

**Making Sense of „America“ -  
Representations of the Americas in the  
1980s West European Protest Movements  
and their Aftermath**

**Veranstalter:** Jan Hansen / Frank Reichherzer (Institut für Geschichtswissenschaft, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin); Christian Helm (Historisches Seminar, Leibniz Universität Hannover)

**Datum, Ort:** 23.05.2013–24.05.2013, Berlin

**Bericht von:** Friederike Apelt, Leibniz Universität Hannover

The 1980s saw a variety of highly heterogeneous protest movements. People from all over Europe joined mass protests articulating fears of environmental abuses, nuclear catastrophes, and increasing global injustices and committed themselves to the protection of natural resources, to peace and disarmament and to rethinking their relations with the countries of the global South.

These movements can be seen as linked by a very intensive attention toward the United States of America. On the one hand, protest activists constructed a representation in which the U.S. appeared as being responsible for all the world's deficiencies. It was especially U.S. President Ronald Reagan who personified the American neo-conservatism and, therefore, played a key role in establishing a generally accepted enemy stereotype. On the other hand, protest movements all over Europe tried to associate themselves with inner-American debates in order to create a transnational civil society and to boost shared protest goals.

However, Europeans did not only establish connections with North American activists, but also started to build up transnational networks with leftist and indigenous movements south of the U.S. The Nicaraguan Sandinistas as well as other oppositional, revolutionary or guerilla movements in Latin America were also, as point of reference, of high importance for protesters in Europe. Acting as a kind of negative backdrop, the U.S. remained ubiquitous in these transnational networks, too.

An international workshop held at Humboldt-University of Berlin on 23/24 May 2013 brought together historians from

Europe as well as from the United States focusing on a wide range of topics concerning the images and perceptions of „the Americas“ in West European protest movements during the 1980s. A brief introduction by the organizers, JAN HANSEN (Berlin), CHRISTIAN HELM (Hannover) and FRANK REICHHERZER (Berlin), gave an outlook on the main issues to be discussed during the workshop: How can we historicize West European protest movements which came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s after years of détente? What kind of role did images of Latin America play within the protest movements? And how did these movements try to make sense of the Americas for their own purposes? The workshop did not only illuminate the impact of the East-West conflict on protest movements, but also engaged in a North-South perspective. Bringing together both Americas, the workshop stressed the entanglement between Europe, the U.S. and Latin America in what the organizers called the framework of a „transatlantic triangle“.

REINHILD KREIS' (Augsburg) keynote lecture raised some key questions by linking images of „both Americas“, North and South. She outlined central characteristics of representations of the Americas in the 1980s by using the example of Central America and the U.S. as well as the West European protest movements' strategies to „make sense“ of these regions. In the movements, ascriptions were quite clear: While Central American Guerillas were usually depicted as the „good“ America, the United States was portrayed as its counterpart, representing the „bad“ America. This dualism was fueled by the dual-track decision and the U.S. foreign policy toward Central America. The American government was well aware of rising anti-American sentiments among members of the West German protest movements and developed an extensive action program for dealing with this so called „successor generation“.

The first panel, which focused on „Protest from Above“, was opened by STEPHEN MILDER (Chapel Hill), who showed how green party member Petra Kelly was perceived in the U.S. as simultaneously German and American. Thereby, Kelly managed to become a symbol for U.S. activists represent-

---

ing the possibility to create an „other America“ at the height of Reagan's nuclear arms buildup. Milder argued that the German green party and especially Petra Kelly did not only present the German peace movement in the United States but offered U.S. Americans an idea of how this „other“ America could look like.

The second talk by JUDITH MICHEL (Berlin) analyzed similarities and differences in the West German peace movement and Willy Brandt's views on the U.S. government, especially the Reagan administration. While Brandt saw increasing tensions and the deployment of more nuclear missiles in Europe as a cause for critique of the U.S. government and showed some appreciation for the peace movement as an important part of civil society, he strongly opposed anti-American tendencies in the movement and avoided an all too close alignment.

The second and third panel gave an overview over different protest movements in West European countries such as Italy, France and Germany. PAOLA VAROTTO (Lucca) presented some of her research on how the rising peace movement in Italy was perceived by the Italian press in the 1980s. In her analysis, she identified three major issues that were discussed: the emergence of new forms of collective mobilization and protest, the rise of anti-Americanism, mainly directed against Ronald Reagan, and a changing attitude relating to nationalism and nation.

Based on the example of the occupation of West-Berlin's „Amerika Haus“ in 1980, VOJIN SAŠA VUKADINOVIĆ (Basel) analyzed the anti-American and anti-imperialist sentiments within the West German militant left. Criticizing the dominant research focus on the most prominent members of the RAF, he tried to shift the attention to the driving ideas of the RAF and its „Umfeld“, in which anti-American politics and attitudes constituted a theoretical and tactical core of their ideology.

ANNE BIESCHKE's (Augsburg) analysis of the West European women's peace movement pointed out the importance of integrating the category of gender into the discussion about protest movements in the 1980s. While the women peace movement shared the views of the mainstream peace movement by holding

the United States responsible for the nuclear threat in Europe, they also included a gendered perspective and tried to activate U.S. American women by appealing to their allegedly „female“ side and thereby using gender as a transnational connection across the Atlantic.

The first presentation of the third panel by ILARIA PARISI (Paris) gave insights into the role of the peace movement in France from 1979 to 1987, which has been widely ignored by current literature. She pointed out that although it was not as much in the public eye and did not have the same mobilization impact as other European movements, it still contributed to a wider and deeper political reflection about defense and security issues in France.

Another example of transnational efforts to promote peace during the 1980s was given by CLAUDIA KEMPER (Hamburg). She argued that the organization „International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War“ (IPPNW), founded in 1980 by both physicians from the United States as well as from the Soviet Union, played an important role in the transnational peace movement. By looking at the German section of the organization, she demonstrated how it supported a dialogue between physicians and supporters of nuclear disarmament from a medical point of view while it tried to stay politically neutral.

JASPER M. TRAUTSCH (Rome) analyzed the perception of the United States by the labor unions and the process of a continuous estrangement. In the wake of the oil crisis of the 1970s, the ideology of consensus capitalism, which had formed a crucial part of the ideological framework holding together the „Western alliance“, was seriously undermined in the 1980s, as the American and British governments chose divergent economic policies from their continental West European counterparts. As a result of the transatlantic drift, Western Europeans also came to a new understanding of their identity in the 1980s.

While the presentations during the first day discussed protest movements in Western Europe mainly with regard to their relationship to the United States, the focus of the workshop's second day shifted southwards to „the

other America“ and West European solidarity movements with Latin American countries. The first talk by KIM CHRISTIAENS (Leuven) pointed out the complex relationship between the „Third World“ and the peace movement in Belgium. While the peace movement had been an important reference point for the solidarity movements with Central America in the 1980s, there were also specific distinctions such as a different development of anti-American sentiments in both movements. Christiaens also showed that the influence and input from political movements in Central America itself in shaping the discourses in Europe should not be underestimated.

GEORG DUFNER (Berlin) analyzed the functions of representations of Chile in the West German solidarity movement with this country, which arose after Augusto Pinochet's military coup in 1973. Although the movement was highly heterogeneous, he identified some general traits in representations of the Americas within the movement, such as the tendency to explain Latin America mainly through its class structure and economic dependency. In this picture, again, the United States appeared as an imperialistic power. Dufner analyzed how this image served as a powerful tool for the German New Left to attack its political enemies in West Germany, basically making Chile a showcase for its own purposes.

FERNANDO CAMACHO PADILLA (Falun) gave another example for a transnational solidarity movement by demonstrating the importance of the Swedish solidarity movement with Chile in the 1980s. According to Camacho Padilla, not only Swedish civil society but also the state and the political parties (especially the social democrats) put a lot of efforts in defending human rights and in restoring democracy in Chile, especially because Sweden became one of the primary destinations for Chilean exiles.

The second panel focused on West German solidarity movements with Central America. In BENJAMIN KIREENKO's (Mannheim) talk it became obvious that, again, anti-American sentiments played an important role in the mobilization of the solidarity movement with El Salvador. By pointing out

the political heterogeneity of the movement's actors, Kireenko showed that although the movement contained coexisting and controversial narratives, the references to Cold War paradigms and anti-Americanism functioned as common ground. In this representation, Central America, oppressed by the United States, became the setting for a global Cold War.

A similar perspective on Central America as David and the United States as Goliath was shown by CHRISTIAN HELM's (Hannover) interpretation of posters and cartoons that circulated in the West German solidarity movement with Nicaragua. In his talk, Helm gave insights in the active promotion of certain visual images by the Sandinistas as well as the function these images had in West Germany's Nicaragua solidarity.

Finally, JAN HANSEN and FRANK REICHERZER (both Berlin) presented a draft design for a new research project. They pictured how multinational elite networks as well as some national parties imagined new concepts of a world order that transcended the post World War II order and one of its master frameworks, the „Cold War“. In their talk, they elaborated on how the protest movements in Western Europe and the transatlantic „establishment“ in general met this objective, too.

The concluding remarks by CHRISTINE HATZKY (Hannover) stressed the diversity and the entanglement of the history of protest movements of the global North and South. Giving a short overview over the stages of anti-Americanism in Latin America, she pointed out that representations and images of the Americas that circulated in Europe were often shaped by Latin American actors during the 19th and 20th century.

All in all, the workshop fruitfully reviewed the variety of protest movements during the 1980s and put them in a global perspective that not only took East-West, but also North-South relations into account. It made clear that „Making sense“ is a question of perspective and often means simplifying complex realities.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Jan Hansen, Christian Helm, Frank Reich-

---

herzer: Introduction

Keynote Lecture:

Reinhild Kreis, Augsburg: Good Americans, Bad Americans. Images of the Americas in West European Protest Movements in the 1980s

*Panel 1: Protest from Above*

Chair and Discussant: Silke Mende, Tübingen

Stephen Milder, Chapel Hill: Petra Kelly and the Power of the Green Alternative in the United States

Judith Michel, Berlin: Dissociation and Cooperation: Willy Brandt's Views on the United States of America and the West-German Peace Movement in the 1980s

Valentine Lomellini, Padua: Transforming the US. The Development of the American Image in the Italian Communists' Ideology in the early 1980s

*Panel 2: Protesters in Western Europe I*

Chair and Discussant: Frank Reichherzer, Berlin

Paola Varotto, Lucca: Civic Engagement, Pacifism and Anti-Americanism in Italy in the early 1980s

Vojin Saša Vukadinović, Basel: „One World - One Struggle - One Enemy“. The Occupation of the Amerika Haus in West-Berlin, 1980

Anne Bieschke, Augsburg: „Women push for awareness“. The West European Women-Movement's Image of America and its Efforts to Change the Political Climate in the U.S.

*Panel 3: Protesters in Western Europe II*

Chair and Discussant: Frank Reichherzer, Berlin

Ilaria Parisi, Paris: A Silent Protest? French Peace Movement During the Euromissiles Crisis (1979-1987)

Claudia Kemper, Hamburg: Black Ties and Grassroots. Making Sense of an Institutional Bias in International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

Jasper M. Trautsch, Rome: The Transatlantic Drift of the 1980s and the Reinvention of Eu-

rope. How Union Worker Movements Imagined America

*Panel 4: Going South – The Other America*

Chair and Discussant: Christine Hatzky, Hannover

Kim Christiaens, Leuven: Anti-Americanism and North-South and East-West Solidarity Movements in the 1980s

Georg Dufner, Berlin: Representations of the Americas within the Chile Solidarity Movement in Western Germany

Fernando Camacho Padilla, Falun: Swedish Chile Solidarity and its Support for the Recovery of Democracy in the 1980s

*Panel 5: Central America in Germany, Germany in Central America*

Chair and Discussant: Claudia Kemper, Hamburg

Benjamin Kireenko, Mannheim: El Salvador's Civil War in Bonn. Grassroots Mobilization and Solidarity Networks in West Germany

Christian Helm, Hannover: Reagan's Mouth Wide Open. Imagery of America in Sandinista Nicaragua and its West German Solidarity-Movement

Short Remarks: Transcending the Cold War?

Jan Hansen / Frank Reichherzer, Berlin: Some Brief Observations on how Protest Movements and the Establishment imagined a New World Order

Christine Hatzky, Hannover: Concluding Remarks and Discussion

Tagungsbericht *Making Sense of „America“ - Representations of the Americas in the 1980s West European Protest Movements and their Aftermath*. 23.05.2013–24.05.2013, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 28.09.2013.