Consumption and Violence

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Sedlmaier, Alexander.
Consumption and Violence: Radical Protest in Cold-War West Germany.

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CHAPTER I

Department Stores: Political Protest in the Commercial Sphere

“Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production.”
—Adam Smith (1776)

The imaginative superelevation that Western-style consumption received in the context of the Cold War competition developed internal tensions and cracks as a result of one of its main driving forces: diversification. Youth movements played a crucial role in the emergence of alternatives that challenged the bipolar structure of Cold War consumption debates. The economy and the market reacted to the rebellious attitudes of young people, took them up according to their logic of commercialisation, and consequently helped their expression. This mechanism has been acknowledged as a factor causing the Halbstarkenkrawalle (yob riots) of the late 1950s. These disturbances and protests often crystallised around places or events of cultural consumption, such as cinemas or concert venues, and built on the appearance of nonconformist behaviour in the public sphere of shopping streets and market squares.

At the time, however, a critical attitude towards consumer society was still the domain of worried parents and educators. Emerging from a sceptical interpretation of commercialisation and its effects on the coming generation, they prescribed social commitment, critical thinking, and politicisation as antidotes. The public debate on youth was dominated by the idea of the manipulative powers of advertisement. This pedagogical variant of the West German Cold War mentality tended to merge three symptoms of the decline of modernity into “massification”: National Socialism, communism, and consumer society.

2. Lindner, Jugendprotest, 45. See also Grotum, Halbstarken.
3. Detlef Siegfried, “Vom Teenager zur Pop-Revolution: Politisierungstendenzen in der west-
Ultimately, the metamorphosis of this critical outlook into the identification of consumer society with imperialism and repression that gained currency amid the student revolts of the second half of the 1960s became an important turning point in the political history of the late twentieth century.

Marxists conventionally scorned political activity in the “sphere of reproduction” as a backwater of revolutionary activity. Nonetheless, political activity resulted from perceptions of change in the structures of the working world and from frustrated efforts to gain influence in the classical sphere of production. Beginning in the late 1960s, attempts to integrate both spheres with innovative means of protest flourished. In November 1970, Frankfurt activists began concentrating on the Opel plant at Rüsselsheim, seeking to rekindle the major strikes that had occurred at the Turin FIAT works in the autumn of 1969 and at the Paris Renault factory in May 1968. During this rather unsuccessful episode of factory agitation, the focus of the radical rebellion went far beyond strictly production-related issues. The entire mode of an “alienated” everyday life marked by deformed need satisfaction was attacked. Factory activists reproduced Adam Smith’s famous insight in their own way. An entry in a political “factory journal” by Reimut Reiche highlighted crucial differences in lifestyle that separated the activists from their desired clientele: “It is somehow preposterous to fulminate against all this work while most people have the motivation to work more without discussing the entire consumption shit that is so adequate to capital[ism]. Those who absolutely want a colour TV, a new car, or a bedroom will hardly be against overtime.”

Reiche, who had been federal chair of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS) in 1966–67, also expressed the considerable distance he felt from the lifestyles and consumer habits of the people he sought to agitate: “I really would have ended up at a psychiatric hospital if, on top of it, I had to share their way of life after working hours, at their pubs or at home, and had to feed off the grub that they feed off!”

The Dutch Provos had been pioneers of political campaigns with a focus on consumption. Seeing themselves as spearheads of a new society, they declared, “Our targets are consumer society and governmental order. We aim for


6. Quoted ibid., 43.
the unlimited autonomy of the individual. We are anarchists.” In 1968, a statement by the Provos was printed in a West Berlin underground almanac: “We live in a tasteless uniform society. . . . Our behaviour and consumption are dictated or forced upon us by capitalist or communist Big Bosses. But the Provos . . . want to be the creative leisure activists of tomorrow. Get rid of Philips, Seven up, Lexington, DAF, Persil, Prodent. The Provotariat abhors the enslaved consumer.” This focus on provoking violent responses from authorities using nonviolent bait, seeking to improve public transport, critiquing real estate speculation via squatting, and challenging newspaper coverage of protest events anticipated crucial aspects of the subsequent entanglement of critiques of regimes of provision and discourses on violence.

In a broader sense, the countless activists and protesters who responded to the structural transformations in production and distribution and to corresponding changes in social stratification affecting highly developed societies mark a turning point in a longer development: rapid economic growth since the mid-nineteenth century had at least theoretically furnished the means to solve the social question and to provide well-being for all. This highlighted the question of whether certain types of property and authority created injustices that prevented a more appropriate distribution and use of society’s riches, especially when this perspective was extended to questions of global distribution. Understanding the profound changes that took place in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, requires examining the contradictions and drawbacks brought about by the culmination of growth. Critical intellectuals, laid-off workers, and members of disadvantaged minorities questioned politicians’ promises of ubiquitous affluence and developed a consciousness of the discomforts of consumer society. The new material blessings came at a price. Increased levels of consumption and participation in consumer markets and the modest but comfortable property of the wage earners of postwar Western societies often went hand in hand with changes in the workplace requiring rather uncomfortable processes of adjustment, loss of autonomy, or destruction of established social structures. Despite the flood of consumer goods, the social distribution of property did not necessarily continue to widen; wealth and influence became concentrated among those dominating oligopolistic market structures.

This chapter does not provide an exhaustive history of the drawbacks of consumer society in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, it puts the focus on members of left-wing alternative milieus who discovered the realm of consumption.

as an object for social and political critique and as a spatial sphere for campaigns. The semipublic sphere of retail came to epitomise the capitalist system and eventually emerged as a target of militant protest, which culminated in incendiary attacks on department stores in the late 1960s. However, the significance of the department store as a target of militant protest cannot be understood without appreciating how avant-garde subculture came to wrestle with consumer society in the preceding decade. The subsequent focus on commumards and department store arsonists shows that they were integral to the merging of discourses on consumption and violence as well as that they were by no means the only ones embedding critiques of regimes of provision in their political thought and activism. This discussion establishes a foundation from which to explore the simultaneous development of philosophical critiques of regimes of provision, the further militarization of the campaign against consumer society, and, in the second part of this book, much broader political campaigns, such as those against fare increases and Springer’s tabloid journalism, that were closely linked with the highly publicised performative protest analysed in this chapter.

**Spur and Subversive Aktion**

The artist groups Spur and Subversive Aktion played a central role in establishing the commercial sphere as a prime focus of protest. Key members—such as future communard Dieter Kunzelmann and future student leader Rudi Dutschke—had personal experience with relative poverty. A photo of Dutschke’s student digs shortly after the erection of the Berlin Wall, when he had settled in West Berlin, shows only the most Spartan furnishings. His financial situation remained precarious throughout his life. Kunzelmann came from a well-to-do bourgeois background but practiced abstention from the blessings of affluence when spending some time as a clochard in Paris in 1959. He subsequently conceived of himself as a bohemian in the Schwabing quarter of Munich, where he was influenced by situationism, continuing surrealist traditions and urging the realisation of communism by revolutionising everyday life. In this context, the working class appeared to be in the bondage of consumption and embourgeoisement.10

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By 1961, a critique of consumer society clashed with the authority of the state. In their attempts to unmask the unholy role of consumption, the avant-garde collaboration Gruppe Spur—until February 1962 part of the Situationist International—became subject to judicial prosecution. Heimrad Prehm, Helmut Sturm, Hans Peter Zimmer, and Dieter Kunzelmann were accused of distributing blasphemy via their journal, which frequently included religious symbols in rather uninhibited social criticism. They were initially sentenced to five months in prison, but a higher court reduced the sentence to probation. Kunzelmann had referred to the realm of commerce when, for example, advertising that everyone who needed a myth would be sent a Virgin Mother to satisfy their sexual needs in exchange for “cash on delivery.” In the same contribution, he declared that “nonrevolutionaries were fed by the noncreativity of huge culture department stores; . . . the dragon of civilisation is vomiting seas of well-wrapped goods onto . . . the manipulated consumer,” thereby turning “revolutionary ideas into common coffeehouse babble.” 11 A manifesto was sent to the governments involved in the Geneva Disarmament Conference suggesting that “a public atomic bomb potlatch” be turned against the “cultural industry.” 12

After the group’s expulsion from the Situationist International, there was a brief sequel with the first and only issue of Der deutsche Gedanke (The German Thought). The journal printed a German translation of an article from Internationale Situationniste that argued that whenever old forms of opposition had been absorbed into the existing order, an irreducible dissatisfaction kept undermining affluent society like Marx’s “old mole.” This perspective sought to identify riots as indicators of dissatisfaction with consumer society. The unnamed author diagnosed a “first wave of vandalism against the machines of consumption” and likened it to Luddite machine breaking. Evidence for this argument was taken from contemporary protest events from France and Italy. In February 1961, Naples tram drivers had gone on strike. Angry workers who had no transportation home started to riot, and the protest escalated into fierce skirmishes with police and army units. Trams and buses were set alight, and shop windows and neon signs stoned. The situationist interpretation took such signs as consumer society’s “most symbolic and most fragile points,” and the

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rioting was seen to “extend to the whole consumer society.” The fact that Lorraine miners had destroyed some twenty-one cars during an August 1961 strike tempted the author to ask hopefully, “Who can fail to see in this action . . . a gesture of self-defence against the central object of consumer alienation?” The task was to revisit the history of anarchism and utopian socialism to establish the decisive “lifestyle criterion” that would save oppositional groups from degenerating into “dull propaganda societies.”

The Munich artist group Subversive Aktion built on these foundations and sought to make anonymous power structures visible in artistic happenings. They declared in one of their first programmatic statements that the historical project of reducing working hours had led to the impoverishment of everyday life: “It stabilises the acceptance of partial fulfilment. Through the creation of organised leisure people, the chance to even guess true need is completely deadened.” This statement referred to Guy Debord’s notion of a “colonisation of social life,” which played a central role in his main work, La Société du spectacle (1967). The mechanism of display (that is, media and advertisement) created illusions that misled people about the fact that they consumed only “a secondary imitation of real events.” Subversives Dieter Kunzelmann, Rodolphe Gasché, and Christopher Baldeney explicitly acknowledged Adorno and Marcuse as their intellectual inspirations. Most significant was probably the latter’s Eros and Civilization, which influenced the following sentences: “Contemporary society and its pressure to consume deprive man of the possibility to realise life in its exceptionality. . . . The creation of artificial needs and their satisfaction make true participation impossible.” The alternative was, “All products must be freely available to the individual.” This was a provocative communist ideal of consumption according to one’s needs.

Satirical critiques of existing regimes of provision became very important for the group’s subsequent statements. Members were keenly aware of the danger that avant-garde art would be absorbed by the “commodity character” of

industrialised societies: “The Parnassus of the arts is the showcase of the department store.”18 The group members contemplated various ways to disrupt the 1964 *documenta* at Kassel, where their former associates from Spur were exhibiting. A brainstorming session produced a list of thirty situationist provocations, including the distribution of forged admission tickets; letters to the editors of newspapers highlighting positions that saw art as a commodity or as absorbing utopian and revolutionary impulses; and design parodies of advertisements for breweries.19 In their artistic focus on the workings of affluent society, Subversive Aktion increasingly added the dimension of violence. The term *terror* found its way into Subversive Aktion pamphlets in December 1963, when “Repressive Aktion” addressed “the terror of industrial society.” The activists identified the creed that “anyone who does not work shall not eat” as the backbone of this terror.20 The conditioning of a right to exist on the economic use of commodified labour pervaded the fabric of everyday life, reducing “man to just work and consumption.”21 When transposing these ideas of a complete economisation of human life to contemporary society, the immediate target was advertisement. Consumerism (Konsumdenken) as a quasi-religion had completely annihilated (ausgemerzt) any consciousness of a nonmonetary distribution of goods.22 Subsequently, the focus rested on luxury needs by introducing a critique of tourism under the label “Costa-Brava-Komplex,” a critique of the marketing of intellectual needs and production, and a critique of the repression of sexuality. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, a Subversive Aktion flyer declared that the death of the American president would be followed by “an even more total identification with the apparatus: I will work even more and consume even more assiduously.”23

In January 1964, Kunzelmann anticipated later developments and put the emphasis on the legal court as a public stage: “We will provoke monster trials to publicise all our ideas. We will . . . raid a department store, take all goods and distribute them in the street.”24 The revolutionary impetus toward “total subversion” was tied up with expectations of a quasi-totalitarian future of consumerism: “We are awaiting . . . legal pressure to consume, . . . manipulation . . .

18. “Unverbindliche Richtlinien 2” (December 1963), in ibid.
21. Ibid., 107.
22. Ibid., 102.
23. “Auch Du hast Kennedy erschossen!” (December 1963), in ibid., 127.
24. Dieter Kunzelmann to Frank Böckelmann, 4 January 1964, in ibid., 129.
ing the 16 hours of ‘leisure time,’ and the . . . liquidation of the private sphere.” 25 However, a revolutionary class appeared to be a mere chimaera: while the social legislation of the nineteenth century had eliminated the revolutionary impetus of the classical workers’ movement, the analogous mechanism of the twentieth century seemed to be “reservations of the pleasure principle.” Drawing on Marcuse’s Marxist interpretation of psychoanalysis, the subversives suspected that the reasons for the failures of past revolutions lay in psychological mechanisms. 26

The Munich section of Subversive Aktion subscribed to a rather generalising philosophy of the commodity: all commodities were abstract, exchangeable, and products of alienation; everything had been reduced to exchange value, commodity, or capital; and this had led to the supreme rule of the achievement principle (Leistungsprinzip). There was no attempt whatsoever to differentiate between what might be desirable commodification or consumption and specific regimes of provision that invited criticism. Curiously, the subversives seem to have taken the penetrating power of advertisement as proof of the “rudiments” of real needs. 27 The revolutionary subject was thus the recipient of advertisement—that is, potentially everyone. One wonders whether this meant that the revolution had to be fought via advertisements.

Subversive Aktion delivered its somewhat exaggerated Marcusian message at the May 1964 meeting of the Union of German Advertising Managers and Consultants, showering the delegates with flyers that depicted advertisers as “preachers of oppression” who stuffed people with products so that they were no longer conscious of their true needs. By making “consumption and work identical,” advertising veiled “the possibility of a world without work” and enthroned “the lie ‘consumo, ergo sum’.” 28 The agitators were interrogated by the Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) but were found not guilty in court. 29

Bernd Rabehl, another member of Subversive Aktion who later became famous in the SDS, went a step further in amalgamating notions of the continuity between colonialism, National Socialism, and West German consumer society. In an article published in the first issue of Subversive Aktion’s journal,

25. “Konklusionen” (early April 1964), in ibid., 133.
27. Frank Böckelmann to Streffen Schulze, 17 August 1964, in Subversive Aktion, ed. Böckelmann and Nagel, 164, 166.
29. Cf. ibid., 146; Nilpferd des höllischen Urwalds, ed. Dressen, Kunzelmann, and Siepmann, 161; Enzensberger, Jahre der Kommune I, 23.
Anschlag, in August 1964, Rabehl maintained that Cold War imperialism had found a substitute for direct expansion: “It now finds its profit in the planned consumer.” Rabehl drew almost a caricature of the “manipulated, senseless human being who has to follow exactly the commands of industry.” Drilled by advertisement, consumers worked to satisfy their addiction: “This consumer behaviour is the new ideology of society.” Consumer society even appeared as a new form of Volksgemeinschaft (national community), with “assiduous work and diligent consuming” superseding “blood and soil”: “Today it is no longer the same race that is supposed to perform the proud bond with the powerful, but the same consumer ideal.” Rabehl criticised the Social Democrats’ attempts to “sell politics as a commodity” and their ceasing to be an oppositional party. His rather crude and hermetic attempt to navigate German history between Helmut Schelsky’s “levelled middle-class society” and Marcusian manipulation culminated in the coinage of the drastic term Konsumfaschismus. The old theory of “social fascism”—a political creed originating in the late 1920s arguing that social democracy, with its corporatist economic model, was a variant of fascism—had acquired a new interpretation.

Kunzelmann contributed an article to the same issue of Anschlag that focused on the commodification of sexuality: “Sexuality in a consumer society is doubly degenerate: its repression is to the benefit of society in such a way that sublimated libido becomes labour power for production, and all consumer goods are symbolically charged with sexuality,” so that what is beyond price—“lived life”—is exchanged for commodities. Contemporary society’s apparent permissiveness only veiled the mechanism of reified sexuality. The argument was again rather rigorous: the freedom of consumer society was “the total suppression of everything human”; all sexuality was experienced as “economic exchange”; and work and consumption were just vicarious satisfaction (Ersatzbefriedigung). The strategy of allowing sexuality to become a consumer good and thus controlling it seemed even more efficient than the continued suppression that the East German rulers were pursuing. The same author discovered hitchhiking as a social form that still resisted total commodification—a reminder of the possibility of a different life beyond work and consumption. Kunzelmann castigated the authorities’ campaigns against hitchhiking, which sought to criminalise the hitchhiker:

31. Ibid., 176.
32. Ibid., 178. “Consumer society as perfectly internalised Fascist order” had already featured briefly in “Parallelen” (December 1963), in ibid., 110.
“Nothing is allowed to be free of charge!” Historically, he put this practice in line with the suppression of vagabonds, highwaymen, tramps, and Gipsies; he mentioned concentration camps in this context.34

At a September 1964 meeting, Kunzelmann, Dutschke, and their comrades agreed on a programme that would address all areas of society to abolish “the regime of the achievement principle [Leistungsprinzip], which is particularly manifest in the ‘contaminated psyche’ of people living in a consumer society.”35 Moreover, they decided to take this programme into the SDS, which they joined. They picked the eightieth German Catholic Convention in Stuttgart to transmit their subversive messages. Kunzelmann suggested a faked announcement that a service would take place at a department store.36 Another scenario that was contemplated had the agitators mounting a huge Mercedes star on an altar.37 A flyer that was distributed declared, “Since the true gods of this society are commodity and consumption, the Good Lord of the old days—if he wants to survive and prevent schizophrenia among the believers—has to arrange himself with the fetishes and become a sublime fetish of performance [Leistungsfetisch]. He does survive: as the absolute boom which blesses production and protects its managed sheep from demonic communism.” Four activists were arrested on “suspicion of blasphemy” when they were caught gluing posters on church doors and windows.38

The second issue of Anschlag, with a Marcuse quote about the possibility of liberation for its motto, shows that Subversive Aktion was attempting a substantial analysis of consumer society. Frank Böckelmann dedicated a long article to the phenomenon of youth riots. It departs from the basic assumption that “youth is a commodity” and that impressionable and developing young adults were ideally suited to adapt to the accelerated cycle of production and consumption. However, this exposed position also predestined youth to be sensitive indicators of the discomforts of “saturated society.” Turning against the conventional interpretation that sees surfeit at the root of youthful rebellion, Böckelmann argued that frustration resulted from the denial of self-realisation: “We do not have too much. We have nothing.” In the youth riots that kept occurring throughout the developed world, he saw damage to property but no “senseless rage.” The almost ritual course of such events betrayed a search for meaning. As was the case during the Schwabing riots, violence erupted only

34. Dieter Kunzelmann, “Tramper aller Länder . . . .,” in ibid., 189–90.
36. Dieter Kunzelmann to Frank Böckelmann, 22 August 1964, in ibid., 211.
37. Dieter Kunzelmann to Frank Böckelmann, 27 August 1964, in ibid., 212.
38. “Botschaft an die Lämmer des Herrn zum Katholikentag” (September 1964), in ibid., 213.
when police intervened.39 These riots, which took place in Munich’s bohemian quarter in June 1962, were the immediate backdrop for such reflections. Major disturbances were triggered by a group of street musicians playing at a late hour. After police tried to arrest the musicians, the situation escalated into four days of street fighting involving up to forty thousand protesters. Nearly two hundred “troublemakers” were arrested, among them nineteen-year-old Andreas Baader. Sixty-eight were sentenced to either fines or short prison sentences, while the one hundred forty complaints against police officers resulted in a single conviction.40 However, Böckelmann’s perspective was broader. He thought that the destructiveness of American gangs was also “a reflection of the economic and political terror of the world powers.” Quoting sociologist Ludwig von Friedeburg, Böckelmann saw theft among youth as “an illegal answer to pressure to consume.” It all boiled down to disenchantment with the lack of happiness behind the plethora of goods and social institutions that society offered young people. The riots sprang from a desire for “spontaneous community” that turned the street into a place of immediate and boundless communication that did not fit with the socioeconomic role that “the system” attributed to youth. Manipulation via propaganda, fabrication of opinion, and advertisement worked only when “facing standardised objects . . . brought down to a common reified denominator.” The subversive activist revelled in the memory of the Schwabinger Krawalle, which seemed to have escaped this trap: “The flooding of the streets with people . . . , the irrational breakthrough from prescribed leisure behaviour . . . created in all parties involved a strange and defiant feeling of somehow being in the right.”41

At Christmas 1964, Subversive Aktion involved customers in Munich department stores in provocative discussions and distributed leaflets in which customers could read, “And ‘love’ gave birth to products, packaged them in false dreams, and put them in shop windows so that people could no longer see their real wishes.”42 At the group’s April 1965 meeting, a formidable catalogue of questions focused on the analysis of consumer society: “Which modified psychological functions does consumption gain in an age in which it is the primary influence on life? In which form and intensity is the . . . compulsion to consume reflected in the individual? . . . What is the meaning of ‘luxury’ and ‘convenience’? . . . What will supersede the ideology of the ‘struggle for exis-

40. See Fürmetz, “Schwabinger Krawalle.”
42. “Weihnachtsevangelium,” in ibid., 286.
tence,’ which is losing its last objective foundations? What is the meaning of ‘need,’ ‘affliction,’ and ‘destiny’ in a time of a total (‘false’) conquest of nature? . . . Which social and psychological potentials of conflict exist in affluent/consumer society, and what mechanisms of absorbing them are available?” The ambitious idea was to investigate the changed relationship between production and consumption, the “dwindling of difference” between these two spheres, “and the reflection of this new relation in consciousness” for the periods of “feudalism and . . . early and late capitalism.”

It is doubtful whether this sweeping analysis was ever realised, but the programme shows the centrality of the topic of affluence to the intellectual and political activities of Subversive Aktion. With the expulsion of Kunzelmann in April 1965, and with the dissociation of Dutschke and Rabehl from the Berlin branch a month later, the topic of consumption—and the group’s dynamism—waned. However, the three renegades took important impulses to their future activities in Berlin.

Go-Ins at Department Stores

In 1966—similar to two years earlier in Munich—the Kurfürstendamm became the scene of “go-ins” in department stores on a pre-Christmas Saturday with extended opening hours. Participants in walking demonstrations on crowded shopping streets camouflaged anti-Vietnam War leaflets in gift-wrapped boxes. This was in response to the authorities banning student demonstrations from the city centre. Eighty-six people, including Dutschke, were arrested. Police were so baffled by this innovative form of protest that they beat and arrested a number of ordinary Christmas shoppers. Members of Kommune I received a sentence of fifty deutsche marks or five days in prison for “obstructing very heavy pedestrian and motorised traffic.”

When Dutschke famously called for the creation of a “countermilieu” (Gegenmilieu) as a “germ of a new society” (in a text mainly on revolution in Latin America), the realm of consumption and more specifically department stores appeared as focal points of political agitation. The target group consisted of the employees whom Dutschke and his coauthors tried to subsume under the

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43. Ibid., 334–35.
44. See ibid., 300–301, 333–34.
rubric “sales producers” (Verkaufsproduzenten). In August 1967, Dutschke and the SDS had intervened in a conflict between several department stores and the union Handel, Banken, und Versicherungen (Trade, Banking and Insurance) over a law allowing for an extension of store hours. Employees were reluctant to work as late as nine o’clock at night on Saturdays. Dutschke made much of the sit-in demonstrations in department stores, which he considered to be a “form of late-capitalist guerrilla praxis.” The revolutionary tactics were rather simple: “We entered the department stores en masse, distributed flyers, more or less obstructed the normal sales rhythm, and encountered a lot of sympathy on the part of the sales producers. The management was forced to temporarily cease profit maximisation.” Berlin’s most prestigious department store, KaDeWe, had indeed chosen to close early because sit-in discussion groups had been established on all floors. Foreshadowing later events, some of the protesters apparently lit cigarettes inside the KaDeWe. At another department store, a bomb threat was made. The chair of West Berlin’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Karl-Heinz Schmitz, stated, “Enough of the storm troops of extraparliamentary activism.” His party pressed for legal charges against lawyer Horst Mahler, who had been present at KaDeWe. Cold War–minded public opinion tended to identify the actions of the student movement with those of the socialist rulers in the capital of East Germany. However, Dutschke and his coauthors celebrated the event as a success, an example of “a tactical victory” by a “radical small minority” over the “superior forces of the state apparatus.”

By 1968 such forms of protest were thoroughly established. In West Berlin, the shopping areas around Wittenbergplatz with the KaDeWe (the largest department store in Continental Europe), Tauentzienstraße and Kurfürstendamm, served astonishingly regularly as central locations for protest meetings. The main reason for this concentration can be seen in the politics of media attention, as protesters sought to challenge society at its most valuable places. Retail

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47. Cf. Enzensberger, Jahre der Kommune I, 205.
was a growth sector in West Germany, with volume increasing continuously: 5.9 percent in 1966, only 0.4 percent in 1967 as a consequence of the recession, but recovering to 4.8 percent in 1968. Growth was even more pronounced in the department store business: 8.8 percent in 1966, 2.8 percent in 1967, and 10.3 percent in 1968. Germany’s largest department store company increased its sales by 12 percent in 1967, achieving an annual turnover of 3.3 billion deutsche marks. Sales among the largest three companies—Karstadt, Kaufhof, and Helmut Horten—amounted to 8.1 billion deutsche marks in March 1968, when twelve new department stores were under construction throughout Germany; many more expanded their sales. A process of concentration favoured the big companies vis-à-vis their small-scale competitors: while the overall retail trading volume of 1967 showed an increase of 175 percent compared to 1954, Karstadt realised an increase of 432 percent in the same period. This success story now became the focus of protest. The chair of West Berlin’s Association of Merchants and Industrialists, Heinz Mohr, lamented that “the disturbers of the peace [Ruhestörer] were not in the least active in the districts with a predominant population of workers, where the wrath of the people would soon put an end to their criminal trade. The disturbers of the peace rather go to the districts where their aim to gain attention from the mass media can be met more effectively.” In the eyes of this captain of industry, the institutions of parliamentary democracy and their executive organs lacked the unrelenting rigour he attributed to the man in the street. He saw the task of securing what he called freedom and law and order—that is, protecting commerce from riots and deflecting any damage to West Berlin’s image as a place of industry—as merely a police matter.

That police did not always find it easy to fulfill such hopes for clean and quick removals of protestors was true beyond Berlin: a London commune staged a Christmas 1969 protest at a department store that generated press and police action. According to a radical Berlin newspaper, “The department stores hire people dressed up as Father Christmas who give presents to the children, which in reality have to be paid for by the parents, fooling the child with the

mystical character of the object. We thus assembled a group, 10 people dressed up as Father Christmas. . . . And they then cleared out the toys and gave them to the children. After 10 minutes, Selfridges had to call the police, and the press was shooting pictures of policemen taking the presents from the children and putting them back on the shelves. Things like this are fun in the first place, and second, they communicate a very simple message: take what you need.”57 In May 1968, students in Paris also focused on the sphere of consumption when they occupied the Censier Annexe of the Sorbonne. They distributed flyers and pamphlets in shops and cafés, calling on people to squat in empty flats, and asked the employees of the department stores Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville and Belle Jardinière to pass out food to strikers.58

Matters of consumption were usually not the main focus of debates, articles, flyers, or protest campaigns. However, such matters were important and were often seen in connection with other areas of concern. In Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s seminal October 1967 interview with SDS members Dutschke, Rabehl, and Christian Semler, the topic of consumption was not the main subject, but Enzensberger argued that consumption as a means of appeasement would not work forever. It was no coincidence that this approach had worked smoothly for twenty years but was now beginning to change. Rabehl pointed out that the ideology of security would vanish since people desired fulfilment over security. Dutschke then brought up “militant needs” that would turn against the “military complex,” and the conversation moved on to Vietnam and the politics of protest and resistance.59

Kommune I

Although Dutschke never moved into a commune and eventually distanced himself from an excessive focus on questions of lifestyle, he played an important role in developing the concept of small communes as seedbeds of the revolutionary countermilieu. Kunzelmann reports that a strategy meeting conducted in the Bavarian village of Kochel in June 1966 discussed the commune in the context of Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* and Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.60 Kunzelmann based the idea of a commune on a rather literal
reading of a right to resist according to natural law, which Marcuse unfolded at the very end of “Repressive Tolerance.”

Kommune I was established in a shared flat in January 1967 and ostentatiously turned away from the values and lifestyle of the bourgeois and Cold War–minded older generations. In the promotion of the commune—a form of living free from parents’ or landlords’ influence on its furnishings—the notion of a self-determined lifestyle and thus style of consumption played an important role. The idea was to abolish private property within the group and thus create a counterconcept overcoming the eschatological promises of classical Marxism in favour of living a communist life in the here and now. Moreover, the commune movement was clearly inspired by its romantic visions of the Maoist people’s communes and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The armed Red Guards banned a number of traditional products because of their religious connotation as well as consumer items with Western names or connections, such as woollen clothing, whiskey, cosmetics, jewellery, high-heeled shoes, mechanical toys, playing cards, and taxis. A long article in Der Spiegel reported on the Red Guards’ repertoire of disruptive protest in November 1966, describing in detail how they valued “Mao quotes over neon signs.” Despite the brutal aspects of the Red Guards’ conduct and a regime of terror, the successes of modernisation policy were highlighted: “For the first time in human memory, all Chinese have a roof over their heads and clothes to wear.” The article described how members of the people’s communes had to yield all “private property down to the cooking pot to the common property of the commune. In return, everything was free: food, clothing, the doctor, and the hairdresser.” In 1969, writer Peter Schneider arrived at a more abstract notion of the cultural revolution, which would abandon all relations where “the human being has become a commodity and the commodity has become the subject.” This still had very tangible consequences, as when Schneider questioned whether personal ownership of cars was still tolerable and suggested tearing down “fascist tenement blocks” and replacing them with “houses that are there to serve not the needs of renting out but the needs of being lived in.”

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Kommune I pursued the semiprofessional pirating of books and carried on a flourishing mail-order trade in Mao Bibles, their own writings, texts by Wilhelm Reich, Horkheimer, and others as well as revolutionary stickers and badges. There were enthusiastic customers but also frequent complaints regarding issues of money. This went hand in hand with regular shoplifting, conceived as a practical demonstration against private property. One of Kommune I’s several compilations of writings and documents from their lawsuits was entitled Klau mich (Steal Me). With a grabbing hand printed on the cover, it predated Abbie Hoffman’s Steal This Book. Fritz Teufel as well as two other members of Kommune I were sentenced to a penalty, paid from the communal budget, after being caught stealing in a supermarket. He declared that he had committed theft not because of need but out of political conviction. On the occasion of the 1967 Easter March campaign for disarmament, a leaflet authored by members of Kommune I questioned whether protest against the Bomb could avoid addressing the question of property by dodging fares, shoplifting, and dining and dashing: “Whoever doesn’t dispossess the petty bourgeois remains one himself.” West Berlin’s minister of the interior pressed criminal charges against the unknown authors of the leaflet. Meanwhile, the communards discussed how their radical ideas could be put into practice. Looting a grocery shop was suggested.

What they chose proved to be more spectacular. The plan was to attack U.S. vice president Hubert H. Humphrey, who was visiting West Berlin, with red smoke bombs, staging a Provo happening after his convoy of cars had come to a halt. The plan was foiled when members of the secret police had the conspirators arrested after observing their acquisition of potentially explosive chemicals. In the absence of conclusive evidence of real explosives, however, the communards created the impression that they were harmless pranksters. In the ensuing media hype, the flour and sugar that police found among the chemicals turned into pudding and custard pie, and the event went down as the Puddingattentat (Pudding Assassination). Ulrike Meinhof, at the time the editor of

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65. See Olenhusen and Gnrß, Handbuch der Raubdrucke.
66. One of many similar letters, see Mainzer Studentenzeitung to Kommune I, 24 September 1967, AHIS, Correspondence of Kommune I (130,01). See also Kunzelmann, Leisten sie keinen Widerstand, 54–56.
67. Ibid., 60–62.
68. Langhans and Teufel, Klau mich. See Hoffman, Steal This Book.
the political magazine *konkret*, criticised the communards for talking about themselves rather than “turning the sensation they caused to Vietnam . . . , with the truth on Vietnam, with facts, numbers and politics.” However, she did sympathise with the underlying message: “Not the destruction of vital harvests meaning death and starvation for millions, but protest against these acts, is criminal . . . . It is considered impolite to aim pudding and curd at politicians, but not to roll out the red carpet for politicians who have villages wiped out and cities bombarded. . . . Napalm yes, pudding no.”72 If only in the imagination of the journalists, everyday commodities lent themselves to raising awareness of the hardship and misery that war caused in a far corner of the world.

**The Department Store Leaflets**

After the Puddingattentat, the antiestablishment figures of Kommune I increasingly became the focus of media attention. They held regular meetings for media work, in which newspaper clippings and the reactions of “the system” to their actions were considered. During one such session in May 1967, they focused on a series of news reports on an accidental fire in Belgium’s largest department store, À l’Innovation, in Brussels, leaving more than three hundred people dead and several hundred injured.73 A provocative fascination with arson had germinated in radically minded intellectual circles. A rebellious attitude sought to instigate acts of protest against the symbols of consumer society, which were combined with imperialism and global as well as local oppression. This was part of a transatlantic emergence of critiques of regimes of provision that became coupled with anti–Vietnam War protest. This cocktail of influences became manifest in a series of flyers Kommune I created on the occasion of the Brussels fire disaster; the flyers were investigated by the courts and widely publicised.74 The Brussels fire eventually inspired arson attacks on department stores in Frankfurt and Berlin.

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The media suggested that the Brussels fire might have been the result of arson by protesters against a special campaign selling American products. Apparently Belgian police had found some “anti-American leaflets” by a Maoist group criticising the sales exhibition. The Springer tabloid Bild reported that anonymous letters had threatened department store arson. Bild quoted from the confiscated “communist” leaflets: “The Anti-Imperialists will not stop until they have cleared the country and the department store L’Innovation from the flag that has become a symbol of aggression and outrage.” A Belgian public prosecutor denied these rumours, but not until a week after the fire and thus a week after the leaflets appeared.

Taking these cues, Kommune I cynically drew a comparison with the napalm bombardments in Vietnam: “With a new gimmick in the varied history of American advertising methods, American sales weeks were opened in Brussels: . . . [T]he inhabitants of the Belgian metropolis were met with an exceptional spectacle: a burning department store with burning people, for the first time conveying this crackling Vietnam feeling (to be there and to burn along) in a European city.” Under the heading “Why Do You Burn, Consumer?” this leaflet shows a characteristic amalgamation of various levels of political violence, invoking the Vietnam War, Hiroshima, the shah’s regime in Iran, the Berlin Wall, barbed wire, and the Iron Curtain and coupling those images with Coca-Cola and the so-called German economic miracle. Despite the pointed cynicism and biting irony that characterised this document, there are also references to the “human tragedy” in Brussels. The communards sought to unmask the rhetoric of affluence as a crucial resource of legitimisation in the American war effort. They were disgusted at how much more public sympathy the victims of a department store fire received than the victims of war in Vietnam.

Another example of Kommune I’s particular relationship to advertising and commerce appeared in a convergence of advertising slogans and criticism of the Vietnam War: “The day is ending, time for Jonny [sic] Walker. / An
American soldier killed in Vietnam costs the USA 12 million DM. / A dead Vietcong costs 1.6 million. / Because being particular in one’s tastes always costs a bit more.”

Another Kommune I leaflet was even more outspoken: “When will the Berlin department stores burn? . . . Starting today, he goes to the clothing departments of KaDeWe, Hertie, Woolworth, Bilka, or Neckermann and discreetly lights a cigarette in the fitting room.” A future escalation of violence was anticipated: “When barracks blow up somewhere, when somewhere in a stadium the stands collapse, please don’t be surprised.” The final words betray the rebellious students’ limited knowledge of English: “Burn ware-house, burn!” This adapted the rallying cry of African American protesters during the “ghetto riots” from Watts to Detroit in stilted English.

Ex-situationist Kunzelmann and his fellow communards may have drawn on Debord’s interpretation of the August 1965 riots in the Watts neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Debord saw the events in Watts in accordance with his theory of the spectacle, transforming issues of race into issues of consumption: “The Los Angeles rebellion was a rebellion . . . against the world of the commodity in which worker-consumers are hierarchically subordinated to commodity standards.” He saw the lootings by the black protesters as attempts to break the spectacle of commodities to which they had been subjected all their lives yet denied access. The essay was distributed as a pamphlet whose front cover featured a photo of a burning department store in Watts. However, transatlantic influences motivating protest in the sphere of consumption should not be overestimated. The German translation of sections from an influential American civil rights pamphlet omitted the passages on consumer boycott and selective buying.

In many ways, the leaflets offered a cynical commentary on the coverage of the Brussels fire disaster in the Springer press. Teufel declared in court that he had been disgusted by the detail and compassion of press coverage of the disaster.

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80. Kommune I leaflet, n.d., AHIS, Korrespondenz der Kommune I, 130,01. The final sentence is a verbatim quote of the 1966 advertising slogan for the cigarette brand Atika. The poem also included slogans for the cigarette brand HB and the fast food chain Wienerwald. See also Kommune I, “Revolution in rosé Revolution in rot,” in Enzensberger, Jahre der Kommune I, 142.


82. See Wilfried Mausbach, “‘Burn, Ware-House, Burn!’: Modernity, Counterculture, and the Vietnam War in Germany,” in Between Marx and Coca-Cola, ed. Schildt and Siegfried, 175; Reavis, Burn, Baby, Burn. The German word for department store is Warenhaus.


Brussels disaster while reporting on the Vietnam War tended to downplay the conflict, depicting it as a misfortune. Ulrich Enzensberger points out retrospectively that the victims of Brussels had been used for scaremongering propaganda, insinuating that left-wing protesters were to blame. However, it seems likely that such allegations did not originate with Springer but had already been spread in Belgium. Enzensberger also highlights that Bild printed information calling the arson allegation into question on the following day, but only in a tiny notice on the final page where it was reported that a member of the implicated Maoists had stated, “We have nothing to do with the fire. We distributed leaflets, but we do not throw bombs.” (For more on the radical left’s criticism of Springer’s journalism, see chapter 5.) On this occasion, the Springer tabloid BZ wrote that the Kommune I leaflets were “peppered with obscenities that would in all likelihood get you thrown out even of a brothel. . . . Whoever glorifies this catastrophe, which can possibly be traced back to arson by left-wing extremists, and praises it as a model for emulation belongs behind bars.”

When legal proceedings were opened against the authors of the leaflets, BZ went a step further and imagined a transnational terrorist network. Under the subheading “Disgusting,” it alleged that Kommune I enjoyed “direct connections with Brussels terrorists” because of the detailed descriptions the communards had given of the “preparations for the arson attack.”

In reality, members of Kommune I were accused of incitement to arson. Illustrating his case, the chief public prosecutor stated in his indictment that on the occasion of the shah of Iran’s state visit, Kommune I had desired the confrontations with the police during which Benno Ohnesorg was shot: “This development shows that intellectual and ideological debate has degenerated into intolerance and terror.” He also highlighted the fact that the communards had considered supporting themselves by “appropriating vacant houses, theft, and looting.” During the demonstration against the shah, Teufel had been arrested.

88. “400 Tote—für sie ein Happening,” BZ, 26 May 1967, http://www.medienarchiv68.de/dl/192970/438.jpg.pdf (accessed 14 February 2011). See Kellerhoff, “1968 und die Medien,” 94–98. Kellerhoff’s account of the leaflets is exclusively based on Enzensberger, *Jahre der Kommune I*. He concludes that the Springer press coverage of the events in Brussels was “sound journalistic workmanship” because it attributed allegations of arson to specific sources, while the leaflets were “tasteless” and “scandalous.” Kellerhoff has been working for the Axel Springer Verlag since 1998.
Consumption and Violence

and charged with throwing a stone. He spent seventy days in pretrial custody, during which time he started a hunger strike. At the same time, police officer Karl-Heinz Kurras, who had shot the unarmed Ohnesorg, went free, claiming self-defence. When Teufel’s lawyer, Mahler, had his client’s remand in custody reviewed, his release was rejected on the grounds that he might flee given his loose living conditions that did not tie him to any possessions. The public prosecutor explained the case with reference to the ten thousand deutsche marks he had invested in his own furnishings. Teufel was eventually acquitted of the charges. When being questioned by the presiding judge of the leaflet trial, he declared that the leaflets protested not only the Vietnam War but also “saturation and complacency.” Mahler used the apparent influence of Marcuse’s thought—that is, a serious academic inspiration—in a failed attempt to fend off a forensic psychiatric and neurological examination of the defendants. In their annotated documentation of the legal proceedings, the communards highlighted the fact that countless anonymous commentators and passers-by invoked the gas chambers in response to their provocations.

The members of Kommune I took both trials as further opportunities to pursue their satirical assault on the authorities. One leaflet, “Have a Nice Trial—Incite to Arson!,” ironically stated that since their initial call had not yet generated any real fires, it was now time to appeal to the masses. Mocking West Berlin’s Cold War city marketing, the communards wrote, “Berlin must become a world city again by adopting the extraordinary success of the Belgian Vietnam protesters.” The lower part of the leaflet provided a form that like-minded people could detach to declare that they, too, were inciting to arson. This used a legal clause adopted from their own indictment to which they added that matches or a petrol-infused cloth would do the job. Then came a multiple-choice section in which people could select from a list of targets, including the high-rise headquarters of Springer publishing and a department store to which the specific name had to be added. Further leaflets called on people to buy Hong Kong–made water pistols at KaDeWe or bubble blowers at Woolworth and to use these items to disrupt court proceedings: “The globular shape and the gentle bang which these exquisite bubbles create when bursting

91. Kommune I, Gesammelte Werke, 47.
will be reminiscent of the globular bombs of *exquisite* anarchists.”\(^96\) Despite these and other provocations made during the court proceedings, which earned the defendants several days of arrest for contempt of court, the judicial enquiry ended with an acquittal. The criminal division concluded that the leaflets constituted incitement to arson, but the judges were unable to prove conclusively that the defendants actually desired an implementation.\(^97\)

The defence had thus had only partial success in claiming freedom of artistic expression based on expert opinion by renowned philologists.\(^98\) Quoting André Breton, Raymond Queneau, and Sören Kierkegaard, Jacob Taubes, a professor of Jewish studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, highlighted parallels between the leaflets and various texts by the Parisian surrealists. Ultimately, the leaflets appeared to be an act of literary provocation in the spirit of “Baudelaire’s *épater le bourgeois.*”\(^99\) Eberhard Lämmert, a professor of German studies, pointed out that the leaflets were clearly imitating the language of “the press and advertising propaganda.”\(^100\) His colleague, Peter Wapnewski, stressed “absurdity” as a leitmotif of the leaflets and thought that they intended to show that it was “inhuman to bemoan the victims of the Brussels department store fire while simultaneously ignoring the victims of the war in Vietnam.”\(^101\) In his view, the texts, “while offending our feelings of tact and style,” sought “to prevent, or prohibit, the burning of people.”\(^102\)

A number of other expert opinion statements were ultimately not consulted at court. Literary scholar Peter Szondi remained ambivalent as he called attention to the fact that the idea of left-wing radicals setting fire to a department store had originally been conceived not by the communards but by journalists reporting on such rumours in Belgium. At the same time, he argued that one leaflet was an entirely fictitious newspaper article based on invented sources and evidence.\(^103\) In another passage, he paraphrased the anticapitalist content of Kommune I’s media critique by arguing that the leaflets “implicitly accused the USA of pursuing their war efforts as a consequence of the needs of

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100. Lämmert, “Brandstiftung durch Flugblätter?,” 323.
102. Ibid., 342.
their industry” by depicting the U.S. government as a company with a new advertising idea. A prominent jurist and former president of the Higher Regional Court Stuttgart, Richard Schmid, pointed to an article by New Yorker journalist Jacob Brackman in which an imaginary opponent of the Vietnam War fantasised about defoliating Central Park and burning down Rockefeller Center without anyone being as “dull-witted as to take this for incitement to arson.”

Literary critic Karl Heinz Bohrer thought that “surrealist cynicism terrorised the nerves of the morally approachable.” Günter Grass diagnosed a “pubescent . . . quixotic anarchism,” placing the leaflets in the tradition of Georg Büchner’s Der Hessische Landbote (1834), though less profound. Moreover, Grass thought that advertising language, the language of the Springer tabloid BZ, and the language of the commune “equally showed fascist symptoms.” He seemed to miss the idea that the leaflets intentionally mimicked the characteristic style of advertisements and tabloid journalism. More to the point was his observation that the leaflets betrayed a “vulgar” understanding of Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man.

Hans Werner Richter, a writer and founder of the renowned literary association Gruppe 47, refused to contribute expert opinion, branding the leaflets as merely “acting out an anarchist revolutionary romanticism.” The communards only played at revolution and “discredited all revolutionary endeavours . . . playing into the hands of the reaction.” Theodor Adorno’s refusal was less wordy. As a consequence, he got involved in a brawl with protesting students while lecturing at the Freie Universität Berlin.

Kommune II, another flat-sharing community with more of a focus on psychology and revolutionary rigour, criticised the defence strategy of portraying the leaflets as mere satire and insinuated that true revolutionaries had to go beyond just talking about fire: “We suspect . . . that the recent capitalist hype, interviews, photos, brochures, etc. has spoilt you. Has money turned you into prostitutes? Do you again intend to grind your fag in front of the department store like the bourgeois brakemen?” Kommune II, including future Red Army Faction (RAF) member Jan-Carl Raspe, were in some respects ideologi-
cally more rigorous than their famous counterparts. Like them, the members of Kommune II opted for a “communal economy” with all private incomes going into a fund for communal use. The planning of consumption was also a matter of collective deliberation.111

Department Store Arson in Frankfurt

A few days after the leaflet trial, three future department store arsonists visited Kommune I. Gerd Koenen argues that the younger Andreas Baader wanted to challenge the intellectual leader of the commune, Kunzelmann, when acting out the provocative fantasy.112 Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and two friends, Thorwald Proll and Horst Söhnlein, travelled to Frankfurt. The next day, Ensslin and Baader went to a department store, playfully tried out a few folding chairs, and put homemade incendiary bombs into a lounge cabinet. Fire broke out in two department stores—Schneider and Kaufhof—around midnight on 2–3 April 1968. The fire did not harm anyone but caused considerable material damage, in part by triggering the sprinkling system. According to the court, damage amounted to 282,339 deutsche marks at Schneider and 390,838 deutsche marks at Kaufhof, all of it covered by insurance.113 Newspapers had initially reported that damage totalled 1.2 million deutsche marks. The Frankfurt department stores apparently organised a “fire-watch service” for fear of “political acts of revenge.” They advertised a high reward for information leading to the arrest of the arsonists.114

Police followed lead and easily caught the four arsonists. A poem in the

111. Kommune II, Versuch der Revolutionierung.
112. Koenen, Vesper, Ensslin, Baader, 142–49. Proll later emphasised that the department store arson was influenced by Kommune I. See Proll and Dubbe, Wir kamen vom anderen Stern, 7; Proll, Mein 68, 51–57.
113. “Urteil des LG Frankfurt (‘Brandstifterurteil’) vom 31. Oktober 1968, 4 Kls 1/68,” in Aktuelle Dokumente, ed. Münch, 178–79. The most comprehensive and solid account of the Frankfurt department store arsons is Sara Hakemi and Thomas Hecken, “Die Warenhausbrandstifter,” in RAF und der linke Terrorismus, ed. Kraushaar, 1:316–31. Hakemi and Hecken interpret the events in the context of a left-wing tradition of critiques of consumer society (Kommune I, Marcuse). They argue that further developments—i.e., the formation of the RAF—saw critiques of consumer society recede into the background in favour of anti-imperialist ideologies. They thus underestimate the continued importance of critiques of consumer society in the RAF’s ideology, especially within its anti-imperialism. For other accounts of the Frankfurt department store arsons, see Varon, Bringing the War Home, 41–45; Mausbach, “‘Burn, Ware-House, Burn!’,” 175–202.
style of Kommune I leaflets was found in Proll’s notebook: “When will the Brandenburg Gate burn? When will the Berlin department stores burn? When will the Hamburg warehouses burn? . . . Smash capitalism.” Investigators also found a piece of scrap paper on which someone had scribbled, “We set fire to department stores so that you stop to buy. . . . Pressure to consume terrorises you. We terrorise the commodity so that you are done with the terror that turns you into consumers.”

SDS spokesperson Reiche was initially “shocked by . . . unjustifiable acts of terror.” However, the West Berlin branch of the SDS later issued a statement that was far more accommodating. Kommune I did not dissociate itself from arson as a means of political struggle, and members publicly declared their understanding of the arsonists. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the communards offered a sweeping legitimisation that pointed to the civil unrest in the United States: “Arson as a political means has become a daily necessity for blacks.” A flyer adopting the usual biting sarcasm explained that King had received the Nobel Peace Price because he refused to fight the “war of . . . a minority against the many rich.” With a dose of hubris, a postscript asked if people distancing themselves from the Frankfurt department store arsons should not also distance themselves from Black Power.

The Frankfurt arsonists were sentenced to three years in prison for setting fire to the Schneider department store, which Baader and Ensslin had admitted. In the case of Kaufhof, they were acquitted because of lack of evidence. Although all four were sentenced to the same penalty, the extent of Proll and Söhnlein’s complicity was never fully clarified. The sentence against Proll was mainly based on the notes found in his possession. Despite some claims to the contrary, the court did recognise political motivation. The judges put on record that the defendants had come to the conclusion “that their previous endeavours could not meet with success given the ‘narrow-minded bluntness of a satisfied consumer society.’ They now wanted to set up a beacon to activate the masses.” The court accommodated Baader’s repeated references to Marcuse:

115. Proll and Dubbe, Wir kamen vom anderen Stern, 117.
118. Enzensberger, Jahre der Kommune I, 271.
121. Ibid., 172.
Ensslin and Baader had no longer considered “peaceful, nonviolent change of existing ‘class rule’ possible.” The court also dealt with the idea of a right to resist according to natural law, to which Baader had referred, invoking Marcuse. The judges rejected this reasoning “for lack of effectiveness” because “influencing the war in Vietnam by means of domestic terror against domestic property” was unrealistic. Ironically, this seemed to suggest that a strike against the U.S. Army might be covered by natural law—a line of reasoning that the RAF eventually followed. The Frankfurt judges finally considered the question of whether the defendants’ strong belief in a right to resist might constitute a “mistake as to the wrongful nature of the act [Verbotsirrtum].” They again denied the rationale with reference to Marcuse, for whom the “question of revolutionary violence” was allegedly “solely a moral question.” Instead, they opted for a positivistic interpretation: “Even the political criminal, the delinquent of conscience [Gewissenstäter], knows that he is violating a rule of the state. That is to say, the concept of guilt in the applicable criminal code is not moral or religious, but it is ‘political’ in the sense that the offender consciously fails to ‘adapt’ to the applicable legal order.” For the most part, the defendants indeed refused to cooperate with a justice system that they considered a mere instrument of an order they wished to overcome. In the end, the court did not acknowledge political conviction as the main motivation.

The general public failed to comprehend the defendants’ attempts to explain the connection between the world of consumption embodied in a department store and the deadly routine in Vietnam. Ensslin stated, “The USA is putting the rule to the test in Vietnam so that America’s affluence can be preserved.” Witness Bernward Vesper, Ensslin’s onetime fiancé, also emphasised the connection between affluence and the Vietnam War: “Commodities take on human traits, while the dead . . . are . . . considered mere statistics.” Proll authored the defendants’ closing words that dealt with the justice system but did not come back to the motive. Consumption was broached only with reference to prison conditions, where “a society that consists of nothing but consumption” was inverted.
Ties between the increasingly commercialised lifestyle laboratory of Kommune I and the department store arsonists remained close. In May 1968, Ulrich Enzensberger wrote to Baader, “We thought up a new sales sensation: group sex, to bring in more money.” Baader— in custody for the Frankfurt department store arson— answered that Kommune I was still appearing only in the cultural pages of the newspapers: “You must make the leap into advertising, Fanta etc. What kind of money would that bring in?” In prison, Proll continued to dabble in anarchic poetry. He invoked Proudhon and predicted commercialisation: “5 years later: the federal republic is a pedestrian zone. you can buy private anarchism.” Kommune I member Volker Gebbert wrote to Proll that another commune, Potskommune, was earning money from interviews about its consumption habits: “There is some money to be earned with the Left.” Kommune I had signed a contract for an arson story with a popular publishing house.

After Ensslin had put the department store arson in the context of anti-Vietnam protest, the West Berlin chapter of the SDS issued a statement that turned against the argument that the Frankfurt fires had wilfully destroyed what society had produced. The SDS took the line that the owners of the means of production constantly destroyed societal wealth. The statement shared a radical critique of Western consumer society that highlighted planned obsolescence, wasteful packaging, profit-oriented product research, and advertising. However, the critique went further by addressing the legal framework upholding this system: it punished the worker who stole stockings at the hosiery factory but not the managers responsible for the production of short-lived stockings. The West Berlin SDS shared the defendants’ challenge to a global regime of provision: “Had one taken the political reasoning of the accused comrades seriously—the clues to the war in Vietnam and the clues to the methods of capitalist production and consumption—one would have had to understand that the genocide in Vietnam . . . is only the up-front and brutal expression of a society that over here is aspiring to suppress” the masses’ true desire for self-determination by means of a quickly revocable system of pseudo-liberties. In

comparison to the crimes of this system, the Frankfurt arsons appeared merely a “helpless symbol,” a petty offence. The system had to condemn the defendants so that the propertied could continue to destroy societal wealth and the nonpropertied would not dare to demand the wealth that an “equitable—i.e., communist society—could produce even today.”

Ulrike Meinhof travelled to Frankfurt to observe the trial and visited the defendants in custody, thus meeting her future comrades for the first time. She wrote an article condemning the arson on the grounds that the fire consumed commodities. The arsonists thus acted in conformity with capitalism. Nevertheless, she approved of Teufel’s words alluding to Bertolt Brecht’s comparison between founding and robbing a bank: “It is still better to set fire to a department store than to run one.” Meinhof clearly shared a critical attitude towards matters of consumption, quoting Vance Packard’s *The Waste Makers* and André Gorz’s *Stratégie ouvrière et néocapitalisme*. The latter inspired her to interpret the blessings of affluence as “substitutional satisfaction” to hoodwink individuals about the conditions under which they had to work as producers. The former provided her with a framework in which the destruction of societal wealth seemed to be built into the system of capitalist accumulation.

Was setting fire to goods in a department store so different from destroying freshly produced goods to prevent market congestion and falling prices? Following Packard, Meinhof fumed, “The industry is still trying to overcome the glut of the consumer goods market by ‘new models every two years’; by wasting millions on research that serves less the products’ improvement than their saleability; by the individual rubbish bin for senseless packaging . . . ; by equally mendacious and costly advertising.” Planned obsolescence wasted millions “so that freezers, razors, ladies’ stockings, toys, light bulbs break much earlier than necessary . . . to artificially keep demand going, to realise rates of profit that are only reinvested into private pockets, not to satisfy social needs.” She would have preferred that the riches of society go into education, health care, public transport, silence, pure air, and sex education.

Critical observations concerning the flood of commodities were by no

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133. Statement of the Landesverband Berlin des SDS, AHIS, SAK 250, 04.
means limited to the Far Left. In 1968, a professional retail journal observed, “We are facing a bewildering host of endeavours to get rid of huge overcapacities.” Even the professionals likened their contemporary commodity market to a Babel as a consequence of “the incredible increase in variety and volume of consumer goods.” The current “hardly measurable mass of consumer goods” included many that no one could have imagined only half a century earlier. They diagnosed the pressure that overproduction exerted on the retail sector when a single product was offered in countless types and different packaging: “Often the effectiveness of an advertising campaign to which the consumer is constantly and pitilessly exposed via the journalistic media is decisive for the marketing success of this or that brand. Nowadays, the producer who . . . employs the largest possible means in an advertisement campaign has every chance of establishing a lead, even to the point of near monopoly.”138 The federal retail organisation Hauptgemeinschaft des Deutschen Einzelhandels used the term Werbeterror (advertising terror) when denouncing the aggressive and often semilegal marketing practices of organised promotional trips (Kaffeefahrten).139

While the retail specialists still strove to solve the riddle of selling the unprecedented abundance, Meinhof posed the question of distribution and identified regimes of provision that were upheld by the legal system and privileged property and profit. Hence, she considered the progressive moment of the Frankfurt department store arson to lie in the criminal transgression of this order: “Those who abuse property are protected by the law. It does not protect those who are victims of this abuse, nor those who create the riches by work and consumption, but those who appropriate it legally according to the law-making of the capitalist state.” Consumers—together with producers—featured as creators of societal wealth. The “surplus value” they produced was then misappropriated by capitalists. Meinhof claimed that “collective needs” remained “flagrantly unsatisfied in the rich capitalist countries.”140

These words represented a clear departure from her views two and a half years earlier, when her assessment of socioeconomic negotiations had been much more conventional and optimistic. On the occasion of wage disputes in the West German metal industry in early 1966, she had criticised employers’ reluctance to agree to a reduction in working hours, but overall she held that collective bargaining was “appropriate to fit economic growth and common

welfare to one another.” This position eroded during the second half of 1967 with Ohnesorg’s shooting and the onset of the Federal Republic’s first recession. Many employers used the crisis to slash or curtail voluntary social benefits, holiday pay, and Christmas allowances as well as wages above the general pay scale. The Industrial Union of Metalworkers (IG Metall) collected evidence on these developments and published a book on business ethics. Meinhof castigated these measures as “securing profits at the expense of workers’ households.” However, she located the real problem in the period of prosperity, when workers and trade unions had been “cheated out of their power for a mess of pottage”—that is, the perks that had subsequently been taken away. She concluded that ethics did not exist in business, only profit and class interest. Affluence merely veiled class barriers. Moral protest was futile; only effective democratic control of business—that is, codetermination—would establish the economy’s real needs. She was developing a crucial idea: affluence clouded people’s ability to realise their own needs.

Meinhof added another tenet to her future philosophy in February 1968 when criticising the fact that provocative but nonviolent student protesters were frequently accused of “terrorism.” She diagnosed a tendency to put “terror” from the left on a level with the historical terror from the right. However, she went a step further in assuming that fascism had had “the task of liquidating any chance of socialism in Germany for decades.” Meinhof took the next step in her intellectual development “from protest to resistance” after the assassination attempt on Dutschke and the subsequent blockades of Springer publishing. She justified the students’ adoption of physical violence as a means of resistance and did not mince her words about what this violence comprised: throwing stones, smashing windows, setting fire to Springer delivery vans, demolishing editorial offices, slashing tyres, knocking over construction site trailers, and breaking through police lines. In an attempt to uphold the differentiation between violence against things and violence against people, Meinhof ignored the significant amount of injury to persons over the Easter weekend, emphasising instead that the physical damage caused by the students would easily be repaired, much of it by insurance companies. Her line of reasoning aimed at delegitimising her opponents: those who called the student

141. Ulrike Meinhof, “Lohnkampf” (February 1966), in Meinhof, Dokumente einer Rebellion, 60.

142. Ulrike Meinhof, "Unternehmermoral" (August 1967), in ibid., 74. See also Vorstand der Industriegewerkschaft Metall, Weißbuch zur Unternehmermoral (Frankfurt, 1967).

143. Ulrike Meinhof, “Gegen-Gewalt” (February 1968), in Meinhof, Dokumente einer Rebellion, 78.
protests “terror” failed to measure “bombs on Vietnam, . . . terror in Persia, [and] torture in South Africa” with the same yardstick. Kurt Georg Kiesinger and Lyndon Baines Johnson were representatives of a violent system that had brought forth Springer and Vietnam. They lacked the political or moral legitimisation to either regret the fate of Dutschke and King, who had fought against the violence of the system, or object to the students whose “counterviolence” resisted the real terror and violence. She explicitly cautioned against “insensible fury replacing superior rationality” and against responding to “the paramilitary police operation with paramilitary means.”\(^{144}\) She later threw this caution to the winds, but a characteristic element of her radical reasoning was already clearly discernible: with reasonably convincing arguments, she amalgamated very different phenomena of political violence from very different historical and geographical contexts into two opposing categories according to moral standards with the aim of delegitimising the establishment and in turn legitimising political resistance.

In November 1968, she displayed this widespread tendency to introduce moral scenarios from transcontinental contexts into her assessment of the Frankfurt department store arsons. She referred to American ghettos and pointed out that the looting “ghetto Negro” could learn that a system that denied him what he desperately needed was rotten. The German people, however, would hardly find what they really needed in department stores, with the notable exception of dishwashers, which were too heavy to carry away. This juxtaposition of the real needs of African American looters with the false needs of German customers was somewhat flawed since African Americans were as keen on television sets as their German counterparts, and German department stores did sell plenty of goods—including food—that could not easily be subsumed under false needs. Overall, Meinhof remained sceptical regarding the educational effect of department store arson or looting. Her account remained ambivalent: she felt a tension between a “counterrevolutionary” element of doing the same as the capitalist system—that is, destroying goods—and the progressive aspect of attacking this system by exploiting the symbolic value of violence. Ultimately, this tension mirrored the dialectics that had already characterised Kommune I’s leaflets in their attempt to unmask the system by its own means.\(^{145}\)

Meinhof had already adopted the title “Falsches Bewuβtsein” (False Con-

\(^{144}\) Ulrike Meinhof, “Vom Protest zum Widerstand” (May 1968), in ibid., 81.

\(^{145}\) Meinhof, “Warenhausbrandstiftung,” 87–88. Biographies of Ulrike Meinhof cover her article on department store arson, but beyond this, the topic of consumer society does not feature in the literature on the RAF.
sciousness) in a contribution to an edited volume on marriage and emancipation. This essay started with an unidentified Marcuse quote to the effect that capitalism produced affluence but not happiness and freedom for all.\textsuperscript{146} Her assessment—which worked with meticulous statistical material on the vast gender discrepancies in wages for equal work—argued that emancipation was falsely equated with women entering salaried work. This process was only one necessary step, consumer sovereignty in “a world in which the value of human beings is measured in terms of their income.” To Meinhof’s mind, the question of emancipation encompassed much more far-reaching issues: whether the blessings of technological progress were to be employed to unburden people—especially women—from “the acquisition of their daily needs concerning food and clothing, or to provide luxury and good business to a few.”\textsuperscript{147} That the creation of needs for the purpose of sales increases had generated new burdens for the homemaker was yet another story.

On 4 November 1968, the same day that Meinhof’s department store arson article was published, the television magazine \textit{Panorama} aired an interview in which the imprisoned Ensslin tried to justify her choice of target, seeking the root of evil in the callousness of consumer society: “The people in our country and in America and in every West European country, they have to gorge themselves. They have to gorge themselves so that it does not occur to them to think, for example, that we have something to do with Vietnam and what we might have to do with it. . . . I cannot believe that the day will . . . never come when people will be fed up with just being full . . . when they will be fed up with the self-delusion of taking all the nice provisions for the meaning of life.” She explained that she, too, liked the things that could be bought at department stores, but if the price was human consciousness, it was too high. To see a frightening “loss of consciousness,” which she called “unworthy of human beings,” did not require looking as far as Vietnam; the misery was apparent in her own society. She then declared that she would never resign herself to late capitalist society drifting towards fascism, for which she cited developments in America as evidence. She would never resign herself to what has been done for centuries, would never pretend that she could not do anything. Finally, Ensslin distanced herself from department store arson without explaining why, leaving open the question of whether she would embark on a different kind of direct action. She had already stated in court that the way the protest had been carried out was a mistake, but it was still nothing of which she was ashamed.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{146} Ulrike Meinhof, “Falsches Bewußtsein,” in Emanzipation und Ehe, ed. Rotzoll, 33.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 35–36.
\textsuperscript{148} Ensslin, interview. Passages from the interview are quoted in Siepmann, \textit{Heiß und kalt},
Ensslin seems to have seen her act as a symbol or wake-up call that went unheard.

Journalist Dieter E. Zimmer, an assistant editor for Die Zeit, admitted that it was debatable whether the violence in “direct action” such as department store arson was “real” or of a symbolic character, whether it was more likely to reinforce or harm the capitalist system. In his opinion, a utilitarian perspective was more to the point: even if one fully supported the revolutionaries’ intentions, one still had to admit that “there is no means of transmission that could make an act of this kind in any way educational or productive. . . . If one really seeks an effective way to forfeit the sympathies that exist in some parts of the population, if one does not want this revolution to happen with the people but against the people, then one will have to set alight as many department stores as possible.” He correctly diagnosed the acute difficulties left-wing militancy encountered in meeting its goal of mobilising the masses beyond a relatively small group of like-minded or well-meaning comrades and observers. Conversely, he ignored the idea that many activists did not care whether they were popular and understood that they were fighting against the majority of the population in affluent societies, thinking such people to be the victims of false needs and complicit in a fundamentally flawed system.

The Frankfurt arson attacks constitute a significant departure in the history of left-wing protest in Germany, since the anti-authoritarian protesters had previously—despite some more militant rhetoric—limited themselves to breaking the law during protest meetings, demonstrations, and related confrontations with the authorities. Apart from some smashed windows and an incendiary device that caused minor damage at the Criminal Court Moabit during Kommune I’s leaflet trial, the Frankfurt department store arsons were the first politically motivated attacks from the Left outside this context.150 Baader and Ensslin’s evasion of their sentences by going underground eventually proved to be the beginning of their well-known radicalisation in the RAF.

Although many contemporaries perceived the Frankfurt department store arsons as either mere spontaneous action or pure crime, they must be seen in the context of their intellectual origins, which embed them in a wider history of protest. By 1962, Gruppe Spur had already pointed to the manipulated con-

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513. Proll later emphasised the anticonsumerist message of the department store arson. There were two motives: the Americans’ involvement in Vietnam, and the call to refuse consumption (Konsumverweigerung). See Proll and Dubbe, Wir kamen vom anderen Stern, 7, 23, 39.
sumer and emphasised the depoliticising role of consumption, which group members saw in connection with destruction. Subversive Aktion continued from this basis, diagnosing alienation on two levels: (1) the absorption of artistic and critical impulses into the sphere of commerce deprived human beings from crucial cultural and political means for an adequate exchange with their societal environment; (2) affluent society also colonised seemingly private fields of retreat such as sexuality or leisure. At least implicitly, the consumer already featured as a potential revolutionary subject, but for most people, affluent consumption seemed to foster identification with “the system.” Consumption thus became a central tenet of ideology and was put in a tradition of totalitarian ideologies, an idea that also connected to Germany’s fascist past. The notion of terror was introduced and coupled with consumption to refer to structures of violence underlying affluent society. The subversives around Kunzelmann, Dutschke, and Rabehl made a decisive move in joining the SDS. They thus took their political programme of revolutionising everyday life on the basis of a theoretical analysis of both consumption and production as well as their method of performative action in the sphere of commerce into the wider student movement. In terms of theoretical framework, Kommune I hardly went beyond Subversive Aktion. The May 1967 leaflets on the Brussels fire disaster were completely in line with earlier happenings, but the communards now merged a critique of regimes of provision with a collective lifestyle, the satisfaction of personal needs with political action. What was new was the intensity with which they used the media and the courts to propagate and radicalise their position.

West German society was prepared to dedicate a high degree of public attention to the protesters, turning the leaflets and to a lesser degree the arsons into media hype. This process resulted not only from the communards’ virtuosity in playing the full range of media scandals but also from the fact that they had really touched a nerve with their contemporary discourse of legitimisation: ideological justification via superior provision. Conversely, Kommune I and the department store arsonists shared an important aspect of the commercial sensationalism they criticised: the performative moment of gaining instant publicity by innovative means. An amalgamation of various levels of political violence became typical of their tactics. Both the leaflets and the Frankfurt arsons firmly tied symbols of war to symbols of affluence. However, despite the odd mention of Woolworth or Coca-Cola, among others, there was no specific targeting of American stores or products. Germany’s fascist past was invoked in a number of contexts, with rather variable meanings: the educators of the late 1950s and early 1960s warned against massification; Rabehl coined the
term *Konsumfaschismus*; Grass claimed that both Springer tabloids and Kommune I showed evidence of fascist symbols; Meinhof’s concept of counterviolence pointed to fascist terror; and Ensslin thought that capitalism’s drift towards fascism was most evident in America.

Meinhof’s treatment of the Frankfurt department store arsons and her subsequent contacts with the arsonists proved to be crucial steps in her theoretical development, as chapter 3 demonstrates. But before I analyse the armed rebellion against consumer society that the RAF and related groups pursued, the next chapter scrutinises the wider intellectual context of such positions. At least since 1963 and up to the court proceedings against the arsonists, evidence indicates that consumption-related protest was influenced by Marcuse’s writings. It is difficult to determine the exact degree of Marcuse’s or other theorists’ influence because German critiques of regimes of provision had their own distinct roots and developed their own dynamism. The emergence of widespread perceptions of connections between the development of consumer society and destruction or violence was a historical novelty in many industrialised countries but especially in West Germany.