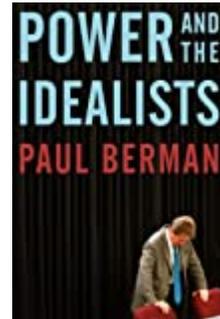




**Paul Berman.** *Power and the Idealists: Or, the Passion of Joschka Fischer and its Aftermath.* Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, Brooklyn, 2005. x + 306 pp. \$23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-932360-91-2.



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## Revolutionaries into Statesmen

This is a partially self-referential book. The first of the five essays collected here, entitled “The Passion of Joschka Fischer,” was originally published in the *New Republic* (August 28-September 3, 2001), briefly before 9/11. Two years later, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the debate about Joschka Fischer resurfaced. In February 2003 in the *Washington Post*, Michael Kelly simplified and sharpened Berman’s more complex argument to make an attack on Fischer’s past, arguing that Fischer’s previous deeds meant that he was not qualified to sit in judgment on the upcoming war (this is part of the argument of chapter 2). Kelly, a well-known Washington columnist and war reporter during the Kuwait War of 1991, went as an embedded journalist to Iraq in 2003 with high hopes as to the moral justice and political domino effects of this war. He died in an attack on a U.S. humvee (as described in chapter 5 of Berman’s book).

Berman presents himself autobiographically as a former adherent of the idea of bringing the U.S. political and intellectual left into the consciousness of Americans, an idea he embraced while still in college (p. 154). Seen from this angle, the book is not about the German For-

eign Minister from 1998 to 2005, but is rather a collective portrait of a generation of left-wing idealists. Berman has published *A Tale of Two Utopias. The Political Journal of the Generation of 1968* (1997). In this volume, he draws heavily upon his earlier book.

Berman starts his tale with Joseph Fischer, one of the leading revolutionaries in Frankfurt in the early 1970s. He adds Fischer’s friend Daniel Cohn-Bendit, with his French-German heritage. Berman moves on to Bernard Kouchner, a Frenchman of communist origins, who as a doctor founded *MÃ©decins sans frontiÃ©res*. Then his narrative expands to cover AndrÃ© Glucksman and RÃ©gis Debray, Che Guevara, Mike Gould (the American communist), Adam Michnik (the Polish dissident) and Kanan Makiya (a student from Iraq living in Great Britain and the United States). Their stories are told by Berman with great journalistic skill. Often the tale is told as one story competes with another: Berman focuses on their families and origins; their intellectual imprints; their more or less outspoken early beliefs in violence and revolution. He continues to follow them through their careers, asking how the members of this generation

sought to find a way to realize their dreams and considering how they could maintain their moralism and idealism when confronted with practical politics. He charts the compromises they accepted in their “long march through the institutions,” as Fischer was transformed from a revolutionary to a “three-piece suit” Foreign Minister (p. 31). Berman uses a wide array of sources to draw a fascinating and convincing picture of these idealists. He relies on speeches, debates, articles and books, and carefully notes what these 68-ers said or did not say; he considers how they dealt with crises in politics and their own political lives; he examines how far they engaged in domestic politics, in revolutionary activities, in humanitarian projects. And he finds differences between all of them, but notes their common belief in morally justified actions.

Berman relates fairly well the violent beginnings of Joschka Fischer and his Frankfurt “Putztruppe,” which fought and beat policemen in open battles on the street. But he avoids all simple moralizing of the sort that characterized earlier attacks in Germany and Europa when Bettina R  hl, the daughter of Ulrike Meinhof, “revealed” Fischer’s past in 2001 to attack the foreign minister (an attack that crossed the Atlantic in 2003). Berman’s goal is to gain genuine historical understanding, without degrading an individual’s past from a moral standpoint; in essence, without questioning someone’s ability to hold office based on his or her particular personal past. This moralizing characterized debate in Germany, and it was not limited to the crowd of more or less conservative politicians and journalists. Especially in Germany, there has been an ongoing tendency to “reveal” the past of 68-ers in the same way that they themselves revealed the Nazi past of their parents or grandparents. Some more radical leftists, such as those from the so-called K groups (small entities with communist affiliations) have explored their personal experiences in memoirs or documentaries, taking a moralistic stance and warning of the paths they chose to take. One thread running through such narratives is the direct line from student movements to terrorism. With this book Berman not only presents a counter-narrative of the good 68-ers, but a subtle expansion on the opportunities and restrictions people from very different regional and ideological backgrounds faced. Berman’s story is not the familiar tale according to which revolutionaries still secretly pur-

sue their former agendas, nor is it a drama of denunciation that details how moralists may have betrayed their idea(l)s.

When Joschka Fischer amended the slogan “no more war” to include the sentence “no more Auschwitz” during the Balkan conflict, the situation developed into the war for Bosnia and then Kosovo. Kouchner ended up in Kosovo as U.N. administrator, surrounded—as he himself noted—by “the hard core of veterans of May ’68” (p. 92): the German Tom Koenigs (presently in Afghanistan), the Dutch anarchist Dan Everts, two Czech protesters from 1968 and Javier Solana from the Socialist Workers Party of Spain. On August 19, 2003, U.N. headquarters in Baghdad were blown up by terrorists. Kouchner himself was not among them, but many members of his former team died or were wounded there. The “humanism of Bad News” and the concept of “‘our generation’ finally ceased to exist” (p. 309). The “tragedy of Iraq” and other features of globalization and Islamism could not be successfully encountered by these 68-ers. As Berman concludes, “Kouchner with his jabs at the three-piece suit, worried that Fischer had outgrown the values of his left-wing past—and Kelly worried that Fischer had failed to outgrow the values of his left-wing past. Opposite criticisms—and yet, the opposite criticisms amounted to the same thing, in the end” (p. 305).

Berman writes the story of a loosely connected international band of brothers (no sisters!), of single persons. This approach is legitimate from a journalistic standpoint. It does not, however, provide us with a deeper insight into the international networks or the national bases of this generation, which represented of course only a small part of the political socialization of their respective countries and continents. Berman’s book is thus the story of a kind of alternative elite, written with sympathy and distance. Probably this generational project—if it was one—has not yet come to an end. And its achievements in national cultures as well as in the international realm should not be underrated. A German version of the book was scheduled for 2006;[1] an English paperback edition, for August 2006.

Note

[1]. Paul Berman, *Idealisten an der Macht. Die Passion des Joschka Fischer* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2006).

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