

1968: A Global Perspective

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The Frankfurt School and Student Politics in the Netherlands

The relationship between the Frankfurt School and the German student movement around 1968, as is well known, was at best a contentious one. Student leaders accused the School of cowardice for refusing to formulate a praxis from the resources of Critical Theory, while Jürgen Habermas, though at first cautiously supportive, later denounced the radicals with the infamous reproach of "left fascism." These events did not go unnoticed in the neighboring Netherlands, and "critical universities" modeled after those in Germany emerged throughout the country as a forum for generating knowledge in the service of liberation, including the discussion of pirated texts by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse.

While these impudent charges were echoed by some of the students in the Netherlands, a number of characteristics of the Dutch movement and its wider cultural and political contexts in the 1960s differed considerably from the more explosive events in both Germany and France, such as the successful integration of the New Left into the labor party, the more "ludic" form of protest, and the swift but partial successes in university reform. This paper draws on student pamphlets, newspaper articles, interviews, and philosophical and sociological writings to examine the impact of the Dutch reception of the Frankfurt School in the global context of 1968 and then demonstrates how Habermas subsequently became a dominant, though not uncontested, touchstone for conceptualizing progressive politics in the Netherlands.