Between the Avant-Garde
and the Everyday
Protest, Culture and Society

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Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday

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Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton
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By investigating the relation between the “personal” and the “political,” this book makes a valuable contribution to the debate on how protest movements and subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s changed our understanding of politics. Protest phenomena such as the campaigns against the Vietnam War or the squat-ter movement did not achieve their impact just by contributing to a generalized mood of upheaval, but by focusing on the creation of new lifestyles and cultural norms with profound political implications. The book’s chapters on avant-garde formations such as the German “Gruppe Spur” demonstrate that the subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s, far from being peripheral and short-lived phenomena, were part of a longer-term attempt to escape manipulation, commercialization, and institutionalization. Such groups defined themselves and acted as avant-gardes precisely because they articulated, in a very pointed manner, problems and values of major importance for society at large. Their focus was not primarily on the traditional field of social conflict—labor—nor did they fit into the political concept of a representative democracy. Seen from a traditional point of view, these young persons were driven by a “peculiarly non-political motive,” one involving, in the words of the German student activist Heide Berndt, “the desire to live an individually satisfying life.” This desire encompassed the sphere of labor as well but had its main impact in the so-called “reproductive sphere,” outside the more or less strictly regularized spheres of school and work.

The approach taken in this book is important for a number of reasons, not least because the “subversive politics” pursued by European subcultures strongly influenced societies on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Among the book’s main merits is the long perspective it takes, encompassing the last fifty years using a broad range of examples drawn from both Western and Eastern European countries. Extending our knowledge of transnational exchange far beyond the well-researched relations between American and Western European student movements, the book provides a new perspective on the under-researched exchanges between different European cultures. Even if Western societies (especially West Germany) and the 1960s and 1970s outweigh other regions and decades, the book still transcends recent years’ research focus on the 1960s in Western Europe. With chapters on diverse topics such as “Nazi Rock,” African-American music in the GDR, and immigrant subcultures, the book also expands thematically beyond the established range of topics.

One of the chapters that contribute particularly important insights and push forward our understanding is Niek Pas’s wonderful micro-study of the British- and Dutch-based avant-garde group “Sigma,” focusing on Amsterdam but in-
cluding strong transnational elements. Especially fruitful from a methodological perspective, because it transcends the alleged gap between avant-garde and the masses, is Pas’s attention to the “vulgarization” of Sigma ideas. Another gap that has mostly been taken for granted, namely the one between the so-called “Old” and “New” Left, is probed in Nikolaos Papadogiannis’s chapter on the confrontation between Greek communist youth groups and rock music. By investigating the Old Left’s inner transformation by popular culture, this well-researched and differentiated contribution focuses on one core aspect of the connection between “the personal” and “the political.” Including a broad range of communist groups and their practices from below as well as from above, Papadogiannis analyzes how, as the main emotional bond of youth culture, rock music became a major challenge for revolutionary groups, which to different degrees attempted to fight Western “cultural imperialism” and maintain “authentic” Greek people’s cultures.

Alexander Clarkson’s chapter presents an inspiring attempt to incorporate immigrant milieus into the history of protest movements, considering the rise of religious radicalism in Europe within the framework of protest movements and subcultures. The chapter is especially convincing because of its detailed research on the French and West German branches of the Algerian Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), Iranian exiles between the 1950s and 1980s, and revolutionary Islamism from the 1980s onward. Malgorzata Fidelis’s chapter on the Polish situation provides new insights into the peculiarities of Eastern European protest movements. By analyzing how the Polish government linked anti-Zionism and anti-consumerism in order to denounce the student movement, this fine piece of scholarship supports and differentiates the findings of important previous studies like Uta G. Poiger’s investigation on the handling of rock and roll music in the GDR. While these brilliant contributions deliver profound historical research, the last three well-informed and theoretically challenging chapters move on to contemporary subcultures and social movements. Highlighting the transnational character of protest movements, while at the same time insisting on their local anchoring, these chapters test inspiring new scholarly concepts such as “corporeal” and “sonic” turns, which may prove useful not only for contemporary topics.

Beyond the innovative potential to be found in its individual chapters, this book marks an important starting point for the investigation of continuities and discontinuities between protest movements and subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s and their under-researched successors in the 1990s. It also represents an important contribution to important but under-investigated topics such as the connection between subversive politics and the media, and the relationship between avant-gardes and mass culture. The belief that avant-garde groups such as situationists or the New Left had developed ideas that in the course of the 1960s and 1970s were appropriated by the masses has always seemed to me too one-dimensional. As many contributions in this volume demonstrate, sub-
versive politics has many sources—not least media products—especially where personal topics such as sexual orientation, musical taste, or gender relations are concerned. Also, vanguard art groups and political subcultures are influenced by major societal and cultural changes, so that attempts to historicize the avant-garde must be careful not to overestimate its impact.

The functioning of this mechanism can be observed in the example of Louis Malle’s famous movie *Viva Maria* (1965), a film that knotted Europe, the “Third World,” gender constellations, and interracial relations together into a revolutionary mélange. The reception of this mass media product provides some insight into how young white European intellectuals could take a fictional story as a model for their own activities. The ironic twists, represented above all by the film itself, and the repeated and intense reception by the West German student radical Rudi Dutschke and his comrades suggest a contemporary functioning of media production and consumption that has not previously been researched in great detail. The confrontations at the focal points of “1968” in Berkeley, Berlin, Paris, and Prague were themselves big media events that tied together the whole world, conveying to the youth of Italy and the GDR an idea of just how wide the spectrum of possibilities for self-articulation had already grown. Recent research into the Swedish student movement suggests that televised images of these events helped shape the movements that formed beyond the main centers. The functional mechanics of the medialization of a society and its protest movements can be finely dissected as never before, because this medialization became a widespread mass phenomenon parallel with the blossoming of a multitude of subcultures. The contributors of this book ask many important questions and provide promising paths to investigate this and other important questions on the mechanisms and societal impacts of subversive politics.

Detlef Siegfried
Introduction

Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton

“We are concerned not with the coup d'état of Trotsky and Lenin,” wrote Alexander Trocchi in 1962, “but with the coup du monde.” Just as “Trotsky seized the viaducts and the bridges and the telephone exchanges and the power stations,” so “the cultural revolt must seize the grids of expression and the powerhouses of the mind.” Thus did the Scottish Beat poet signal the emergence of a new paradigm according to which old distinctions between art and daily life, between “politics” and “culture,” were no longer adequate. The transition from Old to New Left—a move away from the conceptual and practical dead end of old-style Marxist mass politics toward a realm of personal subjectivity carried by new actors with new concerns—was only the barest part of the realignment. Equally important was the emergence of an international counterculture for which Trocchi, as an inheritor of the mantle of existentialism and a key figure in the “left wing of the Beat Generation,” was a formative influence. The counterculture was shaped by two complementary forces. One was the rise of a distinctive youth culture, arising in the unprecedented prosperity of the postwar era and expressing itself at the level of daily life in new forms of sociability and new choices in consumption, music, fashion, and lifestyle. The other was the intervention of artists and intellectuals like Trocchi, inspired by utopian projects for both remaking art and altering the shape of daily life. Trocchi’s own Project Sigma (examined by Niek Pas in chapter 2 of this volume) was only one among many projects that conceived of “the cultural revolt [as] the necessary underpinning, the passionate substructure of a new order of things.”

Taken together, these developments represent a key aspect of the post-1945 period: the interpenetration of the cultural and the political. For scholars, the study of one has become increasingly impossible without attention to the other. This is true in part because of the growing salience of cultural analysis in the study of political phenomena, but it is also a function of the ever-widening definition of political protest. It seems, indeed, that the term “protest” is rapidly developing as many different connotations as the notoriously slippery concept of “culture.” Over the last few decades, protest has increasingly been understood not just as something that happens in the street—that is, not just in terms of demonstrations and other more or less spectacular events—but as something that can be inherent in human relations across a number of spheres. The current interest in protest comes from several directions. One source is the field of Cold War studies. Here, concern with the realm of daily life as a site of resistance to
dominant narratives and strategies of control, associated in particular with the totalizing communist societies of pre-1989 Europe but operative in the West as well, has come to the fore.5 A second, key source of the intensified interest in the study of protest stems from the current focus on the watershed year of 1968.6 Protest figures centrally in the current scholarly project of historicizing the youth upheavals of the 1960s, a period in which protest, in its several forms, achieved a new salience. A third source feeding into the developing field of protest studies is the growing interest in the scholarly study of the so-called anti-globalization—AKA “alter-globalization” or “anti-corporate”—movement. The ever-growing body of scholarship on this diverse set of movements has come to fit very naturally into an overall rubric of protest studies, which brings students of historical events together with those interested in contemporary affairs.7

The dovetailing of these two streams reinforces the idea of a fundamental continuity between the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and those of the 1990s and beyond. While the extent and nature of this continuity is open to question, the dialogue between historians and scholars of other disciplines working on the historical protest movements of “1968” and those working on contemporary social movements has marked out a site of genuine interdisciplinarity. The present volume, which assembles an international group of scholars working in and on both sides of the former Iron Curtain on a variety of topics spanning the period from the late 1950s to the present, is a product of this interdisciplinarity.8 On the one hand, the book reflects growing scholarly interest in the protest movements of the 1960s, movements that have for the most part only fairly recently become the object of serious scholarly inquiry and are now, some forty years after the fact, beginning to benefit from critical distance. On the other hand, the book concerns itself with more recent developments that in many cases may be seen as direct outgrowths of the unique forms of activism born in the 1960s.

The concept of the subversive in the title of the book functions in two senses: first, it refers to the activities of individuals and groups (usually left-wing in orientation but not always so) operating with the explicit aim of disrupting mainstream politics and challenging dominant narratives; second, it refers to the effects of social actors and trends that, although not explicitly political, have been interpreted by dominant elites in political terms. In this sense, the book draws on the distinction—suggested by Detlef Siegfried with respect to the connection between popular music and politics in the 1960s on the two sides of the Iron Curtain—between “politicization from below” and “politicization from above”; that is, the distinction between the political meanings formulated by participants in and advocates of popular music-based youth scenes, and those imposed by regimes and adult societies confronted by new cultural (and to a greater or lesser extent, implicitly political) challenges.9

The essays in this book all have in common an emphasis on the cultural dimension of protest, with the “cultural” enfolding both a set of methodological
assumptions and a set of subject matters. On the one hand, the essays share a common view of the constructedness of culture in the realm of political action; that is, they are motivated by the notions that “politics” and “culture” do not exist in their own spheres separate from one another (nor simply that culture represents a separate realm in which politics are carried out) and that the process of meaning production that seeks to motivate and lend meaning to political action is itself a type of cultural action. Where protest is concerned, this insight is of particular importance, for highly characteristic of the protest repertoires of the 1960s (and since) was the subversive use of symbols to disrupt official meanings and narratives. The essays in this volume share a concern with symbols and their interpretation, a concern connected with a performative understanding of culture and connected with an interest in protest politics that attempt to construct meanings counter to those prescribed by cultural “centers of power” (e.g., political parties, governments, educational institutions, the media, and so on).

If cultural understandings of the nature of politics underpin the methodological approaches in this volume, the cultural also determines the objects of study. The interpenetration of the cultural and the political in the subversive politics of the post-1945 period has functioned in several ways. First, one of the main points of genesis of the protest movements of the 1960s was the attempt of a bohemian intelligentsia, motivated by theories drawn from the artistic avant-garde, to reinvent the political along new lines. The influence of doctrines like Situationism, and the actions, manifestos, and “Happenings” of groups like Provo, Cobra, and Fluxus, had momentous consequences across the various movements of “1968.” The first two essays in this volume, accordingly, deal with the dovetailing of artistic and political avantgardism. Mia Lee, in “The Gruppe Spur: Art as a Revolutionary Medium during the Cold War,” examines the history of the Gruppe Spur, a Munich avantgardist group that, in many of its methods and concerns, prefigured the countercultural wing of the West German ’68er movement. The trial of members of the Gruppe Spur—on charges of obscenity—was the first public trial of artists in Germany since the Third Reich. Spur’s chief theorist, Dieter Kunzelmann, went on to co-found in Berlin the Kommune 1, a group that both experimented with communal living and transpersonal psychology, and helped radicalize the West German student movement with a politics of public pranks and provocations. The Gruppe Spur drew heavily on the theories of Situationism, a doctrine originating in France, which made a radical critique of the “spectacle” through which modern consumer society blinded people to their real needs and desires. The German affiliate of the Situationist International, the umbrella organization founded in Cosio d’Arroscia in Italy in July 1957, the Gruppe Spur was one of the first groups in Europe to attempt to reshape the political along aesthetic lines.

Situationism was both an international and a transnational phenomenon. Niek Pas’s “In Pursuit of the Invisible Revolution: Sigma in the Netherlands, 1966–1968,” takes up the impact in the Netherlands of Alexander Trocchi,
who in addition to being a renowned author and bohemian intellectual, was an associate of the Situationist International. Trocchi’s Project Sigma, as Pas demonstrates, not only resonated with the Dutch Provo movement—a form of countercultural neo-anarchism that itself resonated far beyond Dutch borders—but bled over into teenage popular culture. A key feature of Sigma, as well as of Spur, was the belief that a new emancipatory politics must not be pursued with traditional political methods, nor confined to traditional venues, but must be operative above all in the realm of daily life. If their specific initiatives in this arena often failed to produce the desired results, the overall emphasis of these bohemian intellectuals was precocious, for the politicization of daily life not only developed into a standard feature of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s but became central to the alternative, green, women’s and other movements that succeeded them.

One of the chief concerns of Situationism and the groups it influenced was, as mentioned above, an analysis of the “spectacle” through which modern social life was organized. The attempt to break through the spectacle, to smash the hall of mirrors in which modern man lived out a humdrum existence, was a key aspiration of the groups that, toward the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, began to carry out increasingly violent struggle against the establishment in a number of European countries. In “‘The Brigade is Everywhere’: Violence and Spectacle in the British Counterculture,” Samantha Christiansen examines the history of England’s Angry Brigade, an anarchist-inspired group that carried out a series of bombings in England from 1969 to 1972. As Christiansen demonstrates, the Angry Brigade’s choice of targets was clearly influenced by a Situationist critique. “Life is so boring,” read one of the group’s communiqués; “there is nothing to do except spend all our wages on the latest skirt or shirt. Brothers and Sisters what are your real desires? Sit in the drugstore, look distant, empty, bored, drinking some tasteless coffee? Or perhaps BLOW IT UP OR BURN IT DOWN.”

In both the concerns it expressed and in the violence of its rhetoric, the Angry Brigade was, as Christiansen demonstrates, less an isolated urban guerilla group than an integral part of the English counterculture. Accordingly, its critique of state power became intimately bound up with both critiques of consumer society and the politics of gender, homosexual rights, and other “lifestyle” issues. Here popular culture—understood in its broadest sense, as a field connecting everything from the world of advertising and supermarket tabloids to the underground press and daily practices of the counterculture—became a field of ideological debate.

The distinction between surface appearances and the reality they purported to represent, so dear to the heart of the Situationists, makes up a central component in Quinn Slobodian’s contribution to this volume. In “Corpse Polemics: The Third World and the Politics of Gore in 1960s West Germany,” Slobodian explores the politics of representation in the West German left’s deployment of Third World atrocity imagery. Probing at the fine line between humanitarian
universalist claims of the New Left on the one hand, and on the other, the inscribing of Western politics over the body of the mutilated Third World “other,” Slobodian complicates our understanding of the student left’s moral critique of the West German establishment. Atrocity images, drawn from real life and recontextualized with a moral-political message on protest placards, existed in a complex dialectic with fictive images drawn from the movies, so that in the councils of the West German New Left, the two had necessarily to be treated as part of a continuum. Linking the propagandistic use of atrocity imagery to wider New Left debates about the representation of violence—particularly in the “Sado-boom” in 1960s cinema—Slobodian’s essay makes an important contribution, not only in helping us to think about little-considered ways in which the Third World became present in the metropole in the 1960s, but in helping to break down limiting distinctions between New Left politics and the wider society of which they were a part.

A key field for the development of a politics of everyday life in the post-1945 period—one often far removed from the theoretical concerns of artistic and political avant-gardes—has been popular music. For the theorists of the Frankfurt School, popular culture—and in particular, for Theodor Adorno, popular music—threatened to aid in the desensitization and de-culturation of the masses in a way subversive of critical intelligence.14 Although the Frankfurt School critique was influential in New Left student circles, especially in West Germany, the “pop-culturization” of youth rebellion nevertheless became complete before the end of the decade of the 1960s.15 This did not necessarily mean that the worst fears of Adorno and others had been realized, however, for as Detlef Siegfried and others have reminded us, youth consumption of popular culture became a constituent part of attempts at democratic self-invention from below.16 Still, the question of political content remains complex. To what extent can popular music operate as a venue for politics?

Increasingly, as a host of studies have indicated, genres ranging from hip-hop to folk, from jazz to punk, have been revealed as potential vehicles for political messages and mobilization. Yet arguably more important than the messages that are sometimes formulated within music genres are the meanings that are attached to them from outside. The politics of popular music have lain, more often than not, at the three-way intersection between the intentions of the performer, the expectations of the audience, and the interpretations or manipulations of cultural authorities.17 Recent work on the youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe has highlighted the importance of popular music in constructions of nonconformist or left-wing political identities.18 Yet attention is also increasingly being paid to attempts by political parties and regimes to respond to or utilize popular music for their own ends. In “The Voice of the Other America: African-American Music and Political Protest in the German Democratic Republic,” Michael Rauhut deals with the problems and potential of popular music for the Communist regime in East Germany. Tracing the regime’s vacillations between
suppression and attempts at co-optation, Rauhut shows how themes of oppression and racism in African-American genres like the Blues were put to use for both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic purposes. Nikolaos Papadogiannis shows how popular music proved a refractory vehicle for Communist movements in the West as well. In “Greek Communist Youth Identities and Rock Music in the Late 1970s,” he examines attempts by Greek Communist youth organizations to co-opt rock music for political purposes while simultaneously coming to grips with the threat of American cultural imperialism. Exposing the tension between the desire to foster indigenous (i.e., folk) music forms as a statement of national self-determination, and the need to co-opt the emotional power of rock music in attempts to win youth support, Papadogiannis demonstrates a different, often overlooked set of cracks in the monolith of popular music-as-politics.

The politics connected with popular music need by no means be progressive in character. In “From England with Hate: Skinheads and ‘Nazi Rock’ in Great Britain and Germany,” Timothy Brown demonstrates that popular music can easily serve as a vehicle for right-wing extremist politics, the more so because of the power it holds to shape subcultural identity. The first group of scholars to theorize the spectacular youth subcultures of the postwar period, the theorists of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, sought to detect, in the play of signs and images in the largely working-class subcultures of 1970s Britain, a new form of anti-hegemonic struggle carried out on the level of popular culture. For Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and other theorists of the Birmingham School, the politics involved was of an emancipatory, if largely inarticulate variety. It is increasingly clear, however, that the meaning of subcultures, like that of popular music, is highly contingent. Indeed, music genres and subcultures are often mutually dependent. Timothy Brown demonstrates that at every stage of the development of the skinhead subculture, from its roots in 1960s Great Britain through its spread to Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, music genre played a constituent role in shaping skinhead identity and skinhead politics. The association of the skinhead subculture with a racist iteration of white identity—a transformation that, as Brown shows, was accelerated by the process of transmission from one cultural setting to another—has made skinheads a sought-after constituency for right-wing parties in Europe and America since the 1980s.

As Alexander Clarkson demonstrates in this volume, however, subcultures represent much more than the response of white youth to immigrant presences. In “Punk Jihads: Immigrants, Subcultures and Political Violence 1955–2001,” Clarkson draws provocative parallels between traditionally (but no longer exclusively) white subcultures and successive waves of Third World immigrant subcultures. Outlining some of the little-known history of radical activism by immigrants to Europe, and arguing against the mistaken view of a monolithic “immigrant community,” Clarkson makes a compelling case for a more nuanced view of the internal social complexity of immigrant cultures. Drawing parallels
between the militant Islamic networks of the present and politicized subcultures like Punk and Skinhead, Clarkson offers a challenging update to theses about the politicization of daily life in a multicultural Europe.

As Clarkson illustrates, the semiotic content that so interested the theorists of the Birmingham School represents but one of the axes along which the wider significance of youth subcultures may be analyzed. Increasingly, youth and youth subcultures have been plotted against the spatial relationships so central to current understandings of the concrete political struggles of the 1960s and beyond. The Situationists were early theorists of the social constructedness of space, and in the role of urban geography and architecture in establishing topographies of power. More recently, scholars have emphasized the importance of urban spaces as concrete sites of conflict between the new youth culture and authorities of various kinds. Malgorzata Fidelis examines conflicts of this sort in “Red State, Golden Youth: Student Culture and Political Protest in 1960s Poland.” Focusing on the jazz club Hybrydy, founded by Warsaw University students in February 1957, Fidelis depicts a subcultural world in which students used consumer choices and personal style to signal their disaffection from the Communist regime. Student consumption of Western culture, argues Fidelis, came to symbolize, for the regime, the failure of its policies of youth mobilization. Yet, in attempting to “co-opt and domesticate Western trends,” the regime helped fuel the disaffection that it sought to contain.

If the behavior and lifestyle choices of youth in the East were relentlessly politicized from above—with the microscope turned, in particular, on the meeting places of nonconformist youth in the urban environment—in the West, the politicization of daily life began to be accomplished more and more from below toward the end of the 1960s. In particular, the disposition of urban space and living arrangements began to become a part of a left-wing praxis drawn from the concrete experience of battles over urban space. Carla MacDougall’s essay “In the Shadow of the Wall: Urban Space and Everyday Life in Kreuzberg” examines a well-known but little-studied example of this process: the struggle over the Berlin district of Kreuzberg. Drawing on recent scholarship representative of a “spatial turn” in which a value-neutral conception of space has given rise increasingly to a conception of space as socially constructed, MacDougall situates the activities of the Berlin squatter movement as part of a broader debate about the uses of public space, demonstrating in the process that the line separating public policy and mainstream political debates from supposedly marginal phenomena like youth subcultures can be thin indeed.

The squatter movement examined by MacDougall represents a transitional moment between the activism of the 1960s and the New Social Movements of the 1970s and beyond, movements that in turn bled into the anti-(alter-)globalization movement of the present. The latter movement—arguably the most salient contemporary successor to the protest politics of “1968”—informs the topic of the final three essays in this volume. In “Between Confrontation
and Frivolity? Gender and Militancy in the Czech Alter-globalization Movement,” Marta Kolárová analyzes the role of gender in the Czech alter-globalization movement. Developed since 1998 in close relation to PGA (People’s Global Action), the Czech alter-globalization movement is part of a larger transnational critique of neoliberalism. Yet, as Kolárová shows, the putatively “global” character of the movement should not obscure our awareness of regional particularities, especially where gender is concerned. The relative absence of women activists, breakdowns in cooperation between existing women’s organizations and the protest organizers, and the relegation of women’s issues to the small journals of the anarcho-feminist press, all have prohibited gender and women’s issues from becoming a central component of the Czech alter-globalization movement.

As Kolárová shows, however, gender asserts itself in the very protest tactics of the alter-globalization movement, which range from the militant-male confrontationalism of the Black Bloc to the more ambiguous interventions of groups like the Rebel Clowns and Tute Bianche. In “Protesting Bodies and Bodily Protest: A Plea for a ‘Thinking through the Body’ in Social Movement Research,” Andrea Pabst takes aspects of Kolárová’s analysis a step further, examining the “embodiment” of protest in the ritualized forms of the alter-globalization movement. More than merely a tool of protest, Pabst argues, the body becomes a means of expressing the social opposition of an entire collectivity. Positioning the body as an interface between the personal and the collective, Pabst adds a revealing new facet to the fusion of the “private” and the “political” that motivated the activism of the 1960s and remains one of the most important links between the activism of that era and the present.

Observers of the mass demonstrations of the turn of the twenty-first century—against neoliberal globalization, against the US war in Iraq—have been forced to confront the question of whether the tools of spectacular street protest and symbolic subversion born in the global movements of “1968” retain any efficacy against elites seemingly determined to pursue their initiatives despite popular disapproval. Is the link between culture and protest now too easily taken for granted? Andrew Lison takes up this question in his essay in this volume entitled “Post-Modern Protest? Minimal Techno and Multitude.” Engaging with the theories of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Lison considers the extent to which the links—sometimes concrete, sometimes affective—forged between practitioners of an electronic music genre and the anti-globalization movement may be seen to represent a new sort of emancipatory politics. With this question, Lison bring us full circle, demonstrating that the complex interrelationship between cultural practice and political content continues to involve in unexpected ways and with uncertain consequences. Whatever the shape of this relationship in the future, the territory between the avant-garde and the everyday should, for scholars, continue to yield new thematic and analytic insights.
Part I

Avant-Gardes

Few processes were more pregnant for the development of radical politics in twentieth-century Europe than the interpenetration of art and politics. Interwar avant-garde movements like Dada, Surrealism, and Constructivism were known for their political claims and associations, most notably their ongoing flirtations with communism and anarchism. Communist parties evaluated positively (although sometimes with qualifications) the political potentialities of art and artists, with the early Bolshevik embrace of Futurism and the relationship of the German KPD to artists like Piscator, Brecht, and Heartfield offering prominent examples. The recognition of affinities between the artistic and political projects was by no means, to be sure, per se a “progressive” development; the role of artists in the rise of Fascism (the Futurists under Marinetti in Italy, for example, or writers like Robert Brasillach and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle in France) is well known, as is the more general fascist “aestheticization of politics” diagnosed by Walter Benjamin. Yet politically engaged artists, both before and after 1945, operated by and large under the sign of Marxism, making the fusion of art and politics an overwhelmingly left-wing project. The most prominent postwar attempt to mine the political potentialities of art—Situationism—was part of an attempt to update Marxism in accordance with the realities of a postindustrial consumer society, alongside which the movements of masses orchestrated by Bolshevism or Maoism represented merely other spectacles separating man from authentic existence. That the desired authenticity was to be located somewhat closer to “art” than to “politics,” even while firmly anchored in the rhythms and spaces of daily life, helps explain the influence of Situationism on the development of new forms of political participation—of which May 1968 in Paris was a salient example—lying at the intersection of art, mass culture, and youth rebellion.
Chapter 1

The Gruppe Spur

Art as a Revolutionary Medium
during the Cold War

*Mia Lee*

The Emperor’s New Clothes

In January 1959, the Munich-based art group Spur co-organized an art exhibit titled “Realists-Extremists” at the Museum for Ethnology. Flyers for the exhibit advertised that the highly esteemed German philosopher Max Bense would deliver the opening night lecture.¹ On the evening of 23 January, a large, well-dressed audience congregated at the Museum for Ethnology to hear Bense.² They were thus duly surprised when 23-year-old Spur artist Hans-Peter Zimmer walked to the podium and switched on a tape recorder. A voice purporting to be Bense apologized for unforeseen hindrances and proceeded to deliver a talk on a wild mix of concepts including aesthetic information, continuity, coincidence, perfection, and civilization. A surviving excerpt of the talk testifies to its convoluted nature:

> The aesthetic, understood for the purpose of communication, thus emerging from records of choice of which the selection is a method, which demonstrates positivity and negativity, what it demonstrates depends on the choice, on the communication, which is embedded in the alternative. The positivity, which chosen, is portrayed and is often referred to as the “beautiful.” The negative, which is not chosen and not portrayed, or at least should not have been portrayed, is often referred to as the “not beautiful”. [One sentence in the original German text.]

After the lecture, the audience dutifully applauded. Then, over the course of the next few days, nonplussed journalists contacted Bense to ask him about the highly unorthodox presentation. Bense reacted with as much astonishment as the journalists. The professor had not actually received an invitation to the exhibit, and the talk had in fact been a textual collage of his writings cut-and-pasted and recorded by Hans-Peter Zimmer. The resulting mishmash of *Fremd-*
wörter (words of foreign origin) resulted in, as the group put it, the biggest ‘blah-blah’ of the century.

The revelation incensed the guests, and more seriously, Bense and the exhibit co-organizers, who threatened to take the group to court. The Spur artists, however, saw the event as a great success. First, the ensuing investigation into the hoax and the threat of a lawsuit showed how art could disrupt the order of everyday life. Second, the event dissolved any meaningful boundary between artist and audience. And third, the sham revealed the hypocrisy of Munich’s cultural elite. The hoax served as a reenactment of Hans Christian Anderson’s tale of the emperor’s new clothes. In this telling, Munich’s cultural elite revealed itself to be made up of self-important, passive consumers of culture. Spur thus mounted an attack against this entitlement as well as the entire institution of art criticism. For Spur, art critics could not exist because art was not genius, authenticity, or truth; it was a way of living.

This anecdote suggests Spur’s goals: a complete revolution of the status quo predicated on the simultaneous revolution of art and everyday life. The group’s efforts toward these goals helped launch an extensive critique of the postwar order as well as generate new methods of subverting the status quo. Although the group did not fully realize these goals, its actions and ideas fed into the protests commonly referred to as the ’68er movement. Indeed, this case study deepens our understanding of postwar extra-parliamentary protest. First, it shows how “1968” was not simply a generational departure from the “bleak” 1950s but part of a long trajectory that reached back to prewar leftist activists and intellectuals. In other words, the group’s history encourages a reassessment of West Germany’s “Zero Hour” and the legacy of National Socialism for ’68ers. Second, Spur’s politicization shows how local and international issues intersected and inspired the key protest issues of the late 1960s. And lastly, this case study demonstrates...
how artists revived debates on the arts and culture as well as the concept of revolutionizing the everyday, ideas and concepts that became central components of the extra-parliamentary protests of the late 1960s.

Munich: Testing Grounds for the Revolution

Spur's story is set in Munich in the 1950s, and like many things unique to Germany, it could not have happened anywhere but in Bavaria. Munich set an ideal backdrop for the group to unveil the compromises of the postwar settlement. During the 1950s, Munich was well positioned as an economic and cultural center in West Germany. The third largest city behind Berlin and Hamburg, it boasted one of the Federal Republic's fastest-growing economies, and by the mid 1950s, Munich's residents had cleared away most of the rubble. Although the city continued to suffer from an acute housing shortage into the 1960s, Munich set the national pace for economic recovery. At the time, Munich was celebrated by many as Germany's “secret capital.” As Spur member Dieter Kunzelmann put it:

In Hamburg, the pretentiousness and arrogance didn’t agree with me, and I got into trouble in theaters and bars because of my unkempt appearance. In Berlin, I liked the cheekiness, but the city didn’t have any character. Cologne and Frankfurt were absolutely provincial. So, only Munich was left, and in those days it was the secret capital. In the whole Federal Republic, there was no livelier place than Munich-Schwabing with all its artists, students, layabouts, and liberally inclined Munich natives.

Kunzelmann’s praise was echoed by the Süddeutsche Zeitung, which claimed Munich could stand among the great European cities of Paris, London, and Vienna. Booming tourism further confirmed these claims; in 1957 alone, 750,000 tourists visited the Bavarian capital, making the city the most popular tourist destination in West Germany.

Munich’s economic dynamism did not, however, translate into municipal investment in new art. Indeed, in the promotion of contemporary art, Munich fell well behind its northern neighbors. Several other West German cities showcased contemporary art as part of their democratization process. In Hesse, the city of Kassel provided a national consciousness for modern art in its Documenta exhibitions. The first exhibition in 1955 celebrated the reversal of Nazi cultural policies and exhibited twentieth-century modern art. It drew 130,000 visitors from around the world. By the second Documenta in 1959, the exhibition was one of the most important venues for contemporary art in Western Europe. Around the same time, several cities in the Rhineland set an impres-
sive pace of contemporary art exhibits, timely retrospectives, and much-needed funding for the arts. As early as the late 1950s, Düsseldorf was a major conduit to the Paris art scene as well as a lively base for new art. In 1958, the Düsseldorf Art Association hosted the first comprehensive postwar Dada exhibit in Germany. In 1962, the Festspiele neuester Musik in Wiesbaden and Neodada in Musik in Düsseldorf were organized. Also in Düsseldorf, Fluxus artists Joseph Beuys and Wolfgang Vostell, both faculty members at the Düsseldorf art academy, launched a series of “happenings” (Aktionen) from the Rhineland across West Germany. Fluxus made its German debut in 1959 in nearby Wiesbaden, where Korean-born artist Nam June Paik held the first Fluxus concert, Hommage à John Cage.

Unlike their northern neighbors, Munich officials focused on restoring the city’s pre–National Socialist monuments and arts. The Social Democrat Thomas Wimmer, the mayor of Munich from 1948 to 1960, oversaw the clearing of Munich’s rubble and the city’s immediate rebuilding. His successor, Hans-Jochen Vogel, also a Social Democrat as well as Munich’s youngest mayor at the age of thirty-four, affirmed his predecessor’s commitment to rebuilding the city’s neo-baroque splendors. Unsurprisingly, this focus fed straight into a narrative of recovery and progress that effectively contained the National Socialist period as an aberration in the city’s glorious history. Large, costly building projects that highlighted Munich’s neo-baroque heritage were financed in rapid measure as the city’s 800th anniversary in 1958 approached. Under these conditions, promoting young artists was clearly neither a municipal priority nor fiscal possibility.

Although contemporary art suffered, most Munich residents praised their leadership for choosing to prioritize Munich’s baroque architecture. At the same time, journalists, city chroniclers, and local historians lovingly recounted the city’s history. These writers boasted that Munich’s bohemian quarter Schwabing rivaled Paris’ Montmartre and nicknamed the area “Munich’s most beautiful daughter” (Münchens schönster Tochter). Numerous articles nostalgically recounted the many figures, from Vladimir Lenin to Paul Klee to Henrik Ibsen, who had lived in Schwabing and given it its legendary reputation as a center of avant-garde culture and intellectual daring. In a typically romantic style, the Munich historian Karl Bosl described Schwabing as a center for “artists, permanent carnival” that safeguarded “bohemian life, libertarianism, contempt for the bourgeoisie, and odd habits in clothing, appearance, and discourse.”

Not surprisingly, very few articles or travel guides described Munich’s place in the Third Reich. Dubbed the “Capital of the Movement” by Hitler, Munich was a beloved and key city for the National Socialists as well. Most chroniclers, however, preferred to footnote or marginalize this recent history. The prolific Munich historian Ludwig Hollweck conceded that Munich’s artists had collaborated with the Nazis, but he justified their actions by explaining that these artists had had to “bow under the terror of the Thousand Year Reich and the orders of the art dictators in their uniforms and boots.” Yet, he averred, “most of them
remained true to themselves and to the traditions of the art city of Munich.”17 Most Munich residents readily accepted this argument of internal emigration.

Even the memory of the Scholl siblings, the city’s most famous symbols of anti-Nazi resistance, was appropriated to absolve Munich residents. The National Socialists had executed the sister and brother in 1943 for distributing anti-Nazi propaganda, but instead of acting as a simple accusation, their memory also reinforced the city’s reputation as one of moral strength. Their story and fate typified Munich courage on the one hand, while exemplifying Nazi brutality and the need for restraint on the part of the average Münchner on the other. Officially and unofficially, by the mid 1950s Munich was well on the way to recovery from the war and its National Socialist past.

As mentioned above, funds and resources for the arts remained scarce during this period of recovery.18 The housing shortage persisted into the 1960s and meant few available ateliers. Even Munich’s most prestigious art museums, the Alte and Neue Pinakotheke, were forced to tour or loan their permanent collections to museums with adequate space and facilities. Extensive war damage had rendered these museums as well as numerous other exhibition spaces in Munich unable to house, much less exhibit, their collections.

It thus fell to artist associations and private art dealers to organize art exhibitions in the city.19 The three largest postwar artist organizations in Munich were the Neue Gruppe, the Münchner Secession, and the Münchner Künstlergenossenschaft. These and other smaller associations such the Freunde der bildenden Kunst and the Kulturliga were licensed by the Allied powers during the mid 1940s. Their shared goals were to rebuild artist networks both locally and internationally, improve artists’ material circumstances (studio space, heating supplies, materials, and employment), and revive the art market.20

Toward these aims, the work of private individuals was indispensable. The Munich art historian couple Franz and Juliane Roh played a pivotal role countering conservative voices that saw new abstract art as a threat to German culture and morality.21 Franz Roh publicized and promoted new art, while Juliane Roh became secretary of the ZEN-Gruppe 49.22 The British consul in Munich, John Anthony Thwaites, provided key financial assistance to the group and other abstract artists.23 Private philanthropists such as Solomon Guggenheim’s art consultant Hilla von Rebay helped procure American care packages for artists and also organized funds for new buildings and collections.24

At the same time, private gallery owners organized several important exhibitions.25 Gallery owners Hermann Baudenbach, Günther Franke, and Otto Stangl recovered the great painters of classical modernism for an entire generation of young artists that had been deprived of these works under the National Socialists. Indeed, into the 1960s, Spur member Dieter Kunzelmann remarked on how Nazi cultural policies continued to mark his generation; it was not until he joined Spur that he discovered an entire history of Weimar and turn-of-the-century art he had never even known existed.26 Franke, in particular, was a major
educator in the art world, putting together exhibits by Max Beckmann, Willi Baumeister, and Oskar Schlemmer.

During this revival of classical modernism in the mid 1950s, the Munich-based art collector Otto van de Loo made his first trips to Paris. There, van de Loo visited the ateliers of the postwar abstract artists Asger Jorn, Antoni Tapiés, and Antonio Saura. Shortly thereafter, van de Loo and his wife Heike van de Loo, member of the wealthy Reemtsma family, opened the Gallery van de Loo on the fashionable Maximilianstraße, the first gallery in Munich to showcase Western European and West German contemporary art. Warned by senior gallery owner Günther Franke that the gallery scene was saturated and no market existed or needed to exist for contemporary art, van de Loo nonetheless persisted, and his gallery became a major meeting place in Munich for local and international art figures that was enormously important to young artists.

While the simultaneous efforts of Munich's cultural and political elites gradually reestablished Munich's reputation as a tolerant and even cosmopolitan city, a pervasive cultural conservatism persisted. It was this contradictory situation that provided the ideal setting for the artist group Spur. First, Spur criticized the popular romanticization of Munich's past, especially the restorative and conservative voices that perpetuated this narrative. Through its interventions—from reintroducing the figure in art to writing about members' sexual exploits—Spur showed that the prosperous and progressive reputation Munich cherished remained shallow and haunted by an undercurrent of unexamined authoritarianism. Second, the group deliberately examined this hypocrisy to unveil the much larger deceit of democracy. For the group, “democracy” was just another means of quelling internal dissent and facilitating the growth of the capitalist system. Underneath these two umbrella points, the group challenged the binaries of the Cold War, the authority of the Catholic Church, and prevailing moral and sexual norms.

Munich thereby became the testing grounds for Spur's revolutionary project of integrating art and politics almost a decade before Berlin became a center of political activity. Spur thus provides a case for questioning standard treatments of the 1960s as a cultural and political departure from the 1950s, particularly when one traces the source of the group's ideas on integrating art and politics to Western Marxism, neo-Dadaism, Surrealism, and turn-of-the-century anarchism. The remainder of this essay follows the cycle of Spur's activism from the fall of 1957, when the union of art and politics seemed like a catalyst for imminent revolution, to the early 1960s, when Spur's promise to completely reorder postwar society crumbled under internal suspicions and external pressures.

Multi-generational Protest

The Bense scandal marked the beginning of Spur's activism and secured the group's reputation. Shortly thereafter the Situationist International welcomed
the group into its ranks. This collaboration lasted from 1959 to 1961, during which the group published seven issues of its journal, designed numerous actions, and distributed dozens of manifestos. The group’s core members were Helmut Sturm, Heimrad Prem, Lothar Fischer, Hans-Peter Zimmer, and Dieter Kunzelmann.28 The five artist members, born between the mid 1930s and early 1940s, were old enough to remember the war and particularly the defeat. They came of age when postwar economic growth was funneling over a billion marks annually into the arts.29 The core group had met as students at the Munich Art Academy, where they had been drawn to each other in their shared desire for a forum for discussion and artistic collaboration.30 The single non-artist member was Dieter Kunzelmann, who joined the group in 1960 as the group’s writer-theorist. After living like a bohemian on the streets of Paris for half a year, he accepted his father’s offer of a monthly allowance in exchange for returning to Germany.31 Kunzelmann decided to settle in a basement apartment in Schwabing, where he quickly established his reputation as a *Gammler*, a good-for-nothing layabout, as well as an autodidact. Spur recruited him as their writer and launched his career as a top-rate provocateur.

The group’s introduction to activism was jumpstarted by its connection to interwar artists, most notably Hans Platschek and Asger Jorn. Platschek was a returned émigré from Argentina who had recently relocated from Paris. Jorn had fought in the Danish resistance during the war and had already founded two important postwar art groups before co-founding the Situationist International.32 Both men encouraged their younger colleagues to rescue art from the current trends in abstract art and what they termed functional art. Moreover, Jorn’s international contacts boosted Spur’s career tremendously. He also personally undertook the artists’ theoretical development. Working with Jorn, the group began publishing *Spur*, a journal showcasing their artwork and their ideas on culture and politics. In addition, it was Jorn who invited the Spur artists to join the Situationist International network (Figure 1.2).

Inspired by the contact with the Situationist network, Spur began to examine art world debates on the role of art in society. The group initially drew on ideas from Dada and Surrealism. Like these earlier avant-garde groups, Spur refuted the bourgeois image of the artist as genius and insisted that only collaborative art could be revolutionary. Spur then pushed these ideas one step further. Instead of considering art a tool for changing society, as proposed by the Dadaists, they treated art as an experiential whole—in other words, art itself was conceived as a way of thinking and living. In their vision, art as a separate category of activity ceased to exist. This vision was strongly influenced by the artist and collector Jean Dubuffet, whose *Art Brut* or outsider art—work by the insane, socially marginalized, and nonprofessional—embodied the new experience of art as an all-integrated experience somewhat akin to Surrealist claims for universal creativity.

An integral element of this experiential conceptualization of art was play. Here, the Spur artists drew on the work of the medievalist Johan Huizinga to
argue that art, like culture, evolved in play. By integrating the concepts of creativity, play, and the everyday, Spur meant to attack what they saw as the deadening limitations of postwar society. The new society they envisioned would nurture creativity: once play was released into society, the existing separation between labor and leisure would dissolve. In this formulation, the group borrowed the notion of imposed or alienated labor from Marx and then coupled it with a critique of leisure, a concept that came directly from the Situationists, their one-time ally philosopher Henri Lefebvre, and the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (Figure 1.3). In their declaration, they explained that the artists’ pariah-like status in society arts resulted from society’s never-ending siege on play and subversiveness. In the attempt to overcome this isolation and vulnerability, Spur called on revolutionaries to unite and challenge society’s segregation of work and leisure.

By extension, in this new world art would no longer function within a market-based exchange based on consumption and material gain. Art and creativity would thus become the basis for rethinking political categories, the existing lim-

Figure 1.2. Situationist International with the Gruppe Spur, circa 1960. Standing on the left tractor wheel is Hans-Peter Zimmer; behind him is Dieter Kunzelmann (with cap). At the center of the photo looking downwards is Helmut Sturm (holding the left edge of a placard); to the right in a black sweater is Guy Debord. Heimrad Prem stands alone on the right tractor wheel. *Werkbund-Archiv, Berlin.*
The decision to adopt a nuclear defense strategy marked a decisive moment for Spur.36 Their thoughts about technology, progress, and the future of modernity seemed alarmingly relevant. Although Spur was optimistic that technology used in the service of mankind would promote creativity and better living, Spur members deplored what it considered the government’s “automatic functional thinking.” In a manifesto, Spur attributed “stubborn thoughtlessness” as the reason behind the government’s decision to deploy the atomic bomb.37 For Spur, this thoughtlessness further revealed the false optimism of the 1950s Wirtschaftswunder (West Germany’s rapid economic growth during this decade). They posited that this optimism was “false” because it obscured the government’s