Much ado about Joschka Fischer—the debate over the German foreign minister's past

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For days the press has been filled with articles about the past exploits of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer as a “street fighter”. *Der Stern* began the year with an interview headlined, “Yes, I was a militant,” accompanied by allegedly newly discovered pictures showing Fischer fighting with a policeman 28 years ago. News weekly *Der Spiegel* followed with the headline “Joschka's wild years,” a 14-page lead story, the same pictures and a further interview with Fischer.

From the ranks of the opposition the reproach sounded that Fischer had not dissociated himself seriously enough from his violent past, followed by demands for his resignation. The editorial columns debate whether it is feasible for Fischer to remain as the representative of Germany's foreign policy. The magazines argue whether Fischer should be regarded as a careerist opportunist or as a repentant sinner who has learned from his past mistakes.

Fischer apologised personally to the police trade union and expressed his desire to meet the policeman he beat up in 1973—who, ironically, is named Herr Marx.

The recent exposures offer nothing new. Everything that is now being reported again in detail by the media has been public knowledge for years. What is new is Fischer's identification as the helmeted man in the 1973 photo, who with a raised fist is hitting the policeman. But it was never a secret that Fischer had taken part actively in street battles with the police. As he put it in the recent interview with *Der Stern*: “We threw stones. We were beaten up, but we also fought back strongly.”

The 1997 semi-official biography of Fischer by Sibylle Krause-Burger relates how in a public debate held in 1974 with the Young Socialists functionary Karsten Voigt (who today is a member of Fischer's ministry responsible for relations with America), Fischer defended throwing stones against the “representatives of the system”. According to Fischer at that time, such actions represented “the alternative between a reformism, which in the final analysis represents the practice of capital, or that which means: Organising mass resistance against the reactionary force!” The less friendly biography of him by Christian Schmidt, published in 1998, describes in detail the street fighting activities of Fischer's group.

Fischer has never made a secret of his militant past. In the atmosphere of the 1970s, when the police used extreme force against demonstrators and often exceeded the boundaries of legality itself, such an attitude was by no means unusual.

Even Knut Mueller, who in the 1970s was responsible for the Frankfurt police and was enemy number one among the squatters Fischer was associated with, admits today that the protests at the time were supported by broad social layers and did indeed have some effect. “They protected Frankfurt's west end from destruction by high-rise building constructions,” the now 71-year-old Mueller recently told the press. Only the occupations led to the change of mind within the Social Democratic Party (SPD); the West end citizens' initiative would never have managed it without the militants.

When Fischer was sworn in as foreign minister two years ago, all the facts that are being rehashed today lay on the table, and no one was disturbed by them. Why all the excitement now?

The immediate cause for the media's intensified interest in Fischer's past is the court trial of Hans-Joachim Klein, who has faced proceedings since last autumn because of his participation in the 1975 attack on the Vienna OPEC conference.

Klein was a member of Fischer's group before he took part in the assault on the OPEC conference under the command of “Carlos,” alias Ilich Ramírez Sánchez. Later he dissociated himself from terrorism and went underground. Some of Fischer's close friends—including Tom Koenigs (at present director of the civilian UN administration in Kosovo), Daniel Cohn-Bendit (European parliamentary delegate for the French Greens) and the cabaret artist Matthias Beltz—were in contact with Klein. He was arrested in France in September 1998 and sent to Germany. Fischer has been called as a witness in the Klein trial and, after initial reservations, was set to give evidence on January 16 in Frankfurt.

Since the beginning of the Klein trial various journalists have stepped up their investigations of Fischer's past. The debate over Fischer only got into full swing, however, after journalist Bettina Roehl approached the large news magazines with the pictures now published.

Bettina Roehl has been working on a book for five years in which she relates her own tragic involvement in the events of the 1970s. She is the daughter of Ulrike Meinhof, one of the founders of the terrorist Red Army Faction, and her father was Klaus Rainer Roehl, editor of the left-wing magazine *Konkret*. She was eight years old when her mother went underground, and was thirteen when Meinhof killed herself in prison. These traumatic experiences have resulted in Roehl's pathological hatred for the representatives of the 1968 movement in general and for Joschka Fischer in particular.

The Econ publishing house, which belongs to the Springer press, rejected publication of her manuscript, saying it leaned too far to the right ideologically. This is despite the fact that the Springer press, which also publishes the *Bild* tabloid, was one of the most important targets of the protest movement in 1968. Now the book is to be published by Kiepenheuer & Witsch with the title “Tell me where you stand”. Kiepenheuer & Witsch have also published books by Joschka Fischer.

The pictures, which show Fischer in action, were made available to Roehl by retired photographer Lutz Kleinhans in return for a small payment for work on her book. Kleinhans had taken the pictures in 1973 for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper, which had also published them. Roehl then offered the pictures around various media outlets for horrendous sums, without revealing their source, although she possessed neither ownership nor copyright of the shots. She would return film material that she had borrowed from the archives of ARD television on the condition that her picture was shown on the daily news programme.

A glance at Bettina Roehl's web site clearly shows that—to put it mildly—she has some personal problems. Alongside her own picture is one of Fischer, with the haunting harmonica theme from “Once Upon a Time

in the West" playing underneath.

Roehl also has a copy of her letter to Germany's federal President Johannes Rau, justifying why she has begun proceedings against the foreign minister. This letter is a mixture of abstruse conspiracy theories and open hysteria. It begins with the words, "Here I must address you in your function as federal president and organ of the constitution: It concerns the person of Josef Martin Fischer. It concerns his past. And it concerns the present Fischer-system, the Fischer-network. It concerns a media cartel that is suppressing the truth. It concerns a state of national emergency" ... and so on, for over two dozen pages.

That this material is taken seriously— *Der Stern* and *Der Spiegel* both continue to prominently point to Roehl's web site—says much about the unscrupulous methods with which the media utilise or unleash political scandals. The level that the debate about Fischer has now reached, however, also makes clear that it concerns more than a personal scandal.

The comments that have appeared so far can be divided into two groups. The first, a minority, regard Fischer's militant past as a threat to the state's authority, and demand he distance himself even further or resign as foreign minister. The others, the majority, evaluate Fischer's metamorphosis from a militant opponent of the state to German vice-chancellor as proof of the strength and unifying force of the state. Both agree that the authority of the state should be reaffirmed and strengthened.

Heribert Prantl in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper formulated the second point of view most succinctly. "Precisely the advocates of a strong state," he writes, "should be proud at the unifying force of this state." The state is strong, he argues, when it can integrate such critical movements, and not when it constantly produces new security laws.

In the same newspaper Herbert Riehl Heyse argues similarly. He says the country "certainly did not become weaker when its institutions surprisingly proved to be a magnet for some of the most talented of those who formerly wanted to change the system." And in *Die Zeit* Ulrich Greiner comments along the same lines: "Democracy should welcome the return of its lost sons and daughters. It should not presume to act as the Lord and want to investigate motives."

Indeed Fischer's appointment as foreign minister, and the broad support he has experienced since then in the majority of the media, can be explained only by the fact that he has led the "lost sons and daughters" of the 1968 generation back into the bosom of the prevailing order. The Greens were the organised expression of this generation at a point in time when they had long given up ideas of changing the system, but still had strong pacifist, ecological and, to some extent, social reformist points of view as well. Without Fischer and the Green party leadership who follow him, widespread resistance to international combat missions by the *Bundeswehr* (German armed forces) could not have been so easily overcome, and German participation in the Kosovo War would have encountered substantially greater resistance.

Why is all this suddenly placed in question again with the recent campaign about Fischer's past? There are several reasons.

First, all those on the right-wing margins of the political spectrum are speaking out again; those who never resigned themselves to the Greens entering the federal government.

Second, the Greens have politically exhausted themselves; they have done their duty. With each successive task they have carried out since entering government, abandoning their previous aims—whether concerning combat missions, the exit from the atomic power programme, or in social policy—they also lost their ability to defuse and integrate the potential for protest. While they succeeded in doing this to a large extent with the 50-year-olds from the 1968 generation, among the younger generation they have hardly any influence and support. If this generation comes into conflict with the existing order it will orient itself differently. There are, therefore, fewer reasons to keep the Greens in the government.

The most important cause for the present debate, however, could be that the state authority itself feels challenged. The manner in which all the press comments, whether for or against Fischer, proclaim the need for a strong state and call for a greater dissociation from his militant past makes this clear.

The 1968 protest movement, which swept across Europe and the US, was not limited to street fighting and punch-ups with the police. It was a broad social movement, which in addition to involving a majority of the students also affected large sections of the working class. In France a general strike almost led to the fall of the de Gaulle government, which only clung to power thanks to the Stalinist Communist Party.

"Revolutionary Fight," the organisation created by Cohn-Bendit and Fischer in 1969, was a product of the decay and degeneration of this movement. At first they turned briefly, at least physically, to the working class, when its members joined the production line at Opel (General Motors). After a few months they drew the conclusion that nothing was to be achieved with the working class, and oriented to the house squatter scene.

The view they promulgated at the time—that revolutionary politics distinguishes itself from reformism through carrying out violent conflicts with the state—is not only primitive and theoretically absurd, it is also narcissistic and expresses contempt for the working class. For Marxists, the difference between a reformist and a revolutionary perspective consists in the fact that the latter strives to free workers from the influence of bourgeois parties, in particular the social democrats, enabling them to act politically independently. This does not require wild adventures or street battles, but the patient work of education, in which Fischer and Co. have shown not the smallest interest.

Today there are few outward signs of a substantial protest movement such as that which existed at the end of the 1960s. But social relations are strained to the breaking point. Wide layers of the population are conducting a desperate struggle for daily life and feel alienated from the official politics. The catastrophic conditions in the former East Germany—which *Bundestag* President Thierse recently pointed to in contrast to official government propaganda—make this clear.

Under these circumstances, the leading circles in the media and politics see any questioning of the state's authority as a direct threat. That is the background to the debate over Joschka Fischer, their present whipping boy. While Fischer's loyalty to the state is not in doubt, the broad social layers whose discontent must inevitably find political expression are the real target.

Even if it appears unlikely at the moment, it cannot be excluded that the dispute will cost Fischer his office and could herald the end of the Red-Green coalition between the SPD and the Greens.

There are some dark corners in Fischer's biography, which if illuminated might end him politically. Present discussions particularly concern a Molotov cocktail that was thrown into a police car on May 10, 1976, one day after the death of Ulrike Meinhof, severely injuring policeman Juergen Weber. At the time the public prosecutor's office investigated the case as an "attempted murder". Fischer was arrested and held for a short time as a suspect, but was then released for lack of evidence. To this day the culprit has not been found. Since then, rumours have emerged again and again that Fischer was implicated in the affair. Allegedly, in a discussion of militant protesters held on the eve of the attack, he called for Molotov cocktails to be used. Christian Schmidt made this claim in his biography of Fischer published two years ago, and Fischer has not repudiated the claim to date.

If, some 25 years after this event, the Red-Green government should fall it would clearly strengthen the right wing. The right-wing Christian democrats, who were strongly rebuked in the 1998 general election, would triumph. But no resistance is to be expected either from Fischer and the Greens or from the SPD. On the contrary, with his constant apologies for his past and assertions of loyalty to the state, Fischer is opening the road

for the right wing.