Claus-Ulrich Viol

The Role of Britain in the Historiography of 1968: A Review of Discourse(s)

Abstract

This article subjects standard literature on 1968 in Britain to a critical, discourse-focused reading, asking not primarily what role '68 played in Britain, but what role Britain is allowed to play in the (international) historiography of 1968. It finds a discursive formation in historiography that revolves around divisions of presence/absence, rise/decline, extremism/moderation and original/imitation, with a narrative structure or emplotment that commonly privileges the second term of each pair as the endpoint of the story of '68 in Britain. It also finds that there is a way to undermine the dominant discursive patterns by validating and integrating elements of subjective and collective experience and discourse into historical reconstruction and evaluation, not least in order to avoid some of the pitfalls of master narrative and national mythology.

Keywords: *1968; British history; Whig history; student activism*

Gap, Fail, Dead End

In standard German historical textbooks on 1968, even those that explicitly focus on '68 as a "global phenomenon"[1], the situation in Britain is usually dealt with on a couple of pages. British activism tends to be reduced to the doings of Tariq Ali, the occupations of the London School of Economics (LSE) and the big Vietnam Solidarity demonstrations in London. Ali is more often than not reduced to his anti-Vietnam war position and his organising and speaking skills, there is no discussion of the political and intellectual points of reference of the British groups, of their diversity and more far-reaching political goals. Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey's *Die 68er Bewegung: Deutschland, Westeuropa, USA*, for instance, starts with the claim: "Berkeley, Berlin, Rome, Paris—this book offers a concise overview of the rise, the aims, and the decline of the '68 movement."[2] London is conspicuous by its absence, and with the exception of two

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1   Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey: 1968: Eine Zeitreise, Frankfurt 2008, p. 8 (translated by the author).
2   Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey: Die 68er Bewegung: Deutschland, Westeuropa, USA, München 2001, p. 2 (translated by the author).

brief and quite telling episodes remains so throughout the book. One is in which the British contribution to the international developments of '68 is marked as going back to the history of the British New Left in the early 1960s, especially the foundation of the *New Left Review*, increased Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) activity, and attempts among the British intelligentsia to sponsor a new undogmatic and un-bureaucratic socialist movement among the student population which combined new forms of theoretical criticism of society with a turn towards forms of direct action, democratic self-activity and community projects.[3] The other is an account of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) demonstration on 17 March which focuses almost exclusively on questions of how radical or moderate, how provocational or law-abiding the protest was, recounting how German delegates tried to get Ali to agree to a tactical violation of the rules, how Ali refused but later lost control of the situation, how severe violence erupted (on a level that even surprised a visiting French activist), how Ali sounded the retreat and Mick Jagger, disappointed, went home to write the line about how "sleepy London town is just no place for street fighting men".[4]

In Gilcher-Holtey's *1968: Eine Zeitreise*, which is a fairly chronological rendering of the different 'main' events of that year taking place across the globe from Camiri, Bolivia, to Beijing, China, the British situation is sketched on not more than six pages (out of 211). Most of these are about Tariq Ali, Robin Blackburn, and Clive Goodwin as delegates at the various sites of important international history, for instance visiting Regis Debray in prison, appearing at the Vietnam Congress in Berlin or reporting back from the Sorbonne. British activists merely have walk-on parts in the drama that unfolds internationally, they are messengers from somewhere unspecified, taking back lessons to a place of no consequence, it seems. And even if, this time, Ali's intellectual background is fleshed out a bit more, his and his fellow British activists' political beliefs and plans are far from being dealt with in as detailed a manner as those of the other international figureheads of protest. London is mentioned as the site of occupations, strikes and lockouts at the LSE (1967, 1968 and 1969) and, again, of moderate and moderately successful mass rallies that, however, trailed no political effects or institutional dynamics in their wake. As in the discussion of the protests of 17 March, the account of the demo on 27 October makes relatively much of the question of whether the peace was kept, Ali remained in control ("from Ali's point of view, however, everything during the protest went according to plan"[5]) and of how sensibly the British government reacted to the violent provocations of some Maoist groups that did take place in front of the U.S. American embassy in Grosvenor Square. Towards the end of the book and the year, then, there is a strong sense of an ending of

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3   Ibid., p. 13.
4   Ibid., pp. 74f.
5   Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey: 1968, p. 181 (translated by the author).

something, of overall futility, as Gilcher-Holtey informs the reader that Ali for a while left Britain for Pakistan, that he was not able to keep the radical paper *Black Dwarf* from disintegrating[6], and when she relies on Ali's own assessment of the situation (as she frequently does), which is that the 'one-issue' protest movement, after the October rally, ran out of steam and came to an end, as it did not manage to transform itself into some more permanent political organisation.[7]

In Norbert Frei's *1968: Jugendrevolte und globaler Protest*, the eight-page subchapter on Britain is called *Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll*, expressing the point that a lot of the youthful energies that in other places erupted in political unrest in the late 1960s had been spent in, or channelled into, swinging pop culture in the UK before. Frei's account, like others, validates the role the British New Left as part of the "intellectual prehistory"[8] of the global student movement and later protests elsewhere, listing too the CND activities as important precursors for '68, and … leaves the year as such a virtual blank. Yet where Gilcher-Holtey leaves gaps, Frei explains why he does so: "after 1962 at the latest, [New Left and CND] suffered from a dramatic waning of importance"[9] as parts of their following were disillusioned with world politics in times of the bomb and others committed themselves to what seemed a modernised Labour Party under Harold Wilson. Frei concludes that "though there had been a British student movement […] the revolt had fairly modest proportions"[10], if seen from a political perspective, that is. Locating Britain's contribution to the protest movements of the late 1960s mainly in the cultural domain, he mentions "dynamic changes in youth lifestyles"[11], "new forms of material and cultural consumption"[12], liberating developments in the arts, fashion, literature, journalism and music. Frei, in this context, includes phenomena as diverse as early Beatles pop, the mini skirt, beat poetry, later countercultural psychedelia and the more edgy and 'revolutionary' underground scene. After subtracting the book's short passages on the LSE conflicts in 1966, 1967 and 1969 and the Dialectics of Liberation Congress in 1967, there remains but one page (out of some 230) dealing with the political 1968 in Britain: this is on the two VSC rallies in March and October. Here, as in the parts about the LSE conflicts, the question of the degree of violence of the British protests, when compared to those in other European countries, is one of the central concerns of the author. Frei makes a point of stressing the comparatively low degree of militancy and aggression on the

6   Ibid., p. 194.
7   Ibid., pp. 181f.
8   Norbert Frei: 1968: Jugendrevolte und globaler Protest, München 2017, p. 180 (translated by the author).
9   Ibid. (translated by the author).
10   Ibid., p. 184 (translated by the author).
11   Ibid. (translated by the author).
12   Ibid., p. 186 (translated by the author).

part of the students, and the comparative flexibility on the part of the establishment. According to him, London, on the one hand, saw "massive student protests"[13] and some "rioting", which on the other remained "harmless".[14] There is an interesting play of highlighting, quantifying and qualifying violent unrest at work in Frei's account. Even when more extreme forms of resistance cannot be ignored, as in the 1969 LSE occupation, they are seen as an overcompensation for the principle lack of radical action elsewhere:

> But not always and everywhere things were developing that peacefully. […] Yet this appeared, especially as peace had already been restored at most colleges and universities, more like a rearguard action, and one could almost gain the impression that for some this was also about belatedly proving their own radicalism.[15]

No need to say that in neither Gilcher-Holtey's nor Frei's report there is any mention of any of the "most colleges and universities" other than the LSE, their main political concerns and protest activities and how these linked up with, adopted or adapted national and international forms and issues. There must have been something going on before peace can be "restored", major conflicts before "rearguard action", even if they do not make the grade to be included in global summaries.

While it would certainly be an overstatement to argue that the German historical accounts imply that '68 did not happen in Britain at all, there is a strong sense that Britain does not really figure, or at most figures as insignificant, in the global scheme of things. The British '68 appears as a blind spot, and one that does no more than obfuscate a probable fail. The story is one of activism catching up with international developments, lagging behind and reacting to impulses from abroad. And the story is one of activism lacking theoretical, let alone philosophical, depth as well as determination and endurance. The focus is on action, not thought, and the pattern of narration is one in which acts of resistance appear as alibis, outrage as passing, and both as being quickly contained by moderation and common sense. The standard by which British 1968 activism mainly 'fails' in these accounts seems to be some kind of militancy-assessment scale. As such, there is also some indication that the accounts mirror national stereotypes and time-honoured sentiments: the German view of British politics as being characterised by "robust debate and resilience in the face of crisis"[16], veneration for philosophical and political pragmatism, tradition and the rule of law. Or—inter-

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13   Ibid., p. 181 (translated by the author).
14   Ibid., p. 183 (translated by the author).
15   Ibid., p. 184 (translated by the author).
16   Oliver Moody: Germans Are Astonishingly Well Informed about British Politics, 22 November 2019, The Times. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/germans-are-astonishingly-well-informed-about-british-politics-z7chm7dz7 (last accessed 08 July 2020).

twined with such a view from abroad—elements of British self-perception as found in Whig history versions of British politics as essentially being about moderacy, evolutionary rather than revolutionary progress and respect for "ordered freedom".[17]

Ways of Speaking about '68 in Britain: Discourse and Emplotment

As will have been intimated by the above argument, my approach in this article is to subject a number of historical accounts to what could be called a Foucault-influenced discourse analysis. The question will be whether it is possible, across the different academic texts dealing with the political events and meanings of that year, to identify "regulated ways of speaking about"[18] how these unfolded in Britain, that is how accepted statements are produced, reiterated and combined so as to define that distinct field of knowledge that is '68 in Britain, and by what particular set of concepts such regulations possibly work to constitute the field. Discourses, Chris Barker writes, "provide ways of talking about a particular topic with repeated motifs or clusters of ideas, practices and forms of knowledge across a range of sites and activity. This phenomenon we may call a discursive formation."[19] And it is such discursive formations that do not only produce their objects of knowledge, by bringing them into view, but also define what can be thought and said about them, what appears as true and false. My approach is Foucault-influenced rather than all-out Foucauldian in that, while not excluding questions on the relationship between power and knowledge, and discourse and subjectivity, there remains a clear focus on the meaning and meaning-making of the texts and statements selected, i. e. on how '68-related issues are constructed in the historians' accounts and on the potential variability in these accounts, not overlooking the rhetorical forms and functions of the utterances in the context of the ongoing academic debate. We know that by 'discourse' Foucault "does not mean a particular instance of language use—a piece of text, an utterance or linguistic performance—but rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge"[20] and that he is interested in the (extra-textual) rules that govern the production of texts and statements, of the difference between true and false, "rather than speculating on the collective

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17   David Marquand: "Bursting with Skeletons": Britishness after Empire, in: Andrew Gamble/Tony Wright (eds.): Britishness: Perspectives on the British Question, Chichester 2009, pp. 10–20, p. 15.
18   Chris Barker: Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice, 2nd ed., London 2003, p. 101.
19   Ibid., p. 102.
20   Michael Arribas-Ayllon/Valerie Walkerdine: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, in: Carla Willig/Wendy Stainton Rogers (eds.): The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2nd ed., London 2017, pp. 110–123, p. 114.

meaning of such statements".[21] Still, my attempt here also takes into account aspects of textual analysis such as narrative patterns or "emplotment"[22], semantics, both denotative and connotative, and absences—what Norman Fairclough has called "the *texture* of texts, their form and organization"[23]—nudging it in the direction of some form of critical rather than Foucauldian discourse analysis. Every historical representation "makes a selection from the boundless stream of what happened in the past from the perspective of posteriority, it connects and divides; it defines a beginning and an ending for its narration; it highlights and it leaves out".[24] Thus write Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow about what they term the dimension of determining "subject matter" that underlies all historical writing, adding further important dimensions like "argumentative structuring" and "rhetorical/narrative organisation".[25] According to Jarausch and Sabrow, all historical texts are "discursively organised" in that both their content and form are informed by dominant cultural "meaning structures", which makes any group's or society's very communication about the past possible in the first place.[26]

The focus in this essay is on such texts and their thematic, argumentative and narrative organisation. The task is to identify a "corpus of statements"[27] from the expert discourse of historiography on Britain and '68, and read the samples with a view to finding out how they construct (that is constitute and constrain[28]) their object of inquiry, why they do so in the ways identified (and what this may tell us about their overarching cultural "meaning structures"), and see to what extent their constructions may differ from or are similar to those of other discourses such as, for instance, autobiography or feminism.

The main clusters of ideas thus identified in the German books discussed above revolve around divisions of presence/absence, rise/decline, extremism/moderation and original/imitation, with a narrative structure or emplotment that commonly privileges the second term of each pair as the endpoint of the story of '68 in Britain. As part of the larger contextual framing of global history, the British '68 figures as a gap or ab-

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21   Ibid., p. 115.

22   Hayden White: Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Baltimore 1975 (¹1973), p. 7.

23   Norman Fairclough: Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language, London 1995, p. 4.

24   Konrad H. Jarausch/Martin Sabrow: "Meistererzählung": Zur Karriere eines Begriffs, in: Idem (eds.): Die historische Meistererzählung: Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945, Göttingen 2002, pp. 9–32, p. 17 (translated by the author).

25   Ibid. (translated by author).

26   Ibid. (translated by author).

27   Michael Arribas-Ayllon/Valerie Walkerdine: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, p. 115.

28   John Storey: Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction, 5th ed., Harlow 2009, p. 128.

sence and, if present at all, is recounted by way of decline, moderation and imitation narratives. If such are the dominant ways of speaking of the German history accounts, it is important to stress that these have their counterparts, albeit differently inflected, in British and international 1960s historiography. Conservative British historians, for instance, tend to ignore the late 1960s student protests entirely. Take Charles Arnold-Baker's *Companion to British History*, which was published by Routledge in 2001. Containing some 1,300 pages, it holds entries on the most trivial of historical details, but none on Tariq Ali, the VSC, the LSE occupations or student protests in general (though there are short grudging nods to The Beatles and the CND).[29]

In international academic collections and monographs that look at 1968 in a comparative context, including Britain still is more the exception than the rule. In Kathrin Fahlenbach et al.'s *The Establishment Responds: Power, Politics, and Protest since 1945*, to give a couple of striking examples, British sixties protest is not mentioned at all (though there are references to, and even chapters on, '68-related matters in the U.S., West Germany, the Soviet Union and Poland).[30] Martin Klimke et al.'s *Between Prague Spring and French May* has the usual pieces on the U.S., France, Germany and Eastern Europe, as well as adding a strong Scandinavian perspective, but lacks coverage of the British '68 and the protest activities of that year. In the one contribution dealing with Britain, tellingly, Holger Nehring looks at the British New Left, especially in its very early years 1956–1962 and before its subsequent "decline".[31] In Carole Fink et al.'s *1968: The World Transformed*, there is the regular strong focus on West Germany (five articles), the U.S. (four articles) and France (two articles), and while there are also contributions on Czechoslovakia, Italy, China and the 'Third World', there is none explicitly about Britain. In their introduction, the editors state their aim to "interpret […] 1968 as a global or transnational phenomenon"[32] and to investigate the "concrete forms of cooperation and the exchange of ideas among the protagonists".[33] Going by the two marginal references to British protests (the anti-war movement peaking in '68 with two "massive demonstrations"[34] and some English students' decision "to create a revolutionary organization of their own"[35] after having been impressed by the French

29   Charles Arnold-Baker: The Companion to British History, London 2001, pp. 117, 226.
30   Kathrin Fahlenbach/Martin Klimke/Joachim Scharloth/Laura Wong (eds.): The Establishment Responds: Power, Politics and Protest since 1945, Basingstoke 2012.
31   Holger Nehring: "Out of Apathy": Genealogies of the British "New Left" in a Transnational Context, 1956–1962, in: Martin Klimke/Jacco Pekelder/Joachim Scharloth (eds.): Between Prague Spring and French May: Opposition and Revolt in Europe, 1960–1980, New York 2013, pp. 15–31, p. 15.
32   Carole Fink/Philipp Gassert/Detlev Junker: Introduction, in: idem (eds.): 1968: The World Transformed, Cambridge 1998, pp. 1–27, p. 2.
33   Ibid., p. 13.
34   Ibid., p. 17.
35   Ibid., p. 19.

May), Britain's role in such cooperation and exchange seems to have been virtually nonexistent. This time, a possible British contribution to the intellectual prehistory of '68 is even called into question when the editors choose not to bring it up in their paragraphs on the importance of the international New Left in the early sixties for later student protests.[36] And while both the introduction and the essays of the book largely remain silent on events in Britain in and around 1968, there is a striking echo of the decline narrative in the one contribution that substantially deals with sixties protest politics in Britain, though not primarily with the British '68: Lawrence Wittner's piece on the disintegration of the international nuclear disarmament movement charts the Committee of 100's and CND's trajectory from their role of "largest citizens' movement in modern Britain" in the early 1960s, running campaigns that "terrified the British government"[37], to their massive decline in leadership, membership and finances, which left them in utter disarray and serious debt towards the end of the decade. While, admittedly, there is a sense in which Wittner's story puts down CND's waning role to the very attractions posed by the political student activism of the '68 era—suggesting that the rise in the latter contributed to the problems of the former—the overall picture he draws of the political situation in 1968, and of that burgeoning students' movement, is one of disintegration and disorientation. The widening of the political focus, the "growing sectarianism"[38] of the Left, the rallies that "disintegrated repeatedly into violent confrontations"[39], for him, mean that the "preoccupations of '1968' had a devastating effect"[40] on the possibilities for more focused and promising political projects. Like other decline narratives of '68, Wittner's thus represents the year as terminating rather than beginning mass political mobilisation, as closing rather than opening a window for political change. There are reverberations of moderation narratives, too, in his text, as he points out that the "revolutionary emphasis"[41] of student protests may have alienated supporters of CND and broader segments of the British population.

Gerd-Rainer Horn, in *The Spirit of 68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America*, largely conforms to the gap and default mode sketched above. Apart from the usual extended parts on the U.S. and France, there are chapters on events in Italy, Spain or Belgium; Britain, politically, is mentioned only in passing (and in terms of prehistory, when for instance the Suez crisis and its New Left aftermath is discussed).

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36   Ibid., pp. 24f.
37   Lawrence S. Wittner: The Nuclear Threat Ignored: How and Why the Campaign against the Bomb Disintegrated in the Late 1960s, in: Carole Fink/Philipp Gassert/Detlev Junker (eds.): 1968: The World Transformed, Cambridge 1998, pp. 439–458, p. 440.
38   Ibid., p. 456.
39   Ibid.
40   Ibid., p. 458.
41   Ibid., p. 456.

The one chapter that deals with things British is called "British Rock", detailing how British cultural changes helped "prepare the terrain" for later political events (though not in Britain) and pursuing an argument similar to, though not fully identical with, Frei's explanation of pop-cultural 'expansion' of political revolt.[42] Unlike Frei, Horn remains doubtful as to the exact link between "the youth counterculture of the 1960s and the challenges symbolized by the explosions of 1968"[43], concluding that the connection is not "obvious and apparent" and consisted mainly in the "anti-authoritarian" and "anti-hierarchical" spirit promoted by popular youth culture, which, however, crucially depended on "additional factors" to proceed from generational revolt to major political unrest.[44] For Britain, such additional factors are hardly discussed. The chapter on "British Rock" hence in a way argues that British pop culture paved the way for '68, and then didn't. Horn's account is especially interesting also in the way he bookends the story of British '68 default by adding some paragraphs on the repercussions that year's developments had in the late 1970s. Recounting what to him is "one of the most interesting debates within late twentieth-century Marxism", in his conclusion he maintains that the intellectual exchange between E. P. Thompson and Perry Anderson on Althusserianism, which took place in around 1980, occurred at "the high point of the radicalization of 1968 in Great Britain […], with customary British delay", only to concede that, "brilliant" as the debate may have been, it "elicited preciously few rejoinders and virtually no substantive further elaborations".[45] This, for me, is significant as Horn frames the void that is '68 in Britain by two stories rich in allusions to ineffectuality and failure. Again, there is a strong sense of lagging behind and of aborted development.

    George Katsiaficas's early "global analysis of 1968"[46], *The Imagination of the New Left*, devotes a half-page to the situation in "England"[47] (of some 260), and thus less than on developments in Yugoslavia, Pakistan or Spain: for the year proper, two anti-war demonstrations and "an occupation" of LSE are mentioned, the rest of the short text is about how the British New Left "created the preconditions of the radicalization of the Labour Party" and, by way of explaining the comparative lack of political thrust of the British movement, how English "university students are particularly elite" and protest was consequently "largely confined to issues of educational reform".[48] That

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42   Gerd-Rainer Horn: The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976, Oxford 2007, p. vii.
43   Ibid., p. 34.
44   Ibid., p. 35.
45   Ibid., p. 235.
46   George N. Katsiaficas: The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968, Boston 1987, p. 1.
47   Ibid., p. 56.
48   Ibid.

said, Katsiaficas's précis is noteworthy for the way in which, despite its briefness and conventional focus, it also points the way for an alternative rendering of a British 1968. Seen from a slightly different perspective, "issues of educational reform" may be nothing to overlook or easily dismiss, and indeed Katsiaficas at least names colleges and unis other than LSE as sites of '68 protest (the Royal College of Art, Cambridge, Oxford and Hull), showing an inclination to invert the common decline narrative when he informs the reader that, in 1970, "there were direct actions at one-third of Britain's universities" and that, "since 1968, a significant generation of new political activists has emerged".[49] Somewhere just beyond the confines and constrictions of this text, it seems, narrating '68 in Britain as the beginning, not the end, of something politically important may become a possibility.

Good Sense and Pale Imitations

What about historical accounts that more directly address and engage with 1968 developments in Britain rather than skipping them or representing them as gap, failure or dead end, i. e. those that do not present the year as a sort of non-occurrence (whether or not to throw into relief similar occurrences in other times or places)? Moderation and imitation narratives, it seems, are strikingly prominent here as well. Andrew Marr's *History of Modern Britain*, as a popular history example, like Frei's and Horn's, stresses liberating sixties developments in the field of culture, especially pop music. Turning to alternative political protest in the late 1960s, Marr reports that the VSC "organized three demonstrations outside the US embassy [!] in London's Grosvenor Square", the second of which he refers to as "particularly violent".[50] Violence and extremism are shortly alluded to, only to be revealed as ineffectual grotesqueries and imports from abroad that failed to catch a foothold on British soil. Marr assures the reader that students were merely "copying the cause and the tactics used to much greater effect in the United States" and that their actions at various colleges "were pale imitations of the serious unrest on US and French campuses".[51] His is a liberal view of the period, an extreme form of Whiggism, as it were, that selects from the "boundless stream of what happened in the past"[52] to form the history of that year three of what come across as highly 'ridiculous' anecdotes: a speaker's quote from the Dialectics of Liberation Congress expressing what to any common-sense observer must appear as an absurd example of white self-guilt, an episode of how Guy Debord came over from

49   Ibid.
50   Andrew Marr: A History of Modern Britain, London 2008, p. 282.
51   Ibid.
52   Konrad H. Jarausch/Martin Sabrow: "Meistererzählung", p. 17 (translated by the author).

France, trying to arouse English "revolutionaries", but had to go home quickly after some frustrating efforts, realising that that species "in modern times have been so little real threat"[53] as well as a short report on the Rupert Bear obscenity trial, which was triggered by an indecent cartoon strip in *Oz* magazine and which, for Marr, stands as the British political counterculture's "greatest confrontation with the state" or Britain's "answer to revolution".[54] The argumentative reductionism of Marr's account equates student protest with attempted revolution, and represents revolution(aries) as foreign to "indigenous British"[55] culture, the inevitable laughing stock of cartoons and TV comedies.

Marr's main discursive themes are taken up by more balanced histories, even such published as late as 2018. Richard Vinen's international comparison *1968: Radical Protest and Its Enemies* features a 30-page chapter on Britain in which the author starts from the familiar observations that British unrest was "altogether smaller scale than in many other countries"[56], quoted from a contemporary memorandum by university vice chancellors, and that Britain remained an "island of conservatism".[57] Vinen repeats Marr's sentiment that British protests were a "pale imitation of disturbance elsewhere", topping this by holding that, for instance in Birmingham, they were "an imitation of an imitation".[58] And he also repeats sentiments about the British character and customs, the fundamental incompatibility of things and people English/British with radical and revolutionary politics, as well as the satiric, mocking and self-mocking tone such politics were met with by establishment figures (like Home Secretary James Callaghan), the less political representatives of the counterculture, conservative and liberal students and even some of the radical leaders themselves. While Vinen, initially, seems to be ready to qualify such received assumptions, in the course of his chapter there is no way in which he is able to escape the logic of his own framing. The pages are spent entirely on detailing and explaining moderation and imitation: Vinen lists smaller unis, fewer and more affluent students, better student-staff relations, foreign staff and influences, great geographical and ideological divisions between students and workers, liberal responses of the authorities, the British party system and Labour Party successes in the 1960s, the continually dividing and multiplying "groupuscules of the extreme left".[59] The drift of the argument is so strong, the lack/void narrative so dominant that the reader may be surprised at the author's conclusion that Britain is not at all "insignificant in the long '68" and that "radicalisation" was

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53   Andrew Marr: A History of Modern Britain, p. 282.
54   Ibid., p. 283.
55   Ibid.
56   Richard Vinen: 1968: Radical Protest and Its Enemies, New York 2018, p. 193.
57   Ibid., p. 195.
58   Ibid., p. 193.
59   Ibid., p. 207.

pronounced in the years following.[60] Yet like the moderation/extremism or original/imitation contradictions and non sequiturs written into his account, the interesting problem of how something that is considered rather insignificant can have significant results is not pursued, let alone solved.

Another more serious academic example of Whig '68 history at work can be found, for instance, in Sylvia Ellis's 1998 essay in Gerard Degroot's collection *Student Protest: The Sixties and After*. Degroot's edited volume contains the usual preponderance on pieces on the U.S. (eight), West Germany (three), France and 'Asia', but expanding the limits to include two on Mexico and one—an early and rare specimen of its kind—on Britain. In this, Ellis herself again looks in detail at the events at LSE and Grosvenor Square, but also widens her scope to include previously unstudied activities of students in the North-East of England and student dissatisfaction with the National Union of Students (NUS). Her account is characterised by a striking coexistence of two argumentative moments, which are actually pulling in different directions, though one manages to frame and contain the other. Ellis's piece, more than many other versions of a British '68 to that date, brings out the richness and complexity of the protests in Britain, including many of its diverse locations, forms of action (teach-ins, sit-ins, eat-ins, boycotts, picketing, disruption of lectures and "a variety of alternative methods"[61] such as throwing snowballs or red paint), main concerns and issues (Vietnam, 'race', imperialism; student food prices, rent prices, tuition fees, living conditions; teaching, governing and examining at unis and colleges) and how the latter related to, adopted and adapted, larger international influences and spread out differently across the country in accordance with local contexts and customs. While Ellis thus, on the one hand, is intent on validating the existence of '68 in Britain, on showing that there actually were protests in line with "the international phenomenon of student radicalism", she on the other hand is equally quick to play down or qualify the occurrences she picks out, as for instance "less violent, less radical", "muted"[62], "parochial in nature"[63], with "the numbers involved […] always relatively small".[64] Vietnam, as elsewhere, is seen as important for student mobilisation, but Ellis's rather apologetic and sceptical stance insists that there was "no causal link"[65] between student protest and events in Vietnam, that the latter did not "inspire" the protests, but

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60   Ibid., p. 218.
61   Sylvia Ellis: "A Demonstration of British Good Sense?" British Student Protest during the Vietnam War, in: Gerard J. Degroot (ed.): Student Protest: The Sixties and After, London 1998, pp. 54–69, p. 62.
62   Ibid., p. 54.
63   Ibid., p. 57.
64   Ibid., p. 59.
65   Ibid., p. 54.

"internal university issues did".[66] Student activity in the North is cast as "delay[ed]"[67] and a "messy combination of university-based concerns with wider societal ones"[68]; the violent disruptions, the "many [!] acts of civil disobedience and even, on occasion, illegality"[69] over the country and the "radical and dramatic" behaviour of students at LSE are represented as exceptions and "untypical".[70] There is a clear tendency to read the events in Britain not for what they were or may have meant (in their particular contexts) but for what they were not, failed to be or would have been like in other places. The pitch is British exceptionalism, and an explanation for such perceived exceptionalism is readily offered as well. Ellis's central claim of her article, it may be no surprise to learn, is that "the moderate nature of British politics had a stabilizing effect upon British student protests".[71] As a token of Whig tautology (and teleology), the moderate nature of British politics thus comes to act as both the unreflected cause and result of the author's historical perceptions and evaluations. This is kept up with even in the face of suggestive evidence to the contrary, as when Ellis herself mentions the massive scale of some demonstrations in Britain, the disruptive quality of some, the fact that to politicised contemporaries the link between Vietnam and university politics was clear to see and "causal" enough, the polls that indicate that many, sometimes the majority of protesters were driven by larger concerns than merely "parochial" ones, such as the general structure of British society or "capitalism in general", "indicating a greater degree of radicalism".[72] The author opts to perceive moderation wherever she looks and, in adopting the then Home Secretary James Callaghan's assessment of the London demonstrations as illustrations of 'British good sense' for her title and conclusion, does not shy away from couching her history of (the possibilities of) alternative British politics in the language of the country's establishment.

Surely, academic accounts of the past are not supposed to make something out of nothing, a mountain out of a molehill, yet the problematic pulls of (inter)national comparisons and especially such that are informed by unacknowledged national discourses, myths and master narratives, may become strikingly apparent by comparisons of a different kind. It may hence be illuminating to read Ellis's story in tandem with a history like Thomas Großbölting's *1968 in Westfalen*. Großbölting's approach is driven by the insight that the shape and meaning of '68 cannot be grasped by concentrating only on the metropolitan centres of the protest movement, but that these also lie in the intricate "dynamics and effects" the events had and unfolded in the provinces, in

66   Ibid., p. 56.
67   Ibid., p. 58.
68   Ibid., p. 57.
69   Ibid.
70   Ibid., p. 61.
71   Ibid., p. 55.
72   Ibid., p. 64.

wider social structures and everyday (local) life.[73] In Westphalia as in Britain or the North of England there were "no petrol bombs, no fire hoses, no tear gas, […] no mass destruction of property and no shootings"[74]—as Ellis depicts what she sees as the British particularities; on the ground, developments may in fact have been strikingly similar, links to Vietnam and events and persons in the international centres as "causal" and compelling or not as anywhere else. Yet Großbölting does not dwell on the lack or lagging behind of Westphalian '68 at all. Instead, for him, the local struggles are embedded in different contexts, thus take different shape and are variegated and diverse (rather than "messy"); he holds that they managed to change "society, politics and culture in the region" more "intensively and profoundly" than other historical periods have done.[75] The occurrence of regional inflection of '68 protest is not measured against a metropolitan norm as an aberration or a muddying of waters but declared to be "the dominant structural characteristic" of the '68 movement in general.[76] The absence of radical leaders, uncontrolled violence and big events is not seen as a sign of (telling) moderation or lack (and as such not explained through national or regional stereotypes), but as a central characteristic of the significance of the political dimension of the events of that year: "not the big political bang or sensation were the determining features […]. It is the many small conflicts and rule changes resulting from these that are at the centre of the meaning of '1968'."[77] What this shows, I think, is that—depending on the absence or presence of problematic (national) master narratives—national and local protest activities may be read and assessed quite differently, and that national identifications may be doubly problematic in highlighting and reiterating binarisms that serve to fulfil their own prophesies. Casting the British '68 as typically falling short in radicalism (by contrasting it to a perceived pronounced radicalism elsewhere) may lead one to overlook and critically 'misunderstand' the radical elements that are there just as much as it does not help one to realise that maybe the radical/national 'other' may not be as radical and radically different after all, or that the question of violent disruption may not be the most interesting and central to ask.

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73   Thomas Großbölting: 1968 in Westfalen: Akteure, Formen und Nachwirkungen einer Protestbewegung, Münster 2018, p. 11 (translated by the author).
74   Sylvia Ellis: "A Demonstration of British Good Sense?", p. 54.
75   Thomas Großbölting: 1968 in Westfalen, p. 137 (translated by the author).
76   Ibid., p. 12 (translated by the author).
77   Ibid., p. 139 (translated by the author).

Time of Gestation, Moment of Agency, Opening for Transformation

Recent years have seen a re-evaluation of the meaning of '1968' through a more serious taking into account of personal memories, oral history sources, assessments and self-assessments of former activists, former activists-turned-historians or social scientists and members of the more general contemporary student population. They have seen, too, and in part due to such validation of retrospection and reminiscence, increased controversy about the degree to which autobiographical readings of the events of '68 should be allowed to shape the overall historical picture of the years, the dominant assessment of the causes, concerns and long-term significance of the protest movement. This is a debate conducted with particular vigour in Germany, yet it is not foreign to Britain either. In her study based on oral history interviews of former activists, Celia Hughes remarks that "memoirs of radical youth by writers and historians seeking to change the historical script are criticised for contributing to the false progressive picture"[78] of the era that posits a continuity of liberating developments from the 1950s to the 1970s, and a socially crucial role for the liberationist moments along the way; others have pointed out that the "subjective perspectives and private narratives" will necessarily be "incomplete, sometimes false, sometimes falsifying, always selective" and are likely to serve the self-definitions, interests and current political positioning of those looking back, potentially including elements of self-justification, rationalisation and self-aggrandisement.[79] It is important to note that autobiographical assessments sometimes are made primarily within the context of personal biography—as part of histories of what Hughes calls "modern radical subjectivities"[80], but frequently also reflect positions and evaluations of the group, the cause, the social identifications that have been espoused by those remembering—as part of evolutionary stories or founding myths of these social, political and cultural movements and groupings. Indeed, it may be safely assumed that in most pieces of retrospection these two, the personal and the social, are hard to disentangle.[81]

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78   Celia Hughes: Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self, Manchester 2015, p. 2.
79   Karin Wetterau: 68: Täterkinder und Rebellen: Familienroman einer Revolte, Bielefeld 2017, pp. 20, 19 (translated by the author).
80   Celia Hughes: Young Lives on the Left, p. 1.
81   See, for instance, the interview-based *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt*, whose editors found that "[i]n many life stories, the boundaries between the individual autobiography and the sense of collective achievement were dissolved"; James Mark/Anna von der Goltz/Anette Warring: Reflections, in: Robert Gildea et al. (eds.): Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt, Oxford 2013, pp. 283–325, p. 284. See also Celia Hughes: Young Lives on the Left, pp. 103f.

What is of special significance in the British context is that such personal recollec-
tion holds relatively great weight for the overall historiography of 1968: whereas 'reg-
ular' histories on the British '68 remain silent or patchy, as shown above, oral history
flourishes and almost seems to dominate the historical perception. This may be be-
cause, in the absence of political histories of the era, the existing recollective accounts
stick out much more prominently, but it may also be because, under the impression
that politically and structurally the British '68 was hardly noteworthy, as promulgated
by the discourse dissected above, historians have turned towards the experience of
students, protesters and activists to find and validate a British '68 in subjective experi-
ence. If we look at book-length accounts of sixties protest in Britain, we find Tariq Ali's
autobiography *Street Fighting Years* among the sources most referred to[82]; then there
is Celia Hughes's impressive interview-based *Young Lives on the Left*, which "takes a
biographical approach"[83], and Caroline Hoefferle's *British Student Activism in the Long
Sixties*, which "compil[es] evidence from students and other eyewitnesses from univer-
sities across Britain".[84] And it is certainly no coincidence either that in Ronald Fraser's
early "international oral history", *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt*, British voices
are relatively well represented, compared to the small British share of most interna-
tionally comparative collections on '68 history.[85] Whether the prominent construc-
tion of the British '68 as a subjective experience is motivated by, or runs parallel to, the
perceived dearth of a political British '68, there is an additional effect the latter has on
the former: Celia Hughes has pointed out that the international overviews of 1968 in
Britain as lacking in radical spirit and actions (the no-tear-gas, no-shootings approach
quoted above) tend to produce an overall framing of '68 that "disparage[s] the actions
and rhetoric of British activists as insignificant in comparison to the national power
struggles played out elsewhere across the globe".[86] She, in contrast, reminds us that
"assessing protest movements merely in terms of their impact made upon the national
body politic and society overlooks the more subtle questions"[87], such as how ideas
travel, protests are articulated, networks operate, perceptions, sensibilities and lives
change. For her, it is of central importance to "reposition the voices behind the move-
ments and to acknowledge the legitimacy of their experiences".[88]

If the autobiographical discourse of '68 plays such a striking role in the overall
picture, then it will be interesting to see what its main modes are. This is why, in the
remainder of this article, and for the moment leaving aside the question of whether or

82   Tariq Ali: Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties, London 2005.
83   Celia Hughes: Young Lives on the Left, p. 2.
84   Caroline M. Hoefferle: British Student Activism in the Long Sixties, London 2013, p. 2.
85   Ronald Fraser: 1968: A Student Generation in Revolt, New York 1988, title page.
86   Celia Hughes: Young Lives on the Left, pp. 8f.
87   Ibid., p. 9.
88   Ibid.

not 'objective' historiography is more or less legitimate than subjective or collective experience and assessment, I would like to look at the language and narrative models that such subjective and group-related experience is conceived and expressed in. How is '68 discursively produced in oral history and autobiography, especially that which relates to a group-specific way of constructing the past? For the women's movement in Britain, as suggested by Mica Nava in her contribution to this publication, the period around 1968 was one of 'gestation', the movement as such was "embryonic", the subsequent proliferation of women's groups "rhizomatic". The story is one of burgeoning insights, raising consciousness and beginning a struggle to lift oppression. The general framing is one of origins and beginnings, organic growth, increase and development. Refractions of such growth metaphors can also be found in the recollections of other activists, for instance in David Triesman's assessment of the ideas feeding into the protest movement as "exciting and dynamic"[89], of his realisation that he could take politics into his own hands as a "seminal"[90] experience and in his view that the Vietnam issue "produced a seed bed"[91] for later political mobilisation. Other voices testify to having seen, at the time, student activity as the "rebirth of the revolutionary movement in Britain", the protests as proof that "students could start to change the world" or "the course of events".[92]

Indeed narratives of beginnings, birth and growth are frequently interlaced with elements that stress (life) transformation, (delayed or displaced) impact and agency. For British gay rights activist Jeffrey Weeks, thus, the significance of 1968 is as a "moment of agency" that "opened up possibilities, which are still continuing".[93] For Weeks, the actual revolutionary politics of that year were "almost peripheral, in retrospect"[94], their effects a cultural rather than a political revolution, and change coming in ways and places differently than intended or expected. This is actually a commonly found theme: '68 as a transformative moment, of broad effect, in that it first suggested to people "the sense that anything was possible"[95] in personal, social, cultural and political terms. Mica Nava, in her account of the beginnings of women's liberation, makes the point that attending her first women's meeting "did indeed transform [her] life". Sheila Rowbotham argues that, after 1968, "society did change, but often not as we imagined".[96] If women's and gay liberation appear as two long-term and 'indirect' transformative results of a British '68, others may be found more concretely in the

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89   Quoted in Ronald Fraser: 1968, p. 274.
90   Quoted in ibid., p. 276.
91   Quoted in Sylvia Ellis: "A Demonstration of British Good Sense?", p. 65.
92   Quoted in Ronald Fraser: 1968, pp. 273, 133, 186.
93   Quoted in James Mark/Anna von der Goltz/Anette Warring: Reflections, p. 285.
94   Quoted in ibid.
95   Quoted in ibid.
96   Quoted in ibid., p. 286.

field of leftist politics, for instance in the beginnings of community action, which it is believed to have inspired and which "took root in the early 1970s".[97] Looking back, Camden activist John Cowley sees this too, in the language of subjective/collective '68 discourse, as an "an opening to transform the world".[98]

But even at the very centre of political organisation and mobilisation of 1968, narratives of activity, agency and dynamic development may be encountered by those who do not all too quickly fall for the decline and moderation discourse of official history. Analysing the recollections of her various interviewees, Celia Hughes points out that many student activists "came to see themselves as dynamic social actors, contributing to a rapidly changing outer world".[99] A new perception of movement, she argues, was not just related to the physical experience of street politics and grassroots campaigning, in the sense of 'doing', but also concerned "powerful interior understandings of the political and social agency resulting from activity".[100] Apart from such an awareness of a dynamic transformation of society and selves, conceived as stories of "discovery and awakening"[101], it is newness and openings that are among the defining markers of the stories she collects, quoting former activists on how they thought that they, at the time, "create[d] a new space" and "just opened the door and said yes", or took part in "the first sit-in in Britain" and, exhilarated, embraced "new ideas".[102]

A sense of a fresh start may be perceived even among those groups that are usually seen, on account of their quibbling and dividing, to have contributed to the limited effect and quick end of mass political mobilisation in Britain. Members of the International Socialists (IS) recall the year as a time of increased "activity", growing support from volunteers and sympathisers as well as recruitment of new members. Activist Steve Jefferys, for instance, remembers weeks of successful campaigning among Clydeside workers, selling several thousand copies of *Socialist Worker*.[103] Logie Barrow, in this publication, looks back on a "year of hyperactivity", a broadening of recruitment and a making of contacts among different sections of society crucial for political activity in later years. There seems to be a consensus that IS activity before 1969 "attracted a whole generation of young radical people" to the Left, as Sheila Rowbotham puts it.[104] There seems to be an equal consensus that when IS organisation became more centralised after 1968, attraction rapidly dwindled, tensions increased and a

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97   Marie Cerna et al.: Revolutions, in: Robert Gildea et al. (eds.): Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt, Oxford 2013, pp. 107–130, p. 123.
98   Quoted in ibid.
99   Celia Hughes: Young Lives on the Left, p. 102.
100   Ibid., p. 133.
101   Ibid., p. 103.
102   Quoted in ibid., pp. 106, 104, 105.
103   Quoted in Marie Cerna et al.: Revolutions, p. 121.
104   Quoted in ibid.

moment of opportunity had passed. This is indeed another frequent conception: 1968 as a missed moment—which in a way alludes to failure and endings like the historical discourse discussed above, but of course is totally different from that in acknowledging that there actually was something happening in that year—rather than a downright no-show—that could have had even more and better effects. We can find examples of the missed moment narrative in Stuart Hall's verdict about a missed opportunity to fundamentally reorganise intellectual work at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies after '68—as discussed by Ian Gwinn in this publication—or in Hilary Wainwright's assessment that, amid the potential and over-optimism of that year, activists failed "to address the question of institutional consolidation", foregoing the chance to achieve more thorough structural change in society.[105]

How such attention to subjective and collectively informed readings of the events in the year 1968 may be profitably linked to a detailed and balanced, i.e. non-stereotype and non-teleological, historical reconstruction of past actions, motivations, perceptions and effects can be witnessed in Caroline Hoefferle's excellent *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties*, in particular her chapter on "That Magical Year" (which she argues it was, even in Britain). Drawing on, but not limiting herself to, student memories, contemporary student paper articles, testimonies, manifestos, pamphlets, Hoefferle rereads the familiar events in a way that appraises successes and limitations/failures as well as similarities to, and differences from, other international variants of protest. There are illuminating refutations or inversions of standard historical discursive constructions, for instance, when she quotes David Triesman on how he, after coming back from the United States, felt that the U.S. movement, in comparison with the British, was "utterly incoherent" and lacked an overall strategy.[106] Or when she makes a point of stressing that the British scene, from those quibbling leftist fractions to the more general student body, was infused with "ideological vitality"[107] and that the student protests "gave birth to a new social movement"[108], i.e. women's liberation. Her account thus manages to posit and argue presence and relevance where others deal in lack and irrelevance, growth where others stick with decline. Hoefferle, too, concludes that ultimately the approaches and effects of the British movement were rather reformist (and weren't they in Westphalia?), but she does so alongside arguing that "the British student movement had become a powerful force in 1968", that it was "more confrontational and more focused"[109] than before and that it had effects to speak of (democratisation, uni reform, nation-wide reassessment of educa-

105 Quoted in Robert Gildea/James Mark: Conclusion: Europe's 1968, in: Robert Gildea et al. (eds.): Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt, Oxford 2013, pp. 326–338, p. 338.
106 Quoted in Caroline Hoefferle: British Student Activism in the Long Sixties, p. 86.
107 Ibid., p. 101.
108 Ibid., p. 162.
109 Ibid., p. 129.

tion, politicisation of student body and organisations). Thankfully, there is no *a priori* negativity or quick recourse to national character.

Conclusion

Dominant academic and popular historical discourses of 1968 depict the year in Britain as lacking and lagging behind international developments. Central statements include that '68 did not really happen in Britain at all, and that as far as there were traces of protest activity, these remained mimetic, apolitical and inconsequential. Emplotment of the British '68 story is conceived in terms of gap, decline or moderation narratives. Such discursive constructions are held in place and stabilised by another set of statements that point to the essentially liberal way of doing politics in Britain, to British intellectual mentality and customs, to an alternative occurrence of 'protest' and liberation in the domain of popular culture etc. As to the 'deeper' structural logic that informs such patterns of discourse, I would, by way of a conclusion, like to briefly discuss three of the most obvious ideas that may be raised in this context: i) the view that historical research simply has as yet not produced enough knowledge about the details of '68 in Britain for comparative accounts to tell a story other than of relative insignificance or failure. There may be a point here; however, it can also be seen that even those histories that contain a lot of detail revert to an emplotment and evaluation in line with the dominant discursive structures. The meaning of the British '68 is mostly constructed *ex negativo*, potentially meaningful events and connections are prone to be overlooked and questions of their possible significance remain unpursued. On the whole, ii) the discursive patterns rather seem to point to a continued dominance in (comparative) '68 historiography of a history of (big) events, persons and violent conflicts; this, in part, may have taken its cue from the contemporary language of the protest movement itself, the high-flying rhetoric of revolution, the self-stylisation of revolutionaries and the importance of disruptive protests and clashes with the authorities and representatives of the establishment; yet it also seems to be stuck in the logic set by the contemporary media coverage, and responses of public authorities, which focused on, and whipped up fear of, an escalation of violent unrest, processing developments in terms of a sequence of law-and-order issues, personalising and polarising the debate.[110] Finally, iii) accounts of the British '68 tend to be framed

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110 See ibid., p. 112, or Sylvia Ellis: "A Demonstration of British Good Sense?", p. 64. Many historical accounts, indeed, seem to follow the contemporary media's agenda setting in directing their attention when analysing student protest on questions of order/disorder, violence/non-violence, and subscribing to the media's and establishment's reading of official responses as clever, appropriate and fair; see Caroline Hoefferle: British Student Activism in the Long Sixties, p. 114.

by national comparison, either explicit or implicit, often suffering from a paradoxical effect that seeks to place British protests in an international context, but in so doing heavily relies on national stereotypes, mythologies and master narratives.

It has been proposed by historians who investigate the memories of former activists and student protesters that "any history that attempts to reconstruct the political world of 1968 needs to unpick the reformulations of its meaning that have obscured our capacity to understand it".[111] To this end, Kristin Ross in her *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, sees the need to reconstruct the French movement and "the multiple discourses that have attempted to refashion—or often belittle—it in the years since".[112] For the British history of 1968, too, such an approach seems to be apt. Some of the discursive constraints of historiography are thrown into relief by looking at the subjective/collective discourses of activism, some of the latter's constraints are brought out in relation to the former. An awareness of the discursive patterns at work, of the larger discursive formation of the British '68, may help produce fresh insights into the past and its reconstruction, yet more 'political'—i. e. meta-historical and self-reflexive—histories of political processes, events, ideas and perceptions.

Claus-Ulrich Viol works as a Senior Lecturer in British Cultural Studies at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. His main fields of interest, apart from British political culture, are the James Bond phenomenon, psychoanalysis, and stereotype research. He is co-editor of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*.

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111 James Mark/Anna von der Goltz/Anette Warring: Reflections, p. 284.
112 Ibid.