

From Memory to History: 1968 and Female Students in Revolt

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The student revolt in Finland after year 1968 had only one way to go: ideologically towards Marxism and politically towards Stalinist Communism. The change, which occurred in years 1969-1970 was late but fast in Finland. The radicalization of the student politics followed the general trends in other countries of the Western world. Radical development in Finland had been slow before 1968 and student movement had been a marginal phenomenon. Most of the few radicals in 1960s were active members of the Social Democratic Party. After the “May events” in France, occupations of Student Houses in many European capitals such as Amsterdam and Stockholm, the awe and fascination of radical student movement grew. The French and German student radicalism was admired. International, universal revolution became a source of inspiration. The aims of nonparliamentary movements in Europe and USA were to democratize all levels of society. In Finland the first phase of the radicalism was academic: University of Helsinki as the oldest institution and the Student Union of Helsinki University (HYY) as a bearer of academic traditions were both strongly criticized for being conservative and reactionary.¹

1968 and a political journey to Stalinism

A continuing fight between right- and left wing students in Helsinki became more bitter in the autumn 1968. The Student Union of Helsinki University was to celebrate in November its 100 anniversary with all academic splendour. The President of Finland, Mr. Urho Kekkonen, also a former student politician, was invited to give the main speech in honour of the occasion. The Finnish establishment was invited to the anniversary. This establishment formed the core of the society, with roots in post-war authoritarian, right wing political and cultural ideology. A critical student opposition established in September 1968 a “spontaneous” movement, named it “Ylioppilaat - Studenterna” (The Students). In some weeks “The Students” mobilized students to occupy the Student House, the venue for the HYY-anniversary. “The Students” and their occupation became a new kind of manifest of a new generations of students born in post-war years 1947-1948. It was a start for a new kind

of social and cultural movement at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. The planning of the occupation was still a “male project”, although many female students participated as enthusiastic young revolutionaries.

The student opposition was still without a political home during the two-days occupation of the Student House in November 1968. Many activists had a liberal, agrarian or socialdemocratic background. An ideological diversity existed, and therefore the occupation was easy to capture. The fight for hegemony was won by left-wing students. After the occupation no political party wanted to open its door for these left wing students, who during the occupation had created a socialist strategy. The Finnish student movement was homeless during the years 1969-1970. Pressure for an active nonparliamentary movement was strong. During these years the national university legislation was reformed; many spontaneous, democratic Marxist, Maoist and Communist groups were active at the University, partly organizing student strikes, anarchist student cells and nonparliamentary street manifestations.

Inspired by its success the student movement started to focus on traditional “revolutionary” constituencies, this meant in Finland the working class organized around the strong Communist Party. This development of revolution had its national roots. Communism was the only political power which was able to be base for the anti-imperialist movement. When everything in the Finnish society was in a stir - values, politics and culture - the solid organization of the Communist Party, and its Stalinist minority gave shelter to the young student radicals. In year 1970 the leading group of the student radicals decided to link the movement with the Stalinist Minority Group of the Finnish Communist Party. This “turn of the revolution” in the year 1970 changed the whole climate in the academic world. A strong new pressure group - Akateeminen Sosialistiseura (ASS, Academic Society of Socialists) - was a political reality.

In practice the Stalinist student movement never became the leading group in student politics, but their intellectual capacity and hegemony in the society was great. Stalinism attracted many intellectuals, journalists and artists. The general social and political consciousness at that time in Finland was dominated by the discussion on how to keep the good relationships

¹This paper is based on my two books of post-war student politics at the Student Union of the University of Helsinki: *Sivistyneistön rooli 1945-1959* (1993, The Role of Intellectuals) and *Eliitti, traditio, murros 1960-1990* (1996, Elite, Change and Continuity).

with the Soviet Union. In Finnish academic history the 1970s is defined as the decade of the Stalinist movement. Socialist ideas were strong, and the movement was militant both at the universities, at schools and high schools. The main political tool of the Stalinist minority was to create “democratic alliance”, ie. co operation in student politics with the liberal, agrarian and socialdemocratic groups, leaving the right-wing students in opposition.

From memory to history

Stalinism or Minority Communism was a reaction to the liberal and modernistic 60s, to its spirit of freedom and liberty. Stalinism showed a new way to define the fundamental relationship between the individual and the society, which had suffered an erosion during the 1960s. The turning point was clear, as one of the former male radicals pointed out, “the modernisation process had destroyed the authoritarian norms of the society, and the need for new norms was growing.” The ideal object was a collective movement, where “I” became “we”, a worldwide, powerful and strong community fighting for universal peace, democracy and progress. “We”, members of the new educated elite, were seen as equals with the oppressed and victims of capitalist exploitation. Two female students try later to analyze their individual development at the beginning of the 1970s. Their stories open a keyhole to the most chaotic time of the post-war period and show how memories can be history.

In Finland, as well as in many other countries, the history of the year 1968 is well documented. My purpose is not to describe what happened in that special year. There is an extensive literature on the *Annus Mirabilis 1968*, including my own thorough-going studies on Finnish student politics. During my research I found it most appealing and challenging to study what happened after the student revolution in 1968-1970, from a female point of view, before the student movement was linked to the communism. What happened during these years, when academic tradition had lost its attraction, and every level in the society was stirring? How did female students form their individual and emotional identity in a situation, where the gender roles were changing? When it comes to the female student radicals and their memory, the general development pattern was following:

the “liberal” 60s - rapid change of the society - alienation - denying your social background - frustration - feminism - radicalism - political fundamentalism - communism.

In many senses the 1960s was a “female decade”, which favoured movement, experiment and liberalism. The 1970s became a “male decade”, when fundamentalism, hierarchy and solid organizations were appreciated. How was the identity of a young female student formed at that time?

Kerstin Smeds and Riitta Vartti, two female students and Minority Communists at beginning of the 70s, have analyzed their personal history.² Their background is different, but their political development similar. Smeds comes from an wealthy upper middle class family in Helsinki, with a background of several generations of university education. Vartti is the first university student of her family. She comes from Tampere, the biggest industrial city in Finland and has a solid working class background. Their description of political awakening is similar to many female stories of their generation. Their stories can give some ideas why so many of their generation found a political home in Stalinism.

One feature was common for the whole generation. The new student identity was created in political demonstrations. The experience was equal for both sexes. The female students were in 1968 as tough demonstrators as their male counterparts. The participation in the first protest march, usually an antiwar demonstration in “all for Vietnam” -spirit, opened the eyes and touched also female students. Smeds recalls: “It all started on that day when I realized that a USA B52s bombed also my heart --- from this crazyness grew political awareness. Son My and Vietnam Bulletins, the global network of imperialism, the highest level of capitalism. The impoverishment of the poor people, oppression, Fascism, the Third World, China. Myrdals *Rapport från kinesisk by* - what an alternative! Mao and the Cultural Revolution, Cold War, antisovjetism. That means - Revolution, Demonstration, Protest - everybody’s right to do what ever she want as long as the aim is The Good and The Right.”

The social and political turbulence of the years 1968-1970, rapid change and modernization of the society caused anxiety and frustration; Smeds own “capitalist background” was experienced as superficial and conservative. As Smeds describes, the hunger for a new way of living and being was big. It was supported by the anarchist and antiauthoritarian spirit, yearning for a female liberation and freedom. The female students could feel how time was

²Kerstin Smeds & Gunilla Hemming, *Ansats - meddelanden från 70-talet*, (1979, Exertion - Messages from the 70s, 1979. Riitta Vartti, *Nuoruuden yliopistot*, (1992, The Universities of Youth).

changing. The old role models for educated women felt old fashioned. The individual search for a new way of living was mixed with national and over national paradoxes. Smeds continues: "Soon the protest crystallized to a revolt against your individual consciousness; it was a result of your capitalist and bourgeois background - middle class habits, thriftiness, suspicion, pedantry - combined with your bad conscience about private consumption and money spending. I hated all that, but at the same time I realized that I was a slave under the consumption society. The only way out was to find freedom, individual and autonomous FREEDOM!"

Two ways were open: either to loneliness and frustration or to a collective support of a political massorganization. Smeds describes her individual situation: "I was not successful in my search for an alternative way of living. I lost the touch and fell out. I was lonely and rootless. At this time I became interested in mystical experience. I started from Jerry Rubin and Hippies in USA, with an intermediate landing at Thoreau and Hesse Castaneda, Sartre, Gide and Camus - ending finally into a chaos. -- maybe it was the reason why atheism was the only way out, leading straight forward to historical materialism." At this point the communist student movement and the revolution was the only escape: "I did not have any clear ideology - life was a mess. I was rescued by the communist youth movement and its study circles. There was no other realistic alternative, not at least for me. The communist movement had a massive collective power to a social change. And I was furious with The System, which abused me and the world."

Smeds visited the Soviet Union in 1973, and it became one of the emotional turning points in her life: "I lived one month in the Soviet Union, like many times afterwards. I was very fond of the Soviet people. I did not know so much about the history of the Soviet Communist Party, the bureaucracy, strategy or national tactics, but I loved the spirit of the world I could witness with my own eyes. I realized that there was a special respect between individuals." After coming back to Finland Smeds found the philosophic questions of Marxism-Leninism useful: "Marxism-Leninism helped me to concretize - philosophically and politically - the general confusion of that time. It showed a way out from the bourgeois scientific approach, which had created wrong national myths. It was a helpful tool to make clear analysis of clear political situations - an analysis that would sustain!" Smeds became an active member of ASS.

The other female writer, Riitta Vartti, describes also individual frustration by using an *alter ego*, Orvokki Dahl in her book. Dahl starts to study sociology at the University of Helsinki in 1968. The subleased rooms and the over crowded lecture rooms cause loneliness, anxiety and homesickness. Dahl suffers soon from mental health problems and anorexia. The academic traditions and traditional student organisations do not attract Dahl; she feels aversion to the academic symbols, signs and personifications: “Everything at the university felt musty. I felt like going back to the Middle Ages, all that Latin speaking and terms. Even the main steps were too heavy - they must have been built for a male giant.” Dahl tried to be active with her hobby, photographing. She drifts along different “wet and naked” at underground and anarkist parties, tries some short but unsatisfying sexual relationships and gets finally frustrated. A brief visit to Maois movement follows. Next year she changes her main subject and starts studying art history. In the lecture room she meets a boy, Vesa, who leads Orvokki to the texts of Brecht, André Gunder Franck, Marcuse, Garaudy, Fanon and Baran & Sweezy.

Dahl follows the student movement from distance. She does not participate in its activities but gets excited of its message: “Make the professors feel lousy!” Her own experiences and discussions with other female students strengthened her identity: “I became a feminist, and soon also a socialist” The communist ideology reached Orvokki after the general strike of metal workers in 1971. In front of the Main Building of the University Dahl gets in her hands a propaganda paper by the socialist students : “I knew the figure in the paper: Hammer and Sickle! I read the text greedy and almost run to the bus. ‘Comrade Student’ I could read and started almost to cry. The paper was dirty and obscure, but what a content! Everything I had learned at home was true! Somebody here in this town and in this university was thinking of the conditions of the poor working class. -- how could I miss it so many years. University had teached only fragments, bourgeois nonsense. After graduation no hope for a decent job. I did not like the academic studies. A revolution at the university was really needed! What did the common people get when their children learned so much rubbish. I pressed the paper against my breast.”

Dahl’s class consciousness grew after she get closer to the communist minority group and strated to work within the ASS. The hierarchy of the organization felt safe and secure: “Everything was so clear and logical. People participated first in tutorial guidance. Soon you advanced to a study circle, later to the political section at your institute, then you became leader of that section and finally further up in the hierarchy, nobody knew really how high. The whole system attracted me a lot.” After some consideration Dahl decides to be a full

member of the Finnish Communist Party: “Here was my Political Solution! Finally I could find a place and function. Somebody tells me what to study and how to write my graduate thesis. Now my life and studies have a full meaning. The fight for the working class is my whole life!” Dahl started to create a new female identity; she became a full time revolutionary, agitator and active member of the group. She accepted the rules of the movement, learned the basic and rhetoric facts on Marxism-Leninism, and studied the scientific ideology and its theoretic principles. She submitted the bigger aim, world revolution. Communism and revolution required discipline and work. Dahl got clear moral codes for her behavior: you had to be clean, sober, ascetic, hard-working and sporty.

Both Smeds and Vartti describe how the revolutionary mass movement and its international heroes had a strong sexual appearance. Smeds writes: “At the beginning I was in love with Fidel Castro, and still today, he is my male ideal.” After Castro came Lenin and other stars of the revolution: “Later I found Majakovsky and he took a place in my heart with his airplanes, drums and pink elephants..”. Vartti avoids clear individual sexual references. For Orvokki Dahl the sexual freedom was a disappointment. The mass power of the movement was therefore “masculin”, and the movement made her feel secure and safe. It was like a big lap, when the movement took Orvokki Dahl into its strong arms. To be a part of the collective mass power was an emotional, even sexual experience. A female student could be weak and strong at the same time; weak when seeking support from the masculine movement, strong when working together with others for a better future. In practice, the double standard of the morality existed; an everyday conflict between the utopia and reality was strong and difficult to live with.

Epilogue

What really changed during these years of revolution at the western universities? Can female experience tell us something new? I try to answer these and some other questions during the presentation of my paper in the session of group 11 (Transformation after World War II) at Oslo colloquium of the *International Commission for the History of Universities* in August, 2000.

