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BWB-10  
A Talk with  
Danny the Red

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
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New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The German newsmagazine Der Spiegel reports this week that some of my fellow Americans are so upset at the possible admission of Daniel Cohn-Bendit to the United States that the San Francisco Examiner has warned: "Letting Cohn-Bendit in would mean throwing a torch into a gasoline canister."

Cohn-Bendit, also known as Danny the Red, reputedly wants to continue his studies in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. I doubt that he will be given the chance... particularly after a fellow member of the West German SDS, former chairman K. D. Wolff, repeatedly called Senator Strom Thurmond a "bandit" in hearings of the Senate Committee for Internal Security two weeks ago.

Even if he is refused a visa to the United States (England, Belgium, France and Italy have, on various occasions, closed their borders to him), Cohn-Bendit is not likely to fade from the spotlight of this McLuhanesque age. When I called his apartment in Frankfurt this week, his roommate told me he is in Rome, negotiating with movie producers for the filming of his first screenplay, which one newspaper said is a Western which Jean-Luc Godard may direct and which will feature a horse who spouts the sayings of Chairman Mao Tse Tung.

As the Germans say, "You have to have imagination," and among the student revolutionaries I've read about or met, Cohn-Bendit seems endowed with a goodly share. (Not enough, thank goodness, to star in an Israeli musical about a student revolution, as an earlier erroneous newspaper item reported.)

My notes and clippings on Danny the Red, who burst onto the world scene just a year ago with the formation of his March 22 Movement at Nanterre University, have been accumulating, so perhaps now is the time to put down some thoughts which are the result of an interview I had with him in January in Frankfurt.

When I talked with him for an hour and a half then, Cohn-Bendit was awaiting the appeal of his eight months' jail sentence, the result of his "disturbing the peace" at a demonstration

during the September 1968 Frankfurt Book Fair and "interfering with the police" when he jumped a barricade. When films of the incident bore out the defense claim that Cohn-Bendit did not strike the police, but was almost strangled himself by the overzealous officers, his sentence was reduced to six months' and suspended with a warning for further good behavior. Although Danny is free now, the state attorney in Frankfurt is preparing another appeal...as Danny says, "he wants to put me behind bars."

This carrot-topped, freckle-faced, blue-eyed enragé is a fascinating mixture of revolutionary zeal, youthful exuberance, and intellectual inquiry. His book on Obsolete Communism, A Left-Wing Alternative (which he wrote with his older brother Gabriel in five weeks last summer) is a fast-moving, literate appraisal of the Paris events and a condemnation of the French Communist Party, "a mere appendage of the Soviet bureaucracy," for its betrayal of the student-worker revolution. In Frankfurt, a nerve-center of the German SDS where he settled after his expulsion from France, Cohn-Bendit is scorned by some German comrades for hob-nobbing with socialites (during the Frankfurt Book Fair he talked with an attractive jet-setter at a cocktail party given by his publisher) and for having a sense of humor. A photographer friend who has watched Cohn-Bendit in action at Frankfurt demonstrations tells me he delights in agreeing, deadpan, with all the outrageous accusations Frankfurt citizens make about his plans for revolution ("You'd kill us all if you had your way!" and Danny replies with pseudo-seriousness, "Of course.") until his accuser realizes Cohn-Bendit is pulling his leg.

Cohn-Bendit's impudence is leavened with charm. In a person-to-person talk, his blue eyes twinkle mischievously as he spoofs the public's illusions about the life of a student rebel: "I like like any other student; I read, I study, I talk to my friends--we don't just run from one demonstration to another." But in the foreword to his book, he ridicules the capitalist system and his publisher for advancing him \$12,500, "although they know for sure that this money will be used for Molotov cocktails."

As John Searle pointed out in a recent Spectator article, Danny's elevation to "star" status among the revolutionaries is partially dependent on his telegenic charm. Jacques Sauvageot, the UNEF student leader, and Alain Geismar, the head of the teacher's union, were both "authentic campus leaders and organizers" before the Paris revolt began, "but neither is much good on television, so neither ever attained Cohn-Bendit's symbolic stature." Cohn-Bendit admits it himself: "There will be people who will express something," he told me, "and then the press will build them up like they built me up as a leader. They will always ask him the questions and not the other people."



"Between us and a political goal..." Cohn-Bendit and Frankfurt police.

Photos by Eric Meskauskas

In student circles, Cohn-Bendit makes an obvious effort to remain in the background--he resents the fame (or notoriety) forced on him by the press. But he uses his "star" status to demand money for interviews, his book, the upcoming film, with which he then supports the New Left movement in France and Germany.

In confrontations with the police, however, Cohn-Bendit is a fearless, front-line fighter. He never wears a helmet (as some other German SDS'ers often do) and his Frankfurt arrest resulted from his springing over a barricade, alone, when the plan had been for a mass storming of the barricade. I asked Cohn-Bendit if he relished such bravado, or if he feared the police: "I'm scared, but I don't think about it. I don't see the police except as a barrier between us and a political goal. I don't think about what they can do to me if I can reach a political goal."

Cohn-Bendit sees violence as a part of the system," the only question is who should use it and when." Violence has always existed in the working class, he says, and in last year's events in France, it forged a connection between the students and workers. "But if somebody talks about violence, they mean only our (the students') violence," he complained. "They have never seen that our society produces violence, and we all have to live in supporting the violence. Daily work is a violence against the people who work, the existence of police is based on violence. Everybody agrees you have to use violence against the Fascist government in Greece today... but now to point to the revolution and say 'they are violent, we are non-violent,' it's absolutely absurd...after Chicago, after Paris. You can only talk about the violence of the society, and the movement that wants to change it needs the violence to change it, because in front of them they have the violence of the society's system."

The French-German revolutionary draws the obvious parallels between student violence on American campuses and student revolts in Germany and France. "All the political action in the university has the same response from the administration-- police, police, police. The argument that they try to democratize, to organize themselves in the university is the same feeling...that we all are in the consumer society and that we all consume, and nothing more. We are all passive but we want to be active."

But the idea of an international student movement, a Fifth Internationale, he dismisses as absurd. "All over the world there are student movements, but there is no connection (beyond an exchange of information). There is a connection in the spirit sometimes, in anti-authoritarianism and things like this, but there is not an organized connection," he insists. "It's

very interesting, we see everywhere the Americans say 'It's an international plot,' or the French minister of education says 'It's an international plot,' but led by whom nobody knows. It's really funny...it's only because you have the same objective situations in a lot of countries that you have the same reactions. You have solidarity, but not an international organization."

Cohn-Bendit's complaint that the pot calls the kettle black has a ring of truth, and, in defense of student protests, it is true that street and campus actions, not legalistic proposals, sparked the first political action on university reform in Germany and in France (where the "fruits of May" will now be tested in Education Minister Edgar Faure's "Participation" plan of university councils). The point of polarization, however, at which the conservative reaction of the system overtakes the reform spirit teeters perilously in the balance when excessive violence erupts...and here the qualification of "excessive" is answered differently by left and right.

Cohn-Bendit's anarchist view of society (shorthand labels are always dangerous...as another leftist told me in Berlin, "in the social-political sense, Dr. Martin Luther King's policy of civil disobedience could be called anarchist") seems to run along the lines of philosophic anarchism, but he disregards the possible negative results.

Ernest Jouhy, a French leftist and professor of psychology at the progressive Odenwald School in Germany where Cohn-Bendit spent his high school years, wrote an open letter to his former student which was published in the Frankfurter Rundschau. He criticized Danny for his "relative blindness" on the danger of triggering reaction: "Whoever, like you, buoys up his eschatological hopes through the process of evolution and revolution in the 'conquest of alienation,' in a 'good' system of society which will demolish with one heroic act the current 'evil' system, he is blind to that which he himself effects, to that which occurs today in effective revolution in France, the CSSR, in Vietnam or in Biafra, to what the Arabian leaders and masses incite against Israel, and the Israeli socialists against the Arabian fedayeen, to what the reason is for the role of the student revolt and the role of the working class, to how the changes are to be effected in the existing power structure (whether in governments, party apparatus or economic and social management)."

Cohn-Bendit, continues Jouhy, should study more carefully the realpolitik, and determine what's worth saving before prematurely throwing the whole system in the trashcan. "No modern conception of society can renounce the liberal insights which have developed since the time of Montesquieu into the necessity of power divisions, constitutionality, influences and control

of force through representative organs."

Anarchist-Trotskyist blindness, writes Jouhy, "is merely the naive belief that man and the masses are, historically, more humane than their oppressors and in themselves 'good.' On the one side stand the powerful managers of a consumer society, the evil 'secret seducers.' On the other side, the students and workers who tend toward a humane society."

Cohn-Bendit's anarchist society, as he briefly diagrammed it for me, would do away, for example, with the police. "The (present) society is built up so that a minority is guiding all society, taking the decisions for all society and has the power of society. To keep the power in their hands, the minority must have a defense. This is done by the police and the army. The role of the police in daily life is to give people in the society a feeling of 'you have to watch, you have to obey.' And there are a lot of rules in society whose only object is to make the people feel that they must be a society, there must be these laws, and they must obey."

In Cohn-Bendit's utopian conception, law enforcement would be accomplished by mutual participation. "There will be no official police (but) people who will have to do some job like regulating streets and cars and things. A police which defends some laws is too static. The laws are a reproduction of the political and economic structure of the society. When we change the economic structure, we will have another connection to the laws because then the law won't be there to defend the ruling class...then the people will be more involved. If you have criminals it won't be the relation of the criminal in the society, (it) will be the relation of this society to someone who is sick...because criminal doesn't exist."

Communism, as practiced now within the existing Communist Parties and the socialist states, no longer has "revolutionary courage" and has become "conservative" through its integration into the world system. But Cohn-Bendit believes the New Left is developing "a new kind of social relations, based on the experience of the development of society today and the industrial possibilities we have."

The economic structure he envisions is one in which "all the power belongs to the people." The capitalist system, he argues, is no longer private but state-owned, "because there is one power which regulates the currency system, and that's the state." He rejects the capitalism-socialism convergence theory as "just sociological," and insists that with modern technology "we can make calculations of what we have to produce, so that everybody can understand what we have to produce, and then we can argue about the objectives."

Contrary to some American and German leftist students who

want to restructure the university as a bastion for socialist thought, Cohn-Bendit insists "you can't build up your socialist island in the university when the rest (of society) is a capitalist state." Before self-government can exist in the universities, he theorizes, there must be self-government in the factories, in all levels of society.

Cohn-Bendit contends that, despite the relative quiet which now reigns in French society, the cauldron of revolutionary thought may bubble over again. "Last spring showed us that you can never really forecast what the situation in a country is. If an actual political group tries to show up the contradictions in this society's system, sometimes it explodes."

"The new consciousness of our political power as revolutionaries," a consciousness he believes is shared by students and workers, still hangs in the air. In his book he lyrically describes a night on the barricades: "The barricades were no longer a means of self-defense, they became a symbol of freedom. That's why this night from the 10th to the 11th of May remains unforgettable for all who were there. The barricades will certainly become a symbol of violence, of the doggedness of the assault troops, for the middle-class historian; but for many they were that moment of awakening consciousness, totally in the tradition of great moments of history. The memory of the pogrom, of the first light of morning, of the seriousness of the wounds will remain, but all of that cannot dispel the memory of the beauty of a night in which a truly revolutionary situation arose through the exemplary actions of the communarden or sansculotten of the Rue Gay Lussac."

But the historical moment, the "dialectical change between spontaneity and theoretical nuance" which Cohn-Bendit glorifies is difficult to sustain without organization and leadership. When the French Communist Party refused to take over leadership in France, as Cohn-Bendit accuses, the May revolution crumbled.

Professor Jouhy, who supports his former student's political goals, rejects his ideology "because I evaluate the social powers differently...without leadership and organization the imagination of the masses cannot remain mobilized. The management of society, whether economic, cultural or political, will once again initiate and control the social development alone. I cannot agree with you when you--trusting in the explosive power of utopia--will surrender the concrete, attainable changes completely to the spontaneity of the masses."

At age 24, the orphaned son of Berlin Jews who emigrated to France in 1933 and returned to Germany in 1958, Cohn-Bendit likes to describe himself as "stateless." In his view nationalistic goals belong to the 19th century. He is a German citizen, but he says he is "not loyal to France or Germany or any nation. I'm loyal to the political idea I have and the movement to change the society."

It will be interesting to see whether Danny the Red is absorbed by our society and his revolutionary fervor channeled into the world of films and books where radical opinions can be comfortably put out to pasture, or whether his political experiences ripen and his current black and white conceptions eventually contribute to the forces which will color a new society.

I'm betting on the latter.

Sincerely,

*Barbara Bright*

Barbara Bright

