

[Making Sense of the Americas](#)

How Protest Related to America in the 1980s and Beyond

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Leseprobe

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I. Foundations

Transatlantic Flows and Complex Entanglements of Protest in the 1980s.

An Introduction

Jan Hansen, Christian Helm, Frank Reichherzer

It is 1982. David Horsey, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist, sketches a world map which he believes will irritate those who look at it. "The World According to Ronald Reagan" is the title of this illustration finally published in the daily newspaper Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Most strikingly, the drawing is not in due proportion to other maps. Basically, it rescales the prevalent view on geography. This may be read as an under-mining of all presumptions about how the world

supposedly works. But what can we see when we look at it? First of all, we learn that the world consists of two major countries, namely the United States of America and the Soviet Union, represented by a cowboy figure with the hand on the trigger and a bear-like man with an Ushanka, a Russian-style ear-hat. The cowboy has the face of Ronald Reagan, the then Republican US president, while the bear stands for Leonid Brezhnev, the secretary general of the Soviet Union's communist party. The map further shows the US itself divided into two rivalling parts. On the one hand, there is a giant California with celebrated landmarks such as "Bechtel Corporation", "Hollywood" and "Disneyland", on the other hand there is a remarkably small region called "Democrats and Welfare Bums" on the territory of, roughly, New England. North of the United States the drawing shows "Unexplored Wasteland", south of the country only "Banana Land", disproportionally huge Falkland islands and Cuba as a "Soviet Colony". Europe, quite paradoxically, is almost non-existent, despite Great Britain being "Thatcher-Land". The rest of West Europe is a region of "Socialists and Pacifists" who are opposed to the missiles deployed in this region. While the map describes these missiles as "ours", the USSR has "theirs" just beyond the Iron Curtain - the overall balance is five to six to the disadvantage of the West. At the same time, the African continent, inhabited by "Negroes", seems to be very irrelevant. Twice as big appear the Arab world ("Our Oil") and the state of Israel. The "Palestinian Homeland" is situated somewhere near the North Pole. From an American point of view, however, the biggest enemy stands heavily armed behind the Iron Curtain. His land is almost as huge as the US. Obviously, there is no need to explain how threatening the Russians are. One can read "Godless Communists, Liars and Spies" as the curt portrayal of the red menace.

What then does this map say? "The World according to Ronald Reagan" depicts a binary outlook on international affairs in the early 1980s. It localizes everything that has to be seen as good and worth striving for within the United States and its Republican milieu while similarly demonizing the Soviet Union. Us and them - the map conveys a simple message. Actually, this piece is too simplistic to be taken at face value by readers of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The world atlas is a caricature, and Horsey is speaking tongue in cheek. In fact, the map purports to be a clever parody and criticism of the 1980s Republican mindset, but in retrospect we can see that it is not so much an insight into Reagan's world but rather a peek into what his adversaries imagined as Reaganism. As a result, the map serves to illuminate the left-leaning worldview of the time, filtered through parodic lenses. Think of the map as an archaeological document that reveals the structures of how its creators imagined the world.

"The World According to Ronald Reagan" thus functioned as a powerful tool for those who wanted to brand contemporary America. Democrats all over the country received the caricature with enthusiasm. Not only in the United States was the illustration being reprinted again and again. More than that, it evolved into a famous iconic topos of social protest movements against "the establishment" in the Western hemisphere. This is why we choose to begin our book, which is about how protest activists represented "the Americas" in the 1980s, by talking about this figure. In sum, "The World According to Ronald Reagan" has to do with three things: first, a Manichean view

ascribed to Reagan by the protesters, which appears to be at least ignorant or even dangerous; second, the differentiation between an outsized North America and a marginalized southern part; and third, the style element of parody as the dominant means of expression. These three principles - Cold War binarity, the two differing Americas and irony as a stylistic device in voicing protest - can help us to analyze the images with which the 1980s protest activists constructed their world. This is what this book is all about.

To begin with, it is necessary to underline that the terms "establishment" and "protesters", widely used in this book, are contemporary to the time we are dealing with. One has to bear in mind how these concepts served as vehicles in shaping a specific representation of the other. This is why we need to historicize how the people of the 1980s used to categorize each other. To put it in a nutshell, those who condemned official politics were classified as protesters by the object of their criticism - and not by themselves. The "establishment" then vice versa is the term coined by the 1968 students for the government, the police or the courts. Labelling, from a historical point of view, is a matter of ascribing legitimacy. The terms "protesters" and "establishment" undermined the respective cause of the opponent for both the discontented citizens and the representatives of the state. Bearing in mind how powerful language can be for the construction of reality, we have to concede that we can barely escape this process. It is against this backdrop that we, the editors of this book, use the terms "protesters" and "establishment" in the sense the contemporaries did. Referring to demonstrators as activists of "new social movements" stemmed from the scientific discourse of that time which we cannot entirely avoid.

What does this mean? Social sciences back then analyzed the unrest of the late 1960s and 1970s as "new social movements" to distinguish it from the labor movement as an "old social movement". They stated that social movements from mid-1960s differed significantly from their precursors, such as the labor movement, which had previously been seen as focused on economic concerns. Historically, the 1968 protests soon diversified into different movements with ecological, emancipatory or anti-war goals. Examples of those movements include the women's movement, the ecology movement, gay rights movement and various peace and solidarity movements, among others. It should be noted, in this context, that the terrorist scene of the 1970s had its origins, too, in the 1968 movement. The action focus of new social movements was mostly a local or regional one while also reaching out to the wider public. At the beginning of the following decade, they reached an unforeseen high. People from all over Europe joined mass protests articulating fears of environmental abuses, nuclear catastrophes and increasing global injustices or supporting leftist revolutionary movements in the so-called Third World. They thus committed themselves to the protection of natural resources, to peace and disarmament and to lobbying against neo-imperialism in political and economic affairs with countries of the Global South. Challenging the ruling political and social order, they shocked the establishment.

It is worth noting, however, that protest extended into the establishment as well. This is especially true regarding the two movements this book deals with: the "peace movement" against the

"Euromissiles" and the "solidarity movement" with Latin America. The Italian communists, the West German labor union or even the ruling social democratic party in West Germany can be seen, in some respect, as part of these movements. Their members participated in extra-parliamentary rallies and criticized the political course to which their governments thought there was no alternative. From communists to social democrats, many left-leaning citizens in the 1970s and 1980s acted according to double loyalties. Consciously they saw themselves as members of a traditional organization and of a new social movement at the same time. There was no clear boundary between the establishment and protest movements, and the distinction between mainstream society and a rioting minority was not nearly as clear or meaningful as we conventionally assume.

The background of the peace movement, to start with, was the social unrest of the 1970s. The peace protesters of the early 1980s and the ecological movements of the 1970s shared a profound anti-nuclear sentiment. More than that, these two movements drew upon the very same social milieu. Quite often, concerned citizens took part in demonstrations of the anti-nuclear movement as they would do against the Pershing and Cruise missiles only a few years later. Insofar, the interpretation patterns, symbols and practices of these two movements paralleled each other. The solidarity movements with Latin America invoked older and newer traditions of leftist internationalism. However, at the end of the 1970s, most activists were no longer inspired by a concept of the Third World as the cradle of world revolution, but supported revolutionary and anti-imperialist movements and their visions for social justice in their own right. The appeal of Latin American Liberation Theology and its combination of Christianity, revolution and social reform motivated many Christian groups to join the movement. Finally, it also intersected with the Third World movement of the 1970s, which promoted justice and fair trade between the wealthy north and the underdeveloped south. Both peace and solidarity movement were largely moderate in terms of their action repertoire and political goals. Nevertheless, some radical factions heckled their homogenous appearance. While violence as a means of political communication was judged from very different and often conflicting angles within the movements - some of them justifying blockades, riots and squatting as a legitimate form of protest - the new social movements also gave birth to more radical views. From the leftist terrorists of the 1970s to the anarchist scene in Berlin, all these well-known split-offs tried hard to escalate the confrontation between protesters and establishment. This does not distract from the fact that the movements' protagonists, despite their differing judgment of violence, shared a comparable outer appearance. Their habitus was characterized by an alternative lifestyle: long haired, bearded men and women with shawls or colorful clothes. In many towns, small villages or rural landscapes adherents to the new social movements could be identified according to their outer appearance. At its center, protesting in the long 1970s was a matter of looking differently. As of the human physical appearance, new social movements were recognized as a visual unity by the majority society.

What else bound these different sub-groups together? First and foremost, they can be seen as linked by their paying very close attention to the United States of America. On the one hand,

protest activists constructed a representation in which the US appeared as being responsible for all the world's deficiencies. Especially, the activists considered the US responsible for ecological destruction and the proliferation of nuclear power plants as well as for imperialism toward Latin America and the nuclear arms race between the world superpowers. In this view, it was not primarily the Soviet regime accelerating the spiralling arms race but rather the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its leading power, the US. The vast majority of the 1980s protest movements blamed the US for using and abusing mankind and Earth. For them, Ronald Reagan personified the American neo-conservative evil and, therefore, played a key role in establishing a generally accepted enemy stereotype. Similarly, protest movements all over Europe tried to associate themselves with inner-American debates. They took heart from comparable protest movements within US society. As the European protesters recognized that there was opposition against Reagan and his policy, they made the often surprising experience that "America" was no monolithic bloc. Glad to see the American society as multilayered, they wanted to create and intensify a transnational civil society. Therefore, Atlantic crossings and transfers - for instance with the nuclear weapons freeze campaign, the American solidarity movement with Latin America and many other oppositional movements in the US - were aimed at boosting and legitimizing shared protest goals. However, Europeans did not only establish connections with North American activists, nor did they merely blame the US administration for harming the world's environmental, nuclear and social peace. Since the 1960s, they had also started to build up transnational networks with leftist movements south of the US. The Nicaraguan Sandinistas as well as other oppositional, revolutionary or guerilla movements in Latin America were, as point of reference, of highest importance for protesters in Europe. However, the United States always remained ubiquitous in these transnational networks - acting as a kind of negative backdrop or as the regional hegemon, which collaborated with local elites to suppress any attempt to achieve social justice in this region.

When talking about "the Americas", at least four different meanings of this concept push to the forefront. First, there was the America of Ronald Reagan, the conservative and militaristic, mid-Western and bigoted majority society. Second, there was its fascist South-American mirror image and protégé: the authoritarian regimes in the Southern Cone or Central America. These two Americas, from the viewpoint of the 1980s protest movements, were the bad ones. Luckily, however, they were able to envisage "the other America", the protest movements in the US, marginal but existent, with which they tried to associate themselves. The second glimmer of hope were the revolutionary movements in Latin America itself, during the 1980s mainly the socialist Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Thousands of protest activists throughout Western Europe declared their ideational or even practical solidarity with the Sandinistas. They helped collecting funds and material support for the burgeoning socialist paradise, or they travelled to Latin America in order to experience this prototype of a new society. In sum, referring to "the Americas" could raise very different meanings.

Examining these years through an historian's eye, the 1980s were a decade of extremes: street

demonstrations and riots on the one hand, and years legendary for their boringness on the other hand. Recent histori-ography is still trying to make sense of this decade. Yet, to us it seems obvious that we must refrain from decadological periodization. The protest movements of the early 1980s had much in common with its ancestors in the 1970s. At the same time, they can rightly be seen as foretelling the end of the superpower confrontation, as they had already started to rethink the Cold War binary paradigm in the 1970s. They encapsulated an aversion against binarity - this is one of the claims we want to bring forward in this book. Protest movements rejected the representation of the world as a set of binary oppositions. For them, the world was closely connected and depending on all single parts. As the ideological confrontation between the superpowers came to an end in 1989/1990, their central interpretation pattern - for which the concept of "interdependency" was of highest importance - reentered the stage of international relations as well as of societal and scientific deliberation. It was in this way that the caesura of 1989/1990 proved to be connected to the mental makeup of protest movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Taken together, every periodization is artificial and every caesura is, needless to say, construed; so, the 1980s protest movements were both linked to their predecessors and to the aftermath of their ideas. This is why we have chosen to go beyond the 1980s in this book. However, our main interest rests on the early years of the decade as this was the time when Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States which led many fellow Americans and West Europeans to vehemently oppose his politics as well as his person. This is not to say that it was Reagan who caused the protests. But he was the right person at the right time to serve as a collectively accepted enemy stereotype in Western Europa and in the Americas.

Summarizing what the 1980s protest movements introduced as new elements into the political and social discourse of the Western world, one should at least distinguish two fields here. First, they contributed to the ongoing change of "the political". Second, they encapsulated a new representation of "the West" in which the Cold War binarity was no longer dominant. As to their imagination of an ideal model of democracy, protest activists emphasized political values that had been marginal for quite a long time. For them, a functioning democracy had to provide its citizens with adequate possibilities for participation. "Participation" as a guiding concept structured contemporary discourses profoundly. Protest movements aimed at integrating the demands of ordinary people and of grassroots initiatives into the political system. Their mental depository built upon an Anglo-American exemplification of the political. In this, the state was no divine idea on earth nor, as Hegel would have put it, mind objectified. Rather, the political order rested on the consent of the governed and was thus undergoing permanent change. Especially in the West German tradition of political thought, this was new. Up until the 1960s, there had been a tradition of subservience to the German authorities in many parts of public life. From the late 1960s onwards, however, this was undergoing fundamental transformation. Grassroots movements demanded participation and questioned the system of representative democracy with its established actors such as political parties, parliaments and bureaucracies. Consequently they probed new ways of participating in the political process. This is why many historians, when looking at the late 1970s and early 1980s, tend to see at work a democratization of the political.

This may be an adequate explanation of what was going on in these years; however, though this interpretation, obviously, has a tendency to get normative. Therefore, we refrain here from deciding whether the change of the political around 1980 led Western democracies on a more "democratic" path. What seems crucial to us is that many sources do strengthen the view that the political altered fundamentally in these years. "Participation" became more and more important - at least in the mind of those engaged in extra-parliamentary protest; and this has far-reaching consequences. The following chapters of this book also contribute to assert this assumption. They explore the scope of the transformation, often on the basis of primary sources. Therefore, this book is about change.

The second thing social protest movements in the long 1980s brought about was a new aversion against the Cold War binarity. Criticizing the two superpowers was at the heart of many peace activists' *raison d'être*. Of course, they and their fellow activists in the solidarity movements condemned Reagan and his policy. What we described at the beginning as core elements of "The World According to Ronald Reagan" - mainly the bias against any sort of Manichean view - served them as guiding concepts in formulating arguments against American policies. According to solidarity activists, the 1960s onwards provided plenty examples of how the Cold War bipolarity and subsequent US policies represented a dead end for any attempts to achieve social reforms in Latin America. However, other protesters also included the Soviet Union in their sweeping blow against established politics. They opposed the deployment of mediumrange nuclear missiles close to the Iron Curtain, while also pointing out the ecological destruction in the Soviet sphere of control at the same time. For larger parts of the Western public, however, the 1980s protest movement one-dimensionally demonized what the US government did. Especially by the conservative spectrum this was considered an assault because they saw "anti-Americanism" at work. Full of resentment, this appeared to them as the gravest harm citizens could do to their protecting power. The contemporary interpretation pattern "anti-Americanism" served the establishment as an instrument to make sense of what the protesters did. In this book, we do not want to decide whether new social movements were "anti-American" at all. To us, it is more important to stress how this conceptual figure performed as a vital part in the sense-making process of many protagonists. Whether there was actually "anti-Americanism" is insignificant to us because what we are interested in is the mutual construction of representations of the other. Yet what we can say for sure is that the peace and solidarity movements in the early 1980s watered down the Cold War binarity, which had been of highest importance since the late 1940s. We have already sketched this paradigm above and explained how it was pressurized by social movements. Therefore we shall restrict ourselves here to the remark that the object of our study is, at its heart, a movement against the principle of the Cold War - namely "bipolarity" in a political sense and "binarity" in broader perspective. This representation of the world no longer had any explanatory power for many contemporaries in the 1970s and 1980s for it did not provide them with adequate tools to solve the perceived problems of the time. Beyond that, it could not simply help stabilize societies. Rather, the Cold War order of "us and them", thinking in terms of zero-sum games on the back of potential atomic self-destruction, was creating dangerous threats itself. Instead of the

Cold War paradigm, conceptions like "interdependency" and "globalization" became more and more prevalent. The Cold War paradigm appeared to many adherents of protest as a relic of past times.

Hence, the 1980s were a time of paradox. On the one hand, the Cold War paradigm experienced an intense revival. Defense budgets exploded, new weaponry was deployed and the rhetoric became more radical. On the other hand, the Cold War logic lost its explanatory power and could not deliver orientation for large parts of society anymore. The major threat was no longer being enslaved or killed by communism but the danger of getting ill or dying of air pollution. The protesters thus became sensitive for a global, planetary consciousness, and the East-West split seemed outdated. They thought of the North-South divide as the major test for the present and the future. Often, when reordering is at stake, paradox situations like this arose, and contingency appears on the scene. In the social movements of the 1980s, this process of renegotiation became apparent. From this perspective, we suggest to describe protest movements as "figurations of the third". They brought in a third quantity undermining the binarity of the Cold War order. From this point of view, the social movements we investigate here had two faces. In some sense, they were actors of breaking the paradigm of bipolarity. Nevertheless, they were also products of an eroding order. As a figuration of the third, protest movements were bridging this division at the same moment. By showing and developing different opportunities, they were necessary and catalytic for change and shaping new order.

From a bird's eye view, protest in the 1980s was globally interconnected. Especially the transatlantic flows were important. This does not mean that only ideas, concepts or forms of protest were circulating between Europe and the Americas, nor that there was a homogenous "protesters' international". The concept of this edited volume broadens the view. Of course, tracing transfers and international consciousness is imperative for our concept. However, we try to go a step further. Those transatlantic flows which we think of appear in the form of a "transatlantic triangle". Perceptions were based and positions were built on these intertwined flows. West European protesters molded themselves into these flows by making sense of the Americas and by facing specific situations in their European environments. The "transatlantic triangle" became a powerful trajectory for forming, articulating and performing protest in the 1980s and beyond. To put it more concretely: From anti-Reagan riots in West Berlin to pictures of revolutionary Nicaragua, it is simply impossible to grasp social protest movements in the 1970s and 1980s without referring to how they imagined "the Americas".

This edited volume is aimed at historicizing the representations of the United States and of Latin America among West European protesters in these two decades. Its outline represents an attempt to enrich the existing scholarship on this phenomenon in two ways. First, images of the Americas have gathered the attention of recent research on protest, especially for the years around 1968. This book looks at the subsequent period and opens the floor for future investigations on legacies, continuities and ruptures in these representations. Second, the US and Latin America were both

often present as points of reference in protest movements at that time. However, combined research which takes both parts of the continent into account is still rare.

Largely, the chapters within this book focus on the peace movement against the "Euromissiles" and on solidarity movements with Latin America during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some authors, however, situate their findings in a larger picture in order to illustrate long-term developments. While the outline of this volume can hardly deny a bias towards the West German context and protest movements, its many case studies from other European countries offer valuable insights and points of comparison to how leftist or, in one case, rightist protest related to the Americas during that time. Most of the authors in this volume work at the intersection of research on transnational protest, its representations and transfers. By investigating dominant interpretation patterns, practices and symbols within these movements, this book offers a fresh and compelling look at protest in the second half of the twentieth century. The chapters shed light on how contemporaries built networks with the American continent while at the same time tracing the imaginations of "Europe" and of European protest among American activists. In sum, this volume brings forward the argument that we cannot understand why protest in the 1980s was swelling like a wave if we do not set the record straight on their representation of the Americas - a far-reaching assumption future research will have to deal with.