

# 1968 in Western Europe

## Depictions of generational conflicts and of the late 1960s student movement in European Literature

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### Abstract

In the year of 1968, the student movement reached its peak and became a historical landmark in Western Europe. Despite different political and sociocultural backgrounds, the younger generation who took the lead of the protests in many European countries claimed a provocative and irreverent stance against the establishment and, moved by a utopia of transnational change, aimed at challenging the *status quo*.

Given that all this turmoil did not go unnoticed in literature, my dissertation seeks to explore the fictional depictions of the student protests during the *roaring sixties* in novels from Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. The political activism of youngsters in the late 1960s, their struggle for sexual liberation, the cultural and social conflicts framed by the gap between students and the older generations, and ultimately the meaning of being young, will be closely inspected from a comparative standpoint.

Historically known as the first global rebellion (cf. Kraushaar, 2000: 19), the 1968 student movement was a crucial milestone during the period of political and social uproar lived in the late 1960s. Through barricades and sit-ins, by occupying faculty buildings, and joining in demonstrations, students raised their voices against all forms of authoritarianism and perceived themselves as the alternative for a new society, free from the established conservative standards.

Under the banner of provocation, this dissident position created a trend of protest that spread throughout Western Europe, both in democratic societies and in dictatorships. Guided by the influent speeches of Rudi Dutschke, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Mario Capanna, it was in the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Italy that the student protests were felt with particular intensity, starting at Universities and flooding into the streets of the major cities. In Spain and in Portugal, despite the restrictions imposed by the repressive regimes of Franco and Salazar, the younger generation also managed to demonstrate against the political order and take part in the wave of international dissent.

In the aftermath of this upheaval, history intertwined with fiction and the student movement came to life in literature as well. Written and published between 1968 and the end of the 1970s, there are in fact many novels which bring to the foreground the generational conflicts and the individual and collective experiences of the youngsters' political activism.

The fierce antagonism toward the academic system, the opposition to the press campaigns which portrayed students as hooligans and the outrage about the Vietnam War are pillars in the transnational student struggle, recreated in the plot of the literary works which make up the corpus of my thesis. Alongside with their political engagement, the young characters of the selected novels embraced the "sex, drugs and rock & roll" lifestyle and put forth a counterculture which turned into the expression of a universal language of irreverence.

Even when the novels depict the characters as elements of the young and revolutionary generation, they are careful not to stereotype them. On the contrary, the characters are portrayed as individuals, casting a retrospective, eclectic and plural eye onto the mythical year of 1968 in Western European literature.

### Conclusion

In 2015, this PhD project was granted a DAAD-scholarship, so that I could join the prestigious International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) at the University of Gießen (Germany) as visiting scholar. The permanent cooperation with GCSC top experts both in Cultural and Literary Studies provides my dissertation with international visibility, aiming at an eventual publication at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 student movement. The broad geographic scope of my thesis and the interest shown by many researchers abroad have led me to apply for an international joint supervision PhD degree, to be shared by the University of Aveiro and the University of Gießen.

### References

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Kraushaar, W. (2000) – *1968 als Mythos, Chiffre und Zäsur*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition.  
Klimke, M. and Scharloth, J. (eds.) (2008) – *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977*, New York/London, Palgrave Macmillan.



Fig 2 / Student demonstration against Vietnam War in Berlin, 1967.



Fig 3 / "Be young and shut up": Student poster in France, 1968.

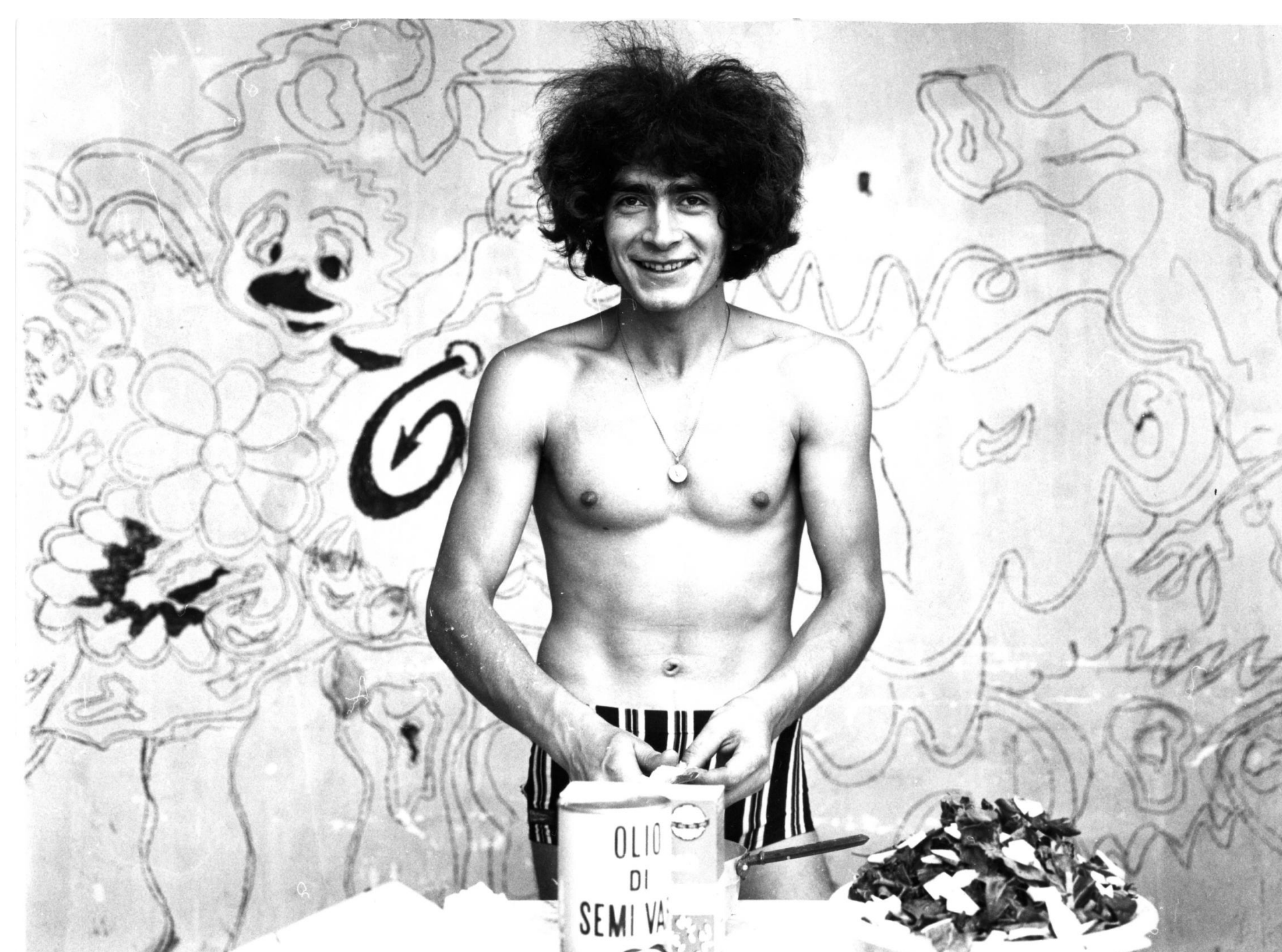


Fig 4 / Young Italian in a beat commune, 1967.

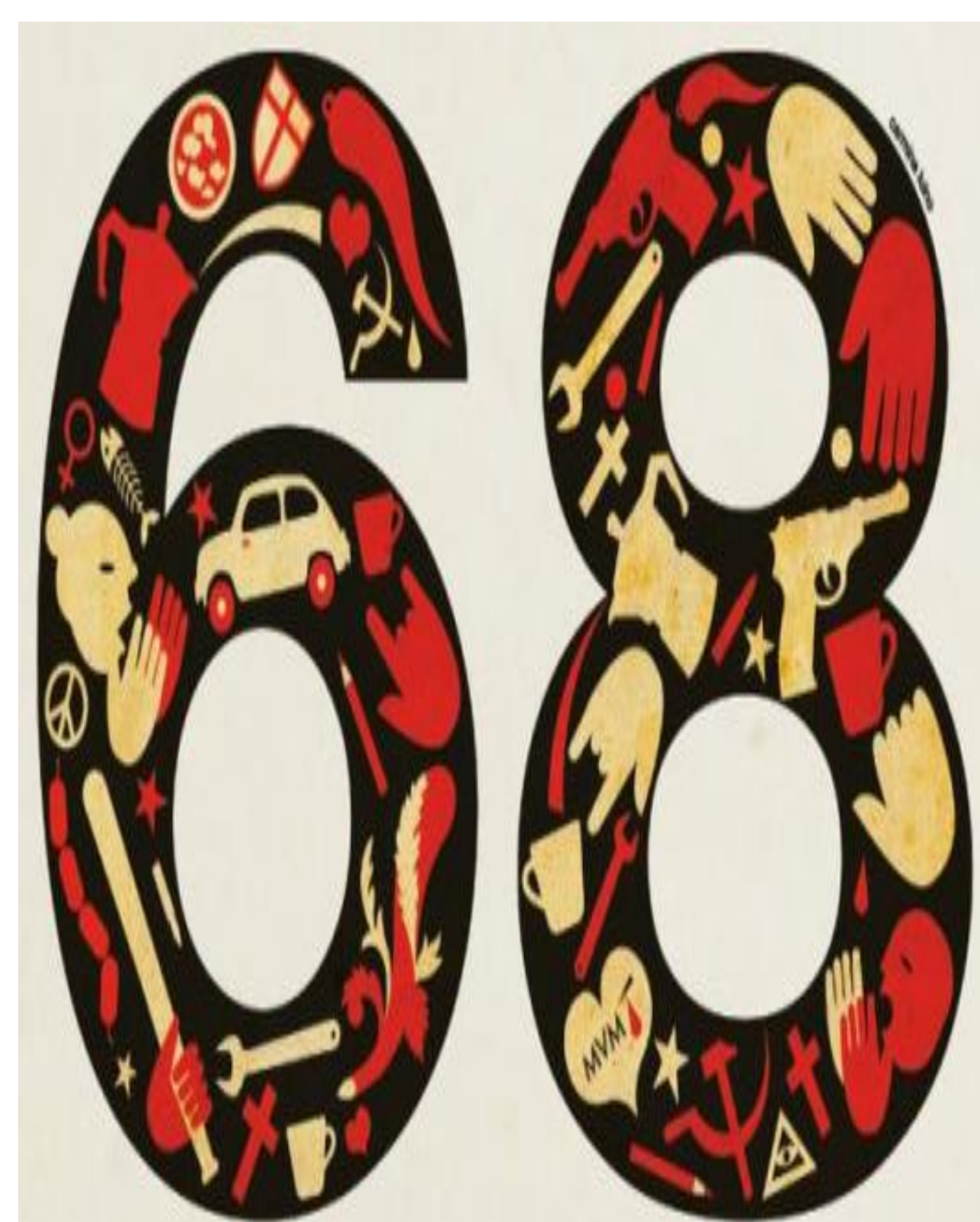


Fig 1 / Poster celebrating 1968 in Italy.

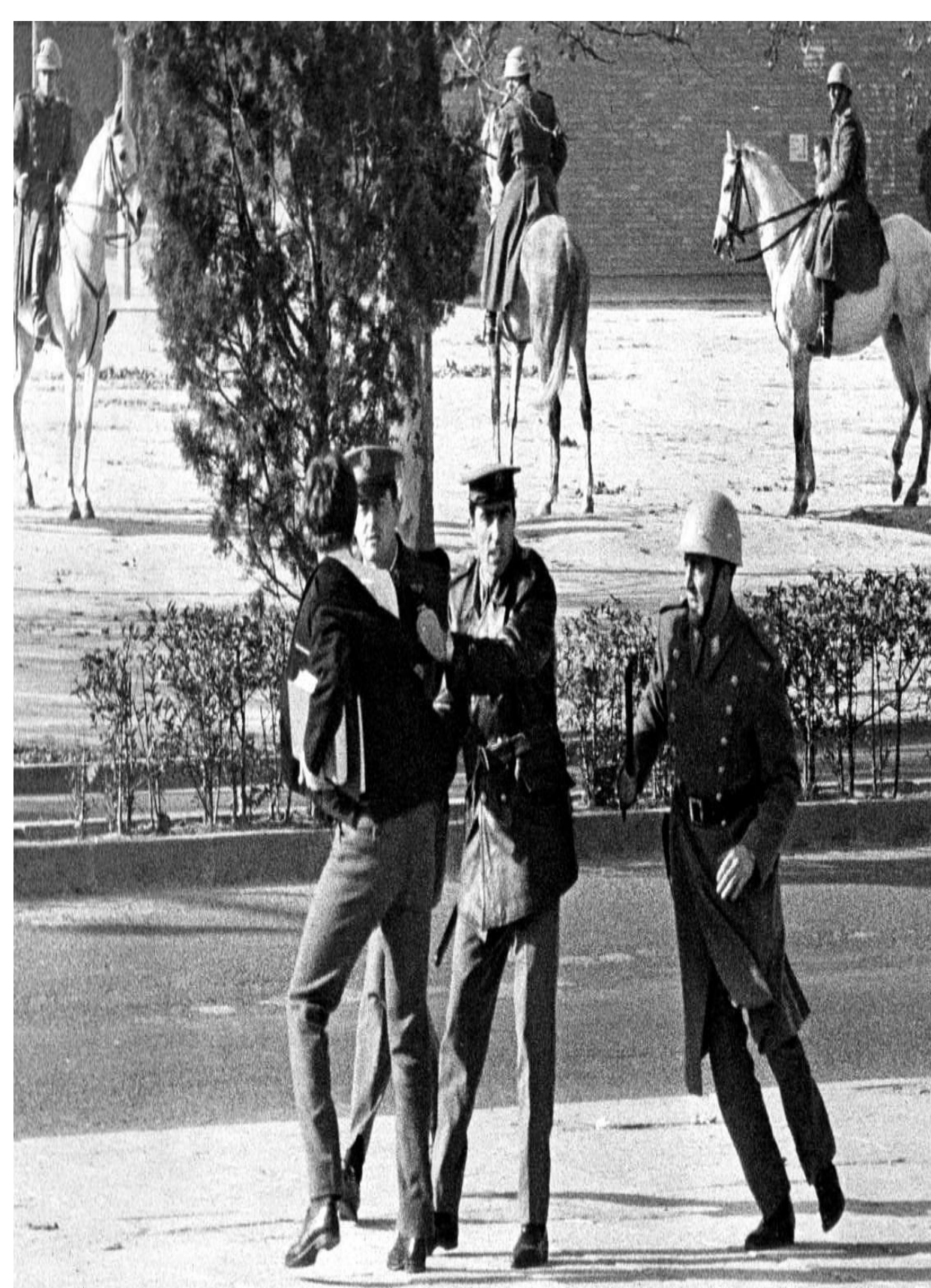


Fig 5 / Student protests in Madrid, 1969.



Fig 6 / "No more political terrorism; freedom for all students": Student motto in Portugal, 1960s.