

Did Youth Destabilize Politics? Western European Social Democracies and Student Movements in «the Long Sixties»

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Abstract: Student movements during «the Long Sixties» had a profound impact on Western politics and societies. One of the major political families in Western Europe, the social-democratic parties, were particularly affected. A major governmental force in a majority of Western European democracies, their post-war views on education, founded on optimistic and careful prospects (democratization of schools, progressive reforms) were destabilized by student protests and radicalism. How did social democrats react to the strong criticism of the universities, pedagogies and hierarchies in educational institutions that they had helped to build? This article is based on archives, documents and publications from the Socialist International, kept at the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam), and on documents held by several national archives and libraries. It uses a transnational and interdisciplinary approach, linking political history and educational studies.

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1. Introduction

In 1969, the well-respected newspaper *The Economist* published a report on the student crisis, which was taking place from Japanese campuses to European cities. Expressing the astonishment of Western elites – whose views were commonly reflected in its columns –, this publication asks: «What's wrong with the universities? Why are students in revolt? The advanced industrial countries are under attack from some of their most privileged young people. The students' protest movement is as much against the society that gives them their education as the education itself» (Allen, 1969, p.1).

The Economist was indeed not the only voice among the social, economic and political elites to express such an astonishment. This discovery that the affluent society was put on trial by its most favoured children was also made by the main Western political forces – which were, indeed, among the first targets of student criticisms. Among them, European social-democratic parties were not the least affected. «Social-democracy» is being defined here as the ensemble of organizations and movements which are members of the Socialist International (SI). Europe is defined here as being the Western-European democracies. Are excluded right-wing dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Greece, as well as communist regimes, which both ban political freedom and pluralism, and therefore did not condone student mobilizations.

This revolt was a major source of embarrassment for the leading European political currents. Conservatives, Liberals and Christian-democrats alike were struggling to deal with a situation for which they were largely unprepared. For Social-democrats, it was even more difficult, as their situation across Western Europe since 1945 was new. For the first time of their history, they were at the very centre of European politics, participating – often in a leading position – in governments, competing – or cooperating – with the other major political families.

This uneasiness left bibliographical scars which are still visible even today when it comes to European social-democracy and student movements in the «long 60s», as labelled by Gerd-Rainer Horn (Horn, 2007). Major books and works on European social-democracy give little room to studies of the interactions between this political family and students during the sixties, with some exceptions (Callaghan & Favretto, 2006; Sassoon, 2010). It was taken as granted that those parties were far from the student crisis, which was believed to be mainly linked to radical-left or «new left» organizations. Such a relative silence was even more paradoxical when it is remembered that education – universities included – has been a traditional priority of social-democratic agendas. How did European social-democracy react to the student revolts of the long sixties? How did those social movements impact the social-democratic compromise on education which emerged after 1945?

This article will proceed in chronological order. The first part describes the rise of post-war social-democratic views on education, and the relative lack of interest they had towards students (I). The second part examines the early sixties, a time during which European social-democracy was forced to deal with the effects of the rise of students (II). The third part focuses on the reactions to the student movements of the late sixties (III).

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2. Students, a non-subject in the post-war «social-democratic compromise» (1945-end of the 50s)?

The post-war era is a key period to understand social-democratic reactions during the sixties towards student movements.

2.1. At the centre of European politics and education policies

After 1945, social-democrats became a dominant governmental force across Western Europe, and not only in Scandinavian countries like Norway and Sweden where this political shift occurred before the Second World War. The figures are striking in the immediate aftermath of the second world war. Among the 13 countries which composed this area, 8 had experienced a government led by a social-democrat between June 1945 and December 1947. Alongside governmental participation, a majority of Western European countries had a socialist secretary of education in the same period. This last figure was even more impressive as Conservatives and Christian-democrats, especially in catholic countries, were sometimes reluctant to leave this ministerial field of education in the hands of social-democrats, because of their secularism and, consequently, the fear they would lead harsher policies towards religious schools and institutions.

Social-democrats were for the first time able to significantly influence education policies in a majority of European democracies. What were their agendas for education – and consequently, for students? Two main ideas were promoted, rather than a unified program for schools and universities, and served to establish a post-war social-democratic compromise on those subjects.

The first idea was the link between liberal democracies and education. This idea was traditional among social-democrats, but had been given a new importance with the rise of fascism in the thirties, followed by the Nazi occupation in Western Europe. In its first free congress in Brussels since the war, in June 9-11, 1945, the Belgian socialist party (PSB) pushed the idea that a key aspect of the denazification of Germany would be the democratization of its schools. Such an objective seemed to be possible only through «an allied control (...) especially of education and civic teaching in Germany» (Parti socialiste Belge, 1945). This idea was reinforced with the Cold War, which broke the war alliance between social-democrats and communists. For instance, in a leaflet published by its research department in 1947, the British Labour party pointed to the opposed goals and functioning of democratic and authoritarian school systems (Labour Party research department, 1947, p. 26). While acknowledging the fact that the British «educational system has many defects» – British social-democrats were calling for a less unfair school–, this text explained that it was possible to make «it gradually both more equalitarian and more liberating to the minds of the children». This position was particularly important to understand what it is being defined here as a social-democratic compromise on education. Being now at power, Labour leaders as well as their European comrades were forced to deal with the practices, equilibriums and legacies which were shaping school systems across Western Europe. Another aspect of this publication proved

to be crucial. The Labour Party was unequivocal in its claim that «a free educational system is among the most important guarantees of liberty», a direct criticism against the Marxist-Leninist policies on schools in Central and Eastern Europe, and the mass indoctrination of children pursued by Franco and Salazar since the thirties.

For social-democrats, education should, in consequence, be protected from right-wing as well as left-wing extremists, a stand whose explanation lies in the personal history of many leaders and militants. In a large majority of European countries, this political current suffered from repressions in the thirties and forties. European social-democracy had even the dubious privilege of being persecuted and restricted under all the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes experienced by the old continent after the first world war. In some European territories, like East Germany, the soviet repression promptly followed the Nazi terror, leading to the destruction of any trace of social-democratic militancy (Pritchard, 2006, pp. 93-106). Many social-democrats escaped from new dictatorships established in the East after 1945, a subject which was a key issue during the international meeting of social-democratic parties in Baarn (Netherlands), May 14-16, 1949¹. For social-democrats, many of whom had personally experienced those sufferings, supporting liberal democracy was an uncompromised commitment – especially regarding policies and regulations affecting school systems.

The other aspect of the social-democratic compromise on education was the so-called «democratization of schools», an expression as popular as it is vague. This idea was present in nearly all social-democratic political programs and platforms after the war. The congress of the Italian PSIUP, in November 19th, 1944, proclaimed the «need for a deep reform of the school system», an idea which was promoted in the first post-war congresses of the French SFIO, the British Labour or the Belgian PSB. In 1951, the first congress of the Socialist International put a clear emphasis on the necessity of providing working-class children with a larger access to education:

Socialism stands not only for basic political rights but also for economic and social rights. Among these rights are (...) the right of children to welfare and of the youth to education in accordance with their abilities. Socialism seeks to give men all the means to raise their cultural standard and foster the creative aspirations of the human spirit².

Education policies led by social-democrats until the early sixties proved to be, in practice, rather moderate and even cautious in several countries. In France, they were forced to deal with other political forces – especially the mainly catholic MRP, or *Mouvement républicain populaire*- whose agenda on education could differ substantially – notably on the sensitive issue of secularism. In consequence, especially in parliamentary committees, compromises were common on school reforms (Clavel,

¹ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, *International socialist conference newsletter*, may 1949.

² IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, Statement of principle, 1st Congress of the Socialist International, 30 June- July 3, 1951, Frankfurt-Am-Main, West Germany.

2015). In Great-Britain, Labour leaders and militants were sometimes deeply divided over measures that the party was supposed – and, often, officially committed- to implement on this field. It was particularly the case of the elitist Grammar schools, their party was officially committed to fight, or at least to reduce, while some Labour members were former students of those institutions (Lawton, 2005).

2.2. Looking at students from a working- class perspective?

What was the social-democratic agenda about students? They were clearly neglected during this period. The first reason for this relative silence was acknowledged within those political forces quite openly: social-democrats were rather weak among students. Like the British Labour, for example, those parties were sometimes lacking a strong student organization. This weakness was mentioned during an international socialist students summer school held in Cambridge in June 1947³. In France or in Italy, left-wing students were mainly attracted by powerful communist parties, which outclassed social-democrats both in elections and influence.

This organizational issue was not the only reason. Inside the programs on education developed by social-democrats, higher education or students were scarcely mentioned. An example could be taken with the platform developed by the Swedish SAP during its congress, June 2-7, 1952, in Stockholm. Universities were not even given a say in the matter, contrary to adult professional training which was brought to the forefront when the text presented the tools available to pursue the democratization of education. This difference of attention betrayed what was probably the main reason for the relative lack of interest shown by social-democrats towards students until the sixties. Socially speaking, this category was not working – a situation that would be at odds with the traditional Marxist theory still influencing many social-democrats. Furthermore, students were primarily coming from the most privileged parts of society, and were strangers to the strong working-class identity of this political family. The Labour party at Scarborough, 29 september-3 October 1958, clearly emphasised the fact that British universities were socially extremely elitist – a rather fair analysis of their sociology at this time.

In fact, some social-democrats have tried to solve this contradiction between their working-class identity and the necessity to consider students. In the case of the « Policy program of the Dutch Labour party », adopted by the Party's congress in Amsterdam, November 12-14, 1959, students were labelled as «intellectual workers» that could interest the organization's actions and proposals. Nevertheless, such an expression has ambiguous implications: students were legitimate only because they were to be workers. It was literally looking at higher education from a working-class perspective.

³ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, *Confidential Silo Bulletin* n°1, London, 1947.

3. More students, more problems? European social-democracy and the rise of higher education (early 60s)

This state of low interactions between social-democrats and students ended with the fifties. How did the early sixties affect this weak relationship.

The demographical and political rise of higher education

During the fifties, the number of students rose rather slowly. The sixties were a period of quick expansion of higher education, as shown by the figures below:

Figure 1- Number of students in Western Europe, 1949-1969 (Sassoon, 2010, p. 394)

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Nether-lands	Norway	Italy	Sweden	Western Germany	United-Kingdom
1949	28000	20000	9200	12000	137000	28000	5500	146000	15000	105000	103000
1959	36000	29000	10000	17000	202000	39000	6100	176000	33000	196000	196000
1969	54000	70000	35000	51000	615100	94000	20000	488000	115000	376000	376000

In France and Italy combined, at the end of this decade, there were more than one million students. This rise was not homogeneous across Western Europe: countries like Great Britain, Austria and West Germany experienced a slower surge. Paradoxically enough, it was in one of the countries with the smallest number of students compared to the population, Norway, that social-democrats began to pay attention to this change, as early as 1954. A social-democratic academic, Ole David Koht Norbye, discussed the subject in an article published in the intellectual journal of the Norwegian Labour, *Konkret*. His view was quite disturbing: How to define students as a social group?

An obvious explanation for the decline in Socialist influence among students is that they always like to be in opposition. But is not merely love of opposition which makes students turn their backs on the Labour movement today. Twenty, thirty, and certainly fifty years ago the poverty and insecurity of the working classes was evidently the greatest social evil which overshadowed the students' and intellectuals' own economic interests. Today, the Norwegian worker is not a wretched exploited proletarian. (...) Thus the students, tutors, chief clerks and doctors may believe today that, in reality, they are the exploited class.

Ole David Koht Norbye was maybe among the first social-democratic intellectuals to label them as an underprivileged minority, and even a new "exploited class". This article was, to say the least, at odds with a Norwegian Labour which was deeply proud of its working-class identity, its achievements in terms of Welfare policies, and not very keen - at least at this time- to pay greater attention to students. In the early sixties, this analysis was no longer isolated and was reaching most of the European socialist parties. Universities and their access were, for example, the main topic of the congress held by the International Union of Social-democratic Teachers, July 23-20, 1960, in Beaumont-sur-Oise (France). For the social-democratic elites and

militants, many of whom having started their political careers before the Second World War, the feeling of a generation gap was explicitly acknowledged. It was even the subject of a confidential memo produced by the head of the Youth organization of the Socialist International (IUSY), Per Aasen, in 1961⁴. The Socialist international even created, at the same time, a «sub-committee on Youth problems», as many parties were expressing growing difficulties in attracting – and keeping – young members.

But that was not the only source of concern for European social-democrats. In Norway, France, Italy, West Germany, the early sixties had witnessed the rise of «new-left» movements, which were deeply critical of old working-class parties, communists and social-democrats alike. As Gerd-Rainer Horn has shown, new-left parties were strongly rooted among students, a trend that social-democrats quickly understood (Horn, 2007, p.168-169). In the case of West Germany, the former SPD student organization, the SDS, was excluded from the party in 1961, which paved the way for the German New-left and what was labelled as the «Extra-parliamentary opposition», or APO (Brown, 2013). The French New Left party, the PSU, which was founded in 1960 partly by former social-democrats from the SFIO, was also closely linked to higher education. Its Paris local committee was the object of a study in the first year of the party's existence. The survey was without ambiguity: students were the first social group among PSU members in Paris in 1961, representing almost 20% of the total number⁵.

Such a reality was largely linked to national specificities. In France, social democracy was identified with the Algerian War (1954-1962), a brutal colonial conflict rejected by many left-wing students, but that a SFIO-led government supported (Morin, 1992). Social-democrats as a whole had, nevertheless, to react to the new demographical and political realities generated by this expansion of higher education. Apart from being more concerned about this field, this political family, in its majority, did not substantially change the views it had promoted since the end of the Second World war. In the case of the Austrian SPÖ, the idea of a «democratic university» was indeed promoted in a speech made by Bruno Pittermann (Minister of transports, co-secretary of the party), during the congress of this organization in Vienna, June 18-19, 1965. But it was opposed to any idea of student autonomy: democratic states should, according to him, have the upper hand on higher education, in order to ban political extremism from universities. Regulations towards higher education were after all, according to his speech, a matter of «honouring (...) the Constitution» and thus «a supreme obligation on a democratic government». The fact that right-wing students and academics played a non-negligible role in the rise of Austrian authoritarianism in the thirties was indeed a major concern for Pittermann, but his centralistic view on universities did not leave much room for student autonomy.

The British Labour congress in Scarborough in October 2-6, 1967, was even more directive, while student mobilizations were already taking place across Europe (including Great Britain). Proposed resolutions regarding higher education (which

⁴ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, 383, Confidential memorandum, meeting of the «sub-committee on Youth problems», February 3, 1961.

⁵ AN, *Archives nationales*, Paris, France. PSU archives, 581 AP 97.

were finally not adopted by the congress) claimed that students benefiting from public grants should pay back their debt to society by accepting specific job duties for their country. It would be an understatement to describe such a proposal as a provocation for student activists, already engaged in a fight against tight regulations and restrictions in universities. Social-democrats might have been more vocal about higher education in the early sixties, but they still had to come to terms with the idea that students could speak for themselves – not to mention the possibility of their empowerment in universities and societies – before the 68' crisis.

4. A «social-democratic compromise» shaken by student revolts (67...)?

With the massive student mobilizations of the late sixties, how did social-democrats finally react?

4.1. How to react?

Student mobilizations proved difficult to handle for social-democratic parties. In the case of the British Labour, the situation was particularly painful, because it was in power from 1964 to 1970 – which included the major period of student mobilisations across the country. Symbolically, the first movement of protest took place in 1967 at the London School of Economics (LSE), an institution which was founded by Fabians, and therefore historically linked to the party. As presented in the following figure, a study made during the events shows that Labour was the first affiliation for LSE students – even during the protest. Still, this fact did not prevent this institution from being the first in the history of British higher education to be occupied.

Figure 2 - Political affiliation of LSE students in %, 1967 (Sources: Blackstone, Gales, Hadley & Lewis, 1970)

	Party allegiance					Total
	Conser- vatives	Liberal	Labour	Left-wing groups	Other	
Under- gradu- ates	20	16	42	9	13	100
Post- gradu- ates	12	14	53	9	12	100
All	18	16	45	9	12	100

In their public declarations and documents, European social-democrats proved to be less aggressive towards students than conservatives or Christian-democrats in the late 60s. It was a remarkable constant across the national borders of Europe, no matter whether this political family was in power or not. Proclamations and speeches tended to emphasize the sympathy or at least the sense of comprehension expressed

by social-democrats for their movements. In August 1968, at the heart of student mobilizations, the Socialist International even produced a positive statement on the subject. It explained that students were «aiming towards goals which, basically, are in accordance with the principles of Democratic Socialism»⁶. This explanation sounded quite paradoxical, as in the UK or West Germany, student mobilizations were precisely taking place under – and against – social-democratic governments.

Within the leading circles of this political family, perceptions and reactions proved to be different, as shown by the archives of the Socialist International. The organization produced a report in October 1968 on the student crisis. The document, named «Student protest, 1968», was unsigned and designed to stay confidential⁷. Its conclusion was crystal clear about its general orientation:

- a. The roots of student protest are in frustrated idealism.
- b. Its symptoms naturally appear most acutely in those countries where the frustration is greatest (...)
- c. The philosophy of «Student protest» is both incoherent and destructive.
- d. There is no evidence of any single source of centralized direction of the movement, but there is a great deal of personal contact and pooling of ideas between militant student leaders.
- e. There is mutual distrust between the movement as a whole and orthodox communism (...).

This document tended to provide a geographically-based analysis. The student mobilizations outside Western democracies were presented as being not only legitimate, but also ontologically positive. It was, in Mexico or in Prague, a matter of democratic and liberal struggle. On the contrary, student mobilizations in Western Europe were described with the utmost contempt, as a nihilistic, senseless and even dangerous movement. Nevertheless, this confidential memo was quite interesting on a precise but important point. Contrary to the positions of other major European political forces – especially the most conservative –, the document acknowledged the fact that communist movements and states had little influence over students and their struggle.

4.2. A European social-democracy divided over student mobilizations?

In 1968, three patterns of reactions over student mobilizations appeared within European social-democracy. The first one was based on a fierce defence of democratic institutions, which were supposed to be under the threat of student movements. This kind of reaction proved to be particularly strong in German social-democracy. It was probably not by chance, as their leaders and militants were

⁶ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives. Resolution VII, «Revolt of Youth in Modern Society», Council conference of the Socialist International, Copenhagen, August 21-22, 1968.

⁷ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, 383, Unsigned and confidential note, « Student protest, 1968 », Socialist international, October, 1968.

particularly afraid of the fascist and communist dictatorships they had sometimes directly suffered from. Willy Brandt, leader of the SPD and of the German federal government, explicitly mentioned this heavy burden of the past, which weighed on many German social-democrats: «In the federal Republic (...) our young people have no share in the experiences which prey on the minds of the governing classes of this country»⁸. Student mobilizations in Berlin were not only negatively perceived according to his analysis: their accusations of «fascism» waved against German democratic institutions were seen as an unbearable and immoral parallel with the past. Such a stand led sometimes to distort the reality of those mobilizations. That was for example the case of the Austrian social-democrat leader Bruno Kreisky in his Vienna speech to the Youth organisation of the SPÖ, in June 23, 1968. Rejecting the mobilizations occurring in nearby West Germany, he blamed the SDS and its most popular figure, Rudi Dutschke, for promoting violence, an accusation which was factually untrue, as this student leader was a pacifist deeply committed to non-violent activism (Bergmann, Dutschke, Lefèvre & Rabehl, 1968).

Another pattern of reaction was based on the working-class roots and identity of social-democracy, which were opposed to the middle and upper-class background of the students demonstrating in European streets. Pierre Aster, a French teacher, SFIO militant and elected member of the city assembly of Paris, considered that the student movement of 68 was merely the revolt of a spoiled youth, who wanted to partake in a revolution without risking its dangers⁹. In the case of the British Labour, the privileged social background of most students was openly used as a way of delegitimizing their mobilizations: «Most people over 18 today have no contact with the education service (...). Hitherto, public discussion has concentrated on the minority getting full time 'higher education' beginning at 18 plus»¹⁰. It was a strategic assumption: European social-democrats were convinced that working-class and student mobilizations, both being extremely intense in the late 60s, would not merge. Ironically enough, this view was shared by many of their old rivals, European communists.

However, not all European social-democrats were so hostile and sarcastic towards student movements. The Scandinavian parties, especially those of Norway and Sweden, proved to be rather open to the student revolts. This is unsurprising as the issue was less sensitive in those national contexts: Scandinavian social-democrats were indeed far from the crisis which mainly took place in other countries in Europe. But it was also the consequence of a specific approach, recognizing the social and cultural changes occurring among students, and more broadly, within European youth. As a draft document by the Norwegian *Abeirderparti* in 1969 explained, «the higher level of education creates a greater outspokenness and

⁸ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, 613, Willy Brandt's speech, SPD party conference, Nuremberg, March 17-21, 1968.

⁹ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, Social-democratic teachers conference in Darmstadt (West Germany), July 28–August 3, 1968, quoted in *Socialist International information*, Vol XVIII, n°15, August 17, 1968.

¹⁰ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives, 629, «Draft programme for Blackpool Conference. Labour's programme», September 30- October 4 1968.

straightforwardness among young people compared with preceding generations»¹¹. It was from now on impossible to ignore those evolutions among students, and the text encouraged the satisfaction of some of their demands as a matter of political realism. Quite amazingly, one of the few European social-democratic leaders outside Scandinavia who refused to divide the global student uprising was Rodolfo Llopis, the head of a party forbidden at home, the PSOE. For him, all student movements, and not only those taking place in dictatorships, were to be taken seriously¹². It was a strong stand, as students and political opponents in Spain were subjected to a brutal repression that was beyond any comparison in Western Europe. It might have been precisely because of this situation, and the fact that many Spanish socialists were in exile, that Spanish social-democratic leaders publicly took such a different stand, quite similar to their distant Scandinavian comrades.

5. Conclusion

After the student revolts of the late sixties, there was a general shift in social-democratic programs and ideas towards education. Social-democrats were more willing, in the seventies, to accept, or even to promote left-wing criticisms of the school system and higher education. In West Germany, the Youth Branch of the SPD, the *Jüsos*, claimed its rejection of a system which was seen as aiming at providing obedient workers ready to comply with the demands of capitalism (Jungsozialisten in der SPD, 1974). In France, the *École et socialisme* (School and socialism) journal, founded by teacher-unionists and left-wing social-democrats in 1975, radically criticized the national educational system. The Italian PSI, in its electoral program of 1977, favoured a radical reform of education governance, which would allow a greater citizen participation in the process of decision-making. Even the traditionally moderate SDLP, in Northern Ireland, proposed an audacious platform in 1975 entitled «Education: the need to reform». Radical agendas and changes in universities were promoted even after the quick decline of student movements in the early seventies. Per Kleppe, a leading politician of the Norwegian Labour, followed some of the claims they formulated, arguing that transforming higher education would be a step towards a more egalitarian and democratic society¹³.

But, to conclude, can a general model of explanation be established about Western European social-democratic reactions towards students? Three geographical areas in this political family seem to have reacted differently regarding this subject. The first group, consisting of Scandinavia, seems to have been less hostile towards student movements. The second group, formed by the bulk of European social democracy, a strip of territories from the UK to Austria, proved to be rather hostile towards student

¹¹ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands, SI Archives, 383, Draft document, Norwegian Arbeiderparti, «Socialism and the new generation», March 28, 1969.

¹² IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives. Rodolfo Llopis (General Secretary of the PSOE) «Spain and the Student revolution», *Socialist International information*, Vol XVIII, n°14, July 27, 1968.

¹³ IISH, *International Institute of social history*, Amsterdam, Netherlands. SI Archives. Per Kleppe, «Scandinavian approach to Socialism», *Socialist International Information*, Vol XX, n°3, March 1970.

movements. The third block, Democratic Latin Europe, was comparatively more remote from the troubles occurring in higher education.

A first factor of differentiation could be the commitment to working-class identity. It was important but nevertheless not decisive. Scandinavian parties were deeply rooted in their respective working classes, as were the British Labour or German SPD, but those organizations had a different position on student movements. On the contrary, French and Italian socialists, having a weaker working-class basis, were traditionally weak among students. A second factor could have been the number of students. In countries with the largest figures, social-democracies proved to be rather hostile towards the mobilizations in higher education. Still, this demographical explanation could be too simple, not to say simplistic. In countries with a similarly low number of students like Norway or Austria (relative to their overall populations), social-democracies reacted in opposite ways.

The third factor, the experience of power, seems to be the most heuristic. In countries like Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the political weight of social-democracy was so strong that students could not seriously be taken as a threat. But in other countries, the political fortune of social-democracy was navigating between (often short) moments of governmental power and long periods of opposition. In this case, student movements seemed to be perceived, maybe not always openly, as a supplementary burden in the difficult road to power. Even without taking part in public responsibilities, student mobilizations had a decisive influence on one of the strongest political families in Western Europe in the late 60s.

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