A few years ago, when a lecturer who taught me Critical Theory was axed as part of the continual reshuffling and cutting of various departments at a UK university, he took the dismissal fairly well. He was nearing retirement age and perhaps he was already prepared to move on. He left with one parting shot, delivered at a presentation on Adorno in a lecture theatre occupied during a student protest: he commented that the state should be careful if it really wanted to impose austerity cuts on universities, since there are many intelligent, talented people stuck in the academic bubble and he wondered what would happen if they were all released back into wider society.

I am always interested in why people end up as academics, which normally entails working at a university, since for me personally activism for social change is an important motivation and this only sometimes coincides with academic work. Having just returned from yet another academic conference which did not answer any of the interesting questions it proposed to answer, which did not even provide any space for deeper discussions, it is important for me to ask how knowledge is produced and for whom.

I would hope that good academic work, whether sympathetic to social movements or not, embedded within them or not, would at least attempt to engage with fighting dominant regimes of truth. Otherwise, why is this work being done? Is it actually helping the social movements concerned to become wiser and more effective, or is it simply furthering people’s careers by marking another notch on the publication stick? In the field of history, surely a prime concern would be to give current movements a sense of what has come before, to save every new generation of activists reinventing the wheel. This seems to me far more useful as an academic motivation than simply churning out texts to fulfil employment requirements.

I had hoped that *A European Youth Revolt*, edited by Bart van der Steen and Knud Andresen would prove itself useful for social movement activists and indeed it will be. Certainly whilst almost all the authors are indeed locked up in the academy, many are also firmly engaged in local
struggles (although you would not learn this from the notes on contributors). Yet another question
haunts this book: Was there really any such thing as a “European youth revolt” in the 1980s? The
individual words in this phrase are troubled by many of the contributions and actually it is hard to
say there was any such thing, with Europe considered in all its forms. Nothing of the sort happened
in Sweden or Spain; in Italy it had already happened; and much of Eastern Europe was still under
the thumb of authoritarian state control until the end of the decade at least. Nevertheless, in other
places such as Denmark, England, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, there were riots of
one form or another in cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Liverpool, London and
Zurich.

Whether these were truly connected in any meaningful way is an enquiry which this book
finds difficult to answer. This is in itself unsurprising since it is admittedly a huge question; yet
every small step towards an answer is useful, since we would be well-advised to try to understand
these larger urban cycles of boom and bust in both social movements and societies as a means to
learn from previous victories and defeats.

The book is broken into six parts and in my opinion only got going with part three, which
was titled “Transforming Radical Movements”.1 With three chapters, based respectively on Sweden,
Italy and Spain, the book goes deeper into local contexts. Interestingly, all of the contributions in
this section refute the idea of a youth revolt in the 1980s, for very different reasons.

In “Why did it not happen here? The gradual radicalisation of the anarchist movement in
Sweden 1980-90”, Jan Jämte and Adrienne Sörbom give cogent reasons why “the forms of activism
developed and deployed by radical left-libertarian activists in Europe did not reach Sweden until the
end of the decade” (p.97). Five reasons are given for this state of affairs, namely low
unemployment, lack of political opportunities, an adherence to the principle of non-violence by
oppositional groups, the legacies of previous protest movements and the slow development of new
anarchist groups. This explanation is highly useful both to understand the Swedish situation and as a
means to analyse why movements were successful or not elsewhere. Thus this chapter lays the

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1 The first and second parts deal with “Concepts and Debates” and “Squatters and Autonomist Movements”
respectively.
Writing on Italy, Gianni Piazza and Pierpaolo Mudu prefer to state that “the youth revolts in many parts of Europe in 1980-81 seemed in many respects a delayed reprisal of the Italian mobilizations of 1977” (p.120), although they do acknowledge that the events in north-western Europe did then come back around to affect the local scene. For example, punk from England became a big influence and also videos from protests in Amsterdam, Berlin and Zurich were circulated. In turn, the impact of the Italian social centre movement continues to reverberate throughout Europe and going against the notion of this being a youth revolt, the authors observe the “intense intergenerational dialogues and learning processes, which were predominantly visible in the anti-nuclear campaigns and the Social Centres movement” (p.124).

As a sidenote, there are some welcome interplays between the book’s chapters at different points. One example is the effect of the squatting movement in Amsterdam on other places. Given the possibility to become powerful through a heady combination of tolerant polder politics, swathes of empty housing and an affluent disaffected youth, the Amsterdam scene took full advantage. As documented in Linus Owens’ chapter, “Amsterdam squatters on the road”, Dutch activists were happy to travel around Europe to share experiences and successful tactics. They pop up in other chapters, since in 1985 they were showing films at the Scaldasole social centre in Milan (p.120) and in 1981 they were in Nuremberg in Germany, at an info night which inspired a spontaneous demonstration in which shop windows were smashed, the social centre KOMM was besieged by police and 172 people were arrested (p.69).

In the third chapter of section three, Claudio Cattaneo and Enrique Tudela show that things were very different in Spain, since the transitional era following the death of Franco lasted from 1975 until 1982, meaning that in the early 1980s Spain was still politically isolated. They also note that important early reference points for Spanish activists were more the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the struggles in El Salvador, than events elsewhere in Europe. Activists were linked both by language and the similarity of these insurrections to the Spanish Civil War, which was still a living memory for many. So it would take some years and the influence of punk for social movements in Spain to link up with those in the rest of (Western) Europe.
How can disparate European struggles be linked? Surely even though in many countries social movements and protest cycles were following different, locally-determined trajectories, it is still significant that in the early 1980s cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Hanover, London, Nuremberg, Vienna and Zurich all saw unrest. The last of the six sections is entitled “Expert Debates” and thus we can look there for explanations.

Jake Smith’s contribution, “Apathy, subversion, and the network sublime: Envisioning youth unrest in West Germany, 1980-87”, concentrates on the reaction of so-called experts and mainstream media commentators and suggests that they othered the protestors, making them into “representatives of the sublime” (p.240). The chapter does not refer to the tempestuous events of the previous decade in Germany, however, which must have coloured reactions.

Jan Hansen’s chapter, “Defining political dissidence: The Swiss debate on the riots of 1980-81”, provides food for thought in discussing the view that it was a conflict between generations and that most actors were keen to reach agreement since in Switzerland consensus is prized. Therefore, the authorities “did not define their identity by disassociating themselves from the ‘other’; rather they embraced what they viewed as different and assimilated the rioters into their fold” (p.253).

In the final chapter, “From ‘Bloody Brixton’ to ‘Burning Britain’: Placing the riots of 1981 in British post-imperial history”, Almuth Ebke states that “riots per se, and a racialized understanding of them in particular, have been repeat occurrences throughout 20th century British history” (p. 259). Riots have of course continued into this century too, for example the 2001 uprisings in Burnley, Bradford, Leeds and Oldham, the 2010 student riots in London and the 2011 UK-wide insurrection, which was sparked by the police killing of Mark Duggan. However, in another instance of an individual author repudiating the grander narrative of the volume, Ebke goes on to state that in the debates over the 1981 riots “the youth disturbances that shook other major European cities in 1981 featured only sparingly, as the violence appeared to originate from an essentially British problem” (p.260). Whilst it might be interesting for academics to seek to comprehend broader links, at root there does not appear to be very much here linking the disparate struggles. The inclusion of a chapter about disability riots, Monika Baár’s “The European ‘disability

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2 Sections four and five cover “New Social Movements and Youth Protest” and “Punk and Protest” respectively.
riots’ of 1981: How were they related to the youth movement?”, does find some links, stating that “the wish of disability activists to exercise self-determination and to change existing social structures was just as paramount as in the case of the youth movement” (p.160), but otherwise in describing a very different type of struggle only illustrates the tendency to shoehorn various things together under one theme.

Ultimately, this book can offer partial explanations as to why some cities in north-west and central Europe were burning in the early 1980s and in contrast suggests some cogent reasons as to why in other places nothing much happened. Much more work needs to be written on these larger protest cycles and surely it will emerge in the years to come, particularly by activists who lived through the struggles and are now beginning to reflect on them. Whilst this might be a fertile area of new exploration for historians, geographers and others, many people who experienced these times first-hand are still alive and it would be very interesting to hear their recollections; the entries here rely too much upon mainstream media and government reports.

A European Youth Revolt is an important step in beginning to understand Europe-wide social movements in the 1980s, even if it merely sketches the parameters of what this work would involve. Whilst I would definitely like to see more comparative assessments being made, this book presents a huge achievement, which I cannot do full justice to here; for example I entirely ignore one section dedicated to punk in Yugoslavia, Poland and the UK.

To return to my original questions and most importantly the topic of whether this book will be useful to current social movement activists in any way, I feel that the answer is a qualified yes. Leaving aside the standard issues regarding the high price and lack of availability of the book, which hopefully will be minimised by individual authors making sure to distribute their chapters widely, there is much of interest here. For one thing, you only have to look at the bibliographies at the end of these chapters. Many have fulsome references to the German or Spanish literature, opening up many paths for future research. Social movement activists can read about and learn from relatively recent events in many European countries. A curious general absence is the lack of reflection on where these movements were coming from, namely the turbulent times of the 1970s, yet this could easily form another book in itself. It is also important for current movements to reflect
back on the 1980s, when social movements were sometimes much larger and achieved significant gains.

As a final note, the revolt is far from over and continues into the present. The photograph on the front of the book, which depicts protestors turning over a police van in Berlin back in December 1980, is reproduced (alongside 14 other images) on a poster produced in support of an occupied social centre in Leipzig called the Black Triangle. This was squatted in mid 2016.

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