

Gert Levy, Cologne:

## **Lecture Cambridge (Violence and Militancy from '68 to the G20)**

First, I would like to thank you for inviting me here to speak on the subject.

Title and topic go far beyond what can be covered exhaustively within 30 minutes. I am currently inundated with articles and reports on the so called “German Autumn” (Deutscher Herbst) of 1977. Perusing these publications, I get emotionally submerged in that time there and then, reconnecting with my feelings and memories; my ambivalences towards violence in politics as well as power and morality.

Just a short while ago my wife and I watched a documentary about the music festival on the Isle of White. The concert took place only one year after Woodstock and ended in drugs and violence. “Love and Peace” had transformed into drug dependency and violence.

**Thesis I.** We failed in our attempt to build a counterworld of love and equality.

“There is no real life in the wrong one.”

Let me begin with a quotation in retrospect: In his book “CheShaShit”, published 1984, the journalist Klaus Hartung wrote about the transitional period between the 60s and 70s, their different sentiments and contents.

*“The no-protest zone in front of the Schöneberg municipality was breached, a ‘demonstration of stewards’ (alternating between 100 stewards and a single demonstrator) was organised, was declared a ‘walking demonstration’ when demonstrating on Ku’Damm [West Berlin’s foremost boulevard] was disallowed, throwing paint-filled eggs at the Amerika Haus, then there was the Pudding Assassination of [US Vice-President] Humphrey – nothing, however, would be more wrong than seeing primarily softish approaches therein. Even less would it have been possible to distinguish between peaceful demonstrators and violent acts, or protesters and violent participants. In all those cunningly staged action the line between game, protest, symbolic violence and real attack remained blurred. There was a constant attempt at destroying whatever shape the ruling power took – or at anything it hid behind, like restrictions imposed on demonstrators, or any prohibitions - either by mimicry or through direct confrontation. The apparatus of oppression - which was perceived foremost the police, later also the judiciary – were to be exposed. This was to be done in a manner leaving the authorities helpless, letting them miss their target despite all their powerful weaponry, because they could never*

*know if their opponent avowed himself to the right of the revolutionary to take to the streets or exercised his right of freedom of demonstration as a citizen.”<sup>1</sup>*

In 1967 I was 14 years old living in Brussels/Belgium.

**Thesis II.** Mentally, by our perceptions and actions, we are, to some degree, the extended arm, the continuation of our parents and forebears; we act in their succession. Unknowingly. we perceive ourselves as the willing helpers of our ancestors in reaching the goals they reputedly fell short to achieve.

My father was a survivor of National Socialism, the Shoah. He was born in 1922 to an assimilated Jewish family in Aix-la-Chapelle and became an illegal citizen after 1935. My grandfather was a member of an organisation helping Jews and antifascists escape into exile to Belgium and Holland. The network's cover was blown and so his family had to flee to Brussels, too. After the German invasion of Belgium in 1940 my father, my grandfather and two of my great-uncles were arrested and deported to a detention centre in Southern France. My father survived the concentration camp of St. Cyprien for three years until he managed to escape. He joined the armed resistance against the German occupation and their French collaborators. When, after the allied landings, General De Gaulle integrated the resistance fighters into his army, my father also took part in the liberation of Alsace and the Palatinate.

My mother was born in 1927 in the Palatinate. As a young girl she helped her aunt, my great-aunt, to transport illegal communist pamphlets from the Anterior Palatinate to the Saarland. After the war she assisted my father as a translator during the interrogation of Nazis apprehended by the French occupying power.

My father, on behalf of the French military government, investigated the medical and psychiatric atrocities committed by the National Socialists. This was about euthanasia, compulsory treatment and pseudo medical experiments. Much later I was to become an actively participating member of the German anti-psychiatry movement.

I consider this the point where systemic thinking sets in. This attitude towards the analysis of mental health I learned from Felix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. From 1977 to 1984 we worked together as part of my time at “La Borde”, the first anti-psychiatric clinic in France.

Many of the activists of Federal Germany's so-called New Left – and I, too, belonged to this group – had parents very different of mine: their father and mother had been Nazis, the father may have been involved in NS-atrocities, the children were brought up accordingly or, rather more often, had grown up in silence over the subject of National Socialism and its atrocities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Klaus Hartung: Der Protest, die Bewegung und ihre Formen, in: CheShaShit, Berlin 1984, page 176pp.

When they learned about what had been kept from them many of them decided they wanted to do things differently and became radicalised within a leftist context. At the same time, their family inheritance and its repression made them vulnerable to the activities of radical Palestinian groups which would not have been justifiable under any circumstances. Accordingly, members of the German radical Left collaborated in the bombings of Jewish community centres, a Jewish kindergarten, as well as hi-jackings. And this complicity, however, had been deliberately spoken about very little within the New Left.

The onset of the history of terror of the New Left has been commonly pinpointed to 2 June 1967 [*~the second of June...*]. On this day, the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot and killed by a police officer during a counter-demonstration against the visit of the Shah of Persia. Much later that police officer was revealed to have been an agent of the East German secret police, the Stasi. The history of post-war Germany can be more complicated than we think.

Already 18 December 1964 [*~on the eighteenth of ...*], on the occasion of Moise Tschombé's visit to Berlin students, apprentices and pupils had been rioting. Tschombé was the one who ordered the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the then figurehead of the anti-colonial struggle.

Though, Ralph Reinders, a friend and comrade of mine, dates the militant resistance – at least with respect to West Berlin – back to the concert by the Rolling Stones to the year 1965 at the Berlin Waldbühne [a Forest Stage seating 22.000]. Apprentices, pupils, and even students, went on a rampage taking the place completely apart and going on pelting arriving police with stones and slats.

From there, a movement originated which became an amalgamation of pupils, apprentices or any “maladjusted”, who were also joined by run-away orphans. For the first time in Germany had there been spontaneous resistance risen against the persistent everyday oppression. Please, bear in mind that in Federal Germany at the time corporal punishment for pupils and apprentices was still openly condoned. This was yet another one of the left-overs of Wilhelmian, followed by National Socialist, pedagogy.

Bommi Baumann, writing as an activist and insider for the “883”, an underground magazine of the radical left, characterised its sentiment and attitude thus:

*“Life, the way it has been spinning off so far, seems pointless to us, barren and inhuman. We are trying to break out, somehow, to experience happiness, tenderness and mutuality, such as what this civil society denies us. We are appalled by the abominable prospect of having to work and spend a whole lifetime under these prevailing conditions, thus we are turning away from all that and towards alcohol and hashish to languish without worrying any longer about anything. Soon enough, though, we must realise that even then the system will not leave us in peace. The rulers let out the cops to round us up. Then there is the problem about the money. This animalist society has managed to arrange everything the way that everyone must take part in it or perish in the gutter. Every day I can see the victims of that oppression. I can understand the history of capitalism through their biographies. As long as the economical conditions remain unchanged life cannot be humane. There*

*is only one way out: the social world revolution, global civil war. (...) Just as Eldridge Cleaver puts it: 'We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be levelled by our attempts to gain it.' 'Destroy what destroys you!'<sup>2</sup>*

The ingredients of this revolt were Rock & Roll and a sense of not going to accept any more of what could be perceived as the continuation of a past German mindset: namely an unfettered obedience and dull trust in authority, and ready submission to the gentrified, capitalist rat-race and its etiquette, which were even more cemented during the National Socialist times. The frowst emanating from those years had to be purged.

It was, indeed, still hanging in the air. While it was on 8 May 1945 [*~the eighth of May...*] that the National Socialists capitulated and World War II ended, this was on no account "zero hour". The predominating sentiment lived on and especially so did the individuals who remained, practically unabated, in their former positions serving state and government, but going about their business as usual.

In February 1972 the German and then Social Democratic government passed the so-called Radicals Decree: Civil servants and apprentice teachers had to certify not to have been in contact and/or even less so, been a member of any subversive organisation and that they were, and would have been, in agreement with the free democratic basic order.

What should have happened in 1945 after the liberation, yet was never really implemented to much consequence, was finally applied with extreme vigour but only targeting the Left and the progressives.

**Thesis III.** Social and political resistance movements surge and scatter. They run aground on the question of violence as well as by their own scattering.

Close to the demise of the movement of the 1968-generation in Germany the rallying cry was issued for "the long march through the institutions". Leftist, as well as progressive, ideas were to be brought right to the core of the establishment. Very few, however, thought such a concept possible to grow accustomed to.

On 02 April 1968 [*~the second of April...*], Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin set two fires in two department stores in Frankfurt as a protest against the Vietnam War. Little damage was caused. This is commonly regarded as the birth of the RAF, the Red Army Faction. A substantial number of its members came from the SPK, or the Socialist Patients' Collective. This group endeavoured to be able to "turn (mental) illness into a weapon"; it liberated psychiatric patients from mental institutions providing them with housing and spaces to live and be free.

All that was common knowledge which I already knew as a student at school, which might partially explain my initial sympathy for this formation.

Pretty soon, the founding members of the RAF were arrested and a battle for their liberation ensued while the other objectives in the revolt against the state moved to

---

<sup>2</sup> Baumann, Bommi: Das Leben erscheint uns öde und unmenschlich, in: Agit 883, Berlin Kreuzberg

the background. The group's aim was void of purpose, only oriented towards facilitating the escape and rescue of their own comrades. The West German State had reacted without mercy. From now on it was all about the struggle against solitary confinement and for the prisoners' reunion and about their hunger strike.

In November 1974 the so-called the 2 of June Movement [*~second of June...*], an extremist group from Berlin which had developed in parallel to the RAF, though with a slightly different approach to the armed struggle, murdered the Superior Court Justice Günter von Drenkmann. They had taken revenge, as they announced, for the death of Holger Meins who had died just the day before by starvation on hunger strike launched by the imprisoned RAF members. In an later statement, released by the 2 June Movement [*~the second of June...*], the leaders responsible for the crime said – and the underlying sound and sentiment expressed therein may speak its own tale – I quote:

*“Today, as announced, we are commenting on the accusation of having killed a person out of base motives, namely the Superior Court Justice Günter von Drenkmann. This is not going to be a plea according to the law, because according to the law you might defend anything – be it National Socialist genocide, mass murder, murder organised from a desk by a bureaucrat, or the one committed from behind a judge's desk – more commonly termed judicial murder – or anti-capitalist resistance.*

*‘The world-view and the system of exploitation by the hucksters is inviolable.’*

*‘To have absolute faith in state authority and into enforcing that authoritarian state is our greatest commandment.’*

*‘Staying chummy with the Yank and a member of his Coca Cola empire are both irrevocable.’*

*While these lines are not included in the Basic Law they nevertheless characterise our social realities better than some clauses of the Basic Law which nowadays sound rather fusty. (For instance the pretty clause about the inviolability of human dignity or the utopian fairy tale about private property, whose use is, at the same time, intended for the collective good.)*

*You see, there is not going to be a plea according to the law. There will be no moral justification, since we think we are not defending our morality but making an accusation.*

*(...) As a lawyer, Mr von Drenkmann should have known that already in 1948 the United Nations defined solitary confinement as torture and banned solitary confinement for all prisoners. Mr von Drenkmann personally intervened in the campaign by the state security forces to eliminate the imprisoned enemies of the state. The rounds fired at Mr Drenkmann were a warning shot across the bows of the*

*ruling power. If you continue to ruthlessly torment prisoners and to kill them the same might just happen to one of you!”<sup>3</sup>*

Around 1973 the Revolutionary Cells, the RZ, formed. They were an answer to the RAF's, as well as the 2 June's [~second of...], loss of purpose and focused on social conflicts in Germany.

Even so, this group eventually succumbed as well to the blackmail strategy of the already described engine of movement of the RAF. On 04 July 1976 the hi-jacking in Entebbe ended. This had been a conjoined operation between members of the Revolutionary Cells and a Palestinian commando, with the intention, among other things, to demand the release of the prisoners at Stammheim.

In 1992 the Revolutionary Cells began to confront their own leftist anti-Semitism as well as that of the radical left at large and also started debating this issue self-critically. Which was not always met with overall approval. In an article titled “We have to be as radical as the reality” they stated:

*We have meanwhile come to the conclusion that we have a lot of catching up to do with respect to matters of anti-Semitism. Especially so, because anti-Semitism is by no means a form of appearance of racism, but constitutes a specific power relationship. The mechanism of formation and action, the social fabric, the racist ostracism which have brought about the modern anti-Semitism, continue to exist. On a daily basis we are confronted with it just as much as we have been impacted by it. To do no more than distance ourselves from it and thus declare our own position as anti-Zionist means that we do not deal with the social purpose of anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitism of the Left is not at all as innocent as how it presents itself. Rather it has evolved into an signature tune of identification between a special set among the radical Left. It is regarded as a test of loyalty. The fact that the article about anti-Semitism has been read as our farewell from internationalism can only be understood if our questions concerning Palestine are already regarded as renunciation and betrayal. We want to scrutinise the feigned certainties which we, like the majority of the Left, have been using over the last two decades in order to position ourselves in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We want to scrutinise terms like ‘struggle for self-determination’, ‘right to land’, ‘agency of US-imperialism’ and so on, which have become blurbs to us. We scrutinise the implicitness with which the Left claims there were a fundamental difference between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. If that is already seen as tipping over to the other extreme then this is precisely the point of critique: Why do the German Left react with indignation and alertness as soon as the relationship between Israel and Palestine is no longer described in black and white only but subtly nuanced? Why is it felt an obligation to reiterate fervently that Israel is*

---

<sup>3</sup> Bewegung 2. Juni: Zum Anklagevorwurf der Ermordung des Kammergerichtspräsidenten (22. 1. 79), in: Der Blues, p. 418 f

*an imperialist outpost and will stay that way, just as we might happen to remind ourselves that it is also a sanctuary?”<sup>4</sup>*

---

<sup>4</sup> Revolutionäre Zellen: Wir müssen so radikal sein wie die Wirklichkeit, Mai 1992, in: Die Früchte des Zorns. Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der Revolutionären Zellen und der Roten Zora, Band 1, Edition ID-Archiv, Amsterdam, 1993, pp. 63.