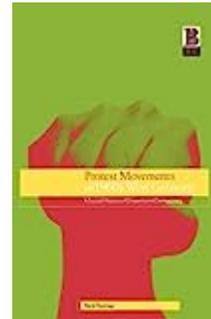




Nick Thomas. *Protest Movements in 1960s West Germany: A Social History of Dissent and Democracy.* Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2003. xv + 277 pp. \$41.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85973-650-0.



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Nick Thomas sets out to write a social history of protest in 1960s West Germany. He cannot provide a complete history of a topic so complex and as yet not fully researched, but he has many interesting and insightful things to say about this vibrant and significant period in German history.

Thomas proposes to offer an archive-based “survey of the whole period” and “the whole range of protests movements within the wider context of social and cultural change” (p. 7). He defines protest to include all types of public demonstrations against or for the authorities and their policies, with two major exceptions. He will not include radical right-wing activities, because that would misstate the “meaning of the term” for contemporaries (p. 8). He also says he will exclude terrorist activities because they sought radical change through violent, not “political” means.

Thomas’s choices here are pragmatic, but they reveal fundamental problems in discussing protest, dissent, and democracy. Certainly the neo-Nazi right was not part of “the ’60s” in the way most people conceived and conceive it—but it was indubitably part of the ’60s and a movement of protest. It was not democratic in the most widely understood sense of the term—as supporting popular sovereignty, with the people broadly construed and sovereignty effectively in the hands of the people, not

some putative elite. However, as Thomas later points out, the antiauthoritarians in the SDS and further Left, whom he does discuss, held a Leninist perspective that implied at least temporary predominance of a political elite in the revolutionary overthrow of the existing system and the establishment of a replacement. And while excluding a resort to violent means seems a reasonable distinction, it raises difficult problems of analysis at the margin (e.g., violence against people as opposed to violence or force against property, throwing eggs as opposed to throwing rocks as opposed to bombings) that he addresses but cannot fully work through.

Crucially, of course, not only the SDS Left had a problematic definition of democracy. Many in the governing and media elites also defined democracy very narrowly. They implicitly accepted the constitutional grant to the political parties of a privileged position in the “formation of the political will” of the populace. They then dismissed as unacceptable any efforts by those outside the parties to raise their voices in protest against specific governmental or partisan policy proposals or for the inclusion on the political agenda of new issues. Older generations of Germans tended to accept this definition. One of the most significant developments in recent German history is the increasingly widespread acceptance among post-war generations of protest movements and demonstra-

tions as central to democracy, a development that needs to be explained and understood and that Thomas does not pursue. Obviously, definitions of democracy are value-laden and not subject to simple historical specification. They need, as Thomas notes at one point, to be negotiated. However, he would have done well to explore more explicitly the assumptions about democracy among the differing actors.

Thomas begins with an overview of some of the roots of the wave of protest that spread across West Germany from the mid-1960s. He is at special pains to emphasize the socioeconomic context, as he sees the increasing prosperity and growing consumerism of 1950s and 1960s West Germany as a crucial prerequisite for the changing attitude toward politics and toward protest that developed after 1965. Those developments, he argues, generated increased expectations for individual opportunity and freedom while proving socially corrosive in numerous respects. For example, economic change eroded traditional family relations and undercut traditional deference. While he cannot *prove* a connection between affluence and protest, he follows others in making a plausible case for that connection. Nonetheless, one must also note that in the 1960s widespread protest characterized not just affluent societies such as West Germany but also less affluent or even impoverished societies such as Czechoslovakia, Mexico, or the People's Republic of China. He also emphasizes the ways in which new forms and ease of communication contributed to the spread of a protest culture.

Thomas discusses the 1950s roots of the new protest culture. Traumatized by the experience of Weimar and Nazi Germany, and terrified by the specter of Communism next door, West Germans sought to create a stable democratic order. They avoided coming to grips with the Nazi past in order to integrate successfully the millions of Germans compromised by past support for Hitler and his policies into the new political order. Older Germans generally expected the opposition to be supportive of the government, and certainly not to take to the streets (actions they denounced as Nazi and Communist methods). Anticommunism was a powerful and pervasive force, and West Germans all too often tarred those who questioned any aspect of West Germany's political, social, and economic order as communists or communist stooges. The SPD failed to mount an effective political challenge to the Center-Right until its decision to accept the basics of the postwar settlement in 1959, a decision that left it ill-equipped to lead mass protests against that postwar settlement. Under the circumstances, a growing num-

ber of people on the Left saw mass extra-parliamentary movement(s) as the only effective opposition, even before the Grand Coalition. And, of course, once the SPD had joined the CDU/CSU in a Grand Coalition, from 1966-69, no significant opposition existed any longer within parliament. And while Thomas rejects any simple analogy between the *Halbstarke* (hooligan) riots of the 1950s and the protest movements of the 1960s, he does welcome Uta Poiger's discussion of the political implications of women's participation in the *Halbstarke* unrest, including the perceived threat to received notions of masculinity that it represented.

His discussion of Poiger is the first of a number of valuable references to the far-reaching rejection of deference to traditional social norms that characterized the protest movements. Central to late twentieth- and twenty-first-century notions of freedom is the right of individuals to live their lives as they choose, without submitting to social expectations or to the pretensions of social, political, and cultural elites. Refusal to defer to traditional gender norms was among the most threatening, but far from the only, instance in which young Germans were asserting alternative values. This challenge to deference was explicitly pursued in the context of demonstrations. Simply to demonstrate was to refuse to defer to political elites' definitions of what was appropriate opinion. Yet demonstrators often chose to dress in provocative fashions (unlike, for example, early twentieth-century workers, who appeared at demonstrations in their Sunday best) and to engage in mocking actions such as throwing eggs at police and political dignitaries. While alternative lifestyles could be apolitical, in the sense of having no direct connection with demands for political alternatives, they were deeply political in that they implicitly or explicitly demanded an acceptance of fundamental changes in social relationships and the social order.

Thomas points out that university reform was a crucial leitmotif in protests throughout the 1960s. West Germany had not made proper provision for the myriad of students who wished, by the 1960s, to study at university. The organization of the universities was hierarchical and authoritarian, with students having minimal opportunity to influence university policy. Leftist students also questioned the Nazi past of many professors as well as the focus on the abstract and the humanities that they saw as uncritical and, *de facto*, apologetic for the existing inegalitarian socioeconomic and undemocratic political orders. The Left could relatively easily mobilize students to protest against the existing university sys-

tem and many of the more compromised professors, even though its larger goal of a politically engaged and critical university seemed too extreme to most. The Left also proved remarkably adept at provoking university administrators to excessive reactions, arguably an important element in angering many and radicalizing some students. However, as Thomas emphasizes, the university rectors proved remarkably adept, in the longer run, at making symbolic but minimal concessions and preserving effective control of the university by the professoriate.

Another leitmotif of the protest movement that Thomas discusses was opposition to U.S. policy in the Vietnam War. West Germans in the 1950s had come to see the United States as the model of a just, democratic state. The spectacle of the most powerful nation on earth raining more bombs on small, impoverished Vietnam than on Nazi Germany, while intervening in what looked like a civil war, proved devastating to the reputation of the United States. As with university reform, the Left had an agenda, international anti-imperialist revolution, that most students and most West Germans did not share. Thomas is certainly right to point out how the war proved an emotionally powerful and effective organizing tool, but he could have explored this difference a bit more.

One of Thomas's main arguments is that the killing of Benno Ohnesorg by a policeman was the real turning point, what "changed the political landscape irrevocably," not the vaunted events of 1968. Certainly 1968 looms large in most accounts of the protest movements and of the 1960s in general—as numerous book titles and repeated discussion of the "68ers" indicate. However, when the unarmed Ohnesorg, who had come simply to observe a demonstration against the Shah of Iran on June 2, 1967, fell victim to a policeman's bullet, political and media elites showed no remorse, seeking rather to libel him as some sort of communist subversive. Meanwhile, reports on the day's events showed that the police had reacted with gratuitous violence against basically peaceful demonstrators—and innocent bystanders. Many Germans feared that the police had become a vicious rogue element and that West German democracy was in danger of going the way of the Weimar Republic. Thomas can cite an opinion poll from immediately after the killing in which two-thirds of students said Ohnesorg's death had politically radicalized them.

Ohnesorg died in West Berlin, the epicenter of 1960s German protest. And even though protest at his death spread across West Germany, Thomas focuses on West

Berlin in this as in other sections of his book, a choice that reflects a fundamental problem for analysis of protest movements, demonstrations, and democracy in West Germany. Even though West Berlin was not the capital of the country, it was the capital of protest—but an atypical one. Leftist students found West Berlin attractive because its residents were exempted from conscription. However, the West Berlin populace at large was vehemently anticommunist. They suffered brutally at the hands of the Red Army in 1945, and then became a beleaguered free island in a communist sea. The police force was unusually large and anticommunist, organized as a paramilitary force to defend the city in the event of war. Thomas focuses on West Berlin because it was the most important site of protest and because covering every city in West Germany would be an impossible task. Yet West Berlin's atypicality means historians will have to find a way to assess the scope and nature of protest in other West German cities before we can have an adequate understanding of the full range of protest in West Germany.

As Thomas points out, recent German history structured West Germans' responses throughout the 1960s. Governing and media elites as well as most West Germans looked at protesters and saw Nazis and Communists battling it out in the streets in the early 1930s, eroding Weimar democracy in the process. And they looked at demonstrators questioning various aspects of the post-war West German order and saw East Berlin agents, Communists subverting parliamentary democracy and the social market economy in order to replace them with a communist dictatorship. The protesters looked at the governing and media elites and saw innumerable former Nazis and a political order determined to defend itself, and the many inequities and inequities it included, against any popular efforts to secure needed change. And they looked at elite efforts to establish a "democracy capable of defending itself" against the threat of subversion by totalitarians and saw elites themselves willing to subvert democracy from within with authoritarian policies. Thomas also notes repeatedly that both sides suffered from fears of "conspiracies" by their opponents to secure their goals. In retrospect we may find many of these fears grossly exaggerated. However, we need to be clear on why various individuals held such fears, given the background of German history.

The assassination attempt against activist and provocateur Rudi Dutschke brought simmering protester resentment of the Springer publishing empire to a boil. Even though Dutschke survived the attack, he never fully recovered from the bullets fired by a right-wing youth

who confessed to reading the Springer *Bild Zeitung* and was acting in accord with what he thought the newspaper, and most West Germans, wanted. The Springer press had a dominating position in West German media, especially in Berlin, where it commanded 67 percent of the readership of all daily newspapers. It had consistently attacked the protesters as subversives determined to bring down West German democracy and indeed the entire social order. Convinced that the Springer press was a proto-totalitarian threat to democracy, protesters sought after the Dutschke assassination to physically block the distribution of Springer titles. They ultimately proved unsuccessful, but engaged in considerable violence, mostly against property, in the process. Their actions, perhaps understandable under the circumstances, still require a careful analysis to understand the differing conceptions of legitimate protest—among both protesters and the public.

Thomas spends a lot of time on the student protest movement. However, he focuses on the more radical elements among them, those who were certainly the most vocal and perhaps the most influential. These activists managed at several points to mobilize substantial portions of the student population in challenging the existing order. Yet they failed in most of their goals. We need to pursue more deeply who the activists were, socioeconomically, and where the weaknesses in their movement lay. We also need to understand just what their influence on future developments was. And we need to explore their relationship to non-student, non-youth opinion.

Thomas briefly discusses the “descent into terrorism.” By 1969, it was clear that the Left could not turn widespread opposition to the Vietnam War into changes in West German, let alone American, foreign policy. Thomas ascribes this failure to the sectarianism of the Left and the fact that the Left was “increasingly talking to itself” (p. 161). A tiny fraction of the activist Left, frustrated by their movement’s failure to secure broad support, resorted to violence to achieve their ends. They started with violence against property and moved eventually to violence against persons, something he sees as a “logical development” from earlier debates on the Left about violence (p. 201). The terrorists had very little support, even on the Left. And the government reacted with draconian measures, indeed with steps that called into

question the democratic stability of the Federal Republic. One does have to ask, though, whether terrorists constituted a “movement.” Thomas never defines the term, but one can well ask whether so tiny and socially marginal a group, even if politically influential in a perverse way, deserves to be discussed in connection with a term that certainly seems to imply some significant social base. And this discussion does highlight the need for a systematic analysis, in any investigation of protest movements, of just what might characterize protest movements.

Thomas closes with a discussion of the women’s movement that began developing in the late 1960s. As elsewhere, the German movement grew out of dissatisfaction with the gap between the emancipatory and egalitarian rhetoric of the student movement and the continued denigration and marginalization of women within that movement. Conservatives had committed themselves in the 1950s to reestablishing the patriarchal family, as a bulwark against communism; they continue to denounce “the ’60s” as the cause of high divorce rates, etc. Thomas, though, emphasizes the social and economic roots of changes in women’s situation and status and of the women’s movement. The movement may have developed out of the protest culture of the ’60s, but it reflected and responded to real changes.

The greatest gap in Thomas’s book is his failure to address concretely how West Germany got from the vicious attacks on protest movements and demonstrations in the 1950s and 1960s to the political culture(s) of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that accepted protest and demonstrations as a central part of democratic politics. If one did not know anything about recent German history, one would be stunned, after reading Thomas’s vivid description of widespread popular repugnance at the student protesters, to learn that the Left won the 1969 elections and that demonstrations had become widely accepted by the early 1980s. Explaining how West Germans arrived at those results is obviously a complex problem, but it does deserve some consideration in any discussion of the protest movements of the 1960s. Still, Thomas has written a thoughtful and enlightening book, full of solid information and careful judgments. It is most certainly worthy of attention, as we work to make sense of a recent but crucial period in German history.

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