Demonstration Marches of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in a Comparative Historical Perspective

Veranstalter: Matthias Reiss; German Historical Institute London
Datum, Ort: 25.02.2005-26.02.2005, London
Bericht von: Matthias Reiss, German Historical Institute London

For the last two centuries, organized demonstration marches have been widely used as a means of political protest, and there is little sign that taking to the streets to register support for, or opposition to, a cause has lost its appeal in the twenty-first century. Although they share certain elements, however, the success of demonstration marches and their ability to achieve the results desired by organizers and supporters vary considerably.

On 25 and 26 February 2005, scholars from a number of different countries and backgrounds in history, political science, anthropology, psychology, and geography, and people with practical experience in the organization of demonstration marches met at the German Historical Institute London to discuss the changing forms, elements, and outcomes of demonstration marches since the nineteenth century. Instead of focusing on individual demonstrations, each paper had a comparative perspective. The presenters were asked to discuss the use of symbols, rituals, and traditions; the aims and expectations of the marchers; their interaction with the media, politicians, the police, and onlookers; the significance and use of space; the importance of numbers; the problem of violence versus peaceful protest; how the success of demonstration marches could be measured; and their legacy.

Hagen Schulze (Director, German Historical Institute London) opened the conference and welcomed the participants. Thereafter Matthias Reiss (London), who had planned and organized the conference, briefly summarized some of the guiding questions, before Clifford Stott (Liverpool) presented the keynote speech: 'Overcoming the Historical Legacy of Gustave LeBon: Identity and the Social Dynamics of the Crowd.' Stott stressed the historical context in which ideas of crowd psychology first developed in nineteenth-century France. Born out of a framework of social tensions and upheaval in which the crowd was the lower classes' only weapon to create change in their favour, crowd psychology seemed to offer the promise of manipulating and controlling the crowd as well as harnessing its revolutionary potential. The crowd was understood as a pathological intrusion into the social order which had no normative structure and had to be controlled by the use of overwhelming force. This view, popularized but not invented by LeBon, became highly influential and still often determines the authorities' approach to crowd control today. However, Stott stressed that police tactics based on LeBon's theory often provoked the violence they were designed to prevent. New theories of crowd psychology have successfully overcome the legacy of LeBon. They hold that crowd behaviour is driven by social identity and that changing the contexts of events also results in changes in the psychology of the crowd. Stott explained these new theories and the limitations of the old ideas using the example of the Anti-Poll Tax Riot which took place in London on 31 March 1990, and the policing of football fans during the 2004 European Championship in Portugal.

The first session, on 'The Long Nineteenth Century', was chaired by Jon Lawrence (Cambridge) and opened by Pia Nordblom (Mainz), who spoke on 'Resistance, Protest and Demonstrations in Europe in the early Nineteenth Century: The „Hambacher Fest" of 1832'. Nordblom placed the celebration at Hambach into the context of widespread social and political protest in Europe in the early 1830s. Compared with the revolutionary activities elsewhere in Europe, Hambach was a peaceful affair in the traditional form of a public festival, but imbued with a new political meaning. Nordblom described the long procession to the castle of Hambach, which reminded contemporaries of the mass progression of Napoleon's armies, the use of colours and symbols by the participants, and the order of the procession. All in all, between 20,000 and 30,000 people from a broad social background attended the festival, but the organizers tried to keep the poor away. Nevertheless, in many communities in the Rhine area the lower classes rioted after the festival, and the Bavarian authorities reacted by taking punitive measures which contributed considerably to the violence in the area after the festival. Nordblom concluded by commenting on the changing and lasting legacy of the festival in Germany's political culture.

Hugh L. Agnew (Washington, D.C.) followed with a paper on 'Demonstrating the Nation: Symbol, Ritual, and Political Protest in Bohemia, 1867-1875'. Reforms within the Habsburg Empire after the war with Italy in 1859 opened the way for the

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

transformation of the Czech nationalist movement into a mass-based political phenomenon. According to Agnew, a number of public manifestations of the late 1860s and early 1870s in Bohemia were symptoms of this gradual transformation. They included celebrations of the return of the coronation regalia from Vienna to Prague and the laying of the foundation stone of the new National Theatre, but especially the series of mass protest meetings called 'people's camps' (*tábory lidu*) that expressed the nationalist reaction to the *Ausgleich* with Hungary and the ensuing December constitution in Cisleithania. The *tábor* movement drew on foreign examples, in particular, the mass meetings organized by Daniel O'Connell in Ireland, but it also adapted symbols and rituals from domestic sources that were to remain recurrent features of Czech political demonstrations throughout the remainder of the century and beyond. Agnew explained the various symbols and procedures common to the celebrations and demonstrations, including the use of the traditional heraldic symbols of the Kingdom of Bohemia and aspects of its coronation rituals, the application of colours to represent political positions, the use of song and music, and the selection of specific locations for protest. In addition, he assessed the effectiveness of these manifestations in changing policy and winning popular support.

Birgitta Bader-Zaar's (Vienna) paper, '„With Banners Flying": A Comparative View of Women's Suffrage Demonstrations 1907-1914', concluded the first session. Providing case studies from Britain, Austria, France, Germany, and the United States, Bader-Zaar explained the various ways in which female demonstrators dealt with the constraints they faced when moving in public spaces. Moderate suffrage organizations emphasized respectability and circumvented possible antagonism either by encouraging women to use cars and carriages, thus avoiding setting foot on the streets, or by organizing orderly, well-planned processions. Especially in England and the United States, the processions were characterized by a rich use of symbols such as suffrage colours, banners, floats, and pageants, all emphasizing feminine civic values. The militant Women's Social and Political Union joined in staging spectacular demonstrations that drew impressive numbers of participants and onlookers, but reverted to radical tactics such as raids on Parliament when its expectations of success were disappointed. The publicity around these events encouraged the Labour Movement in Britain to commit itself to the women's franchise, and, in contrast to the moderate suffrage movement, the radicals' protests were largely modelled on traditional labour demonstrations consisting of assembled crowds marching on foot. According to Bader-Zaar, interest in demonstrations began to fade shortly before the First World War. In England it became difficult to make every new procession more impressive and entertaining than the previous one. Movements on the Continent still hesitated to adopt this tactic, and the Labour Movements in Austria and Germany questioned its chances of success. Militants in the United States began to give up marching, preferring instead to picket a prominent spot, the White House. Nevertheless, demonstrations were important for the integration of suffragists in the movement, and for publicizing the cause. The ultimate decision concerning women's enfranchisement, however, lay in the hands of governments and parliaments, which could only be brought round under specific political conditions.

The second session, 'Protest between the World Wars', was chaired by Richard Bessel (York). In his paper 'Between Peace and Order: Demobilization and the Politics of the Street in Britain and Germany, 1917-1921', Adam R. Seipp (College Station, Texas) discussed the discrepancy between the support the war enjoyed for most of its duration and the rejection of its legacy in both defeated and victorious countries when demobilization began. Using evidence from demonstrations in Munich and Manchester, Seipp argued that this transition can best be understood as a crisis of reciprocity. The rhetoric in both cities was based on the idea that service during the war legitimized grievances and deserved reward. Not only members of the armed forces, but the entire social milieu of those who had served, were depicted as having made sacrifices, and women and non-combatants were able to harness this flexibility to make space for their own demands. Seipp explained the need to frame the protest in both cities within a rhetoric of loyalty by arguing that the period of demobilization was still 'wartime', when protest was easily coded as disloyalty. In Manchester, the protesters' efforts to demonstrate within the boundaries of loyalty rendered their activities ineffective, while in Munich, the Jews were used as scapegoats to permit coded criticism of the government.

Matthias Reiss (London) spoke on 'Marching on the Capital: National Protest Marches of the Un-

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

employed in Interwar Great Britain'. In the 1920s and 1930s, four organizations in Britain organized national protest marches to London or Edinburgh: the National League of the Blind, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, the Jarrow Borough Council, and the British Campaigners' Association. Each of these organizations contributed in its own way to this form of political protest, which reached its peak in 1936. In addition, each enjoyed different levels of political support and had different resources at its disposal. All marches were two-act dramas and shared many common features. The march to the capital served to demonstrate strength and the urgency of the marchers' cause, as well as to mobilize support, collect funds, and disseminate information. Former servicemen and non-combatants alike presented themselves as forgotten heroes of the Great War and tried to convey an image of military order to emphasize their respectability and deservingness. The climax of each march was the arrival of the marchers in the capital, where mass meetings for their reception were held. Afterwards, the marchers attempted to present their case to Parliament or to Cabinet members, but were rarely successful. All governments defended representation as the exclusive privilege of elected Members of Parliament. Reiss concluded that historians are still divided about whether the marches were successful and argued that they probably worked best as a means of information, as the street was the most effective mass medium to which the unemployed had unrestricted access.

The conference continued on the following day with a session on 'Protest in the City', chaired by David Gilbert (London). In 'Demonstrating in Zurich between 1830 and 1940: From Bourgeois Protest to Proletarian Street Politics', Christian Koller (Zurich) explained that demonstration marches became popular in this Swiss city during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Organized protest in the era of bourgeois revolutions up to 1870 took the form of assemblies, but the emerging Labour Movement merged this form of protest with other traditions and created the classical demonstration march, for which the May Day demonstration soon became the model. Until the end of the First World War, the Social Democratic Labour Movement was the only political force in Zurich to organize demonstration marches. In the 1920s, the Communists copied this form of protest, and in the early 1930s, the Swiss fascists contended with the left for the streets as a political arena. According to Koller, both the bourgeois assemblies and as the proletarian marches tried to convey the impression that the claims of their respective movements were supported by large numbers of citizens. In addition, the Labour Movement's demonstration marches also intended to show that the workers were not a rebellious mob, but a disciplined class fighting for its rights by peaceful means. Nevertheless, the Labour Movement's marches into the bourgeois area of the town symbolized the proletarian attack on this class, which conferred a certain ambiguity on these demonstrations. Although both bourgeois protest meetings and organized proletarian street politics were intended to be peaceful, from time to time proletarian street politics slipped from Social Democratic control, leading to street battles with the police or military forces. In the early 1930s the emergence of the fascists as new actors in street politics also led to an increase in everyday political street violence. While the bourgeois protest assemblies twice successfully initiated far-reaching constitutional changes (in 1830 and in 1867-8), the success of the socialist demonstration marches is more difficult to assess. Few of these marches resulted in immediate action by the political élite. Koller thus suggested that the main achievement of the socialist demonstration marches was to give the abstract concepts of class and class struggle concrete expression by institutionalizing and ritualizing a certain form of collective body politic.

Neil Jarman's (Belfast) paper was entitled 'Another Form of Troubles: Parades, Protests, and the Northern Ireland Peace Process, 1995-2004'. Explaining the history and role of annual commemorative parades for demonstrating and affirming cultural and political identity in Northern Ireland from the eighteenth century, Jarman focused on the symbolic importance of these parades to Protestants and Catholics after the declaration of a ceasefire in 1994. Since 1995 disputes about whether the Protestant Orange Order and related organizations have a right to march along 'traditional' parade routes in the face of opposition from local residents and political opponents have dominated much of the summer months, and in recent years a number of parades have degenerated into violent rioting and serious public disorder. Using the community of Portadown as a case study, Jarman reviewed the recent history of parades in Northern Ireland while placing the disputes within their im-

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

mediate political context and acknowledging their historical antecedents. He also discussed the role of symbols, tradition, territoriality, and power as key elements that have underpinned and helped to sustain the problem, before summarizing the main attempts made by government, civil society, and the protagonists to address the problems and establish a peaceful means of managing the culture of parading that remains significant in the local context.

Nikola D. Dimitrov (Weimar) concluded the session with a paper on 'Street of Anger: Opposition Protests in Belgrade and Sofia during the Winter Months of 1996-1997'. Although Yugoslavia and Bulgaria had developed different types of socialists system and faced different sets of problems in the 1990s, the outcries of 1996-7 in their respective capitals were similar. Large daily rallies on the main boulevards of Belgrade and Sofia brought together thousands of people who marched through the city centres from one government building to the next, shouted opposition slogans, and made as much noise as possible. The people in both cities utilized the same methods and their protests developed in similar ways over the winter months, leading to considerable street violence and outrage against the major public buildings in Belgrade and Sofia. Nevertheless, the results of the protests were strikingly different. In Bulgaria, parliamentary elections were announced (February 1997), while in Serbia the rivalry between the opposition leaders and a much more violent response from the government led to further years of political struggle. Showing a number of images and also referring to the recent street protests in Kiev, Dimitrov explained the use of space, satire, and irony in the demonstration marches he focused on.

The fourth and final session on 'New Models of Demonstrations' was chaired by Irina Novikova (Riga), who started by also making some remarks on the recent protest in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. Speaking on 'Symbolizing „Peace" in the Cold War: the British and West German Easter Marches, 1958-1964', Holger Nehring (Oxford) compared the staging of the British and West German anti-nuclear weapons protests in order to show how protest traditions and the Cold War environment interacted in shaping the symbolics of protest in both the United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany. The protest form of the 'Easter March' was imported to West Germany from Britain in 1960, but despite this transnational link, the symbolic politics of the marches in both countries still depended on national political traditions and therefore differed markedly. Nehring focused in particular on the symbolics of 'peace', a word also used by the Soviet Union, the GDR, and Communist Parties to legitimize their own policies and denounce the West as totalitarian. This confronted the British and West German protesters with a formidable challenge when staging their protests. At the same time, protesters had to situate themselves within traditions of 'good politics' and 'public peace' in the two countries.

In contrast to Nehring, Fabian Virchow's (Kiel) paper 'Towards a Typology of Demonstration Marches: the Case of the Far Right in Germany' focused on the public processions of the far right. After the Second World War, the German far right was long unable to use demonstration marches as part of its political strategy. After initial attempts during the 1980s, some factions of the German far right took up the idea of demonstrations and rallies as a means of mobilizing followers and disseminating propaganda more systematically from the early 1990s. Now there are rallies every weekend in Germany, the largest of which can attract up to 5,000 participants, and a demonstration march calendar with certain fixed dates has been established among the far right. According to Virchow, these marches have become among the most attractive and high-profile events which the far right has to offer its young followers. On the one hand, the marches aim to recruit new followers and activists and are designed to season participants and train new leaders; on the other, these demonstration marches try to increase the neo-fascist movement's chances of disseminating its propaganda. Virchow argued that the demonstration marches of the far right differ in various ways, depending on the events which trigger them, their aims, and the ways in which they try to achieve them. He concluded by presenting a typology of far right marches in Germany, ranging from 'fighting demonstrations' to silent commemorative marches taking place at symbolic locations.

The final paper in this session, presented by Danielle Tartakowsky (Paris), was on 'Is the French *manif* still specific? Mutations of French Street Demonstrations'. Tartakowsky argued that national repertoires of collective action with their own, often implicit, rules came into existence in the countries of Western Europe between the 1880s and the First World War. These national repertoires

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

provided the framework for all kinds of demonstrations organized in the various countries of Europe, even where a formal right to public demonstration did not exist. In France, where this repertoire has been summed up in the term manif since the 1950s, public demonstrations played a leading part in the main crises of the Third Republic (February 1934) and the Fifth Republic (May/June 1968), and have become more frequent since the 1970s. Although most of these demonstrations were similar to those of earlier decades, Tartakowsky suggested that the French *manif* is no longer as inclusive as it used to be before the 1980s. In the last decades of the twentieth century, new kinds of demonstrations appeared, with new functions in political life, new features, and partly in new places. Some of these new demonstrations have, with the tacit agreement of the government, become a conventional way of interfering in politics. As a result, a de facto constitutional right to demonstrate, provided the public order is not endangered, has been introduced by stealth in France. Tartakowsky explained that the new kinds of demonstrations are rather different from what the *manif* used to be, and that the *systeme manifestant* has been shaken by changes in French political culture, the crisis of the traditional organizations, the irruption of new models of demonstrations, and the circulation of other national models throughout Europe and all over the world.

The conference concluded with a panel discussion on 'Protest in the Twenty-First Century: Old Traditions, New Developments', which was chaired by Dominik Geppert (London) and brought together a number of people with practical experience of organizing demonstrations. Bertold Baur (Frankfurt/Main) from the German Metalworkers' Union IG Metall opened the discussion. In a short paper he summarized IG Metall's experience of mobilizing its members for demonstrations, while highlighting the opportunities and risks inherent in such a step. Felix Kolb (Dörverden), founding member of ATTAC Germany and a former spokesperson for this organization, reported on the efficiency of demonstrations in generating press coverage and attracting new members. He also argued that the reliance of social movements on mass demonstrations was a weakness, as the movements could not control the interpretation of the processions they organized. He suggested that instead of judging the 'success' of a demonstration, one should speak of its 'outcome'. Dieter Rucht (Berlin), who has worked extensively on contemporary protest and is a member of ATTAC Germany's academic advisory board (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat), commented on both papers. This was followed by a general discussion.

The conference showed the various ways in which organizers of demonstrations were influenced not only by national traditions, but also by events in other countries. The question of how this transfer of knowledge actually took place is one of the points which still require more clarification. While the different papers showed strong continuities between demonstrations organized by diverse social and political groups over time, important changes also became apparent. The desire to appear respectable, for example, which dominated organized demonstrations from the nineteenth century on, became less important after the Second World War, when irony and satire acquired a more prominent role in many demonstrations and the formerly orderly, almost military-style processions became far less disciplined. Banners have likewise lost their once important symbolic significance and have been replaced by whatever people can find. The protesters on the streets of Belgrade, for example, enthusiastically waved Ferrari and other flags while demonstrating against the regime in 1996-7. The importance of the marchers' mobility is another question which needs further research. The denial of mobility is obviously significant in certain cases, for example, the blockade of the annual parades in Portadown by the police, and intrusion into the territory of the class-enemy is also a symbolic act, as the example of Zurich shows. However, the question remains as to whether a demonstration march in general has a different impact from a protest meeting. Finally, the appearance of new media, for example, photography, film, and television, and their impact on demonstration marches repeatedly came up in the discussion. While organizers of demonstrations use the publicity which the press and other media offer, they have little control over how a wider audience are informed about their march. When the unemployed marched to London between the world wars, for example, the police asked the film companies to abstain from filming the processions in order to deny them publicity. Photos of demonstrations are often carefully arranged and need to be interpreted with caution. This conference, which brought together people from various fields, will, it is hoped, be a step towards solving these and other problems,

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

and highlight the need for an interdisciplinary and multinational approach to the study of demonstration marches. A publication is planned.

Tagungsbericht *Demonstration Marches of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in a Comparative Historical Perspective*. 25.02.2005-26.02.2005, London. In: H-Soz-u-Kult 15.04.2005.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.