# The Ostensible End of the Protest Movement (March 15, 1975)

## Abstract

In the following article, political scientist Bernd Guggenberger analyzes the protest movement of the previous years. He explores its motivations and strategies, as well as the reasons behind its apparent loss of momentum in the mid-1970s. On the basis of this analysis, Guggenberger predicts a "new Biedermeier era," referring to a period in the early nineteenth century when people—at least publicly—made a turn away from politics and towards private life.

## Source

### The Return to Reality

Where is the protest movement going? A definite answer to this question is impossible, if for no other reason than our temporal and spatial proximity to this phenomenon. The recognizable approaches, motivations, and directions are too diverse and ambiguous: the development also proceeded too breathlessly; the passage of time left so many things outdated, things that the culturally-critical social sciences had already deemed all but "certain knowledge."

One need only recall the theory of the "end of ideologies," which was proclaimed with missionary zeal until well into the 1960s. What remained of it when one took stock of things at the end of that decade? Not only did a new right-wing party establish itself here in the Federal Republic in the mid-1960s in the wake of the economic recession; a "New Left" also emerged, and as a worldwide movement at that. Its criticisms were ignited precisely by the anti-ideology stance of industrial society, the complacency of the older generation, the sobriety and everyday pragmatism of the politicians, and the orientation toward prosperity for [*Wohlstandsorientierung*] that was prevalent everywhere.

What remains when we look back at the "doctrines" of the early 1970s today? And when we think of slick formulas such as re-ideologization, polarization, anarchy, and class struggle?

Today, in 1975, is the ideological permeation of broad areas of social life, indoctrination and political polarization, class struggle and anarchy still the central issue in schools and universities?

What is immediately obvious to everyone is that, outside the walls of our universities, and in large part even within them, things have gotten noticeably quieter. Gone is the pure excitement, the hectic revolutionizing, the outpouring of emotions. Gone, too, is the lightness, the optimism, the ingenuousness that was thoroughly characteristic of this collective escape from the despised world of the fathers. Initially, the spokespeople of the "New Left" included many more artists and poets than politicians and functionaries of organizations. This has changed fundamentally. No longer does the talented loner, the critical, well-read, original, sharp-tongued, articulate individualist dominate the scene, but rather the—often meticulously tidy—wooden, but well-prepared, narrow-minded dogmatist of an SED-friendly "Marxism-Leninism."

With the new "Spartacist" formation (and some other large and small groups that call themselves communist), the revolution has lost its "cosmopolitan" flair. It has become provincial, petty-minded, bigoted, and is mostly consumed by arguments about the proper exegesis of each respective text that promises liberation. It no longer feels responsible for all the world's problems, but contents

itself—sometimes in a way that is almost pushy and petty—with the articulation of “student interests.” At first glance, this new student generation doesn’t seem all that different from the older, “quiet,” or “skeptical” generation of the 1950s and early 1960s, which, from time to time, also “took to the battlefield” with neatly printed cardboard placards to protest increases in streetcar fares and cafeteria prices.

Despite all of the revolutionary slogans that remain (and can still be seen on university walls today), it is hard to overlook the fact that there is hardly anyone who still seriously believes in revolutionary interpretations of the current situation. The revolution has been put on ice. The revolutionaries are taking a breather. This “breather” served above all to push the revolution off the public stage. It is taking place once again—here in this country with typical German thoroughness—in auditoriums, in lecture halls, and at meetings of SPD leftists. The unusual sobriety actually testifies more to exhaustion than to a deceptive calm before a new storm. The revolutionaries are tired, sad, disillusioned. In the end, it is more draining to be against everything than to totally subordinate yourself to one idea, one mission, or one commitment, to dedicate yourself fully to one thing.

What the antiauthoritarian “New Left” never really managed to find, however, was precisely this sense of security and identification that springs from dedication to a cause. They never found a clear-cut theme, their own distinct purpose. For a while, they seemed to have found it in their concern for the Third World, in dealing with war, need, hunger, and suffering on the margins of the affluent world. Identification with the revolutionaries of the Third World promised guidance and a boost to one’s own revolutionary efforts. By feigning participation in a worldwide, unified front of the oppressed, they gained courage and at the same time found a purpose and a direction for their own rebellious desires again. And they saw themselves as an important factor in the global struggle.

It was precisely the more far-sighted and critical theorists of the “New Left” who saw how much secret safeguarding of interests, how much “private” interest accompanied this orientation, how unsustainable this strategy would thus be in the long run. Failure in the real world of politics and the accompanying frustration, the relapse into discouragement and desperation were not hard to prognosticate. On top of that, the political developments in Cuba, China, and Vietnam also made their own contribution. What had begun so full of hope, what had suddenly made the world seem so “young” again: the rediscovery of humanity, the feeling of being connected globally, the return to individuality, spontaneity, and the power of the human will to move mountains—all of this went off like fireworks. The antiauthoritarian exuberance has dissipated. People are finding a new point of orientation somewhere between subculture and party communism.

The promising revolt against the constraints of the alienating world of technology and science was just a short flirt with freedom. All of a sudden, among the supporters of sub-culturalism, a privatistic cultural pessimism started to appear from behind the well-justified criticism of industrial society. The blind and desperate flight from reality and the future led to the total exclusion of any all-connecting social reference to the rest of the world.

The situation looks a little different on the “other side,” among the champions of an orthodox cadre strategy. Here, it is not the return to the individual person that offers evidence of capitulation in the face of the real tasks and problems that industrial society poses to socially imaginative citizens, regardless of their political orientation; instead, it is the “escape” into believing in the security-bestowing Marxist historical philosophy of the nineteenth century. Partaking of a more than century-old understanding of structure and law, which leads to an avowal of the social teachings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, has less to do with “criticism” and “intellectual freedom” than with a deeply rooted need for security, safety, and a clear orientation with regard to the origins and goal, the meaning and future course of history. Believing in a law of history that works behind the participants’ backs and ultimately remains inaccessible to them always also involves some fear of freedom and some fear of the infinite openness and uncertainty of

historical existence.

So what remains; what should remain? What is there to preserve beyond all the fronts and factions?

First and foremost, the protest of the young generation did away with a host of long-outdated taboos once and for all. What had often been regarded as unspeakable up to that point was called by name, without hesitation. Language and general behavior have become freer, if not always also more tolerant; but on the whole there was an increase in openness and the willingness to engage in criticism. This can certainly be entered as a win on the overall balance sheet, even if the "losses" cannot be ignored: a persistent lack of understanding of the need for governance, rash denouncements of "the formal," of "superficiality" in social relations, of tradition in particular, and a general readiness to rebel that prevents authority from being able to be experienced as a source of enrichment and self-enhancement as well.

What was new and often unfamiliar: a basic, underlying moral sensitivity to need and misery, to the disenfranchised and oppressed, a sense of the one-ness of the world, of universal concern no matter where evil should emerge. But unconditional side-taking turned all too easily into aggression, knowledge into know-it-allness, and justifiable criticism into sweeping accusation.

And yet: the sometimes downright hectic "openness" to the problems of the time and the day would not fail to leave a lasting impression. Most of the problems that were raised were not the fantasies of pessimists or hysterics; they were about the basic survival of humanity. It was definitely not superfluous to point urgently, again and again, to the errors and weaknesses of our system, to imminent hunger catastrophes, psychological threats, the situation in the Third World, the self-destructive arms race, and a lot more. These things were not new in the sense that no one had ever recognized them or given them precise names. But they were brought into the public eye, the veil of indifference was torn away, and the disastrous adjustment to misery and worldly catastrophe was prevented, sometimes dramatically—this is certainly the unquestionable contribution of this movement. All of this is the original moral and emancipatory achievement of the "New Left."

But what will happen now? To be sure, the comparatively less spectacular "long march through the institutions" that we are experiencing now is not a carefully planned and systematically implemented strategy of overcoming the system by "treading softly." The revolution of yesterday and today is taking place partly in radio studios, newspaper editorial offices, publishing houses, educational institutions, political party groups, and the headquarters of associations. This definitely has something to do with political strategy, but far more with the transitory status of the mostly student rebels and the psychological constitution of the movement as a whole. After the relatively unproductive theoretical assault, most are now concerned with the concrete application and practical testing of system critique. Effective work in the neighborhood and the workplace, social involvement among apprentices and pupils, project-related teamwork in small groups—in the present phase of development all of this ranks far ahead of the distant goals of the revolution and is regarded as more important and more meaningful than comprehensive theoretical analyses and sweeping diagnoses of the era [*Zeitdiagnosen*].

What we are presently experiencing is a new, totally unfamiliar "modesty" with respect to political demands: an orientation toward what is closest at hand, toward whatever is directly important to one's life at the present time. It is a concentration on whatever seems just within the realm of the politically possible.

This return to modesty is no coincidence. It is part of a larger and more general shift in direction: the "limits to growth," an appeal to a moderating reason that cannot be ignored. The energy crisis, with its long-term repercussions for the stability of the entire global economy, has been a decisive factor in raising general awareness of the risks facing our planet. We are beginning to realize that the pathological

cycle of the arms race, that the global resources, environmental, and food crises, that the stultification of cities, the social, cultural, and psychological crises that find expression in neuroses, drug addiction, asocial behavior, crime, and increasing suicide rates, that all of these indicators of decline and self-destruction ineluctably force humanity to confront the question of survival.

The reality of crises and the growing awareness of crises also influence the development of the protest movement. In contrast to older social-revolutionary movements, this movement, from its very beginning, was not the product of shortage but rather of abundance. Therefore, the crisis of this affluent society [*Wohlstandgesellschaft*] is also its very own crisis, because only a prospering society can afford the "luxury" of a protest against affluence and its consequences. The end of the ideology of growth and prosperity also means the end of the manifestations that ignited the protest.

Added to this is the growing pressure that rising student numbers are exerting on universities. The practice of *numerus clausus*, which students in all disciplines will certainly be faced with soon, has already led students to worry so much about their own university admission and major that they barely have any leftover energy for other activities.

Because of this additional pressure, the protester sees himself as being entirely caught up, for the very first time, in a situation that has been ruled an overall crisis. He shares in the general fear of the future and experiences the doubt and uncertainty that plagues everyone. It can therefore be expected that his reactions will not deviate substantially from those coming from his social environment. He, too, will probably initially react to the dreaded situation of a general shortage of means by restricting his expectations and demands, also—and particularly—in the political sphere. He will be prepared to live with contradictions and compromises in a way that he would not be during times of carefree prosperity.

So, as for the prognosis for the further development of the protest movement: for the near future, a new Biedermeier era is more likely than a new chapter in the great battle for freedom. It remains to be seen whether our epoch, whether the heirs to the former protest generation, in particular, find their way to that "happiness at the bottom of melancholy" that literary historian Paul Kluckhohn attributed to the historical Biedermeier style of the Vormärz era. Traces of worn-out, hypochondriacal, privatist tendencies, a good dose of thinking about individual security, and the tendency to approach the inevitable with resignation—albeit without panic—are in any case easy to make out in the current models.

Source: Bernd Guggenberger, "Rückkehr in die Wirklichkeit," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 15, 1975. © All rights reserved. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung GmbH, Frankfurt.

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