

**Mathieu Dubois, *Génération politique. Les « années 68 » dans les jeunesse des partis politiques en France et en RFA*, Paris, Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014, 502 p.**

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This is an important book. While there have been plenty of studies looking at aspects of “global 1968” which focus on the manifold social movements and radical political organizations at that time, few historians have investigated the impact “1968” had on mainstream political parties and their supportive milieus. Mathieu Dubois does precisely what few others have considered worthwhile. In a series of well-informed, detailed and insightful chapters, the author presents an innovative and eye-opening survey of how “1968” affected those political families which are often ignored or at best sidelined in standard accounts of *les années 68*. The frosting on the cake with regard to *Génération politique* is the author’s consistently transnational gaze. West Germany and France are at the center of Dubois’s concern, two societies which were, each in their own way, fundamentally affected by the turbulent events of that era.

For Mathieu Dubois, the years 1966-1974 were the crucial years when a wave of radicalization shook the postwar consensus on both sides of the Rhine. And it only stands to reason that the author concentrates on the pivotal role of youth in this process of deep-going and long-lasting renovation of political practices and outlook. Young people were then at the basis of the challenge to politics-as-usual in many parts of the developed world, certainly in the vast swath of territory between Hamburg and Bordeaux. In a series of introductory chapters (which could have been shortened more than just a little bit), Dubois paints the broad contours of youth politics in the twentieth century, making the point that precisely in the postwar period which culminated in the proverbial Sixties, youth developed a noticeable and ever-greater autonomy from adults. At the same time, this period – and especially the decade of the 1960s – produced an additional and perhaps even more crucial change in the sociology of youth:

“Dans les représentations collectives comme dans la réalité sociale, les ‘longues

années 1960' furent aussi celles du passage d'une jeunesse ouvrière à une jeunesse étudiante." (p. 60)

"Le passage de la prépondérance de la jeunesse ouvrière à celle de la jeunesse étudiante constitua un facteur déterminant de cette évolution de la condition des jeunes dans les années 1960." (p. 74)

The signal contribution of this monograph lies in the description of the curious ways in which this autonomization of youth politics, especially student youth politics, made itself felt within the ranks of traditional mainstream youth organizations, i.e. precisely amongst those elements within this increasingly restless youth, who did not join up with the colorful French and West German New and Far Left:

"Au-delà de sa dimension transnationale, l'intérêt de cette comparaison réside donc également dans le croisement de l'histoire de six des principales familles et cultures politiques européennes : social-démocratie, socialisme, communisme, démocratie-chrétienne, libéralisme et gaullisme." (p. 25)

Until the 1960s, for the most part, youth organizations linked to these political milieus had generally not been known for any particular proclivity towards radicalism. To the contrary: they had traditionally served as a training and recruitment ground for functionaries in their mother parties once young members came of age.

More or less suddenly – and with a great number of parallels between the two targeted countries and all political families – in the course of the 1960s the atmosphere of contestation began to affect youthful activism in these traditional spawning grounds of docile politicians. It would go beyond the limits of a book review to furnish many individual details. May it suffice to underline that the most stimulating observation by Mathieu Dubois is precisely his recognition that this proverbial "spirit of '68" affected every single one of the targeted youth milieus – from orthodox Communism via the young Gaullists of the Union des jeunes pour le progrès (UPJ) to the rapidly swelling ranks of the Christian Democratic Junge Union:

"La démocratisation du fonctionnement interne, la critique des rapports hiérarchiques, le recours à des modes d'action politique plus directs, l'encouragement d'un militantisme plus spontané constituèrent autant des pistes pour renouveler l'identité et le fonctionnement des organisations." (p. 153)

In France, the youth branch of Gaullism was most visibly affected by the questioning of authority, and already in 1969 a radical minority split from the UJP in search of greener pastures. But even those activists who stayed behind in the ranks of the UJP did not remain passive spectators of adult-dominated politics-as-usual. "Se considérant elle aussi comme une avant-garde réformiste, l'organisation des jeunes gaullistes rejetait le conservatisme de la majorité d'ordre élue en 1968 et se définissait comme 'une espèce d'anti-droite'." (p. 223) By 1974, the UJP as such – on the eve of "1968" the second-largest youth group in France! – severed its ties with their elders in the Union des démocrates pour la République. The largest of the traditional youth groups in France, the Mouvement de la jeunesse communiste de France, up to May 1968 conforming to the structures of party discipline, in the aftermath of May/June 1968 also pushed for and obtained what Mathieu Dubois aptly terms the "*libération de la parole*." (p. 162)

West German youth organizations were no strangers to controversy either. By all

means the most far-reaching rupture with an adult mother party was experienced by the Jungdemokraten, the junior recruitment ground for the liberal Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP). Especially in the course of the 1970s, the Jungdemokraten adopted an increasingly strident anti-capitalist orientation which flew in the face of liberal traditions, eventually – in 1982 – severing the few remaining ties to the FDP. The SPD's youth group, the Jungsozialisten, underwent its own turbulent evolution from 1966/7 onwards all the way through the 1980s.

Yet perhaps the most astounding changes occurred within the ranks of the Christian Democratic youth organization, the Junge Union. An evocative juxtaposition of photos from their November 1967 national congress in West Berlin and the June 1973 congress in Herford says it much better than words could ever possibly describe. In late 1967 the participants sat perfectly choreographed in the fixed rows of a classic auditorium. Neatly trimmed short hair, suits and ties, and the corresponding earnest demeanors of the listeners represented the atmosphere at this annual event. The portrayed individuals, with virtually no exception, come across essentially as middle-aged family men. A mere five-and-a-half years later, the room is suddenly full of much-younger-seeming individuals. A few white shirts and ties are the exceptions which confirm the predominance of various types of leisurewear. Hair styles are no longer uniform, short hair by no means the rule, beards are suddenly cropping up, sunglasses are worn by delegates in the enclosed conference hall. Delegates are no longer sitting in neat rows with polished dress shoes marking the open space between delegates and speakers, but instead laid back and nonchalant individuals, some chewing on pencils while listening, others reading newspapers, create an atmosphere of informality in Herford entirely lacking just a few years earlier in West Berlin. And, as Mathieu Dubois makes clear, these stylistic changes were likewise reflected in a sudden burst of creativity, new designs, and an avalanche of color in political poster production, the organizational press, or leaflets – an evolution not limited to the Junge Union, it goes without saying, but certainly (and astoundingly) making a forceful presence in Christian Democratic terrain.

Of course, the content of youth politics still differed significantly between the represented traditional political families, and the Junge Union never evolved along seemingly boundless lines of radicalization as was the case with the Jungsozialisten or the Jungdemokraten – and the same holds true for some French youth groups. Still, in the words of Dubois: “Sans avoir pour objectif la mise en oeuvre du socialisme, l'aspiration à un profond changement de société n'en existait pas moins dans toutes les autres organisations à travers l'idée une troisième voie.” (p. 214) Long before Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson emptied this expression of all meaningful content, Third Way politics provided a common denominator for youth politics in the long Sixties, allowing each individual political formation to fill it with its own concrete aims and (sometimes) utopian-seeming goals.

To let the author provide a snapshot of this seemingly paradoxical conjuncture in his own words:

“Jamais au cours de leur histoire, les organisations de jeunesse politique ne connurent une activité de propagande et une médiatisation aussi intenses. Cette situation exceptionnelle était à la fois le fruit de l'attente portée aux questions relatives à la jeunesse, de l'autonomie nouvelle des organisations, du renouveau du militantisme, ainsi que de l'essor des méthodes et des techniques de

propagande.” (p. 365)

“Cette pensée politique du changement social s’exprime à travers une critique de l’économie de marché commune à toutes les organisations de jeunesse politique. Elle fût à l’origine de toutes les grandes thématiques telles que la participation dans tous les domaines de la société, la cogestion et l’intéressement dans les entreprises, la redistribution des richesses, la démocratisation de l’enseignement ou encore les nouvelles questions sociales. La dimension utopique de ces théories s’accompagnait d’une croyance généralisée en l’imminence d’un changement profond de la société.” (p. 410)

From the mid-1970s onwards, there then occurred a generalized *retour à la normale*. In some cases fairly early, in others at a rather slow pace, youth organizations lost their critical bite and became far less contentious players on the party political scene – certainly compared to the heyday of radical impulses between 1966 and 1974. In a more or less straightforward way, however, or so contends Dubois, some of the fresh winds, which had ruffled the stale feathers of adult politics, ranging from orthodox Communism to ordo-liberal Christian Democracy, made a lasting contribution to the inner workings of political parties nonetheless, a sea change which, the author claims, lasted into the twenty-first century. The author points to the exceptionally high percentage of members of the formerly rebellious generation who ascended to leading posts in adult political parties, an influx of new blood highest in the decade of the 1990s.

These final chapters on the medium-term changes, supposedly brought about by youthful restlessness, occurring in the decades since the waning of the radical edge in the mid-1970s, constitute, however, some of the least convincing parts of this opus. Significant sections of these final portions take on the character of encyclopedia-like listings of which erstwhile rebel eventually assumed which ministerial post. In which precise ways the aging members of the *génération politique* continued to effect important changes with regard to content and style of party politics around the turn of the millennium is largely left to the baffled reader’s own imagination.

Yet the weaknesses of this volume, partly derived no doubt from the less-than-successful conversion of a *thèse doctorale* into a sometimes long-winded, footnote-heavy monograph, should not detract from the value of this, in many ways, truly original work. Not the least of the conclusions of this ground-breaking volume is the clear and present way in which Dubois again and again underscores the one great underlying reason for this remarkable episode in the history of mainstream party politics. With no exception, quite literally, all of the changes adapted and adopted to varying degrees by the panoply of youth groups under review were a consequence – or perhaps better: an echo – of the truly pioneering processes engaged in and actions taken by the vibrant radical student movements and the radical New (and, after 1968, increasingly Far) Left, which blazed new ground in style and content of (not only youth) politics in both West Germany and France, and which had erupted entirely outside the field of vision of traditional party politics.

To let the author have three final words:

“L’inventivité et la créativité de la production des groupes d’extrême gauche, ainsi que des affiches publicitaires, forcèrent peu à peu les organisations politiques [traditionnelles] à multiplier et à faire évoluer leur propre conception de l’affiche qui devint le support politique par excellence dans les années 1970.”

(p. 348)

“En RFA, la Junge Union organisa de plus en plus systématiquement des actions publiques s’inspirant du travail de masse mené par ses adversaires de gauche et d’extrême gauche.” (p. 322)

“Le fonctionnement interne de la propagande des organisations de jeunesse politique au milieu des années 1970 n’avait donc plus grand-chose à voir avec ce qu’il était une décennie plus tôt. (...) Cette évolution relevait cependant surtout d’un apprentissage collectif des militants et d’une nécessaire réaction à l’essor des organisations d’extrême gauche. Sans avoir une influence directe, le défi politique lancé par ces groupes joua un rôle fondamental dans la volonté des organisations de jeunesse partisans de rendre l’action de leur mouvement sans cesse plus efficace.” (pp. 369-70)