

Cohn-Bendit attacks German novelist Günter Grass for opposing Afghan war

Stefan Steinberg
14 December 2001

At a conference held last weekend in Berlin to commemorate the work of the philosopher and writer Hannah Arendt, Green Party leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit lashed out at German intellectuals who have spoken in opposition to the US-led war in Afghanistan. He singled out the writer and 1999 Nobel prize-winner Günter Grass, author of *The Tin Drum*. Cohn-Bendit likened the position adopted by Grass and others to the stance adopted by Britain and France in 1938, i.e. appeasement with fascism.

Grass has published a series of comments and interviews criticising the Bush administration's war on Afghanistan. Declaring that "revenge" was not a justifiable motive for waging war, Grass pointed to the "religious fundamentalist background" of the American president. The war in Afghanistan, according to Grass, would endanger many ordinary Afghans who have nothing to do with the conflict and would serve merely to aggravate hatred and further terrorist actions. He also warned of the dangers posed to democratic rights by the anti-terrorist security laws introduced in Germany by Social Democratic Interior Minister Otto Schily.

In an interview with the newspaper *Märkische Allgemeine*, Schily accused Grass of anti-American sentiments, referring to the "really terrible anti-American faux pas, which are to be heard in certain circles."

Grass responded with a speech at a meeting of the Berlin Academy of Art, in which he emphasised his "great sympathy" with the victims of the terror attacks on the World Trade Centre, but added, "No one can force me to express sympathy with the American government. In simplistically dividing the world into good and bad, US president George W. Bush, and all those who argue in a similar manner, are descending to the level of the fundamentalists themselves." Schily responded by describing Grass' comments as "foolish".

Leading Green Party European parliament deputy Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the closest confidantes of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (who also belongs to the Green Party), has joined the fray. He naturally sided with his ministerial colleague Schily, who himself was a founding member of the Green Party until he switched to the Social Democrats.

Cohn-Bendit first came to prominence as a leading figure in the 1968 May-June student revolts in Paris. As a veteran of radical student politics at the ripe old age of 23, he wrote the book *Obsolete Communism, The Left-Wing Alternative* *, dealing with his experiences of the 1968 events. In his book, he describes the calamitous and treacherous policy pursued by the French

Communist Party, but at the same time makes clear that his version of a "left alternative" excludes any sort of genuine socialism. In *Obsolete Communism*, Cohn-Bendit also took up his cudgels against the Russian revolution and Lenin's Bolshevik party—mendaciously declaring that the latter was responsible for Stalinism: "As far as we are concerned, there is no break between the ideology of the Bolshevik Party and that of the new bureaucracy."

Even in 1968, at the time of the publication of his book, Cohn-Bendit opposed the revolutionary implications of Leon Trotsky's struggle for genuine socialism against the Stalinist bureaucracy. He wrote, "No matter what Trotskyist historiographers may tell us today, it was not in 1927 nor in 1923 nor even in 1920, but in 1918 and under the personal leadership of Trotsky and Lenin that the social revolution became perverted—a fact Trotsky could never understand—simply because he himself was one of its prime architects."

Cohn-Bendit search for a "left alternative" continued in Frankfurt, Germany, where together with Fischer he founded a student group named "Revolutionary Struggle". Both men dedicated themselves to *sponti* politics (derived from the word "spontaneous"). Eclectically drawing from elements of anarchism and Maoism, their group favoured "gut politics" and were hostile to any far-reaching theoretical considerations.

Rejecting the working class as a force for social change, and the class struggle as the basis for an understanding of society, the adherents of "Revolutionary Struggle" vehemently railed against superficial aspects of capitalist society in the manner of a petulant child revolting against his or her parents. The group's main political activity was squatting in unoccupied houses, which they subsequently defended in street battles with police.

As the leading *sponti*, Cohn-Bendit, who had already become a media favourite in Paris, functioned as a sort of spiritual godfather to the younger Joschka Fischer. According to Sibylle Krause-Burger, one of Fischer's biographers, the "son of a petty bourgeois, Fischer, was fascinated not least by the big bourgeois Cohn-Bendit, his love of good food, his French savoir vivre, his worldliness. To live life like Danny, meant, for Joschka, transcending his own background into a much broader framework. His own social revolt acquired more dignity".

Following spells working in an alternative nursery and the Karl Marx bookshop in Frankfurt, Cohn-Bendit, dissatisfied with his efforts at developing a new life-style in "Revolutionary Struggle",

joined the Green Party in 1984.

Cohn-Bendit's support for imperialist war is not new. He was one of the pioneers of the German Greens who argued for a policy of ditching the organisation's traditional adherence to pacifism. Already in July 1992, he called for the dispatch of a military force to Bosnia against the Serbs and fully supported the first intervention by German troops in a European conflict since the Second World War.

Since then, Cohn-Bendit has found his place in the most belligerent wing of the Greens and has played a leading role in the party's reorientation, spearheading its support for imperialist militarism. Arguing in a similar manner to Fischer, he regularly evokes the spectre of fascism and the crimes committed at Auschwitz to argue in favour of broad military intervention. In a speech he made at the Hannah Arendt conference in 1995, at a time when most German politicians were arguing for a limited and brief engagement by the military in Yugoslavia, he pleaded for the stationing of troops in Bosnia for a period of "10, 20, 30 years".

With regard to the US-led war in Afghanistan, Cohn-Bendit has made his views clear in an interview with the German *taz* newspaper. He declared his preference for an expanded United Nations-led military operation to unseat the "fascistoid, anti-women Taliban government", with support given to "the liberation struggle of the Afghan opposition, with planes, weapons and soldiers."

At the recent Green Party conference, which voted emphatically in favour of supporting the war in Afghanistan, Cohn-Bendit managed to stand even further to the right than the party leadership. Together with Ralf Fücks, he introduced a motion which went much further than that favoured by Fischer and the majority of the Greens parliamentary faction. In order to avoid a split with the declining pacifist faction inside the party, Fischer was forced to oppose the Cohn-Bendit/Fücks motion, which called for blanket support for military intervention.

His advocacy of military intervention has not proved an obstacle, however, to his participation in the anti-globalisation and ostensibly pacifist movement *Attac*. He has been a member of this organisation for the last four years and has spoken at a number of its meetings and conferences.

From this brief sketch of the career of Daniel Cohn-Bendit it should be clear that we are dealing with a man who pays little attention to historical truth or the development of a rounded argument. His claim that opposition by German intellectuals to the current war in Afghanistan is the same as the position adopted by France and Britain in 1938 is simply absurd. Despite their political limitations, those such as Grass are motivated by serious concerns about the move towards war and the restrictions being made upon democratic rights in America as well as in Germany, a country which was primarily responsible for two world wars and the rise of fascism in the twentieth century.

Cohn-Bendit's motive in raising the spectre of appeasement proceeds from an entirely opposed standpoint. He demagogically raises the bogey of fascism and "totalitarianism" to stampede impressionistic petty-bourgeois layers into supporting new wars and attacks on democratic rights, enabling German imperialism to forward its own interests on the European and world arena. He

likes to pose as a good European, but it would be more correct to describe him as a Euro-chauvinist. His support for the current US-led war is stimulated by the realisation that the only possible way to pursue German interests (and in particular in Europe) is provisionally under Washington's wing, given America's present military and economic superiority. He has made it clear, however, that the long-term interests of German and European imperialism are diametrically opposed to those of the US.

In a recent interview with *taz* headlined, "With a new EU against the USA", Cohn-Bendit outlined his own view of European developments: "This Europe can only be an alternative to the USA. Basically the neo-liberal project is historically represented by the US, with a Trojan horse in the EU and that is England. We have to strengthen these [European] institutions in such a way that we can deal with this Trojan horse and at the same time define ourselves as a counterbalance to America."

In response to a question from the *taz* interviewer, he went on to explain what he regarded as a "good" European and a critic of globalisation: "He must be a radical European. I also want us understand ourselves in a political and cultural sense as a counterbalance to the US."

In an interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine, Cohn-Bendit revealed that his version of Europe and the world was one in which German interests played the defining role: "After recognition of the German role in the Balkans and also in the Middle East, German Foreign Policy must now take up the challenge of shaping globalisation."

Günter Grass has an uneven record with regard to German militarism. In 1995, he supported the intervention by German troops in the Balkans. Following his latest critical comments on the Afghan war, Grass, together with a brace of prominent German intellectuals, was invited to dinner with SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Since the meeting, Grass has maintained his criticism of the war, but at the same time, in a comment to *Die Zeit* newspaper, pledged his loyalty to the SPD. This is not enough for Cohn-Bendit. With his ferocious attack on Grass, he is not only attempting to intimidate certain intellectuals who have misgivings about the current course of the war but is seeking to forestall more widespread popular opposition.

With the possibility of participating in Great Power politics, and representing a certain layer of Green Party politicians prone to hysterical demagogy and unpredictable opportunism, Cohn-Bendit has long since abandoned his "adolescent differences" and reconciled himself with his parent. Tossing aside his kindergarten uniform and *sponti* politics, he is now putting on the garb of a crude Prussian military bully.

* *Obsolete Communism, The Left-Wing Alternative*, Penguin Books, 1968



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact