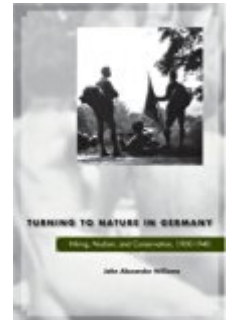


John A. Williams. *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. x + 354 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-0015-3.



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Published on H-German (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

In the past two decades, scholarship on modern German history has focused upon the bourgeoisie and cultural history to the detriment of studying labor and Social Democracy (and its party organization, the SPD). Though the latter were huge movements with significant implications for the whole German past, especially as "internal enemies" from the 1860s to the 1960s and as the main advocates of democracy, many historians almost overlook their existence. In his new monograph, John Alexander Williams begins to redress the imbalance by integrating the Left and labor's social activism within the larger movement to restore a concern with, and engagement in, nature. His book is a remarkably even-handed account, correcting the old ideological approaches of intellectual historians such as Hans Kohn and George Mosse. He summarizes their tendency "to condemn it as antirationalist, antimodern, and illiberal" and their view "that these characteristics made naturist thought a precursor of Nazism" (p. 4). Williams rightly asserts that such "influential" and "teleological" views fail "to explain adequately

ly the origins, ideological complexity, and influence of mass naturist movements"(p. 5). His book is a successful corrective showing that moderate bourgeois reformers and Social Democrats led in organizing a broad-based turn toward nature, a movement that the Nazis twisted and destroyed.

In the introduction Williams sets his own work within the recent, more nuanced, approach to reform movements, especially regarding imperial Germany. That historiography has begun to show that the "variety of historical responses to urban, industrial modernity" were "always ambiguous" and "multifaceted" (pp. 6-7). In three parts, comprised of six chapters, the study examines in turn the workers' nudist movement, the Naturfreunde, the background of youth hiking, youth development or cultivation (*Jugendpflege*) through hiking, including the attacks on it, and the move from preserving to planning nature by bourgeois conservationists. The conclusion reviews by whom and how nature was appropriated for a variety of purposes from *Kaiserreich* to Third Reich. Appropriately illustrated, this thor-

oroughly researched and well-argued study provides an important addition to understanding the Germans' response to urban ills with various idealistic, perhaps even naïve, approaches far removed from romantic and racist ones.

Nudism is usually associated with the middle-class *Lebensreform* movement, which started before World War I. Artist Paula Modersohn Becker recorded in her diary hiking, nude swimming, and long nature walks with her sculptress friend, Clara Westhoff. Under the cover of darkness they skipped out of the studio window in their conservative village, Worpswede, to take "air baths." A bit later Becker's husband sketched her doing trendy exercises in the nude. Her social outlook sometimes tended toward appreciation of Germanic values, yet for her Paris was the center of art. She illustrated the ambivalence toward modern life: escapism and escape to an artist colony surrounded by peasants (assumed to be wholesome and in tune with nature). Yet her tastes and outlook were cosmopolitan in travels, reading, and painting styles. Williams does not mention her case, which has been well analyzed for the relationship of nudity to art (Modersohn-Becker was the first female to depict herself nude), but she never participated in any movement. He notes that "bourgeois nudism was the most radically right-wing in its ideology. Yet the generalization that all nudists were racists, still prominent in even the most recent studies, is simply not valid—especially for the Weimar Republic" (p. 24). In addition to demonstrating such claims, Williams outlines very clearly the organizational diversity and demographics of various nudist groups.

The section on the workers' nudist movement typifies Williams's approach to his overlapping subject matter. It contains much novel material, and supplements what Vernon Lidtke offered in *The Alternative Culture* (1985) on the social and cultural movements affiliated with Social Democracy during imperial Germany, and Lynn Abrams has written on leisure and recreation. Williams

acknowledges the middle-class origins and right-wing ideology of part of the nudist movement, but provides numbers to demonstrate that by the early 1920s the socialist faction was by far the largest: "By the early 1930s there were an estimated eighty thousand practicing nudists, only 20,000 of whom belonged to the bourgeois camp" (p. 24). Middle-class initiators impressed municipal authorities with their message about the benefits of air and light baths, so that by 1906, some 230 establishments with fenced-in bathing areas existed. Williams reviews the ideological content of those advocates' outlook, as well as that of their opponents' endeavors during the late imperial era, contrasting this period with more liberal Weimar, when religious and party-political strictures mostly disappeared. He employs the case of Adolf Koch and his schools to buttress the claim that "the socialist labor movement ... most successfully popularized nudism in the Weimar years" (p. 30). Koch's concern was social justice, especially for industrial workers whose working and living conditions he wanted to improve. Koch's ideological outlook overlapped with Social Democracy, though his focus fell on nutrition, housing, and finding ways to restore the overworked body. He asserted: "Air and sun are the worst enemies of all proletarian sickness" (p. 39). Not unsurprisingly, the police sought to control, regulate, or repress nudity. Williams provides examples of prudery as well as religious opposition to the nudists while admitting that the response of the general public remains unknown. A surprising finding is Williams's discovery about the lack of discussion regarding differing exercises according to sex: instead, he writes, "what we have here is an ideology of progress based on concepts of both nature and the body that were standardized and made to seem universal and unchanging. The nudists' holistic ideal of the new human being—body, mind and political consciousness combined—turned the nude body into a site of political agency in the liberation of the German working class" (p. 47). Williams also examines some ten-

dencies toward authoritarianism and eugenics to conclude that the movement walked a fine line between individual freedom and group subordination, but "on balance socialist nudism remained firmly committed to the tradition of egalitarian, emancipatory, and democratic socialism" (p. 52). This quality led to its demise after 1933 through a complicated set of events, the nuances of which Williams chronicles in depth.

Social hiking grew from a few adherents and organizations to a mass movement of sixty thousand before the Great Depression, when it, too, had a socialist majority. Williams traces the meaning of nature, as escape and as regenerator, for some hikers. The *Naturfreunde* had a following of 30,000 by 1914. They erected rural shelters, with some 230 in place by 1933. His analysis of institutional development and participation by SPD leaders finds that the majority were "relatively well-educated, politically active, highly skilled male workers and their families" (p. 76). Differences of opinion between SPD and communist members led to a drastic decline in membership from 1923 to 1926. In examining the ideology of the *Naturfreunde*, Williams sets out their claims about workers' lack of contact to nature, their exhaustion under so-called rationalization norms, and the vapidness of urban life. Hiking was to serve as a restorative, especially to allow "a diversity of sensory experience and mental stimulation" (p. 81). With its moderate and radical wings competing for members, the hiking movement reflected the larger political scene of factionalized labor, but Williams underscores that all distanced themselves from the conservative *Heimat* appeal. Most importantly, Williams demonstrates that the attempt by the moderate leadership to placate the Nazis led to their demise: "the *Naturfreunde* leadership did not fulfill a sinister protofascist bourgeois tradition. Instead, they betrayed a progressive, socialist one" (p. 97). As an epilogue Williams presents the controlled hiking of the Strength through Joy (KdF) Nazi system with its specially trained hiking leaders, cheap train passes, and

state support for accommodation: "KdF hiking was in every way a betrayal of the democratic *Naturfreunde* tradition" and intention (p. 103).

Middle-class hiking, by contrast, mostly became an attempt to control or at least to direct youth. Youth cultivation (*Jugendpflege*) by educated elites sought to employ hiking as a means to elevate youth, as well as to contain what many saw as the rebellious stance of the Wandervögel. Williams illustrates the competing approaches of the Wandervögel and the adult-directed groups to understanding and to experiencing nature. The diversity of ideological outlook and social practice is recounted well, including acknowledgment of Romantic elements in some of these movements. He reviews the so-called moral panic of early 1914 and efforts to replace the spontaneity of the Wandervögel with adult-led efforts. Fueling part of the attempts by religious and state institutions to assert control were fears and accusations of homosexuality among the Wandervögel. Worries about who controlled or influenced youth were partly allayed in late 1914 as many headed off to war. The question as why so many youth, including hikers, with their appreciation of unregimented life and nature, were prepared to sacrifice their lives remains mostly unanswered. Williams, too, seems to grope for answers. When taking up the next question, of how youth cultivation changed due to a world war, Williams returns to examining the bourgeois-reformist groups with side glances at the Social Democrats. He relates a shift in values to the supposed crisis of generational authority, especially regarding sexuality. Moreover, an "ethos of liberation through self-discipline and ennoblement transformed both *Jugendpflege* and the youth movement" (p. 147). Again, touting the benefits of directed hiking was among the ways that adults sought to enforce authority. The labor sector offered a special case. SPD *Jugendpflege* had gained some state support during the war, though its numbers declined from around 100,000 in 1914 to 31,000 in 1919. But, the adult-directed Sozialistische Arbeiterjugend (SAJ)

had reached the level of 105,000 members again by 1922. However, SPD leaders realized the need to allow youth some self-mobilization: "In the political situation of early Weimar, then-SPD leaders simply recognized the SAJ for what it was—a synthesis between the *Jugendflege* commitment to a disciplined community and the ideal of youthful autonomy derived from the Wandervögel" (p. 165). All these groups' attitudes to outdoor exercise, to health, and to female and male sexuality are carefully delineated. The main focus falls on hiking and where it fit between authority and freedom. That it had many adherents is shown by the use of hostels, of which there were 2,760 by 1932, with over four million overnight stays. During the 1920s, hiking had become one of the most popular youth free-time activities.

Weimar's compromise between adult needs for authority and the youthful quest for more freedom was terminated by the depression and the National Socialist imposition of a leadership cult. Williams paints the contrast presented by the new movement, showing especially how nature was conceived as a new terrain for Hitler Youth war games and organized camping. He concludes that it was "directly at odds with the independent youth movement tradition. It was much closer to the most authoritarian, anti-sexual, and conservation-militaristic forms of youth cultivation that had risen during the late Wilhelmine era" (p. 216). The old style of hiking would eventually be banned by the Nazis. Though bourgeois conservationists would also be "coordinated" into the Nazi system, with some accepting the planning, as opposed to preservation, approach to nature, Williams argues that nudists, hikers, and conservationists were "an altogether modernist force within German popular culture" (p. 257). He shows that "[n]ationalism is almost entirely absent from socialist nudism except as a target of criticism" (p. 261). With such findings Williams has integrated workers' culture and bourgeois reform movements into environmental history in a superb fashion. Not the conquest of nature, but

rather the positive employment of its opportunities, dominates the making of this modern Germany.

Some open issues remain, but on the whole, Williams has unearthed and presented a convincing amount of evidence. Implicitly, his approach challenges the intellectual and cultural historians who might wish to retain the discredited myths and claims of those authors who only looked at selected words of a few leaders and equated them with "Germanic" movements and the masses while leaving labor out of the picture. Those historians will have to utilize the tools of institutional and social history to dig up material facts and contextual contours if they want to refute Williams's conclusion that "a great difference [existed] between the National Socialists and the naturist movements that predated them. Most German naturists before 1933 tried to improve their world by finding a *peaceful* way of turning to nature. Naturists at their best sought a way to master industrial modernity by preserving the rights of human beings and of nature itself" (p. 263).

Notes

[1]. See Günther Busch and Liselotte von Reinken, eds., *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990).

[2]. Doris Hansmann, *Akt und Nackt: Der ästhetische Aufbruch um 1900 mit Blick auf die Selbstakte von Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Weimar: VDG, 2000). The section of her work entitled "Körper und Nacktkultur um 1900" complements Williams's approach.

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Citation: Dieter K. Buse. Review of Williams, John A. *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

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