

**A European Youth Revolt 1980/81?  
European perspectives on youth protest  
and social movements**

**Veranstalter:** Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg; Institut für Soziale Bewegungen, Bochum; Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam

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KNUD ANDRESEN (Hamburg) and BART VAN DER STEEN (Leiden) opened the conference by raising three central questions about the research of emerging youth revolts in Eastern and Western Europe in the early 1980s, which were hitherto perceived as militant riots and the squatting of houses. The first question challenged whether it is at all possible to speak about a European phenomenon of unrest and political discontent at that time or whether conflicts were parallel local events. Did interrelations exist between the different countries, in common protest forms, goals or transnational activists? The second question focused on the concept of youth. Was it more than a sociological and media category? What social conditions determined the protests, with the steep rise of unemployment especially affecting young people? Was this an important factor in the revolt or was it more about a standardized life and the criticism of lifestyles evolving around work and consumerism? Thirdly, the term revolt was brought into question. Generally, revolt is understood as an explosive, spontaneous spectacle with a dimension of violence and militant action with the aim of changing the social structure. But does this narrow definition overshadow other forms of protest in the 1980s? The term revolt is also linked to classical political terminology but does this still apply to the protests of 1980/81?

In his keynote speech, SEBASTIAN HAUNSS (Bremen) conceptualised the aims of the conference from a political science perspective and questioned the value of historical concepts for exploring the social phenomenon. He encouraged the partici-

pants to discuss three different approaches: a generational perspective, a phenomenological and a political process perspective. In addition, he suggested focusing on mobilization, submerged networks and on the spaces of activists. The concept emphasises the embeddedness of social movements in social conflicts and social structures beyond the single events themselves.

In the first panel, LINUS OWEN (Middlebury) highlighted the European dimension of the squatting movement in the early 1980s. Taking the Amsterdam squatting scene in the 1970s and 1980s as his empirical base, he debated the relations between squatters in Europe through travel networks of activists. The analysis of emerging travel networks underlines the interconnections and transnational links between events of social unrest and might help to explain the similarities of the outer form of the protest wave in Europe.

ROBERT FOLTIN (Vienna) gave a profound inside look into the protest and squatting scene in Vienna around 1980/81. He pointed out that Austrian protesters were inspired by urban conflicts in Zurich and West-Berlin, yet there were no riots in Vienna, where a consensus was quickly reached with local authorities. They feared the same kind of social unrest as in Zurich and Austrian police officers travelled to Zurich to learn how to react. This shows that interrelations on a European level existed not only between autonomists or squatters but also between the responsible authorities.

ADRIENNE SÖRBOM and JAN JÄMTE (both Stockholm) discussed the question „Why didn't it happen here?“ with a focus on the autonomous movement and Antifa in Sweden, where the movement remained quite a marginal phenomenon until the end of the decade. They gave the lasting dominance of the „Authoritarian Left“ and corporatist structures as reasons why protests stuck to consensus-based repertoires of action. Another explanation could be seen in the relatively strong economy in the early 1980s. Low unemployment, no housing problems and a strong social security system might have helped keeping social conflicts at a low level.

In a panoramic introduction to the punk

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and new wave scenes of the late 1970s and 1980s in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, OSKAR MULEJ (Budapest) asked if these youth subcultures served as catalysts for broader social change within the communist regimes. With special attention to the punk scene in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, he pointed out that the communist authorities characterized the youth subculture as a political subversive problem, in contradiction to the self-perception of the activists as anti-political. This raised questions about the definition of political, anti-political and a-political movements within the context of youth unrest in the early 1980s. Perhaps new forms of protest created new definitions of what constitutes political action, subverting the more traditional terms.

In his presentation, NIKOLAUS PAPADO-  
GIANNIS (Berlin) argued against the decline of political radicalization and a crisis of left-ist ideologies. He underlined the enduring strength of left-wing groups in Greece after the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974 until the early-to-mid 1980s in focusing on individual militants and collective action around the occupation of several universities. New forms of networks challenged and rejected what they regarded as „bureaucracy“ (state institutions, left-wing parties, their youth organizations) and opposed the intensification of university studies. 1968 in Western Europe remained a reference point, but they failed at synchronizing with protest movements in other European cities.

Although the opposition in Poland failed due to the declaration of martial law in 1981, youth subcultures inspired by their Western counterparts began to emerge. GRZEGORZ PIETROWSKI (Stockholm) discussed the role of youth subcultures in the dissolution of the communist regime. With the Jarocin rock festival in Poland (1980-1986) as a case study he illustrated the rise of different subcultures and networks. Although it was organized by the youth section of the communist party, the festival created an autonomous space for subversive ideas and radical ideologies such as anarchism, pacifism and radical environmentalism. The communist party might have underrated its significance for the development of social movements or they failed to see the

festival as a „safety valve“ to canalize youth energy.

DIDIER CHABANET (Florence/Paris) and ALMUTH EBKE (Mannheim) presented a different picture of youth unrest. France and Great Britain, two post-colonial countries, witnessed urban riots of mostly young people with backgrounds of immigration in 1980/81. The unrest in the suburbs of Lyon in September 1981 showed the existence of a hitherto unknown social group, mostly unemployed youth of immigration origin. Immigration or racism so far had not been a political issue. Chabanet outlined local initiatives like „the march of equality and against racism“ in 1983 with the short-term character of a wider social movement. However, the institutional participatory approach with the foundation of SOS Racisme and France Plus failed. The mistrust between the residents of the suburbs and the forms of national representative democracy could not be overcome and urban riots became a commonplace phenomenon.

Ebke focused on media representations of the riots known as „Bloody Brixton“ in the spring of 1981, which expanded to various English cities. Even though the protagonists came from the Afro-Caribbean and the South-Asian community, as well as the white working-class youth, the events of April 1981 were framed as race riots by the media and local officials. Her presentation showed how the public discussion about the position of post-colonial immigrants in British society was embedded in discourses concerning economic capabilities, imperial legacies and the changing structure of society.

In the final discussion of youth in post-colonial society Jan-Henrik Friedrich (Berlin) pointed out that in both countries people tried to gain access and fought for inclusion in the French or British society. In other European countries (Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands) young people such as punks, squatters and drug users, who were mostly white middle-class and male-dominated, rather wanted to exit society. This called the homogeneity and European similarities of a „Youth Revolt“ seriously into question.

DAVID TEMPLIN (Hamburg) opened the fourth panel on „Spaces in Youth Movement“

and emphasised in his presentation that the wave of squatting in West-German cities in the early 1980s had its pre-history in the „Jugendzentrumsbewegung“ of the 1970s. He took a social history perspective on the origins and continuities of the struggle for urban space and autonomous zones. The self-governed youth centres created spaces for radical leftist thinking and for the practice of new protest forms. Beyond that they were central locations for travelling activists and allowed for an exchange of new political ideas and the development of networks.

JAN-HENRIK FRIEDRICH challenged whether the term „Youth Revolt 1980/81“ applied to the social phenomena around 1980. Based on his research about squatted houses and the heroin scene in West-Berlin and Zurich, he preferred to focus on spaces of transgressive youth, who were experiencing the normalizing regime of Fordist society as a restraining force and tried to „drop out“ of this social order. Understanding rebellious juvenile behaviour in the larger context of transgression allows for new insights into the history of social movements, urban policies, social change and politics of normalization.

ALINE MALDENER (Saarbrücken) adopted a consumer historical perspective upon different urban milieus in West Germany and Great Britain. She interpreted the urban riots in 1980/81 as struggles of distribution in polarizing societies. She analyzed the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion through the lens of consumer behaviour and lifestyle. This approach highlighted general trends and shed light on the majority of young people and therefore emphasised developments that ran parallel to youth unrest.

In the fifth panel JAKE SMITH (Chicago) debated the reactions of experts and officials in West Germany and their envisioning of youth movements in the 1980s. He extracted two main discourses in media and politics – a social-psychological and a political-criminalistic analysis of the activists and their milieus. Both envisioned youth movements in a similar way as networks outside of Western democratic rationality and saw a shift towards the vision of a parallel world of terrorism.

JAN HANSEN (Berlin) talked about the reactions to urban riots of the so-called „establishment“, those who felt challenged by the events of youth unrest. By describing the youth activities as „revolt“ and „unrest“, the establishment sharpened its representation of „the other“ and, by this means, clarified its self-imagery. He argued that politicians and experts interpreted protest as collective behaviour stemming from generational shifts, which enabled them to delegitimize social and political rebelliousness.

FREIA ANDERS (Mainz) and ALEXANDER SEDLMAIER (Bangor) challenged the definition of youth revolt for the European developments in 1980/1981. In a comparative perspective on squatting, especially in West-Berlin, Amsterdam, and Zurich, they emphasised that central issues concerned not only youth protests, but also were a form of opposition to the policy of urban renewal. In their opinion, political ideologies and the fundamental critic of capitalism no longer played an emphatic role, and the movement was more focused on particular aspects of and concrete alternative designs for its environment.

DARIO FAZZI (Middelburg) pointed out the transatlantic and environmental dimensions of the European youth revolt of the early 1980s. In his opinion interdependences and overlaps of social groups existed between the environmental, the anti-nuclear, the peace movement, and the youth movement in European countries and in the USA. The common criticisms of modernity and the call for a more equal society characterised these movements and the young protesters and these interrelations deeply affected the development of a critical mass.

MONIKA BAÄR (Groningen) enriched the discussion with her presentation about the European „Disability Revolts“ of 1981. The fight for autonomy, which had been mentioned already, was not only about self-governed youth centres, squats and music festivals. Simultaneously, protests by disabled people were directed at their infantilisation and they fought for autonomy and self-determination. The protests during the UN International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 brought disability into mainstream discussion but there was still an emerging gap between

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official propaganda and everyday life.

In the last panel CONSTANT HIJZEN (Leiden) gave an inside look at the perception of the squatter movement in Amsterdam in the files of the Dutch secret service. He argued that the secret service, which was habituated to other forms of protest in the 1970s, could not classify the new squatter movement, their political demands and their transnational networks. In addition, he sketched an image of a non-interventional secret service, which was more driven by politics, which demanded quick reactions to the urban conflicts. This was questioned by the audience with regard to his limited access to the files.

JOACHIM HÄBERLEN (Warwick) focused on self-perception and political subjectivity as a starting point of the youth unrest in 1980/1981. He was in favour of a reconceptualisation of the political and emphasised the analysis of moments of transgression in new forms and aesthetics of violent protest.

In the last presentation MATHEW WORLEY (Reading) defined the development of punk in Great Britain and especially the construction of punk by music journalists, media, politicians and cultural scientists. From a phenomenological and political perspective punk was always too diverse and wracked by internal contradictions to form a coherent political movement or mode of expression. It did, however, provide a space and a means for protest and facilitated critiques of politics and society.

In the final discussion Andresen and van der Steen summarized that in all their diversity, there were some similar baseline patterns within social movements in Europe „around“ 1980. All of the participants agreed that the definition of youth revolt does not cover the variety of events and actions in Europe. A solution may be to define youth as an identity, a self-perception of activists being in a critical stage of life. They pled for sticking with the term revolt for pragmatic reasons. The alternative term transgression could be too wide for the use as a conceptual tool. In the end the results of the conference underlined that a tendency towards a local-transnational perspective with a focus on networks, interdependencies, and similarities due to socio-economic changes is highly beneficial for re-

search on a „European Youth Revolt around 1980“.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Opening Remarks*

Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam), Michaela Kuhnhenne (Düsseldorf), Stefan Berger (Bochum)

#### *Introduction*

Knud Andresen (Hamburg), Bart van der Steen (Leiden)

#### *Keynote*

Sebastian Haunss (Bremen): Unrest or Social Movement? Some Conceptual Clarifications

#### *Panel 1: Youth Unrest in Consensus Democracies*

Chair: Bart van der Steen (Leiden)

Linus Owen (Middlebury): Activism and Travel Networks

Robert Foltin (Vienna): March 1st 1981 in Vienna: A Strange Demonstration

Adrienne Sörbom / Jan Jänte (Stockholm) Autonomous Movement and Antifa in Sweden

#### *Panel 2: Youth unrest in East- and South Europe*

Chair: Lex Heerma van Voss (Den Haag)

Oskar Mulej (Budapest): Punk in Slovenia and Yugoslavia

Nikolaus Papadogiannis (Berlin): The Party is Over? Youth Protest in Greece 'around 1980'

Grzegorz Pietrowski (Stockholm): The Jarocin Rock Festival in Poland (1980-1986)

#### *Panel 3: Youth in postcolonial Societies*

Chair: Anna Tijsseling (Leiden)

Didier Chabanet (Florence/Paris) The French Republic „One and Indivisible“ Challenge to the Suburbs: The Turning Point of the 1980s

Almuth Ebke (Mannheim): „Bloody Brixton“ Placing the Riots of 1980/81 in British Post-Imperial History

#### *Panel 4: Spaces in Youth Movement*

Chair: Pepijn Brandon (Amsterdam)

David Templin (Hamburg): Youth Center Initiatives in the „Youth Revolt“ of 1980/81

Jan-Henrik Friedrichs (Berlin): Revolt or Transgression? Squatted Houses and the

Heroin Scene as Spaces of Transgressive Youth in the Early 1980s

Aline Maldener (Saarbrücken): To have and have not – The 1981 Youth Revolt in Germany and Great Britain as Point of Culmination in a Youth-centered 1960s and 1970s Consumer Culture

*Panel 5: Reactions in Politics and Media*

Chair: Stefan Berger (Bochum)

Jake Smith (Chicago): From Apathy to Subversion: Envisioning European Youth Movements, 1980-87

Jan Hansen (Berlin): Defining Political Dissidence: How did the „Establishment“ react to Extra-Parliamentary Protest?

Freia Anders (Mainz) / Alexander Sedlmair (Bangor): Debates, Definitions, Developments: Comparative Perspectives on Squatting in the Early 1980s

*Panel 6: Beyond Youth Revolts*

Chair: Sebastian Haunss (Bremen)

Dario Fazzi (Middelburg): A Global, Western Concern. The Transatlantic and Environmental Dimension of the European Youth Revolts of the Early Eighties

Monika Baår (Groningen): The European ‘Disability ‘Revolts‘ of 1981: How were they Related to the Youth Movement?

*Panel 7: Youth and Radical Politics*

Chair: Joost Augusteijn (Amsterdam)

Constant Hijzen (Leiden): The seeds of danger. The Dutch security service’s perception of „the movement“

Joachim Häberlen (Warwick): Between Autonomous Youth Centers and Free Sight on the Mediterranean Sea: The Politics of Subjectivity in the Youth Revolts of 1980/81

Mathew Worley (Reading): Punk and Politics: The British Experience

*Final discussion*

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