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Gerd-Rainer Horn. *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 264 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927666-0.



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The Spirit Was Willing but ...

To the burgeoning literature on “1968,” Gerd-Rainer Horn adds a survey intended to “rescue these experiments in ‘participatory democracy’ and the corresponding social struggles from the historical distortion and condescension” (p. 1) they have subsequently suffered. A long-time participant in (and student of) the emancipatory social movements of the 1960s (that is, ca. 1966-76), he proposes to focus on the causes for the rise of these social movements, rather than on the causes of their failure.

Horn emphasizes the cultural aspects of these social movements throughout his book, and he starts with cultural movements. He is particularly interested in the Situationists, whose roots lay in Dadaism and in a 1956 artists’ conference in Italy. The group analyzed sharply the cultural impoverishment and alienation of modern consumerist societies and sought transformation in everyday life. Their praxis was cultural critique, initially in traditional artistic forms like painting, but soon expanding to provocative activities such as happenings. They also became increasingly political. The group was always small, but it pioneered a radical, activist, culture-focused praxis that other larger and more political groups would adopt. Beatniks, hippies, and other marginal groups also began challenging the predominant culture in the early

to mid-1960s. A crucial breakthrough came with the systematic efforts of the Dutch Provos, drawing on the Situationists, to turn from traditional protest techniques such as demonstrations to more provocative, often playful, and transgressive public activism designed to challenge social and political norms and to garner attention.

Horn looks at 1960s social movements broadly. For example, he emphasizes international interconnections, across the North Atlantic and within western Europe. His discussion of the Dutch Provos reflects an unusual element in his work, a focus on less frequently studied countries, often based on texts in Flemish/Dutch, Italian, and Spanish. He spends several pages on student activism in Leuven (Belgium), which drew on U.S. models but also pioneered in Europe important elements of 1960s youth protest (such as sit-ins) and, he argues, influenced movements elsewhere. He also spends considerable time exploring developments in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, much more than on France, Britain, or Germany.

Committed to a broad participatory democracy, Horn returns repeatedly to the role of workers and to efforts at direct democracy. His discussion of France in 1968, for example, skims quickly over the well-known student rebellions at Nanterre and the Sorbonne but emphasizes the spread of activism to workers, including many union

leaders. He then goes on to note the many French discussions of worker self-management. Similarly, in discussing developments in Italy, he moves on quickly from the student movement to emphasize the broad scope of worker activism and radicalism in 1968-69 and the development of various forms of shop-floor organization and shop-floor control of grievance protests and strikes, forms of participatory democracy that sidestepped existing union channels. He lauds various examples of participatory democracy in unions and of worker self-management.

For all his preference for workers, Horn recognizes that a key shift from workers and their immediate interests characterized the rise of the New Left. The Old Left was notably stodgy, especially on cultural issues. Like other scholars, he sees the relative inactivity of Old Left parties, including communist parties, as having opened a space for a more activist New Left. Where the Old Left emphasized workers, party building, parliamentarism, and the economy, the New Left focused on marginal groups (most notably students), comprehensive attacks on authority (including traditional parties), direct action and grass-roots control, and culture. He notes the opposition of the Italian Communist Party to spontaneous demonstrations and extra-parliamentary actions, although such opposition characterized traditional leftist parties more generally. Nonetheless, given his commitment to worker emancipation, he also argues that one must not overemphasize the role of intellectuals, including students, but must recognize the broader social base of 1968, especially in southern Europe.

Horn grapples with the decline and legacy of 1968. He sees a lack of coherent leadership leading to the dissolution of the New Left into various social experiments and political splinters. He asserts that the various subsequent forms of group activity were meaningful and fulfilling for some individuals. Without really explaining its consequences, he notes the infusion of New Leftists into traditional social democratic politics and into various careers in the 1970s (the long march through the institutions). He ultimately follows Arthur Marwick in identifying the significant effect of 1968 as a cultural revolution that undercut deference and sparked "individual and collective liberation" (p. 216). Yet, not surprisingly for someone whose ultimate goal is worker self-management and direct democracy, he concludes that it is hard to identify clear impacts of 1960s social move-

ments. He closes the book with an emphasis on the need for human agency to spark meaningful change, in the past and in the future, and with the hope that the twenty-first century will see another, more consequential, rejection of capitalism.

Disappointingly, considering the title, Horn never really comes to grips analytically with the concept of the spirit of '68, beyond periodic references to participation, emancipation, and liberation. Such references are insufficient, as each of those terms has meant varying things to different groups in different countries. Any discussion of the rise (or fall) of the era's social movements must nonetheless work from a clear sense of what they sought to achieve, of what spirit moved them. Such assessments will affect not only how one evaluates institutional and other concrete consequences of the movements, but also how one evaluates the cultural shifts and personal meaningfulness he ascribes to them. This requirement applies even if we assess the cultural transformations as having been to a greater or lesser degree unintentional. An example of the latter would be second-wave feminism—which he slights with a hurried overview of less than two pages; scarcely anticipated even by the mid-60s, it nonetheless blossomed out of earlier social movements and has had significant long-term consequences. Moreover, most of the concrete successes he lauds (such as free schools and examples of worker self-management) were short-lived. Furthermore, he emphasizes the greater changes that took place in southern than in northern Europe (especially Spain and Portugal). Yet he does not seek to distinguish clearly between the role of the "spirit of '68" per se and the role of a broader rebellion, amid substantial socioeconomic change and political problems, against authoritarian rule in those countries. And, similarly, he notes the entry of movement figures into left-of-center parties without analyzing their "spirit's" impact on these parties' future actions.

Horn has written a lively, occasionally enlightening, but quirky assessment of "1968." Its brief compass does not allow for a comprehensive overview of its subject. It is, however, particularly useful for introducing an English-speaking audience to events in less studied countries. It gives a good sense of one former participant's perspective on what was or should have been important about the movement.

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