



Jeremy Varon. *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 394 S. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24119-0.

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Representative Democracy, Political Action, and Armed Struggle: The Weather Underground and the Red Army Faction

Analyzing the relationship among leftist activism, armed struggle, and democracy, Jeremy Varon's well-researched volume is the first comprehensive study to compare post-World War II left-wing violence in the United States and in West Germany. Drawing on a range of primary source materials, including interviews, letters, and FBI reports, Varon not only provides a historical account of the era's events but also questions critically "the origins, purpose, and effects of political violence" (p. 4). In its assessment of political violence, the book lingers as much on the actions of the terrorist groups examined as it does on those of the state. Unlike previous studies of either the Weather Underground or the Red Army Faction (RAF), Varon's is a comparative analysis of both. Furthermore, Varon's study is not merely a chronology of the RAF's first generation, as in the work of Stefan Aust and many other journalists, historians, or commentators. Varon adds a nuanced, substantive exploration of the limits of political action and the tricky subject of political violence.

In his introduction, Varon presents the decidedly internationalist politics of student and armed struggle movements and the commitment to anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist self-determination struggles in the late 1960s and 1970s. Despite this internationalism, Varon argues, national history, politics, and experiences played a decisive role in shaping armed struggle in each context. Thus, beyond the first chapter, Varon examines the Weather Underground and the RAF vis-à-vis their

respective national contexts. In the United States, the Black Panther movement as well as the killing of student demonstrators at Kent State University and at Jackson State University figured centrally in the Weather Underground's alignment with the civil rights movement. In Germany, the fascist past was pivotal in the rhetoric both of the RAF and the state. As Varon puts it, "West German terrorism was a tortured form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—a symptom of Germany's difficulty in confronting and working through its Nazi past" (p. 15).

In chapter 1, Varon begins his comparative analysis. Since both the Weather Underground and the RAF grew out of the student movements, Varon examines the New Left's origins, both how it set itself off from the Old Left of the 1930s and 1940s, and how it evolved. In the United States, students linked "the issues of racism, militarism, economic injustice, and student power" (p. 26) as they focused on the Vietnam War, whose architects were the Democratic administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. They also became weary of the allegedly liberal spirit of Democrats and disenchanted with the electoral system. In Germany, the Communist Party had been banned in 1956, the SPD had renounced its founding commitment to socialism, and in 1966, the SPD and the CDU constituted a joint government. Thus, Varon argues, in Germany, too, students were without "meaningful alternatives within the political establishment" (p. 31) and consequently formed the *Außerparlamentarische Opposition*. In both countries, Varon considers the limits

and failures of representative democracies, which led students and leftists to abandon voting and electoral strategies and to adopt methods based on direct action.

The era was also characterized by what Varon calls a “larger climate of crisis driven by violence” (p. 35). While students were denounced for being unruly, the police attacked them in increasingly violent ways and often went unpunished, which radicalized many students, such as future RAF founder Gudrun Ensslin. In the United States, after a half-decade of riots, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968 further escalated tensions and clarified for many on the Left what was at stake. In response to the assassination of King, Eldridge Cleaver announced a “requiem for non-violence.” Varon lays out the larger international context of violence as well: while “by the end of 1968, over 30,000 American servicemen had died [in Vietnam], with the television news reporting daily losses” (p. 35), countless more Vietnamese had died fighting for their right to self-determination. In sum, “the spring of 1968 represented,” as Varon puts it, “a decisive transformation in the West German New Left’s relationship to violence—one that closely paralleled the evolution of the American New Left” (p. 43).

In subsequent chapters, Varon analyzes first the Weather Underground and then the RAF. He presents the early history of the Weather Underground, focusing mainly on the October 9, 1969 Chicago Days of Rage. Through such militant actions the Weather Underground sought to help the Black Panther Party and the civil rights movement. But many on the Left and within the Black Panther Party itself, he argues, criticized this militancy.^[1] Chicago and Illinois Black Panther Party chair Fred Hampton denounced the Days of Rage and the Weather Underground, stating “We do not support people who are anarchistic, opportunistic, adventuristic, and Custeristic [i.e., suicidal]” (p. 81). Varon shows how the Days of Rage marked a clear change in the Weather Underground’s strategy as they realized the limits of support for militant actions: despite steady organizing efforts, attendance had been much less than expected. The response to the Days of Rage, Varon argues, led the Weather Underground to turn away from uprisings and toward an underground campaign of terrorist attacks.

Varon subsequently discusses the Weather Underground’s actions in light of the larger antiwar movement, including mass demonstrations, such as the Vietnam Moratorium, and peaceful actions against the draft

by pacifists, such as the Catonsville 9, to end the Vietnam War. Varon does not merely present a historical chronology but also examines the concepts underlying such massive mobilizations. “By assembling bodies in public spaces,” he argues “[a mass demonstration] seeks to issue a unilaterally declared referendum that affirms or withdraws consent from the actions of government” (p. 132). Thus, he both presents historical events of the late 1960s and revisits debates about how best to agitate for political change when faced with an administration with radically different priorities. In this way, the volume critically engages with the limits of dissent and what is perhaps at stake when groups turn to violence as a political tool.

Varon then examines the implications of the Weather Underground’s use of revolutionary violence in greater detail. Discussing the accidental explosion on March 6, 1970, in which three of its members died, Varon presents the group’s shift toward a more moderate stance on violence, opting for actions through which people would not be killed, as announced in the communiqué “New Morning—Changing Weather”: “the townhouse [explosion] forever destroyed our belief that armed struggle is the only real revolutionary struggle” (p. 182). Varon makes clear that leftists and even members of the Weather Underground responded differently to Weather’s change in position. Yet, “central to Weatherman’s transformation,” he says, “was its meditation on the ethics of violence—whom it was willing to harm and to what ends” (p. 188). Although Varon is very even-handed in presenting the positions of various former members of the Weather Underground, his stance on the issue comes across clearly: “the Weathermen wanted to have it both ways: on the one hand, to continue to claim an exceptional status among whites by backing the militancy of people of color; on the other hand, to steer clear of the greatest hazards of armed struggle and to claim as their greatest defense that their own violence did no ‘real’ harm” (p. 193).

Varon then turns to an analysis of the RAF, focusing on its first generation from its inception in May 1970, to the May Offensive of 1972, to the *Deutscher Herbst* of September and October 1977. As in the section on the Weather Underground, woven through this history is an analysis of how the RAF’s rationalization of violence changed over time, and how the responses of other leftists and the public shifted, too. Unlike the Weather Underground, the RAF took numerous lives. To present the shifting positions of the group and the public, Varon draws on the group’s communiqué’s (p. 205) and “a

widely publicized 1971 poll ... [in which] 40 percent of respondents described the RAF's violence as political not criminal" (p. 199). As Varon lays out, "The May offensive was a turning point ... the West German Left sharpened its objections to a program of violence that now included planned political murder and injuries to civilians" (pp. 212-213). The public increasingly provided tips to the police that led to countless arrests. In a closing section of this chapter, Varon examines the RAF's action in light of Germany's fascist past. On the one hand, he argues, the RAF and the New Left accused the state of being fascist, while on the other, the Left itself bore signs of antisemitism, as evidenced by "the fire-bombing by German leftists in 1969 of a Berlin synagogue on the anniversary of Kristallnacht; Ulrike Meinhof's exultation in the massacre by Palestinian commandos of Israeli athletes in the 1972 Olympics; and the separation of Jewish from non-Jewish hostages for the purpose of execution by the Palestinian and German Red [sic] Cells hijackers of a French airliner in 1976" (pp. 250-251).

In closing, Varon examines how the actions of both the RAF and the West German state pivoted around an alleged defense of democracy. He studies not only the tensions between the terrorists and the state but also the ways in which the media and changes to laws fueled animosities. Rather than de-escalating tensions, Varon argues, both sides seemed vested in the opposite. As Varon puts it, "the state's antiterrorist campaign, in short, limited the scope of the RAF's violence. Yet attempts to eliminate terrorism also helped bring about new rounds of violence ... Had the state's reaction been less severe, the RAF's armed struggle might neither have endured so long nor become so brutal" (p. 254). Those who opposed the repressive changes included German jurists,

politicians, intellectuals, and civil libertarians. As Varon puts it, "what people remember about the era is typically not only the pervasive fear of terrorist violence but also the tremendous constriction of thought and feeling caused by heightened demands for loyalty to the state, enforced, in part, by repression" (p. 254). Varon looks at the potential factors motivating the state to expend such an extraordinary amount of resources to combat the RAF, bringing in theoretical frameworks, such as Max Weber's concept of *Gewaltmonopol* and Wolfgang Kraushaar's analysis of the Hanns Martin Schleyer kidnapping, which draws on theories of Carl Schmitt.

Drawing on archival research, interviews, and previous scholarship on the 1960s, the Weather Underground, and the RAF, Varon's comparative and theoretically informed study provides a new angle on the two groups, the concept of democracy, and the subject of political violence. Varon establishes clearly the political context by way of his historical survey and the groups' statements but also by including photographs of the Weather Underground, the RAF, and the era's related events. An invaluable contribution to scholarship of the 1960s, the Weather Underground and the RAF, Varon's study is a gripping, well-researched march through the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s and a thoughtful exploration of the vexing problems of representative democracy and political action.

Note

[1]. For a very different position on and a sustained analysis of the relationship between the Weather Underground and the Black Panthers, see Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006).

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