

## **A new Oxford research project: 'Around 1968: Activism, Networks, Trajectories'**

A group of Oxford historians has been awarded a research grant of £567,000 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a three-year international research project entitled, 'Around 1968: activism, networks, trajectories'. It is the first grant on this scale made to the History Faculty under the new regime of 'Full Economic Costing' which contributes to salary bills and overheads as well as to the running costs of the project.

The project is innovative in research terms also: it is the first fully comparative European study of activism in the years around 1968 which deals equally with Communist and non-Communist countries, and with the Mediterranean Europe of Franco and the Greek Colonels as well as democratic northern Europe. The collapse of the Iron Curtain permits access to archives and witnesses in Eastern Europe and the encourages historians to move beyond Cold War agendas and to explore activism as a pan-European phenomenon. We are especially interested in international connections that can be traced between militants.

The story of 1968 has been told many times before, but is embedded in a number of grand narratives, such as the shift from utopianism to revolution, 'from hedonism to Leninism', a failed revolution that led to an enduring cultural revolution, or a disastrous attack on civilised values in the name of drugs, free love and violence. This project will historicise 1968 – consider it as a historic moment between postwar austerity and the Thatcher-Reagan years in which young people believed that they could change themselves and change the world. It will explore network of activists engaged in both political radicalism and lifestyle radicalism. It will focus not only on the familiar centres of Paris, Berlin and Milan but also on regional centres where students and workers and even students and peasants came together. Finally it will trace the trajectories of militants between 1965 and 1975 into different forms of activism such as anti-militarism and ecology, feminism and gay rights, religion or regional nationalism, or out of activism altogether, in order to define the significance of this moment in its widest context.

The project involved both archival study to discover familiar and unfamiliar sites of activism and the collection of oral testimony from former militants. Part of the resources for the project will go into creating a database of activists in order to patterns of how they became involved and to trace their trajectories. This will involve recording, transcribing and translating into English scores of interviews with activists in order to understand what activism meant to them then and now. The intention is not only to write a book and articles in the traditional way but to create a resource for future generations of researchers. Fortunately to realise this goal the team have committed IT backup from the History Faculty IT officer, Simon Ellis, and his assistant Christopher Hoskin, and from Rowan Wilson of Oxford University Computing Service.

The AHRC project supports six UK-based researchers and interlocks with a network of a further six non-UK researchers. Annual meetings between the twelve are financed by the Leverhulme Trust. The project is headed by Robert Gildea, Professor

of Modern History and chair of the Modern European History Research Centre in Oxford, who will work on France. The other Oxford historians are John Davis, Fellow and Praelector in History and Politics at the Queen's College, who will work on activism in the United Kingdom, Rebecca Clifford, completing her D.Phil at St Antony's college, who will work on Italy, Anna Menge, Junior Research Fellow at Magdalen College, who will work on the two Germanies, and Juliane Fürst, Junior Research Fellow at St John's and from this October lecturer in History at Bristol University, who will work on Russia and Yugoslavia. The other AHRC-funded historian is James Mark, Lecturer in History at Exeter University, who is an expert on Hungary and the project's expert on oral history. The members of the Leverhulme project are Anette Warring, Professor of History at the Roskilde University in Denmark, Niek Pas of Amsterdam University, Nigel Townson of Universidad Complutense, Madrid, Polymeris Voglis of the University of Thessaly, Piotr Oseka of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and Oldřich Tuma of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague.

International collaboration is matched by the collaboration of historians at different stages of their academic careers, aged from 56 to 28, which will bring together experience and new ideas in the highly creative way. 'Especially for a young researcher like myself', writes Anna Menge, 'it's a great opportunity to collaborate closely with scholars from all over Europe, to share ideas, pool knowledge, and meet regularly over a period of three years. I'm extremely excited to be getting involved and know I will learn a lot from this.'

The First workshop was held in Oxford on 15-17 March 2007. There was a powerful clash of national visions, a great deal of work on forging a common approach and method, and a not entirely glitch-free hands-on session with the Marantz digital recorders. 'The workshop impressed upon me just how enormous the task before us is', reported Rebecca Clifford. 'I can see that a large comparative project involves a considerable amount of balancing, negotiation and diplomacy; not only do we have thirteen very different national situations to assess, but we have the different interests and approaches of twelve individual historians to navigate. Hammering out our common ground was harder work than I'd imagined. It was wonderful, however, to work with such a creative and dynamic group of historians.' Fortunately the IT team have designed a wiki enabling the team to debate issues within the team while fieldwork is embarked upon and until it meets again in Roskilde in April 2008.

Robert Gildea