H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jens Ivo Engels. *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950-1980.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2006. 452 S. EUR 58.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-506-72978-1.

Reviewed by Sandra Chaney

Published on H-German (October, 2007)

Jens Ivo Engels's published ***Habilitationsschrift*** is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on nature and environmental protection in postwar Germany.[1] With a nuanced analysis of the political conduct of groups and individuals involved in protecting nature and the environment, Engels makes a unique contribution to the larger story of changes in West German political culture over a generation. Making creative use of impressive archival research, Engels shows how conservation went from being a minority, elitist cause of social conservatives in the 1950s to becoming an important component of the modern environmental movement, which found support from citizens across the political spectrum in the 1970s. The increase in support for nature and environmental protection, Engels writes (concurring with Franz-Josef Brüggemeier), makes this political project one of the most successful in recent times. Central to its success was the willingness of activists--at home in a pluralistic society by the 1970s--to forge alliances uniting diverse constituencies behind a shared cause. Ironically, Engels states, this change in strategy was part of a more general change in political behavior in West Germany, from a consensus model that used protest as a last resort, to a confrontational one that made protest an integral part of daily life. Throughout the period the state remained an important partner in negotiations, leading Engels to conclude that in a civil society, "environmental protection without the state" is "an illusion" (p. 426).

The first half of the study examines the "pre-ecological" 1950s and 1960s, with three chapters devoted to an analysis of the political behavior of the conservation bureaucracy and private groups, in particular the Nature Park Society (Verein Naturschutzpark, VNP, established in 1909) led by Hamburg millionaire Alfred Toepfer, and the German Council for Land Cultivation (Deutscher Rat für Landespflege, DRL, established in 1962), presided over by Swedish-born Count Lennart Bernadotte. A fourth chapter analyzes several regional conflicts over conservation and construction projects.

The second half of the book examines developments that contributed to, or reflected the political culture associated with, modern environmen-

talism. Five chapters assess the impact of television on conservation; strengths and weaknesses of the federal government's environmental program (1970-71); the "ecologization" of conservation organizations; the normalization of protest and the broadening of alliances by citizen initiatives; and the creation of an alternative culture of protest by the ecology movement.

A significant contribution of Engels's study is its analysis of the cultural values communicated through political conduct. Engels explains that in the 1950s, conservation was carried out by a close-knit group of well-connected individuals born around 1900. Members of this exclusive group embraced values associated with the educated middle classes, such as introspection, self-discipline, and individual initiative. These men (few women occupied leadership roles) viewed their work as a selfless moral commitment to defend nature and society from the materialism and apathy they associated with modern civilization, a critique not unusual at the time. Engels challenges conservationists' claim that they were marginalized, citing support they received from political leaders at all government levels. If conservationists lacked support--and they did--they were partly to blame. Blinded by a fortress mentality, they made alliances with few groups beyond foresters and hunters. Engels also faults conservationists for not exploiting the media and not protesting more often. But these criticisms seem historicist in a study that otherwise takes pains to contextualize political behavior. Is it reasonable to assume that tactics used successfully in the late 1960s and 1970s would have been equally effective in the 1950s? Engels does note some successes, such as Toepfer's effort to link conservation to public health through establishing nature parks for recreation.

Engels' instructive analysis of regional conflicts from the 1950s and early 1960s reveals that ordinary citizens exhibited greater flexibility in their behavior than members of conservation organizations. Both groups of people, however, used several means to achieve their ends. They wrote letters, drafted resolutions, circulated petitions, staged rallies, lobbied parliamentarians, commissioned reports by experts, filed lawsuits in administrative courts, and raised objections in local licensing hearings. Because their ultimate goal was reaching a consensus among the parties involved, they viewed public protests as a last resort. To convey that protesting was serious business, men wore suits and ties and women wore dresses. Citizens' conduct was orderly, their mood somber. They used forceful yet conciliatory language in order to stress their loyalty as citizens. Engels corroborates other scholars who find that protests were inspired by diverse motives, despite claims to be fighting for the common good. Sometimes citizens stressed a concern to protect property values and the future development of their communities, as was the case in the 1950s in Kleinblittersdorf, Saarland. Other times, citizens and local leaders acted out of resentment against intervention by official higher-ups. This occurred when Hanover's leaders sided with activists in opposing the federal government's treaty with Britain, which allowed the Royal Air Force to use Knechtsand (a molting area for shelducks in the Wattenmeer) as a bombing range.

The study implies that the 1960s were a time of transition, though this might have been made more explicit. The book's division into "pre-ecological" and "ecological" periods implies an abrupt shift around 1970. But the evidence Engels presents suggests a more gradual transition accelerated by increased professionalization and scientification, westernization, and enthusiasm for technocratic state planning--trends that he and other scholars associate with the period.[2] An engaging chapter on the German Council for Land Cultivation offers new insights into how this elite group tried to make professional landscape architects into experts with political leverage. The chapter on the Social-Liberal coalition government's environmental program offers compelling

evidence that, despite its successes in cleaning up the environment, the program's technocratic emphasis disappointed citizens demanding deeper, ecologically sustainable reforms.

Engels makes an original contribution with his research on how three television series about animals popularized and politicized traditional conservation: Heinz Sielmann's "Expeditions into the Animal Kingdom" (1960-91); Bernhard Grzimek's "A Place for Animals" (1956-87), and Horst Stern's "The Stern Hour" (1970-79). Grzimek, in particular, emerges as a pioneer in conservation during the 1960s, when he introduced television fundraising for wildlife preservation and exposed scandals (such as the clubbing of baby seals), which invited criticism and protest. Grzimek and Stern made nature and environmental protection legitimate topics about which to express dissent in increasingly rebellious times. They brought their message, marketing strategies, and media experience to the conservation community, most notably the Bund für Umwelt- und Naturschutz in Deutschland (BUND), one of Germany's most influential environmental groups, which they helped to found in 1975.

Engels sheds new light on citizen initiatives through his thoughtful analysis of the nuclear protest at Wyhl in Baden-Württemberg, which vividly illustrates the broad alliances that formed around environmental issues. Respectfully dressed locals who led the protest acted out of concern to protect their community's autonomy and economic future, while outsiders, many sporting jeans and long hair, came to effect more sweeping changes, whether it was feminists seeking to liberate rural housewives or communists wanting to make Wyhl the center of a counter-culture revolt. During the nine-month occupation of the construction site, locals and outsiders resolved differences, strengthening their opposition and creating an alternative culture in which protest became integral to daily life. Partly because environmentalism came to be associated with opposition to the state, as in this conflict, leftists found it appealing.

A fascinating chapter explores the counter-culture movement that blossomed in the late 1970s. Between 1978 and 1983, an estimated 80,000 activists established alternative groceries, cafes, theaters, and newspapers, and organized protests and festivals to support significant changes in lifestyle ultimately aimed at protecting the environment and helping the oppressed. Inspired not by duty as in former times but by the principle of "engagement," activists viewed participation in events of the movement as an opportunity for self-development and social reform. Whether protesting automobile use by walking, or toting a Bangladeshi-made jute bag instead of a plastic one, participants transformed personal choices into political acts that aided the oppressed, protected the environment, and showed a commitment to social justice. Their oppressor-victim discourse encouraged building alliances with other oppressed groups locally and around the world.

Engels leaves readers with a deeper understanding of the incremental, and ultimately striking, changes in the political conduct of people involved in nature and environmental protection, but also with an appreciation for noteworthy continuities. Throughout the period, most activists belonged to the educated middle classes and were oriented toward the state. They looked to the state for alliances, financial support, and answers to their grievances. This also was true for citizen initiatives of the late 1970s. Despite their anti-state rhetoric, these activists expected the state to implement their reform proposals, from providing more public transportation to improving food safety. Officials tolerated this confrontational behavior, Engels writes, because they had proven flexible over the last three decades and had gotten used to it. Moreover, the environmental movement had grown too powerful to ignore, especially because its base of support was rooted in the

mainstream of society, which had shifted to the left politically.

Engels underscores that activists throughout the period were motivated by diverse moral, economic, jurisdictional, scientific, and medical concerns, though social justice became central only in the 1970s. He also notes the tendency of activists to view their struggle as a "David against Goliath" fight. Yet over a quarter century, activists' self-image shifted from that of a proud elite defending innocent nature to heroic rebels (Grzimek and Stern, for example), then to an oppressed group ready to resist. By the 1970s, activists cast not only nature, but also themselves, in the role of victim (oppressed by the state, automobile drivers, and so on). Why, the author provocatively asks, have so few challenged the oppressor-victim framework consistently used to promote conservation and environmentalism?

Throughout the period, activists used a range of measures to achieve their goals, a factor critical to their successes. Of particular importance were alliances, which became broader by the 1970s, and protests, which became more frequent, informal, sensational, and confrontational. Proponents of nature and environmental protection also linked their struggles to specific understandings of "the good life." In doing so they expected supporters' conformity to certain lifestyles. In the 1950s, that meant becoming a self-disciplined, introspective individual through solitary walks in nature. In the late 1970s, it involved a commitment to social justice by consuming environmentally acceptable products--a less exclusive approach that invited greater participation.

Thoroughly researched, convincingly argued, nicely illustrated, and containing a wealth of information and original insights, Engels' work is highly recommended. It opens up news areas for future research and will become a standard work in German environmental history. The study also will be of interest to scholars in related fields.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, the book-length studies by Monika Bergmeier, *Umweltgeschichte der Boomjahre. Das Beispiel Bayern* (Münster: Waxmann, 2002); Kai F. Hünemörder, *Die Frühgeschichte der globalen Umweltkrise und die Formierung der deutschen Umweltpolitik (1950-1973)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004); Willi Oberkrome, *"Deutsche Heimat". Nationale Konzeption und regionale Praxis von Naturschutz, Landschaftsgestaltung und Kulturpolitik in Westfalen-Lippe und Thüringen (1900-1960)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004); Frank Uekötter, *Naturschutz im Aufbruch. Eine Geschichte des Naturschutzes in Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1945-1980* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2004); and Sandra Chaney, *Nature of the Miracle Years: Conservation in West Germany, 1945-1975* (New York: Berghahn, forthcoming 2008).

[2]. Axel Schildt, Detlef Siegfried, and Karl Christian Lammers, eds., *Dynamische Zeiten. Die 60er Jahre in den beiden deutschen Gesellschaften* (Hamburg: Christians, 2000); Matthias Frese, Julia Paulus, and Karl Teppe, eds., *Demokratisierung und gesellschaftlicher Aufbruch. Die sechziger Jahre als Wendezeit der Bundesrepublik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Sandra Chaney. Review of Engels, Jens Ivo. *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950-1980.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13776