Consumption and Violence

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Conclusion

In October 1990, the editors of the newly founded journal *Clash*, an international joint venture of autonomist activists from seven European countries, published an article on what they called the “annexation of the GDR”: “The commodity won out over an independent development by the people in the GDR. . . . The commodity is violence! It is the capitalist tool for the colonisation of consciousness that surpasses all previous violent means of capitalism.” The language and content of this analysis were not new, but the demise of the East German state changed an important parameter of the consumption debates analysed in this book: the implosion of a tangible other regime of provision. The GDR had hardly functioned as a model for the radical left over the preceding thirty years, but its existence—despite the increasing influx of Western consumer culture—had demonstrated the possibility of a different organisation of production and consumption. The idea of Western capitalism creating for itself a “low-wage country on ‘German soil’” conjured up the perspective that a single all-encompassing regime of provision would henceforth eliminate or subdue all alternatives. The larger kitchen debate seemed to have come to an end. When analysing the causes of the GDR’s failure, the autonomist authors diagnosed the fault in the shortcomings of socialist practice, which created a “political vacuum allowing the ‘desire’ for commodities to thrive.” The GDR’s petit bourgeois planned economy, coupled with political repression, had long since squandered the opportunity for an authentic and autonomous articulation of needs and political positions. Given the sorry state of the socialist project, this task fell to the new social movements and their radical vanguard, which, according to the authors, included the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF) and other “guerrillas,” the revolutionary feminist movement, squatters, and other movements against urban renewal.

2. Ibid., 46.
3. Ibid., 50.
Much like Herbert Marcuse, philosopher and social theorist Oskar Negt addressed the new social movements of the late 1960s, in which he participated, and their challenge to existing regimes of provision under the formula *anti-kapitalistische Bedürfnisrevolte* (anticapitalist revolt of the needs).\(^4\) Such politics of needs involved a comprehensive concept of the political that, unlike narrower liberal concepts of politics, did not relegate needs into a pre-political private sphere. Traditional politics treat the human needs behind political demands on a highly mediated and abstract level. On this level, a demand for lower rents or higher social benefits can be articulated, implying that needs for food, shelter, and clothing have to be met. However, the details and implications of such human needs and their psychological dimension—for example, the despair that grips someone who cannot pay the rent—remain anterior to policy formation. They seldom appear in the classical formation of the political will, and if they do, it is only in a marginal or illustrative way.\(^5\) The social movements addressed in this book sought to bring such needs back into the political. They tried to establish legitimate ways of political communication that would address consumers’ experiences and make their social and moral concerns heard. Commonly used concepts of anticonsumerism prove inappropriate: notwithstanding certain rhetorical figures, their critiques of consumer society or of specific regimes of provision were not fundamentally anticonsumerist. Usually it was not a question of *not* consuming, of embracing radically ascetic ideals, but of consuming *differently*, of attaching alternative social or moral values to consumption, and of inflicting less destruction. The accelerated development of affluent society, however, seemed to destroy social fabrics, to rob things and lifestyles of their authenticity and legitimacy. To those who perceived this phenomenon, it became a significant source of existential disillusion and disenchantment with conventional politics.

This book shows that radical aspects and offshoots of the new social movements engaged in various struggles over particular regimes of provision in West Germany against the backdrop of the overarching Cold War system confrontation. These struggles ranged from quotidian articulations of moral or political concerns about seemingly trivial issues—for example, relatively minor fare increases—to militant resistance to international or global regimes of provision. A central result is that political violence arose from conflict over

\(^5\) Ibid., 125.
public commodities, such as transport, media, or housing, and from the political metadiscourse attached to commodity purchasing. While activists rarely realised their utopian goals, they had tangible effects on the way capitalist regimes of provision organised and presented themselves, from alternative approaches to urban communities to new strategies embraced by the institutions of global governance.

The politicisation of consumption—for example, via boycotting—is a communicative technique of favouring and/or discrediting particular interests that can be used by any political persuasion. The postwar period was dominated by politicisation impulses from above that emanated from various political and commercial institutions in Washington, Moscow, Bonn, Berlin, and elsewhere before eventually trickling down to (but not determining) the experiences and attitudes of individuals. Project ‘economic miracle’ attempted to depoliticise consumption domestically and harness its political potential to the outwardly oriented thrust of Cold War competition. Politically motivated boycott campaigns were first embraced and staged by strong players in the political contest (the state, large corporations, sizable parts of the population) before the extraparliamentary opposition and the new social movements seized the method to articulate and mobilise critical minority views: Springer used boycott flanked by economic pressure against Blinkfüer and the GDR long before the students boycotted Springer; Willy Brandt and the Confederation of German Trade Unions called for a boycott of the East German–run Berlin S-Bahn prior to students protesting public transport fare increases; and the CIA-sponsored Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit (Combat Group against Inhumanity) committed stink bomb and incendiary attacks against East German department stores long before any left-wing protesters launched arson attacks. The Combat Group against Inhumanity, cofounded in 1948 by CDU politician Ernst Benda, who became interior minister in 1968 and a judge on the Federal Constitutional Court in 1969, committed sabotage against the GDR’s distributive system: counterfeit administrative directives misrouted food deliveries and ordered retail price reductions, products and foodstuffs were destroyed, bomb attacks against power poles were planned, attacks against roads and railways took human lives. This case illustrates vividly how judgments about the legitimacy of boycotts, militancy, or terror in

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8. Ibid., 59, 107.
the realm of consumption were and are bound up with the political positions of both perpetrators and commentators.

Politicisation impulses from above continued throughout the Cold War but increasingly faced competition from impulses from below—from the social movements, which sought a third way between the blocs and faulted established modes of politicisation. The social movements aimed to expose the moral and political problems of the domestic and global dimensions of consumption, which had long-term effects that eventually influenced majority society and state institutions. Overall, it does not seem helpful to assume the existence of a historical threshold separating an earlier period where matters of consumption were somehow less morally or politically charged from a later period of politicised consumption. What was new since the late 1960s was the plurality of competing moral economies from above and from below. Forms and practices of protest pioneered in the 1960s and early 1970s were adopted and adapted according to changed circumstances, resulting in a proliferation of localised campaigns that tended to be more anonymous and less spectacular but perhaps more successful in raising public awareness. Such applied critiques of regimes of provision meant less abstract theory but more direct action as well as a professionalisation of protest in the 1980s. An accompanying decrease in the size and diversity of social support for protest activities made way for smaller but more radical groups. Political communication that addressed the moral dimensions of globalised economic structures contributed to a novel spatialisation of politics that was manifested in the increased transnational organisation of protest movements that sought to mirror the intensified connectivity of the global economy.

In this context, one might ask in how far the approaches analysed in this book were specifically German reactions to consumer society. Given that comparable analyses for France, Italy, Britain, and Denmark simply do not yet exist, this volume offers a point of departure for future research into the question of whether the West German trajectory of radicalisation resulted from stronger critical attitudes towards mass consumption or perhaps less developed organisations pursuing the peaceful organisation of consumers. However, the material presented here does not seem to suggest a German Sonderweg in radicalism but points to rather similar developments regarding squatting movements, autonomist groups, and globalisation critics elsewhere. In explaining the intensity of conflict in Germany, the material highlights the potentially explosive nature of the legacy of the Nazi past and of the Cold War–system confrontation rather than peculiarities of ill-developed institutions of civil society or alleged continuities in antidemocratic extremism.
Strong continuities existed over time as anti-IMF action at department stores in 1988 came full circle with earlier campaigns: the KaDeWe remained a powerful political symbol, incendiary devices went off on store shelves, and even the agitation among those working at the department store resembled what Rudi Dutschke and his comrades pursued at KaDeWe in August 1967. Contrary to the popular belief that the 1968 movement disintegrated quickly, leaving little protest potential, it had clear developmental trajectories that led to various protest movements. The overall number of “protest events” in the Federal Republic of Germany was higher in the period after 1968 than during the 1950s and 1960s, when demonstrations and collective political pursuits were more likely to go alongside Cold War–inspired governmental activities. In many ways, the economic aspect of opposition grew more prominent. Youth, as a socioculturally determined period of life, grew ever longer, which, coupled with economic downturn, created the “superfluous” youth that found it difficult to pursue the trajectories conventional social models held in stock for them. Compared to the experience of the boom years of the 1960s, which saw the massive expansion of tertiary education opportunities, the 1970s offered a decidedly bleaker picture of the economic future. Educated young people joining socially vulnerable groups leading a precarious existence became a widespread and tangible phenomenon. Protest was a possible source of orientation and remedy.

The moral and political content of attacks on manifestations of consumer society aside, they were ineffective insofar as they hardly impeded the commercial success of the targeted businesses or economic growth based on consumer goods more generally. The campaign against Springer journalism neither seriously jeopardised its target’s dominance of the newspaper market nor substantially changed tabloid journalism, and the few tangible successes of the protests against public transport fare increases did not survive the inevitable next price hike. The squatters’ movement likewise neither managed to dispose of real estate speculation nor change the existing system of property ownership. The squatters of the early 1980s might at least claim a role in a wider process that ushered in alternatives to existing regimes of provision in the realms of housing and the distribution of urban space. Moreover, squatters

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were instrumental in establishing informal infrastructures that continued to enable projects of self-help, protest, and participation.

What did emerge were alternative economies. By the early 1980s, a “countermilieu” had developed in a sense not entirely foreseen by Dutschke or Marcuse. The alternative milieu had grown into a relevant section of the economy in some cities, but this phenomenon was firmly grounded in services and consumption and had only a limited basis in production. An analysis of an alternative address book for West Berlin (Stattbuch 2) lists twelve hundred projects, of which 71 percent were in the services sector (transport, retail, bookstores, pubs, cinemas, media, child care, social work, culture); the remainder involved political work (23 percent) and production (6 percent). However, to retrospectively reduce the protests treated in this book to their tangible yield in terms of economic or symbolic capital would not do justice to the meaning of their intentions. They questioned the abstract reasoning of the bottom line by appealing to moral imperatives and by invoking responses to injustices and abuses of power, especially in a global context.

The focus on the global consumption nexus sheds new light on the increasing internationalism of the different segments of the radical left since the 1970s. Recent scholarship under the label “transnational history” has interpreted the work of nongovernmental organisations and social movements as a decisive contribution to the emergence of a global civil society that has reduced the potential of conflict between states. By exploring hitherto neglected precursors of the global justice movement, this book adds an exploration of agents of transnationalisation that operated below and often in opposition to the established governmental and nongovernmental international organizations, giving due weight to the dimension of militancy in response to the apparent failures and shortcomings of the globalising process during the crises of the 1970s and 1980s. The theoretical critiques and political activism of West German radical leftists mark both an intriguing contrast and an instructive complement to what they would have perceived as exceedingly positive accounts of the highly ambivalent globalisation of consumer capitalism, such as Harvard business professor Rosabeth M. Kanter’s definition of globalisation as “the world . . . be-

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11. Iriye, “Transnational History.” See also Iriye, Global Community; Iriye, “Century of NGOs”; Iriye, Cultural Internationalism and World Order. For an almost exclusively positive interpretation of transnationalisation as a legacy of 1968, see Klimke, Other Alliance; Klimke and Scharloth, 1968 in Europe. For a critical assessment of the transnational turn and its normative implications, see Goltz and Mark, “Encounters.”
coming a global shopping mall in which ideas and products are available everywhere at the same time.”

**Intellectual Reflections of Regimes of Provision**

An economic system based on trust in the civilising properties of economic progress and thus of the emergence of consumer societies (harking back to August Comte and Adam Smith) was challenged by critics who saw this connection more pessimistically and considered violence and destruction correlates of spatially confined affluent societies. Individuals and their needs were imagined as revolutionary subjects or as fighters for more limited forms of liberation. Their utopias—or their countercultures—crucially contained visions of alternative regimes of provision. However, squatters who sought to legalise their living conditions via politically negotiated leases continued to criticise the existing variant of consumer society, but they ultimately were prepared to integrate their lifestyles into an improved or alternative version of affluent society. In some respects, the loss of utopia over time—the gradual embracing of more limited counterdrafts, which were then integrated into improved variants of affluent society—could be read to confirm Marcuse’s dystopian vision of a one-dimensional society where critiques and utopian scenarios are bound to collapse into a vast realm of commodification. Some of the trajectories of radicalisation analysed in this book were attempts to break the cycle of modern capitalism, which adopted criticism and opposition and in turn served them up as commodities.

Radical concepts of consumption emerged from social movements that responded to social change. They reflected changing regimes of provision. The analytical approach pursued in this book thus combines socioeconomic developments with political and artistic responses to the development of modern society. Intellectual constructions both built on and entailed social practices and political actions and were thus as much part of reality as economic or institutional conditions. This book demonstrates that intellectual constructions such as manipulation or depoliticisation were very closely linked with very real socioeconomic developments—for example, retail or media concentration, fare increases, housing shortages, and the Third World debt crisis. Radical

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and even militant concepts had a rational core that responded to tangible socio-economic developments and were thus not so far removed from what artists, intellectuals, more moderate contemporaries, and more recent scholars have thought and discovered about the developments and contradictions of consumer societies.

An erosion of revolutionary visions over time and a loss of theoretical sophistication might be obtained from a comparison of Jörg Huffschmid’s Habermasian analysis of the Springer press with an autonomist pamphlet that reduces all evil to the machinations of banks and department stores and otherwise displays postmodern indifference. Conversely, the squatters’ establishment of more limited free spaces and formation of challenges to governmental policies that were sustainable at least in the medium term also points to a more rational analysis of society that overcame the verbose and unrealistic revolutionary fantasies of earlier generations. Both the activists of the 1960s and of the 1980s wrestled with the legacy of a century-and-a-half of left-wing revolutionary traditions, ideas, and utopias. Their ideology and practice displayed a tendency to draw the good life—traditionally held out as a carrot of the future—into their present. In this respect, they also stood at the end of a 150-year political learning process. This perspective helps to integrate opposite interpretations—loss of utopian potential versus gain in tangible success—into a dialectical step: they had arrived in a political space less riven between utopian visions belonging to different levels of historical time. They were facing the inconsistencies of the economic process and of various approaches to political economy that tried to explain and influence this process. They were partially conscious of two centuries of intellectual traditions trying to govern and moralise the economic process. They saw their own projects as continuations of or alternatives to existing interpretive patterns, which in some respects came to an impasse in the 1980s. It became clear that a historical philosophy that would have fully explained and controlled the economic process did not exist and that any venture into the territory of political economy—of critiques of regimes of provision—was fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies. Ultimately, the ideas and actions treated in this book were attempts at political orientation in highly complex systems of provision. They reflected a quest for moral integrity amidst the irresolvable contradictions of the economic process. They were bound to meet their own limits—for example, in embracing means that really did not lend themselves to curing the dilemmas they sought to address. The contradictory nature of gentrification

leading the movement to wrestle with itself—as both originator and critic of the process—is a good example for such irresolvable inconsistencies that did not allow for an easy way out.

In the final analysis, protesters shared such dilemmas with all other economic and political actors because no one has a universal formula for generating well-being for all. Consequently, everyone must weigh the beneficial and destructive potentials of the regimes of provision they partake in, support, or disapprove of. This implies that, nolens volens, all historical actors are involved in the competition between different regimes of provision—not only for practical implementation but also for political legitimacy—and thus need to position themselves vis-à-vis the violence resulting from the friction between such competing regimes on various levels.

Consumption and Violence

During the decades after SDS activists Peter Neitzke and Christian Semler developed their theory of political action with regard to the distribution sector in 1969, their three types of political campaigns (the burning of commodities, the appropriation of goods by the masses, and the smashing of shop windows) remained in the repertoire of actions adopted by the more militant branches of the new social movements. Systematic attacks on shop windows with paving stones had become a well-established practice. Despite Neitzke and Semler’s scepticism regarding this type of protest, it eventually emerged as the most prominent. Given their Marxist perspective, they were missing an ideological message that would emanate from broken windows and could be conveyed to the masses. Though the militant squatters of the early 1980s did not go to the same theoretical lengths as their Marxist forebears, they experienced the smashing of windows during confrontations with authorities as combining existentialist self-liberation with critiques of tangible regimes of provision, which could even amount to political leverage in their struggle with the authorities.

In analogy to the dilemmas and diversities of affluent society, the historical actors examined in this volume were confronted with a wide range of different concepts and interpretations of violence and counterviolence. Activists consciously chose violence against objects to propagate their political ideas and lifestyles. The rationalised, depersonalised, and latent violence of the powerful was supposed to be pulled out from the “setting of everyday life” (Kulisse des Alltags), in which, according to Norbert Elias, it disappeared in the civilis-
ing process. Central to ideological justifications of protest was the idea of destruction caused by the prevailing political economy. The labels “violent” and “destructive” were essential to this mode of legitimisation, which helped to intellectually integrate threatening developments on various levels: the destruction of neighbourhoods and their social milieus by speculative builders and gentrification; the destruction of livelihoods by tropical deforestation and debt crisis; and the destruction of nature by pollution and growth ideology. All of these entangled processes seemed to be driven by Western consumers and the greed of the rich. Again, a silver bullet that would have solved the larger dilemmas between complete nonviolence and political militancy did not exist either for the social movements or for the larger debates about the legitimacy of various forms of historical violence. The forms of political violence treated in the previous chapters—from Cologne students blockading tramway tracks in 1966 to the unknown persons placing incendiary devices in Berlin department stores in September 1988—were usually accompanied by explicit or implicit scruples and considerations regarding the use of violence. An upper limit on the forms of violence employed and the nature of the damage inflicted was for the most part integrated into the planning and justification of such acts. One might strongly disagree with the perpetrators’ assessments of legitimacy, but violence was almost never embraced for its own sake but rather consciously intended as a politically calculated means of communication. This also holds true for instances when leftist activists embraced anti-Zionist campaigns—for historical reasons a particularly difficult field of political communication—where their political calculations usually backfired, as was the case with the pro-Palestinian boycott campaign triggered by the Hafenstraße mural.

A central message of the analysis presented in this book is that violence resulted from complex interactions among several actors (protesters, authorities, media, and intellectuals) and that protest was by no means violent from the outset. Violent conflict and discourse on violence found their way into the protest scenarios analysed in this book via four avenues: (1) the verbal and symbolic violence that was meant to call attention to the factual violence (for example, in the Third World); (2) the militant or openly violent tactics embraced by specialists in violence (such as the RAF or RZ) but also imagined in the press; (3) the often controversial actions of government security forces shielding urban retail and commerce from protest activities; and (4) the political and legal controversies triggered by the protests, focusing on definitions of violence and the legitimisation and delegitimisation of particular forms of po-

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Militant protest led to adjustments and changes in authorities’ theoretical and practical understanding of violence. Some of the protest activities triggered complex legal debates that went all the way up to the Federal Court of Justice (BGH) or the Federal Constitutional Court, with significant consequences for German legal history. The social movements’ discourse on violence prompted an inverse discourse on violence among the legal authorities. A central bone of contention was whether certain protest activities were to be seen as illicit or even criminal offences or rather as political articulations covered by constitutional basic rights, especially freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. This pertained to linguistic and intellectual speech acts (for example, the leaflets of Kommune I) as well as to performative and physical articulations (for example, blockades), while many protest activities combined both aspects (for example, boycott campaigns). With its 1969 Laepple verdict concerning protests against fare increases and its 1972 verdict upholding the civil law claims against the “ringleaders” of the Springer blockade, the BGH established a legal framework that under the concept of “mental coercion” interpreted the mere intention of obstructing or blockading something as violent activity regardless of the actual means employed. This legal framework was not effectively rescinded by the Federal Constitutional Court until 1995. Concerning the liability of “ringleaders,” the BGH had already reversed its interpretation in 1984, ruling that only active perpetrators of physical violence could be held liable. On the level below these high court decisions, the protest activities of the new social movements occupied grey areas of legal discourse, forcing lawyers to come to grips with more or less unprecedented challenges. This was the case for Landfriedensbruch (breach of the public peace) in the context of the demonstrations of the late 1960s and Hausfriedensbruch (breach of the domestic peace), which became controversial during the squatting movement of the early 1980s. Legal opinion was initially far from fixed in both cases, and several years passed before a certain variance among lower court judgments made way for a prevailing opinion. More generally, debates over legal conflicts tended to shift towards questions of law and order and away from the controversial contents concerning regimes of provision that had triggered the issue. Since 1976, the legal expansion of imputability under section 129a of the Criminal Code (Forming terrorist organisations) accelerated this development.

Protesters’ attitudes towards law and justice varied. A point of departure
was the impression that it was impossible to effect the desired changes by appealing to a point of law. Petitions and legal proceedings in favour of protest agendas had usually proved fruitless. References to fundamental rights or to a right to resist under natural law were made with the claim that the disputed speech acts or performative acts were covered by a higher level of justice than that embodied by the courts of West Germany. This distrust was nourished by Marxist critiques of the bourgeois legal system, by pointers to German lawyers’ Nazi pasts, and eventually by the insight that the forces of global capital were increasingly uncoupled from the legality of the national state. The more or less limited performative breaking of rules and laws served as a strategy of mobilisation, which quickly brought protesters into prolonged conflicts with the authorities. While the illegal act was initially conceived as a means of making visible other forms of violence, the authorities’ counterstrategy of highlighting the criminality of disputed acts could appear to the perpetrators like a large-scale conspiracy designed to cover up injustices that could only be brought to light via illegal acts. All of these perspectives tended to situate the protesters’ violence—conceived as communicative and limited—relative to other forms of violence that were seen as ubiquitous and unrestrained. From this perspective, even the phenomenon commonly labelled “terrorism” appears to result not primarily from individual shortcomings such as psychological deficiencies, violence fetishism, or antisemitism but from a radical response to major societal changes—that is, the unprecedented growth and diversification of the realm of consumption, a dimension neglected by existing research.

On a more abstract level, this analysis shows that the discursive amalgamation of different forms of violence was indispensable to the legitimisation of political violence on both sides. An essential aspect of the communicative strategies that challenged dominant regimes of provision via boycotting or other forms of mobilisation was to bridge distance—both spatially and historically—to connect seemingly far-removed political struggles. Specific forms of protest or violence assumed to be legitimate were justified with reference to other forms of past or present violence deemed illegitimate. Challenging forms of political violence (emanating from social movements) and preserving forms of institutional violence (executed by the authorities) were interlocked in discourses that sought to invert their respective legitimisations while amplifying each other in the process. Challengers accused the authorities wielding state violence of sharing responsibility for violations of human rights, war, and genocide in the contexts of decolonisation (South African apartheid) or alleged continuity with National Socialist Germany. The application of state monopoly violence was in turn justified by associating the challengers with the violence of
past and present revolutions and terrorism or with the state violence of the GDR and Soviet Union. Analogies with National Socialism usually pointed to the *Kampfzeit* of the NSDAP up to 1934 when shops owned by Jews were attacked.

In this context, the question arises whether anti-Zionist or anti-Israeli boycotts and protests differed fundamentally from other protests in Cold War West Germany. On balance, the radical left did not target Israel more than other targets, but protests against Israel were more intense. Given the unique historical past of the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict, more explosive matter on both sides of the debate went into the discursive amalgamation of judgments concerning different aspects and periods of Jewish and Israeli history. Antisemitic statements—or accusations of antisemitism—sometimes resulted from this process. However, judging from the primary sources analysed during the research for this book, antisemitism was not a precondition or motivation for activism for the majority of radical left-wing activists in Cold War West Germany, another important difference from the self-avowed and pervasive antisemitism of the Nazis and neo-Nazis to whom the radical Left was often likened.

Restrictive definitions of political violence that exclude certain manifestations of violence—for example, state violence—are bound to obscure views of the legitimisation of political violence, a topic that should be studied more explicitly in other historical contexts. Discursive amalgamations of different forms of political violence were part of broader strategies of legitimisation and delegitimisation. Acceptance and success were decisive for these constructions’ plausibility and ultimately for their continuity or erosion. The continued legitimacy of the West German authorities banked on the almost mythical reputation of economic success that the Federal Republic acquired as well as on the criminalisation of the more radical parts of the new social movements, a strategy that dovetailed with the depoliticisation of their agenda. At the same time, authorities made their use of violence appear legitimate and infinitely preferable to that of the undemocratic regimes of Germany’s past. Ultimately, West German state legitimacy rested on the political attitudes and opinions of the vast majority of the population who did not share the socialist ideals animating the critiques of the challengers. This did not mean that the challengers went entirely without acceptance or success. Quite the contrary, they could have maintained their multitude of interrelated protest campaigns over several decades only by virtue of scoring repeated successes in setting political agendas and politicising of regimes of provision in response to crisis; bringing public attention to abusive or problematic uses of state power; and mobilising a sizeable minority of the population to devote at least some political resources to the promotion of alternative moral economies.