H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James M. Brophy. *Popular Culture and the Public Sphere in the Rhineland, 1800–1850.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 365 S. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84769-8.

Reviewed by Michael E. O'Sullivan (Department of History, Marist College)

Published on H-German (June, 2008)

Forging a Popular Political Culture from Below

One of the most difficult challenges historians face is writing about regions or periods that have already been the object of significant research. Adding to the fine work already available on the Rhineland, such as Jonathan Sperber's classic *Rhineland Radicals* (1991), however, James M. Brophy makes a compelling contribution to our understanding of early-nineteenth-century German history. Seeking to comprehend "how modern political publics arose" (p. 1), this monograph uncovers the activities of political actors outside of the bourgeois public sphere. Analyzing the politicization of Rhenish popular culture, Brophy convincingly proves the existence of a vibrant political consciousness among broad sections of the urban and rural populace during the *VormÃ¤rz*.

The primary aim of this book is to reshape older narratives about the middle-class roots of modern German political culture. Brophy persuasively challenges JÃ¼rgen Habermas's definition of the public sphere as a new middle-class circle of readers that emphasized individualism and thus crafted the spirit of modern political life. He suggests a more inclusive public sphere existed, in which popular culture provided less well-educated people access to information about contemporary political trends. Subtle and direct allusions to European revolutions, liberalism, and republicanism all occurred in popular literature, songs, festivals, and religious life, and made open challenges to corporatism and Prussian hegemony. Brophy also argues that meaningful links developed between bourgeois associational life and populist political culture, forming a basis for the revolutionary movements of 1848-49. Furthermore, cultural and political activity from the lower classes altered the public sphere by combining folk traditions with modern politics, such as using *Katzenmusik* (satirical serenades where the quality of the critique was more important than the execution of the music) to hold state officials accountable to their constituents. In sum, Brophy restructures the Habermas model for the public sphere by emphasizing how less educated social groups, influenced in part by intense economic need, engaged ideas about revolutionary, republican, and liberal politics in a period when they were usually associated only with the middle-class elite.

Brophy creatively assembles and analyzes a dynamic source base to reconstruct the role of new ideologies in

post-Napoleonic Germany. Chapter 1 explores widely read folk calendars for their political content, in order to disprove the notion of "common readers as trapped within the confines of traditional print and thus unexposed to the political tenets of bourgeois civil society" (p. 21). Responding to interest in contemporary events that spanned all social groups, calendars provided extensive sections that recalled the events of the French Revolution, discussed the Greek war for independence, and spread news and information about the Hambach Festival of 1832. Liberal writers who wrote for popular publications, such as Johann Peter Hebel and Philipp Christmann, addressed their readers as political participants and frequently indicated support for Enlightenment ideas, political reform, and civic values.

Brophy advances his thesis on other chapters on the basis of other contemporary media. He shows how street performers used freedom songs to expose commoners to partisan themes and depictions of contemporary international events such as the Polish uprising against Russia, the July Revolution in France, and the "martyrdom" of Karl Sand after his assassination of August von Kotzenbue. Parish festivals and taverns became sites where bourgeois and populist political culture interacted, which led to a convergence of values as well. Finally, an entire chapter probes the political rhetoric associated with the modern reform of carnival. Voluntary associations used the organization of carnival to practice liberal ideals, but such occasions also provided a forum for critiques of authority and calls for a free press during events attended by people of all social classes.

Two of this book's most convincing chapters focus on "tumult" and "religion." Chapter 5 examines 109 physical confrontations between civilians and representatives of the Prussian state such as soldiers, gendarmes, and police officers. Brophy effectively argues that these incidents represented more than spontaneous outbursts motivated by narrow self-interest. Instead, he sees in them a rudimentary political movement and identifies anti-Prussian sentiment, economic turmoil, and political language as motives for this sort social unrest. The final chapter explores the so-called Cologne Troubles of the 1830s in order to illustrate how Catholicism imbued reluctant sections of the public with modern political ideals. Angered by restrictions on processions, Prussian laws about confessionally mixed marriages, and the imprisonment of the archbishop in Cologne, middle-class Catholics, a handful of priests, and lower-class congregants used the languages of civic rights and constitutionalism to argue for religious autonomy from the Prussian state. Most importantly, religious controversies caused otherwise conservative Catholics in the Rhineland to engage with modern politics and offer at least minimal support for liberal values. These meticulously researched chapters demonstrate how Brophyâs depiction of *VormÃ¤rz* Germany contrasts with that of Habermas. Rather than emphasizing how financial prosperity provided the middle-class reading public time to develop liberal ideas, Brophy illustrates how economic need, religious struggles, and exposure to partisan values also shaped a republican movement from below that would drive the events of 1848-49.

Brophy's book is set apart not only by its intriguing thesis, but also by the compelling evidence it offers. Readers may still lave the book with a few questions. For example, the author makes a strong argument that the political activism of the liberal bourgeoisie was connected to the populist ideas of commoners. Even so, the book might have helpfully differentiated between the various elements of German society. It would be valuable to know the exact ideas that appealed most and least to a diverse population divided not only by class but also within classes by religion, occupation, and gender. Although these nineteenth-century political cultures were not yet "mature," different aspects of the liberal platform attracted farmers, artisans, weavers, Catholics, and Protestants. While Brophy notes that popular politics apparently blurred class distinctions, he is less clear on the places where social boundaries remained firm. In particular, a more vigorous analysis of gender would have aided his project a great deal. What roles did women play in popular culture and religion? Did they have the same access as men to partisan political venues? To what extent did they view themselves as actors in the emerging public sphere? Uncovering when and how women of various social classes became activists would seem crucial to a book devoted to the early politicization of less visible groups, but these questions are engaged in brief rather than extended sections. Finally, this monograph is not always precise on whether those without education became political upon exposure to ideas formulated by others or if they significantly shaped the ideological content of bourgeois liberals. Did they become instruments of a liberal agenda or did they add new political values to the emerging revolutionary movement? Brophy proves that the public sphere was broader than the one depicted by Habermas, but it is not entirely evident if everyday Germans changed the substance of its ideas.

Despite these questions, however, this monograph should become required reading for specialists, graduate students, and anyone teaching a survey of modern Eu-

ropean history because of its contribution to the historiography and its theoretical reflections about the public sphere. It enhances our understanding of Restoration Germany. In its discussion of the popular level of politics in the Rhineland, the book is an effective contrast to works with an emphasis on Prussia and intellectual movements, such as Matthew Levinger's *Enlightened Nationalism* (2000). It also examines the dynamic antecedents to the radicalism of 1848-49 so thoroughly researched by Sperber. The book expands Habermas's definition of the public sphere [by including those without formal education in his analysis] and finds innovative methods to write a political history from below during an era of political repression and censorship. Brophy thus adds another layer to our increasingly complex understanding of the relationships between social and intellectual history. Finally, fluid prose, well-chosen illustrations, and a balanced tone make the book a pleasure to read.