movements were centred on sexual liberation based on a revolutionary, Marxist, or libertarian perspective. In 1970 heterosexuality was still seen as THE sexuality, a viewpoint that was reversed by the activities of lesbians and gays. “1968” was thus a clear turning point in gender norms, although this was true in varying degrees depending on the different countries of Europe.

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