

“To rebel is justified!” – Mao Zedong, the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and left-wing subcultures in Western Europe and the US during the 1960s and 70s (working title)

In 1966, when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was initiated in the PRC, societies in Western Europe and the US underwent a fundamental reconfiguration of state-society-citizen relations. In the midst of the bipolar world order of the Cold War, the US was engaging in a war in Vietnam, while French society was struggling with the aftermath of the Algerian war, and Italian and West German societies were wrestling to come to terms with their fascist pasts. Left-wing subcultural countercultures burgeoned in opposition to mainstream elite politics. Soon, the rise of the PRC began to attract many Western activists for manifold reasons. Be it the theory of the Three Worlds, the perceived image of a justified youth rebellion against the establishment, or the concept of “people’s war”, the Chinese example seemed to lead the way beyond exhausted and discredited Western socialist concepts.

This project investigates the impact of Maoist thinking on urban, left-wing subcultural strongholds such as West Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Bologna, Paris, and the San Francisco Bay Area. It asks why Maoist ideology and the icon Mao became appealing role models for local and regional left-wing subcultures from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s. Focusing on regional strongholds and local agents in various Western countries, it is argued that Maoist ideology did not simply travel from “East” to “West” in the “Global Sixties.” Rather, the trajectories of Maoist ideas from the PRC to Western countries involved various agents and differed from locality to locality. For example, West German groups initially relied almost entirely on translations of Chinese works, while left-wing groups in the Bay Area faced strong Chinese minority groups opposing the PRC regime. While West Coast American groups seemed to be much more involved in debates stretching across the Pacific Ocean and targeting the Vietnam War and the events ongoing in the PRC, Western European groups situated their adaptations of Maoist thinking into the context of the Cold War divide in Europe. This project thus demonstrates that the travel of Maoist ideas to “the West” constituted not a uniform process, but consisted of very different adaptations and reconfigurations in the respective regional and national contexts of Western left-wing subcultures.

Research Interests

- Contemporary History/German History since 1945
- Media, Research on Public Opinion
- International Student Movements of the 1960s
- European Left-wing terrorism of the 1970s
- History of "State Identities"
- History of "Generations"
- Analysis of Political/Historical Discourses