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REVIEW ARTICLE

West German radical protest in the long 1960s

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Consumption and violence: radical protest in Cold-War West Germany, by Alexander Sedlmaier, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2014 [Book series: "Social History, Popular Culture and Politics in Germany"], 342 pp., \$39.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780472036059

West Germany and the global sixties: the anti-authoritarian revolt, by Timothy Scott Brown, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013 [Book series: "New Studies in European History"], 408 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781107022553

Foreign front: Third World politics in sixties West Germany, Quinn Slobodian, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2012 [book series: "Radical Perspectives"], 320 pp., \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780822351849

The other alliance: student protest in West Germany and the United States in the global sixties, by Martin Klimke, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010, 368 pp., \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780691152462

In April 1968, four members of an infamous organisation to be, the *Red Army Faction* (*Rote Armee Fraktion*, RAF), started their revolutionary career by setting fire to two department stores in Frankfurt with the intent of igniting at the same time public consciousness around the issue of the Vietnam War. Three years away from the fiftieth anniversary of that first violent action, the RAF has already entered into the world of museums as a piece and a part of German contemporary history that can be displayed. The Baden-Württemberg House of History in Stuttgart initiated the move in June 2013, with an exhibition entitled "RAF Terror in the South West" (*RAF Terror im Südwesten*). In November 2014, the exhibition was renamed "RAF, the Terrorist Violence" (*RAF – Terroristische Gewalt*) and relocated to the German Historical Museum (*Deutsches Historisches Museum*, DHM) in Berlin where, according to the exhibition's leaflet, everything started with the student protests of the 1960s. Ten years after the controversial 2005 art exhibition "Imagining Terror" (*Zur Vorstellung des Terrors*) at the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, this retrospective on the history of the RAF in the DHM – one of the biggest museums of the city – was particularly well attended.

Tempting as it might be to see these exhibitions as evidence of a German society coming to terms with the turbulent social protests in the 1960s – when anti-imperialism was at the forefront of the new radical outlook – and the RAF's short but active period of violence in the early 1970s, it is worth highlighting that the relationship between museums, memory and history is by no means simple. On the contrary, these exhibitions on the inception and development of the RAF in West Germany illustrate the extent to which the contemporary history of German radical politics is anything but over. As Leith Passmore suggests and as, more recently, Charity Scribner pinpoints well in her work on the impact of the left-wing armed group on German society, it is a still lingering past that is haunting the imagination of generations of political actors, novelists and filmmakers (Passmore 2011; Scribner 2014). There has been considerable academic interest in studying the connections between the varieties of dissident attitudes at a time of generalised outpouring of protest against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the turn by some from verbal violence to direct action. The question of whether and how the student movement can be considered as a prequel to the RAF or the turn to direct action by some new Leftists be seen as a sequel to these same protests flares up periodically in German political and scholarly discussions (Gutmann 2008; Von Stetten 2009).

Clearly, the question of extreme violence is a crucial battleground in the fight to define the legacy of the 1960s (Klimke 2008; Hanshew 2012) and no oppositional political culture has received more attention from historians, political scientists and polemicists than the obstreperous Western students' movements of the 1960s. This was a decade acclaimed by some as much as hated by others and perhaps clearly over-romanticised in both ways (Varon, Foley, and McMillian 2008). The cause, amplitude and the magnitude of the political radical outlook and cultural exuberance that led to extreme forms of political violence are still subject to debate. Yet, until very recently, the tale and the analysis of the West German 1960s and 1970s was often jealously defended as the quasi-exclusive property of the "68er-generation": those who were more or less active contributors to the 1968 movement (*68er-Bewegung*). The West German protagonists of "1968" have frequently portrayed themselves as the first to have openly confronted the Nazi past and thus portrayed their revolt as an ultimate breaking point and seminal moment (Gassert and Steinweis 2006). Quite often, the image of a dying young protester shot by a police officer during a demonstration against the visit to West Berlin by the Shah of Iran in June 1967, and cradled in the arms of a shocked young woman, works as the iconic image of the West German 1968.

Yet, as we gain distance and critical detachment from the events and personalities that seemed so remarkable at the time, German historiography has changed. For many historians, 1968 is no longer interpreted as a key marker and more as a moment surrounded by mystification or a myth to decipher (Kraushaar 2000; Gilcher-Holtey 2008). Critical engagement with the 1968 generation's emotional entrapment in conflicting memories and interpretations about the events that took place (Gildea and Warring 2013), investigations into the complex interconnections between individual and collective memories (Davis et al. 2010), including challenging the notion of a 1968 generation (Horn 2007), and controversies about the relevance of the mythic year of 1968 have rapidly emerged throughout Europe since the end of the 1990s. Since then,

scholars seem to have been more eager to transcend both the iconic transfiguration and the deeply rooted condemnation of 1968, opting for more comparative and transnational approaches in order to assess the complex ideological undercurrents of the political and cultural upheavals across the Western world (Fink, Gassert, and Junker 1998; Kraushaar 1998). They have also delved into social movement research in order to get a better grip into the complex and contentious Sixties (Thomas 2003; Varon 2004; Davis et al. 2010). They have challenged the fixation on 1968 with a longer-term perspective, looking back to the 1950s and forward to the 1970s and locating 1968 within a larger political, social and cultural context of the “long Sixties” (Marwick 1998).

The four works under review participate in this welcome critical endeavour within contemporary historiography. They are all erudite and ambitious monographs rooted in conscientious archival work. They all shed important light on violence and radical protest in post-war Germany, and they complement each other in many respects. And last, but certainly not least, they all contribute to make the rich findings of German and Germanophile scholars available in English.

In his monograph, *The Other Alliance*, Martin Klimke moves beyond the usual declaratory statements concerning the global nature and transnational character of the 1960s revolts and investigates a specific transatlantic social activism and how the US Government kept a close eye on it (Klimke 2010). The prominence of opposition to the American war in Vietnam in the West German student movement makes it easy to forget how much young West Germans in the 1960s looked up to the United States. Klimke details the intellectual exchange between the *American Students for a Democratic Society* (SDS) and its West-German equivalent, the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* (Socialist German Student Federation), and shows how the result of this particular networking was the rapid spread and exchange of forms of action but also regimes of justifications.

If Klimke highlights how these protest techniques became rapidly shared cultural and political reference points among students across the Atlantic, he also aptly stresses how these techniques were adapted to the German experience, and thus transformed. Finally, Klimke’s thesis, outlined in his previous publications (Klimke 2007; Klimke and Scharloth 2008; Davis et al. 2010), is persuasively reinforced in this particular monograph: this student transnational connection under governmental surveillance and also constrained by the American foreign policy in South-East Asia had nonetheless some lasting effects on the orientation of radical politics in Germany. As Klimke (2006) has previously argued, the inception of the *Black-Panther-Solidaritätskomitees* (Black Panthers solidarity committees) in West Germany is key to understanding the expansion of a militant rhetoric within the student movement.¹ In his well-documented chapter, Klimke highlights how Black American radical politics substantially shaped the formation and dynamics of the student activists’ ideological position. When Black Panthers activists in the United States claimed that they had opened a second front in White America, it resonated with the German middle-class students’ search for revolutionary authenticity and provided German radicals not only with a new repertoire of justifications but also a model for urban guerrilla warfare. He further argues that the Black Panthers played an important role in “the ideological self-definition of the RAF” (129).

This transnational dimension of the 1960s German protests is also rightly emphasised in Quinn Slobodian’s monograph, *Foreign Front* (Slobodian 2012). He also focuses his

analysis on the SDS, one of the most well-known and perhaps key organisations of the broader West German youth rebellion. Yet, if Slobodian endorses the necessity of exploring international dynamics he nonetheless moves away from the transatlantic connection and suggests the necessity of exploring the impact of Third World countries' students on the German movement. He aptly reminds us that Third World students residing in West Germany had an impact on West German politics in the 1960s that went beyond abstraction and ideology. What Slobodian shows in his monograph is that in a context of a country rebuilding its international standing, these overseas students who were supposed to demonstrate the openness of the new post-War German society to the world quickly deviated from their attributed role and became "dissident guests" who really pushed West German activists into action. In his personal diary, the charismatic German student leader Rudi Dutschke noted in December 1964 a few days after a demonstration against Moïse Tshombe, "Our friends from the Third World stepped into the breach and the Germans had to follow" (Dutschke 2003). Based on a thorough analysis of official archives of the West German federal government (mainly the Foreign Office) and archives of the *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* (Extra-Parliamentary Opposition), Slobodian provides a compelling case for the pre-eminent importance and role of those already mobilised African and Asian students in building German students' political awareness and concerns.

In reconnecting immigration and social movement history in his monograph, Slobodian offers a comprehensive account of the intellectual collaboration, romantic projection and distorted adulation of Third World actors and literature within a section of the German Left. Slobodian's thoughtful description of the 1966 contested premiere of Gualtiero Jacopetti's documentary *Africa Addio*² and his analysis of the influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the German New Left show clearly the ambivalence and complexity of the relationship between the German protest movement, foreign students and foreignness. As he elegantly puts it "the influence of Vietnam in socialist student circles helped displace the alternative visions of development built around liberal and critical freedoms proposed by foreign students in West Germany for the panacea of partisan revolution" (100). Slobodian's monograph is a valuable addition to our understanding of the circulation of ideas and the politicisation of German New Left Activists. Whether one considers the Berkeley Free Speech movement or the death of the Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba as the tipping point of the German Student movement, Slobodian and Klimke's volumes efficiently illustrate how the nature and form of West German New Left "internationalism" transformed over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. But they also both emphasise the revolutionary politics of student activists to the detriment of an analysis of the other, more ordinary participants in these protests.

West Germany and the Global Sixties (2013) by Timothy Scott Brown is also concerned with qualifying and interpreting the importance of transnational exchanges. It is an ambitious, eloquent and well-documented volume, aimed at offering a synthesis of the German long Sixties. With its eight thematic chapters (Space, Time, World, Sound, Vision, Power, Sex and Death), Brown illustrates convincingly how dissent and anti-authoritarian left-wing politics in West Germany grew out of a new interplay of radical politics and popular culture. Technological innovation and an internationalised media landscape

created a qualitatively new level of sociocultural networking across national borders well before 1968.

But, as Brown shows, it is not only a matter of identifying the “globality” of that peculiar youth counterculture that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, but also analysing its reception and the incredible speed and extent to which this encompassing popular culture became connected with an emancipatory political agenda that, once articulated with local concerns and traditions, reinforced specific worldviews, feelings, emotions and particular political action schemes where politics and violence became thoroughly aestheticized. Solidarity did not appear to be just an expression of sentiment, but resounded as an eminently practical programme for the rebellious youth of the 1960s, mixing Marcuse, Fanon, Rock’ n Roll and the powerful and mythologised image of the AK47. By redirecting our attention to more “ordinary” cultural effects, affects and transformations in material conditions and lifestyles, Brown shows how an extraordinary variety of subcultures permeated post-World War German society, producing enabling conditions to the anti-authoritarian revolt. Such a revolt was

synergised at every step by transnational exchanges, whether receptive (e.g. those involving the presence of Third World or other foreign student radicals, the reception of foreign texts, music, or other cultural products) or active, that is, exchanges in which West Germans acted themselves as agents of the transnational, either through travel abroad and the attendant relations thus formed or through their role in importing political strategies and ideas, texts, and other cultural goods with a political valence into West Germany. (364)

Brown certainly successfully retrieves the seminal importance of arts in the propagation of the spirit of revolt and his work is an important addition to our understanding of transnational cultural history. His most recent edited volume (Brown and Lison 2014), highlighting how the youth counterculture remains the most evocative and best-remembered symbol of the cultural ferment of the 1960s, should be read in parallel. The strength of his monograph is in the extremely detailed and finely crafted analytical narratives Brown weaves, chapter by chapter. It provides excellent and vivid support to the recently translated, provocative thesis on the transformation of capitalism by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in which they show how this particular rebel counterculture worked also as a perfect preparation for a more fluid and informal kind of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007).

In *Consumption and Violence*, Alexander Sedlmaier also redirects our attention to long-term changes in consumption and lifestyle (Sedlmaier 2014). It is now well established that the legitimacy of both East and West German States was based on their ability to materially overcome the hardships of the war and that the provision of a wide array of consumer goods, and the promises of prosperity that they embodied became the terrain upon which the two new States competed (Crew 2004; Landsman 2005; Loehlin 1999). Drawing on extensive new archival material, Sedlmaier’s work is concerned with detailing the theoretical relationship between violence and abundance in the context of West Germany, and showing how “militant protest and political violence can essentially be traced back to competing concepts of moral economy” (21). How the consumption critique (*Konsumkritik*) in Post-War Germany and how the critique of regimes of provision spurred new modes of protest and new forms of being militant

are fascinating issues, and Sedlmaier's volume provides stimulating and thought-provoking reading.

The successful translation into German in 1959 of John Kenneth Galbraith's classic on the economics of abundance (*The Affluent Society*, published in 1958) along with the writings of the Frankfurt school, and especially Herbert Marcuse's classic distinction between true and false needs, proved an important backdrop for the unleashing of a veritable militant revolt against consumer society (94). According to Sedlmaier, that particular complex critique of regimes of provision and of affluent society formed "a central part of the cognitive orientation of the (German) activists" (62). His invitation to reconsider the intellectual plurality and vivacity of competing moral economies offers an interesting path to seeing how the ordinary daily life concerns began to be part of the analytic repertoire of the New Left. In his Chapter 3, he offers a thorough analysis of the literature produced by the RAF, the June 2nd Movement (*Bewegung 2. Juni*) and autonomist groups. He aptly highlights how "consumption as a domestic analogue of imperialist expansion was firmly established in the RAF' ideological repertoire" (106). By analysing the connection between anti-imperialism and attacks on consumer culture, Sedlmaier opens an interesting and welcomed discussion on the circulation of ideas from Critical Theorists to political activists and, subsequently, ethically motivated consumers in the late 1980s (Chapters 6 and 7). In both Brown and Sedlmaier's monographs, there is a salutary, more encompassing understanding of protest, not limited to the activities of particular student groups such as the SDS.

Across all four of these works, there are several agreements. First, they tend to agree on the fact that the student revolts of the second half of the 1960s were a turning point in the political history of the late twentieth century. Second, the German revolt and events were shaped by West Germany's peculiar position on the front lines of the Cold War with a city such as Berlin, divided in two and embodying all the global tensions between East and West, ideals and Realpolitik. This was reinforced by the fact that the new German Republic was barely two decades old and its political legitimacy was driven primarily by material concerns heightened by Cold War competition. Third, all four volumes contribute to a renewed interest in economics and social issues, highlighting how these protests were linked to massive changes across German society and that there was therefore a number of enabling conditions encouraging this coalescence of revolt. The prosperity of the 1960s that financed a dramatic increase in university enrolments, provided substantial disposable income and self-confidence and underpinned a youth culture is also a common denominator to the four works. Additionally, all seem to agree that ease of communication and travel between countries increased possibilities for shared ideas and transformation of activism.

Finally, and contrary to a common narrative among "68ers" that would regard the turn towards political violence as a case of a small fringe group taking an extreme and indefensible path, these four volumes reinstate the question of violence (*Die Gewaltfrage*) within the boundaries of a largely more common creed for revolutionary authenticity and political solidarity (Varon 2004; Siegfried 2010). All four volumes highlight that the transnational transfer and assimilation of distorted ideas and representations about "armed struggle", resistance and solidarity provided the context for local actualisation of violence. The idea that the willingness to consider violence was intimately woven in the fabric of the 1960s anti-authoritarian revolts is a transversal

element in these four volumes under review. The overwhelming number of “68ers” who were enchanted with a more militant rhetoric did not turn to armed struggle, yet they found themselves, nonetheless under a banner of basic sympathy for anyone challenging authority. “Anyone” included a clandestine organisation, argues Karrin Hanshew in her very astute history of the West German Left’s confrontation with the RAF (Hanshew 2012).

These four eloquent volumes provide a fascinating and more complex picture of the interaction of international and local forces, and of the circulation of new forms of political participation and new collective identities in the long 1960s. They expand and refine some of the findings published in the important volumes edited by Wolfgang Kraushaar (Kraushaar 1998, vol. 1, 2006) on the overlapping ideological, political and social scenes and communities from which the members of the RAF emerged. On the downside, they do not help to further understand what led some students to participate in the protests while others did not. While they all retrieve fascinating archives of the New Left protest movement, there is still some room for a more thorough engagement with the other sides, i.e., the rise of the *Neue Rechte* (New Right) but also the attitudes of the police, as well as local and national government towards an eclectic movement that they did not really understand at first. Institutional archives point to the fact that West German authorities mistakenly believed in the imminent collapse of the social order. As Donatella Della Porta aptly argues when she puts the emphasis on the relational approach to the study of contentious politics, the institutional responses to the student movements can be seen as a major political precondition for the development of violence, i.e., radicalisation (Della Porta 1995). Nonetheless, the freshness and depth of the research underpinning these monographs collectively contributes definitively to a new historiographic endeavour to open up the 1960s German radical protest to new historical assessment, accessing new archives and sources and situating the movement within a broader chronological context.

Notes

1. A position shared also by historian Maria Höhn. See her contribution on the BP Solidarity committees and the American GIs underground journal *The Voice of the Lumpen* (Höhn 2008).
2. A previous and shorter version of that analysis by Quinn Slobodian is also available in Brown and Anton (2011).

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