



*"This Town Is Gonna Blow..." European Protest Movements and Society in the 1980s.*  
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## **"This Town Is Gonna Blow..." European Protest Movements and Society in the 1980s**

About twenty-five historians attended the conference "This Town Is Gonna Blow..." European Protest Movements and Society in the 1980s, held from May 6th to 8th at the University of Bremen. Thirty years after the so called Bremen *Bundeswehrkrawalle* of May 1980, sometimes seen as the birth of the German autonomous movement, the organizers Inge Marszolek (Bremen), Hanno Balz (Bremen / Lüneburg), and Jan-Henrik Friedrichs (Berlin / Vancouver) aimed at a first survey of 1980s protest movements in a European context.

HANNO BALZ (Bremen / Lüneburg) put the Bremen riots in a European context, ranging from the Swiss youth movement to Dutch squatters to so called race riots in the UK, and the Polish Solidarity movement. Emphasizing the importance of 1968 as a reference point for the New Social Movements, he also observed a paradigm shift with these movements now turning to single-issue campaigns, aiming at a wider consent within society. The founding of Green Parties as "anti-parties" as well as the development of autonomous scenes showed, argued Balz, that political and private emancipation was sought to be accomplished not within society and its hegemonic institutions and not necessarily in opposition to it, but rather beyond it. Balz also raised the question in which way the focus on the individual within social movements has been paralleled by the rise of neoliberalism and its key concept of self-realization.

In the following JAN-HENRIK FRIEDRICHS (Berlin / Vancouver) introduced some of the main analytical concepts of the conference: consumption, transnationalism, and space. He argued that consumption practices were of major importance, e.g. in boycott campaigns and the preference for products from the "Third World". But also in the Warsaw Pact states consumption, e.g. of Western products, was a way to express discontent as well as a site to formulate demands. Consumption could therefore provide a useful tool in the comparison of protest movements across national borders. Finally, 1980s protest movements appear primarily as urban movements; not only because they took place in the city, but because they were about the city. Therefore, Friedrichs asked for a combination of critical geography with methods of cultural history.

The first panel on "Protest, Consumption, and Identity" was opened by ALEXANDER SEDLMAIER (Bangor, UK). Tracing "Traditions of Militant Critiques of Consumption in the 1980s" and focusing primarily on the campaign against the meeting of IMF and World Bank in West Berlin in 1988, he identified four avenues through which violent conflicts and discourse on violence were communicated: verbal and symbolical violence that was used to call attention to manifest violence, especially in the so called Third World; militant tactics employed by protesters – either real or imagined by the mass media; the governmental security dispositif; and the political

and legal controversies following violent actions, used in order to de/legitimize these acts.

Although there was never a significant autonomous movement in Great Britain, MIEKE ROSCHER (Bremen) showed how anti-consumerism and ways of consumption that were quite similar to those on the continent influenced radical activists in the UK and vice versa. Taking “The British Animal Liberation Movement between Disassociation and Exerting Influence” as her example, she focused on cultural transfers between the UK and the continent. By propagating vegetarianism and veganism as a political lifestyle the threshold to become an “activist” was set rather low. This added to the success of groups like the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) who served as a producer of consumer habits, lifestyles, and direct action politics for autonomous groups in continental Europe.

What had been brought forward as a denunciation of capitalism by leftist groups in Western Europe was part of governmental policies in the Eastern Bloc: the pacification through consumer goods. HELLA DIETZ (G ttingen) showed in her talk on “Solidarnosc and the Struggle for a ‘Normal Life’ ” how price increases of consumer goods sparked unrest among workers and led to the rise of the Solidarity movement. In contrast to the 1970s and very similar to the British ALF becoming an activist was merely a matter of self-proclamation. Accordingly self-concepts shifted from “militants for life” to short-term mobilisations and from “organization” to “fulfillment” with a strong emphasis on individual human rights.

In the second panel on “Protest in a Cold War Context” presenters approached this topic from two different angles. ASTRID MIGNON KIRCHHOF (Berlin) explored “Western Influences in East Germany’s Peace and Environmental Movement”. Although marginalised East German peace and environmentalist groups had been triggered by Western influences, Kirchhof argued that their focus on armament in the Warsaw Pact states rendered the common perception questionable according to which threats of the United States were the sole motivation for these groups. What connected Eastern and Western movements was the shared conviction of the limits of growth. Especially the West German Green party made efforts to support Eastern movements, e.g. with the East Berlin “Umweltbibliothek”.

REINHILD KREIS (Munich) on the other hand took “Anti-American Protest in West Germany in the 1980s” as a means to compare several political factions, from

the peace movement to the “Autonomen” to councils of solidarity with Latin America. The slogan “One world, one fight, one enemy” presented contemporary perceptions in a nutshell. “Imperialism” and the threat of global nuclear destruction sparked movements that focused on action not words: if the political situation was life-threatening then it needed to be fought. The “enemy” was identified as the US, with the FRG playing the role of a co-perpetrator. Despite the differentiation between “the US” and “current US politics” or the “other America”, only in the peace movement marginal positive references could be found. US officials were increasingly worried about anti-American sentiments among German youth, mainly due to lacking positive experiences with the US.

The global dimension of many issues in the context of 1980s protest movements was further scrutinized in the third panel on “*Internationalism*”. In the first presentation NIKOLAI BRANDAL (Oslo) showed how Scandinavian Maoist parties were torn between the constant changes of Chinese foreign policy. The import of Mao’s theory of the three worlds together with the frontline position of Norway and Sweden (Finland was not part of the presentation), led to many Maoists preparing and waiting for World War III and a following guerrilla warfare, while the Danish Maoists split over debates of inner-party democracy. The war never came and the self imposed isolation eventually led to the demise of “*Scandinavian Maoism after Mao*” even before the events on Tiananmen Square in 1989.

WOUTER GOEDERTIER (Leuven) tied together “Neoliberalism and Social Movement Culture: The Case of Belgium” with a focus on peace and anti-Apartheid organizations. The connection between “first” and “third world” as much as between protest movements and neoliberal ideologies was most apparent with the anti-Apartheid organization “Aktie Komitee Zuiderlijk Afrika” (AKZA). The Belgian state had always left alone those unemployed who were working for an NGO and on whom AKZA relied heavily. This policy changed in the early eighties, plunging AKZA into a deep crisis. This ended only in the mid-80s due to events in South Africa that triggered a renewed interest in anti-Apartheid policies. Boycott campaigns like the one against South African products, Goedertier argued, are typical for consumer societies, fit into neoliberal ideologies and even developed a “minor cultural industry”. An implicit focus on civil and political rights that was compatible with neoliberal globalisation dominated the protesters’ discourse and led them to “lose the bigger picture.”

Following up, SEBASTIAN HAUMANN and SUSANNE SCHREGEL (Darmstadt) opened the panel “Spatial concepts in protest movements” with their presentation on “Squatted Houses, Appropriated Places, and Nuclear Free Zones: Changing Patterns of Oppositional Politics (1977-1985)”. Both emphasised the importance of spatial concepts for protest movements. Geography became the object of struggles over space, place, and scale and their respective uses, i.e. space became more than just a stage. The examples ranged from the squatting of houses and construction sites of nuclear power plants to feminists creating “female” spaces, and the proclamations of “nuclear free zones”, thereby turning the threat of global thermonuclear war into an issue of local politics.

CARLA MACDOUGALL (New Brunswick/Berlin) illustrated the concepts of space and margins in her presentation “Kreuzberg is in Germany: Considering National Culture in the Political Margins”. Taking a look at the situation in the Berlin neighbourhood of Kreuzberg, MacDougall showed how two threats to the hegemonic order were seen in the squatters’ scene and a growing Turkish migrant community. Eventually migrants were blamed for the assumed decay of the whole neighbourhood. Turning to the “Autonomen” MacDougall argued that despite their emphasis on solidarity with and attention to struggles of oppressed peoples in the so-called Third World there was little mention of structurally oppressed groups in their own neighbourhoods. In contrast to their rhetoric the squatters’ scene did not establish lasting political links on an everyday basis with their migrant neighbours in Kreuzberg.

How a film-theoretical approach can contribute to the topic was shown by DAGMAR BRUNOW (Halmstad/Hamburg) in her presentation “Film as Historiography: Mediations of Social Unrest, Urban Landscapes and Surveillance in 1980s Black British Filmmaking”. She gave a comprehensive introduction to black film collectives of the 1980s like the “Black Audio Film Collective” and how they turned away from documentary and towards expressionism. These film activists propagated an attack on the colonial gaze in openly “looking back” against authorities and represented an opposition against racist stereotypizations of the riots through mass media. Brunow then discussed how perceptions of a counter-public changed during the 1980’s when means of subversion and self-reflexivity became more influential not only in the Black British activists’ films, but in debates on alternative media in other parts of Europe as well.

The final panel on “Challenging the State” was opened by FREIA ANDERS (Bielefeld). In her talk on “Violent Action and Political Communication: The Autonomen at the Startbahn West, 1981-1988” she identified three phases in the struggle about the extension of the Frankfurt airport. After a relatively peaceful phase, dominated by *bürgerliche* groups trying to stop the extension by legal means, the struggle shifted to more confrontational ways after all petitions had been rejected by the courts. Up to 15,000 people participated in forest walks, demonstrations and visits to a hut village that had been built by protesters. The final phase was one of governmental vengeance after two police had been shot during a demonstration in 1987. And while the Autonomen had to reevaluate their concept of militancy, the Green Party finally accepted the state monopoly on violence. The effect of the struggle at the Startbahn West was that of a wider range and an increased acceptance of different protest forms.

MOLLY O’BRIEN CASTRO (Paris, Tours) showed in an “Anatomy of Urban Riots: The Case of Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher” how the economic crisis as well as governmental and urban politics caused the so called “race riots” in the early eighties. A high unemployment rate combined with the “stop and search” tactics of police, often directed against ethnic minorities, caused unrest in some of the most deprived inner city areas in Britain. Unwilling to acknowledge any social reasons for these riots the Thatcher administration reacted primarily by providing better equipment for and granting more rights to the police. The conservatives’ urban policy of privatization led to even worse living conditions for many, though interspersed with occasional “islands of excellence”, contributing to a further decline of British inner cities.

In the final presentation KLAUS WEINHAUER (Bielefeld) compared methods of “Policing Squatting and Youth Riots in Germany and England during the 1970s and 1980s”. In 1968 confrontations between protesters and police had been much fiercer in Germany than they had been in the UK. While German students clashed with what they perceived as a “fascist police saving a fascist state”, the image of the Bobby together with continuous communication between police and protesters led to restraint on both sides. In 1980, things had changed significantly: while the police forces that had to deal with the squatters’ movement had been modernized in Germany, in Britain media images of “black hooligans” nurtured fears of a black other set out to destroy society, so that “English police had its 1968 in 1980”.

**Conference overview:***Opening*

Inge Marszolek (Universität Bremen)

Hanno Balz (Universität Lüneburg), Jan-Henrik Friedrichs (University of British Columbia):

Key Concepts in Researching 1980s Protest Movements

*PROTEST, CONSUMPTION, AND IDENTITY*

Chair: Birga Meyer (University of British Columbia)

Alexander Sedlmaier (Bangor University): Traditions of Militant Critiques of Consumption in the 1980s

Mieke Roscher (Universität Bremen): Animal Liberation âor else! The British Animal Liberation Movement Between Disassociation and Exerting Influence

Hella Dietz (Universität Göttingen): Solidarnosc and the Struggle for a âNormal Lifeâ

*TRANSNATIONALISM 1: PROTEST IN A COLD WAR CONTEXT*

Chair: Inge Marszolek

Astrid Kirchhof (Technische Universität Berlin): Western Influences in East Berlinâs Peace and Environmental Movement

Reinhild Kreis (Universität Augsburg): The âSuccessor Generationâ: Anti-American Protests in West Germany in the Early 1980s

*TRANSNATIONALISM 2: INTERNATIONALISM*

Chair: Birga Meyer

Nikolai Brandal (University of Oslo): From Phnom

Penh to Tiananmen Square â Scandinavian Maoism after Mao

Wouter Goedertier (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven): Neoliberalism and Social Movement Culture in the 1980s: The Case of Belgium

*SPATIAL CONCEPTS IN PROTEST MOVEMENTS*

Chair: Jan-Henrik Friedrichs

Sebastian Haumann, Susanne Schregel (Technische Universität Darmstadt): Squatted Houses, Appropriated Places, and Nuclear Free Zones: Changing Patterns of Oppositional Politics (1977-1985)

Carla MacDougall (Rutgers: State University of New York): Kreuzberg is in Germany: Considering National Culture in the Political Margins

Dagmar Brunow (Halmstad University): Film as Historiography: Mediations of Social Unrest, Urban Landscapes and Surveillance in 1980s Black British Filmmaking

*CHALLENGING THE STATE*

Chair: Hanno Balz

Freia Anders (Universität Bielefeld): Violent Action and Political Communication: The Autonomen at the Startbahn West (Frankfurt, Runway West), 1981-1988

Molly OâBrien Castro (Université de Tours): Post-mortem of Urban Riots: The Case of Great Britain (1979-1990)

Klaus Weinbauer (Universität Bielefeld): Policing Squatting and Youth Riots in Germany and England during the 1970s and 1980s

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