

Philipp Gassert, *Bewegte Gesellschaft. Deutsche Protestgeschichte seit 1945*, Stuttgart (W. Kohlhammer) 2018, 308 S., ISBN 978-3-17-029270-3, EUR 25,00.

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Across nine chapters that weave protest into the master narrative of postwar social and political history, Philipp Gassert's »Bewegte Gesellschaft«, describes the »normalization« of protest in Germany. On the one hand, the book is a cogently written and accessible textbook, introducing students of German history to important protest campaigns of the past seventy-five years. On the other hand, it is a clearly argued and provocative intervention into scholarly debates on protest's place in parliamentary democracy.

The book begins with a pair of chapters on the western zones of occupation during the late forties and the GDR during the early fifties. Gassert embeds the protests of this period in pre-war history, emphasizing their rootedness in longstanding labor movement traditions, as well as their links with Nazi nationalist mobilizations. Not only »forgotten« (p. 30) mass protests like the »Stuttgart Tumult« of October 1948, but also the well-known 17 June 1953 uprising in the GDR began when workers laid down their tools and organized orderly street marches – as they had done since the Wilhelmine era. Despite its rootedness in the past, the June 1953 uprising, which became unruly as it grew in size and scope, was unique in postwar history. Gassert classifies the uprising as an »attempted revolution« because unlike later protests in East or West, it »shook the system to its core« (p. 58), and was intended to overthrow the GDR's social and political order.

In chapter three, which focuses on 1950s West Germany, Gassert pivots away from the exceptional protests of the postwar years, and begins to build his argument about the »normalization« of protest in the FRG. He juxtaposes labor movement actions aligned with the »social movement« tradition« (p. 97) with »hooligans' riots« that brought rowdy youth onto the streets after movies and concerts. In the latter sort of protest, he finds an early example of the »link between youthful rebellion against social constraints, ›Americanized‹ consumption, and social modernization before the backdrop of pronounced generational conflict« that has shaped the »protest culture of the Federal Republic« (p. 97).

In emphasizing youthful rebellion and questions of consumption, rather than wages and working conditions, Gassert lays groundwork for his contention that contemporary protest – unlike historical labor activism – is an expressive medium, not a tool for effecting deep societal change; in contrast to their labor movement predecessors, Gassert contends, contemporary protesters have »limited their own creative will« (p. 212).

In the following three chapters, which deal with West Germany from the late sixties until reunification, Gassert presents cases – epitomized by 1980s peace protests – that he considers



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archetypal of the protest culture that has become normalized in the FRG. For Gassert, the extent to which peace protests addressed »the classic themes of the Federal Republic: peace, the Nazi past, integration into the West, the relationship to America and to the Third World« (p. 164), evidences these protests' place in the middle of society – and hence the normalization of protest as such. In fact, because he understands contemporary protest as a mirror of society or – as he puts it in his assessment of '68 – »more an indicator than a motor of change« (p. 130), Gassert is less interested in articulating which attributes characterize particular protests and how people make protests.

Nonetheless, Gassert does go to great lengths to contrast New Left and NSM protests, both of which he claims dealt with »quality of life issues« and »cultural questions« (p. 135–136), from concurrent labor protests. To this end, he claims that protest since the late sixties has been more »locally rooted« than labor protests, more critical of economic modernization, and more »expressive« with specialized, targeted goals (p. 135). This constellation of attributes underpins Gassert's larger contention that »the normalization of protest went hand-in-hand with its taming« (p. 162).

Of course, emphasizing »defanged« (p. 29) protest downplays the role of militant actors within the movements Gassert studies, and overlooks altogether a range of further protests – from the direct actions of the Autonomen to the armed insurgency of the Red Army Faction – which are left out of his narrative. Thus, while Gassert presents a clear and compelling argument about the normalization of a particular type of »collective street protest« (p. 26) that became widespread in West Germany after 1968, he does so without discussing the place or importance of other varieties of protest that persist in the FRG and remain unpalatable to many Germans.

The lengthy section on the FRG during the Cold War is followed up by a single chapter on the GDR. The East German state's »institutionalized protest culture« (p. 192) and Gassert's contention that conventional social movements are not possible in a state without a »free public sphere« (p. 192) lead him to think deeply about just what constituted protest in the GDR, and to emphasize the importance of studying the ways in which unconventional sorts of protests served as indicators of societal problems and drew responses from the authorities. This broad approach to »movement under socialism« (p. 187), therefore, suggests ways of rethinking protest in democratic societies – the book's primary focus – as well.

In the book's two final chapters, Gassert offers a »protest history of the present« (p. 209). Here, he continues to look at the big picture. For one thing, he frames protest since German reunification within discussions of post-cold War geopolitics and the effects of globalization. At the same time, he makes a strong case for integrating migrant mobilizations and Right Wing protests – subjects which are not often included in histories of protest – into the field of protest history. In keeping with his overall argument that a certain form of street protest has been normalized in the contemporary FRG, he reasons that PEGIDA and other recent



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Right Wing mobilizations have been successful because they learned from the mobilizations of the 1970s and 1980s and even appropriated their tactics.

»Bewegte Gesellschaft« is an innovative and valuable introduction to the subject of protest for students of postwar history precisely because it so successfully embeds protest in political and social history writ large – even if it focuses almost exclusively on a particular, tamed variety of street protest. Gassert's book also has much to offer experts in the subject: his bold central thesis and clearly elucidated supporting claims will provoke fruitful debate amongst scholars by drawing attention to questions about the characteristics, meaning, and societal role of protest in the FRG and beyond. In short, »Bewegte Gesellschaft« will appeal to a broad readership and influence the way protest is addressed in scholarship on postwar German history.



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