

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/136691>

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

Spiritual Politics: New Age and New Left in West Germany around 1980

Joachim C. Häberlen, University of Warwick

Abstract

In the late 1970s, an increasing number of West German “alternative” leftist authors and activists turned to spiritual ideas. A milieu that had once been characterized by what Timothy Scott Brown called a “scholarly-scientific imperative” now turned to magic and mystics, fairy tales and stories about American Indians. The article explores this turn to spirituality within the “alternative left” in West Germany around 1980. Drawing on a close reading of several books, mostly published by Munich’s famous left-wing publisher Trikont Dianus, the article argues that fairy tales, myths and accounts of American Indian shamans promised a deeper and more holistic understanding of the world that was beyond the grasp of rational scientific thinking, including Marxism. This holistic understanding of the world provided the basis for a form of politics focused on living in harmony: in harmony with one self, not least in a bodily sense; in harmony with nature and the universe; and in harmony with the community and the past, which is why authors began to reevaluate notions of Heimat (homeland), a notoriously right-wing concept. For leftists tired of the confrontational and often violent politics of the 1970s, such ideas proved appealing. The article suggests to understand the fascination with spiritualism as part and parcel of a moment when old, confrontational forms of politics were rapidly losing appeal and were replaced by a politics concerned with questions of self-hood. Spiritual politics were, to quote Michel Foucault, part of the struggles that attacked “not so much ‘such and such’ an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power”, namely a power that determined “who one is”.

In the fall of 1981, the Munich based left-wing publisher Trikont-Dianus (formerly known as Trikont) published an anthology entitled *The Return of the Imaginary: Fairy Tales, Magic, Mystic, Myth. The Beginnings of a Different Politics*.¹ The book contained chapters by popular German New Age authors such as Arnold Graf Keyserling, but also authors connected to the alternative scene, such as Volker Elis Pilgrim and Klaus Bernd Vollmar. Pilgrim had become famous in the scene for his books on sexuality, whereas Vollmar frequently wrote for *Ulcus Molle*, a magazine that published reviews of books that were of interest to an alternative-leftist milieu.² For the anthology, both authors wrote autobiographical accounts that depicted personal and political conversions. Under the title *Am I Lived: Things partake in the conversation. Experiences with extra-rational movements in my life*, Pilgrim described the influence of extra-rational forces on his life. His consciousness, he explained, had rested on “four pillars of rationality”. In the GDR, where he was born, he had been brought up with dialectical materialism; in the Federal Republic, he had studied law and worked with the theories of the Frankfurt School. Christian religion, “a phenomenon of rationality” as well, had been the basis of his spiritual development. And finally, he had always been interested in astronomy, biology, history, physics and chemistry. Using the “toolkit of psycho-analysis”, he was able to “make rational the irrational in human relations”. No wonder then that an Thai-Chi master doing an “aura exercise” with him had found that only the right part of his brain was glowing, whereas his left side, “according to old knowledge the emotional side”, remained bleak, Pilgrim wrote. But now he had come to realize that his life was also subjected to “different forces”. He understood how the stellar constellation under which he was born had determined his life, and how material objects had spoken to him. He needed, he claimed, to have both rational and irrational forces work within him.³

Vollmar, too, had been raised in an environment where only science and rationality mattered. At school, teachers had worried that religious studies would confuse students by questioning a scientific spirit. When he became active in the student movement and the famous SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*; Socialist German Student Union, the driving force of the protests around 1968 in West Germany), he and his comrades did nothing but having dead-serious discussions. For the most part at least, the “world of fairy tales” had drowned in the “official politics of the moving left [*bewegende Linke*]”. But when he moved to the United States for his first academic job, he ended up living in a rural commune. He learned about the world of plants and trees, while his former comrades back in Germany blamed him for turning away from politics. And suddenly it dawned on him what he had disliked ever since childhood: “It was the existing order, the belief in fixed scientific systems, in efficiency and logic. The irrational, the imaginaries of myths, fairy tales and legends had not yet received their place, this was bourgeois idyll, romanticizing nature, pubescent behavior

I would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

¹ Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen, eds., *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik* (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981).

² Copies of *Ulcus Molle* can be found, for example, at Papiertiger Archiv, Berlin. The magazine called itself an “information service for alternatives”.

³ Volker Elis Pilgrim, “Werde ich gelebt? Die Dinge sprechen mit. Erfahrungen mit außerrationalen Bewegungen meines Lebens,” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981).

and mawkishness [*Gefühlsduselei*] – but in any case ‘utterly apolitical.’” Thus he found a new understanding of politics in the world of magic and fairy tales. “Magic, mystic and mythos belong to the deranged [*ver-rückt*] languages: they touch us, tell us the truth, unlock new worlds.” This new perspective would “purify the senses” and allow for seeing not only “excerpts”, but “connections”. For Vollmar, a Marxist perspective had to be complemented by a mystical perspective to develop a holistic understanding of the world. Thus, he celebrated a “colorful, multifaceted whole, where the wisdom of unthinkable ages is celebrating a marriage with the political wisdom of Marxism or at least that of ecological anarchism.”⁴

These autobiographical accounts exemplify a larger trend within a branch of the West German radical left often described as “alternative” around 1980.⁵ The book catalogue in *Ulcus Molle* (the magazine also sold books via mail order) for example included an entire section on the “spiritual world”. Readers could order titles on witches and sorcerers, a feminist book on the moon, Carlos Castaneda’s presumably real, but in all likelihood invented reports about his encounters with shamans and psychoactive drugs in Mexico, or Hans Peter Duerr’s *Time of Dreams* (*Traumzeit*); the magazine also advertised New Age magazines such as *Hologramm* or *Middle Earth*.⁶ And the *Return of the Imaginary* was only the most prominent title in Trikont-Dianus’s program that focused on books about magic, American Indians, or “gypsies”.⁷ “Truly, I think, it has been a long way from the student

⁴ Klaus Bernd Vollmar, “Eine andere Weltansicht ...” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981).

⁵ On this alternative milieu, see above all Sven Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft: Linksalternatives Leben in den siebziger und frühen achtziger Jahren* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014). See also my own Joachim C. Häberlen, *The Emotional Politics of the Alternative Left: West Germany, 1968-1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁶ The book catalogue of the March / April 1979 issue for example included Pierre Derlon, *Unter Hexern und Zauberern: Die geheimen Traditionen der Zigeuner*, trans. Iso Karrer and Thomas Meyer (Basel: Sphinx Verlag, 1976), Sergius Golowin, *Hexen, Hippies, Rosenkreuzer: 500 Jahre magische Morgenlandfahrt* (Hamburg: Merlin-Verlag, 1977), Hans Peter Duerr, *Traumzeit: Über die Grenze zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Syndikat, 1978), Anne Kent Rush, *Mond, Mond*, trans. Anita Eichholz (Munich: Verlag Frauenoffensive, 1978), Vine Deloria, *Nur Stämme werden überleben: Indianische Vorschläge für eine Radikalkur des wildgewordenen Westens* (Munich: Trikont, 1976), William Willoya and Vinson Brown, *Im Zeichen des Regenbogens: Träume und Visionen des indianischen Volkes*, trans. Sylvia Luetjohann (Obernhain: Iris-Verlag, 1976), Carlos Castaneda, *Eine andere Wirklichkeit: neue Gespräche mit Don Juan* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1973), ———, *Die Lehren des Don Juan: ein Yaqui-Weg des Wissens* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1973), ———, *Reise nach Ixtlan: die Lehre des Don Juan* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1975).

⁷ Publications for example included Doug Boyd, *Rolling Thunder: Erfahrungen mit einem Schamanen der neuen Indianerbewegung*, trans. Janet Woolverton (Munich: Trikont Verlag, 1978), Dorje Konchok, *Marxismus und Meditation*, trans. Karl Baier and Helmuth Hausberger (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), Yann Daniel, *Das Nebelpferd: Geschichten aus der Bretagne*, trans. Angela Wicharz-Lindner (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), Alvaro Estrada, *Maria Sabina: Botin der heiligen Pilze*, trans. Albert Hofmann (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), Fausto

movement [of 1968], when we were protesting, our arms linked with each other, emphasizing the objective contradiction between wage labor and capital, to the ontology of human beings, ...”, Klaus-Bernd Vollmar summarized the development in a review of Dieter Duhm’s book *The Synthesis of Science: The Becoming Human Being* (Die Synthese der Wissenschaft: Der werdende Mensch, 1979).⁸ Duhm, famous for his 1973 book *Fear in Capitalism* (Angst im Kapitalismus), in which had he sought to demonstrate how capitalism, analyzed in Marxist terms, necessarily caused people to feel afraid, had now turned “life experiences”.⁹ The new book was about, Vollmar wrote in his review, “seeing harmony with nature in the recapture of mystical experiences”, it was about “the realm of magic and mystery.” According to Vollmar, Duhm tried to move beyond conventional science by way of mind-expanding drugs and psychoanalytical experiences, in order to reach “a concrete, not yet alienated experience of life.”¹⁰

Vollmar’s review perceptively summarizes, this article argues, a development within a certain section of the post-1968 radical left. Leftist thinkers loosely affiliated with the “alternative milieu” (Sven Reichardt), sought to develop a “different politics” that was no longer grounded in an objective, Marxist understanding of society, but in spiritual insights. The development of Munich-based publisher Trikont exemplifies this development. Founded in Cologne in 1967, it had originally published books dealing with revolutionary struggles in the so-called Third World. In the mid-1970s, the publisher, now run by Herbert Röttgen, widened its program to include titles dealing with diverse topics such as Africa, women and men, alternative technologies, and medicine. In contrast to other left-wing publishers such as Wagenbach, it sought to represent a multitude of “autonomous subjects”. By 1980, Röttgen then renamed the publisher to “Trikont Dianus” (and himself as Victor Trimondi).¹¹ Some of the authors Trikont Dianus published had clear biographical ties to the (alternative)-leftist milieu. Other spiritualist authors, published not only by Trikont, had no ties the left at all, but were widely read within the “scene” nevertheless.

How did it come that significant parts a leftist scene that had been characterized by what Timothy Scott Brown has called a “scholarly-scientific imperative” turned to magic and mystics?¹² What was the appeal of fairy tales, stories of American Indians and shamans,¹³ and

Reinaga, *America India und das Abendland*, trans. Otto Weerth (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), Harold A. Hanson, *Der Hexengarten*, trans. Elke Herzog (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), Stan Steiner, *Der Untergang des weißen Mannes?* (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980).

⁸ Dieter Duhm, *Synthese der Wissenschaft: Der Mensch ist anders* (Heidelberg: Kübler Verlag, 1979).

⁹ ———, *Angst im Kapitalismus: 2. Versuch der gesellschaftlichen Begründung zwischenmenschlicher Angst in der kapitalistischen Warengesellschaft* (Lampertheim: Küber, 1973).

¹⁰ Klaus Bernd Vollmar, “Besprechung von Dieter Duhm: Synthese der Wissenschaft”, in *Ulcus Molle* 5/6 1979, 20-23.

¹¹ On the publisher, see Uwe Sonnenberg, *Von Marx zum Maulwurf: Linker Buchhandel in Westdeutschland in den 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 58-62, 313-315. On the renaming, see Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen, “Die höchste Ehre der Rebellion? Der Trikont-Verlag nennt sich Dianus und erklärt”, *Das Blatt* 184, 7 – 20 November 1980, 20f.

¹² Timothy S. Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962-1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19f. See also Nina Verheyen,

New Age thinking more broadly for numerous, though by no means all, alternative leftists? By closely examining a selection of books dealing with spiritualist themes in a broad sense as well as reactions to these books in sometimes obscure magazines of the alternative left in West Germany, this article seeks to make sense of the “spiritualist turn” of the alternative left. It explores the knowledge such books offered, and what leftists could find attractive about it. First, the article argues that esoteric texts of all kinds unveiled, or so it seemed, hidden truths about the universe and human beings alike that were not accessible to rational science. Stories about sorcerers, witches and gypsies promised access to an old and secretive world of forgotten knowledge. Arguably, the opaqueness and vagueness of some of these texts was part of their appeal. A reader of Castaneda for example remarked that she could now interpret his books herself, but that she was not yet able “to convey this [i.e. her interpretation of Castaneda] through language to others.”¹⁴ This spiritual knowledge described possibilities of experiencing the world in more “wholesome” fashion that went beyond the fractured nature of industrial society as leftists saw it.

Second, the article inquires about the “different politics” that alternative leftists sought to develop by embracing magic and mystics and why it proved so fascinating in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To be sure, the fascination with “anti-rational” ideas is nothing new in Germany. It is part of a tradition that goes back to romantic critiques of the Enlightenment at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but also includes movements such as the *Lebensreform* and the *Wandervogel* around 1900 that exhibited a similar suspicion vis-à-vis rationality and technology, and that were similarly interested in non-civilized, “savage” and more “holistic” cultures outside of Europe.¹⁵ Yet the revival of such ideas around 1980 requires an explanation. After the German Autumn of 1977, when a wave of terrorist attacks by the Red Army Faction had resulted in massive state oppression, many leftists felt having reached an impasse.¹⁶ Confrontational politics clearly did not work, and thus they longed for alternatives. Some activists turned to parliamentary politics and formed the Green Party.¹⁷ For others, spiritual politics was the alternative. They hoped to develop a more harmonious approach to politics that would allow people to live in more harmony with themselves and their bodies, with others and their community, and not least with nature and the environment.

Diskussionslust: Eine Kulturgeschichte des “besseren Arguments” in Westdeutschland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 244-298.

¹³ On Germans’ fascination with American Indians more generally, see Glenn H. Penny, *Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Bibiana X., “Die vielen Dinge machen arm”, *Ulcus Molle* 5/6 1982, 1-3.

¹⁵ For a long-term perspective, see Thomas Tripold, *Die Kontinuität romantischer Ideen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), in particular 184-193. I have discussed these traditions more extensively in Häberlen, *Emotional Politics*, 35-47.

¹⁶ On the German Autumn and both the left’s and the state’s reaction to it, see Karrin Hanshew, *Terror and Democracy in West Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ———, “‘Sympathy for the Devil?’ The West German Left and the Challenge of Terrorism,” *Contemporary European History* 21 (2012), Brown, *West Germany*, 330-365.

¹⁷ On the early Green Party, see Silke Mende, *“Nicht rechts, nicht links, sondern vorn”: Eine Geschichte der Gründungsgrünen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011).

This fascination with esoteric and spiritualist thinking within the alternative left has received little scholarly attention, perhaps because it neither fits into images of students struggling for radical democracy that are meant to be still inspiring today, nor into accounts of bloody terrorism threatening the democratic Federal Republic.¹⁸ Historian Pascal Eitler, who has studied the West German New Age movement most thoroughly, has primarily focused on what he calls the orientalizing and emotionalization of religion as well as (bodily) practices of subjectification in esoteric circles. Eitler, too, notes holistic ideals amongst New Age thinkers, but does not inquire why stories of mystics and magic could appeal to leftists.¹⁹ Sven Reichardt, author of a massive study about the “alternative milieu”, by contrast, provides an account of various New Age groups more or less loosely related to this “alternative milieu”, concluding that “left-alternative youths sought to satisfy their hunger for new, unknown and different experiences” by turning to spirituality.²⁰ While this is arguably true, such a “hunger” for experiences cannot quite explain the intellectual appeal of spiritualist thinking as an alternative to the rational or “scientific” politics that had characterized the left for so long.

A final caveat: two important issues that would call for further inquiry will not be addressed in this article. First, we know relatively little about the New Age in terms of its social history beyond contemporary surveys.²¹ Given the fractured nature of both the leftist and New Age scene, it is difficult to precisely assess how many people took an interest in esoteric politics, and what impact such ideas had. Yet, the sales-numbers of books by Duerr or, even more so, Castaneda, which went into the hundreds of thousands, indicate the broad appeal of spiritual

¹⁸ See for in addition to the literature mentioned above Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Various edited volumes on protest movements and countercultures make no mentioning of this interest in spirituality either, see Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton, eds., *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present* (New York: Berghahn, 2011), Belinda Davis et al., eds., *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York: Berghahn, 2010), Martin Klimke, Jacco Pekelder, and Joachim Scharloth, eds., *Between Prague Spring and French May: Opposition and Revolt in Europe, 1960-1980* (New York: Berghahn, 2011), Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried, eds., *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960-1980* (New York: Berghahn, 2006).

¹⁹ See Pascal Eitler, “‘Alternative’ Religion: Subjektivierungspraktiken und Politisierungsstrategien im ‘New Age’ (Westdeutschland 1970-1990),” in *Das alternative Milieu: Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa, 1968-1983*, ed. Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010), ———, “‘Selbstheilung’: Zur Somatisierung und Sakralisierung von Selbstverhältnissen im New Age (Westdeutschland 1970-1990),” in *Das beratene Selbst: Zur Genealogie der Therapeutisierung in den “langen” Siebzigern*, ed. Sabine Maasen, et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), ———, “Körper – Kosmos – Kybernetik. Transformationen der Religion im ‘New Age’ (Westdeutschland 1970–1990),” *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 4 (2007).

²⁰ Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 807-831, quote 831.

²¹ In addition to Reichardt’s work, see the contemporary study by Michael Mildenberger, *Die religiöse Revolte: Jugend zwischen Flucht und Aufbruch* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1979).

critiques of modern science and society.²² Second, the transnational dimension of the spiritual politics would deserve further scrutiny. Numerous of the books discussed here were translated, mostly from English but some also from French, and people interested in New Age ideas liked to travel to allegedly “mythical” places, be it Brittany in France or *Ashtams* in India.²³ While this article limits itself to West Germany in the late 1970s and early 1980s, its result may speak to a broader transformation of leftist politics beyond national borders.²⁴ Due to its focus on the West German left, I have also relied on German editions of books, even if they were translated from French or English.

Beyond Science: The Lure of Holistic Knowledge

As the autobiographic accounts of Pilgrim and Vollmar indicate, numerous leftist thinkers of the late 1970s were deeply skeptical about scientific and rationalist explanations of the world. In their mind, scientific thinking offered, at best, only a partial and fragmented understanding of reality. Importantly, such critiques of the alleged limitations of science included “scientific” Marxist thinking that characterized much of leftist discourse. Alternative leftists longed for a way of grasping reality in a more holistic fashion, for gaining access to those parts of the world that remained hidden for a scientific mind. Stories about gypsies, American Indians, old fairy tales and mythologies seemed to promise an understanding of the world in a more wholesome fashion. Their appeal to leftists should thus be understood in the context of a widespread dissatisfaction with traditional, rational politics.²⁵

One of the first prominent leftist authors to voice sympathies for spiritualism and “Eastern” religions was Dieter Duhm. Duhm had been involved in the student left since the late 1960s and was intimately familiar with scientific-Marxist jargon typical of the leftist scene. But with

²² By 1985, the print run of Castaneda’s *Die Lehren des Don Juan* had passed 300,000. See also the bestsellers, published in German in the early 1980s, by Marilyn Ferguson, *Die sanfte Verschwörung: Persönliche und gesellschaftlich Transformation im Zeitalter des Wassermanns*, trans. Thomas Reichau (Basel: Sphinx-Verlag, 1982), Fritjof Capra, *Wendzeit: Bausteine für ein neues Weltbild*, trans. Erwin Schuhmacher (Bern: Scherz, 1983).

²³ On alternative tourism and the “hippie trail” leading to Afghanistan and India, see Anja Bertsch, “Alternative (in) Bewegung: Distinktion und transnationale Vergemeinschaftung im alternativen Tourismus,” in *Das Alternative Milieu: Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa 1968 - 1983*, ed. Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010), 214-219, Richard Ivan Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors: How Youth Travel Integrated Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Chapters in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären* also contain reports about traveling to such places, as do numerous alternative publications.

²⁴ See, for example, on the spiritualist ideals in the American counterculture already during the 1960s, Tripold, *Kontinuität*, 302-313, and for an example on the other side of the Iron Curtain, Terje Toomistu, “The Imaginary Elsewhere of the Hippies in Soviet Estonia,” in *Dropping Out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc*, ed. Juliane Fürst and Josie McLellan (Lanham, Boulder; New York; London: Lexington Books, 2017).

²⁵ For an extensive discussion of this critique, see Häberlen, *Emotional Politics*, 76-122.

his 1975 book *The Human Being Is Different* (*Der Mensch ist anders*), he effectively turned against this scene. The book was a harsh polemic against Marxist dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. Beyond the polemics, Duhm also pointed to what he considered significant mistakes, rather than lacunae, as he was eager to emphasize, of Marxist thinking. In particular, he argued that Marxism ignored the natural side of human beings and that it lacked an “anthropology”, that is an understanding of human nature beyond history. Leftists should, he urged, address “their political audience not primarily as homo oeconomicus, but as *human being*.”²⁶ In order to achieve this, leftists would have to deal more seriously with religion and “East-Asian philosophy”.²⁷ The “secretive things of this world”, the “real revelations and wonders” could not just be ridiculed as “imagination and charlatanry”, Duhm wrote.²⁸ In his mind, “Marxism ignores that part of philosophical and religious thinking that is usually called metaphysics. It thus ignores a yet unknown part of reality, that is, the truth.”²⁹ Marxist thinking, he charged, and its “social-theoretical categories, on which revolutionary theory was grounded, did by far not suffice to grasp human beings in the entire reality of their wishing, feeling, thinking and acting.” Marxism had denied the “extra-social dimension of life,” he concluded: “Marxist sociology [sic!] has not been able to include the cosmic and natural side of human existence.”³⁰ What was needed to overcome these shortcomings of Marxism was, in Duhm’s view, a holistic approach to understanding human life.

Duhm thus imagined a holistic anthropology that would lay bare the “latent potentialities and powers in human beings.”³¹ Such an anthropology would require drawing on a secretive knowledge that a purely materialist Marxism could never provide: “I think above all about that secretive inner power that is discussed by psychedelic experience-reports, by East-Asian ways of liberation, by Yoga, or in the books of Castaneda.”³² Merely understanding human society was, Duhm claimed, insufficient, as human beings existed in the universe, whose laws would determine human life as much as social laws.³³ To give an example, Duhm noted that he could see two lights at night, one electrical, the other a star in the sky. “Is really only the first part of the human world? Is the second really not hiding, in its distance, its genesis and its radiation, secrets that could *also* be important for understanding human existence and development?”³⁴ he wondered.

According to Duhm, bodily practices such as yoga had the potential of facilitating more holistic experiences. The very root of the term “yoga” in Sanskrit meant, he claimed, “to connect”. “The goal of Yoga is the connection and unification of the Ego with the Non-Ego (a more precise formulation is not possible here; it would cause only misunderstandings).”

²⁶ Dieter Duhm, *Der Mensch ist anders: Besinnung auf verspottete, aber notwendige Inabtle einer ganzheitlichen Theorie der Befreiung. Kritik am Marxismus. Beiträge zur Korrektur.* (Lampertheim: Kübler, 1975), 51. Emphasis in the original.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 77f.

³³ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

Both Yoga and Zen aimed at facilitating “experiences of illumination”, during which “the Ego dissolves into an all-embracing foundational ground [*Urgrund*], into a divine self. The boundaries that separate the Ego from its environment no longer exist.”³⁵ Duhm made a similar point about death. Ignoring death meant keeping life encased by a deep-seated fear. Reflecting on death, by contrast, meant accepting that everything in life was only temporary, and hence to accept whatever happened without striving for security all the time. Such an attitude would, he believed, allow for a life in the present. And “who lives in the present, will experience life fully conscious and without boundaries. This is the teaching of Yoga and of the Indian Don Juan (Castaneda).”³⁶ Thus, dealing with death was just as important for an “inner liberation” as was dealing with sexuality, Duhm concluded.

Books about mythologies, American Indians, “gypsies” or magic provided similar critiques of the limitations of rational thinking and promised a different, more holistic understanding of the world and the place of human beings in this world. In the thick *Bildlexikon der Symbole*, published by Trikont Dianus in 1980, for example, folklorist Sergius Golowin, author of numerous books about myths and magic, claimed that Indians had considered different mythologies and religious system a “unity through all times”.³⁷ Along similar lines, Herbert Röttgen, Janette Woolverton, Otto Weerth and Ursula Wolf wrote about “[American] Indian philosophy”: “It is the philosophy of a tribal society, in which human beings perceive themselves as being one with [*eins mit*] the world that surrounds them, that is not the counterpart to ‘nature’ (that has to be subdued), but a universe of our relatives: mother earth, father sun, grandmother moon.”³⁸

Doug Boyd’s *Rolling Thunder: Experiences with a Shaman of the New Indian Movement*, published in German in 1978 by Trikont (before it was renamed) as well, may serve as an example for what made such stories appealing to leftists.³⁹ The book tells the story of how its author met Shaman Rolling Thunder, participated in the struggle against the US government and the Bureau for Indian Affairs, and in the process learned to view the world in a different way. While some contemporary critics charged the author of not depicting actual events,⁴⁰ the authenticity of the story is irrelevant for understanding the kind of knowledge the book produced and how this could speak to leftist readers. Depicting the “spiritual world of North-American Indians”, the blurb on back cover claimed, the book was an “expedition

³⁵ Ibid., 99f.

³⁶ Ibid., 93.

³⁷ Sergius Golowin, “Indische Symbole,” in *Bildlexikon der Symbole*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer, et al. (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), 53. Other publications by Golowin include ———, *Der ewige Zigeuner im Abendland* (Munich: Trikont-Verlag, 1980), ———, *Paracelsus im Märchenland: Wanderer zwischen den Welten* (Basel: Sphinx-Verlag, 1980), ———, *Hexen*, ———, *Magische Gegenwart: Forschungsfahrt durch eine Zivilisation in Wandlung* (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980).

³⁸ Herbert Röttgen et al., “Indianische Symbole,” in *Bildlexikon der Symbole*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer, et al. (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1980), 92.

³⁹ Boyd, *Rolling Thunder*. The book was originally published in English in 1974 under the title *Rolling Thunder: A Personal Exploration into the Secret Healing Powers of an American Indian Medicine Man*. The change in the German title that focused less on healing and more on the political movement is telling.

⁴⁰ Uwe Stiller, *Naëtsàn: Mutter Erde* (Berlin: Verlag Eduard Jacobsohn, 1980), 53.

into a sphere that some people consider[ed] the ‘real’ reality.”⁴¹ For Boyd, Rolling Thunder’s understanding of the world was a revelation: “He had just called the earth an organism, a comparison I had never heard before.” He had already learned to think about the world as a unity during his journeys in Asia, but Rolling Thunder went a step further by describing “the world as a body, a gigantic body of a conscious, fighting living being.”⁴² It was not just a holistic worldview that Boyd offered, but a vision of a struggle against the destructive forces of technology, which involved the entire earth. Arguably it was this idea of struggle that made such accounts appealing to a left looking for alternatives to the violent politics of the 1970s.

According to Boyd’s account, a rational, scientific mind would be incapable of grasping how the world, and human beings in it, functioned as a single organism. To give an example of how limited a scientific perspective was when it came to understanding spiritual powers, Boyd told a story about Rolling Thunder’s skills as a healer. Treating patients, Boyd relied on the power of herbs. However, it was not their “biochemical composition” that mattered, but how they worked as agents and how Rolling Thunder communicated with them. Herbs gained their powers only in a specific context, with a specific purpose, which is why the results of healing ceremonies could never be reproduced under laboratory conditions. Having witnessed Rolling Thunder’s powers, Boyd thus came to believe that “everything that concerns us, our body and our environment, is also part of our consciousness, of our spirit.”⁴³

A rational mind would fail to understand such connections.⁴⁴ It had taken a moment of an inattentive mind for Boyd himself to really grasp this point. When Rolling Thunder described the world as an organism, Boyd noted that he had not fully paid attention, and hence his “subconsciousness could accept the words”, while his rational “mind was turned off.” Had his mind functioned, he would have taken everything verbally and would not have felt that overwhelmed by the claim.⁴⁵ And it was not enough to abstractly understand that everything was connected, that everything had its “right time and right place”. Rather, it was necessary to “live” this “truth”, which is what Rolling Thunder did, Boyd wrote (in contrast to himself). Living as part of the organism earth meant that Rolling Thunder never did anything without reason; he did not pick herbs he did not need, or killed an animal “just for fun”.⁴⁶ In that sense, Rolling Thunder functioned as a role model for Boyd as much as for his West-German readers for who looked for ways of living and fighting in accordance with nature.

Fairy tales seemed to provide a similarly holistic and deep knowledge that went beyond what science could offer. Citing Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Otto Betz, professor for educational studies and religious pedagogy at the University of Hamburg, described them as “hieroglyphs of a secret, abundant wisdom”. “He [i.e. von Hofmannsthal] thus conceives of the overcoming [*überkommenden*] stories as a key for reality without which we cannot do lest

⁴¹ Boyd, *Rolling Thunder*, backcover.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 62f.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

we want to live in a flat, one-dimensional world without any secrets.” Forgetting fairy tales would be an “unredeemable loss: the secret hatches and cracks in our world that could allow us to peek into hidden areas close.” Whereas Betz charged stories coming “from the outside” for “dominating human beings”, fairy tales would bring to the fore an “imaginary potential” that was inherent in human beings.⁴⁷ Given the critique of rational thinking, it is perhaps not surprising that Betz argued that sciences such as literary studies or psychoanalysis remained incapable of grasping what fairy tales were really about; a story teller who could read a fairy tale with a lively voice would contribute more to a “appropriating understanding” of the story than any scholarly analysis. After all, fairy tales did not operate with “abstract concepts”, but with an “imaginative language” that “cannot be explained with certainty, but that sets something into motion, not logical thinking, but a contemplating tuning [*nachsinnendes Einschwingen*], an appropriation [*Aneignen*].”⁴⁸

Whereas texts such as Boyd’s account of Rolling Thunder or analyses of fairy tales promised a holistic understanding of the world, other texts emphasized experiences that transgressed the boundaries of normal reality and in that way provided access to a realm beyond the grasp of science. The extremely popular books by Carlos Castaneda give an example for this. Castaneda was, or so he claimed, an anthropology student at the University of California, Los Angeles, who had sought to learn about traditional healing plants. But when he came to know an American Indian man named Don Juan, a “brujo” or healer, he became more interested in the “states of nonordinary [*nichtalltäglicher*] realities.”⁴⁹ Castaneda’s books describe a transformative journey that opened doors into this “different reality”, as his second book was entitled. To enter this reality, Castaneda had to learn the “secrets of a man of knowledge” and to overcome his rational way of thinking.⁵⁰ And tellingly, Don Juan kept on mocking Castaneda for constantly asking questions about the precise meaning of what Don Juan had said, something that would only prevent him from gaining genuine knowledge.

Rather than rational understanding, it was hallucinogenic drugs, namely Peyote, that helped facilitate experiences of extraordinary reality. In a central scene of the series’ first book, Castaneda described how, under the influence of Peyote, he had an experience of flying. “My legs turned soft and long, very long. I took a further step. My knee joints felt elastic like pole vault; they trembled and vibrated and contracted elastically.” And then he flew through the nightly air. “I felt a freedom and speed I had never experienced before.” The next day, he discussed what had happened with Don Juan. “Did I really fly”, he asked his teacher. “This is what you’ve said, isn’t it”, Don Juan replied. But Castaneda was not satisfied with the answer: “I know, Don Juan. I mean, did my body fly? Did I fly away like a bird?” But Don Juan only laughed. Birds would fly like birds, he explained, but Castaneda had flown like a man who had taken the second dose of Jimson Weed.⁵¹ It was an experience that Castaneda, still trapped as it were in his rational categories, could not quite grasp. But the experience was no less real; it was, indeed, part of a “nonordinary reality,” as Castaneda would say. In

⁴⁷ Otto Betz, “Geschichten aus dem Wurzelgrund: Annäherung an das Märchen,” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981), 42f.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44f.

⁴⁹ Castaneda, *Lehren*, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 130-135.

line with other popular texts about American Indians and Shamans, Don Juan offered a more “complete” knowledge of the world. But importantly, gaining this knowledge required a transgression of the boundaries of the “normal” world, aptly symbolized by the act of flying. Acquiring the secret knowledge of wise men like Don Juan promised, the story suggests, an experience of individual freedom beyond the confines of a rational, scientific world.

Descriptions of such transgressive experiences of freedom arguably made his writings appealing for leftists in search of an “extra-social dimension” of reality, as Duhm had put it. Indeed, Duhm was not alone in citing Don Juan as the “prophet” of a new age.⁵² Yet, what leftists took away from his books is anything but clear: leftists avidly read them, and the writings clearly had an impact on how they “thought and felt”, Herbert Röttgen claimed, but people rarely discussed the books’ meaning.⁵³ One of the few authors to discuss Castaneda’s work in some extent with was Hans Peter Duerr. Born in 1943, Duerr had studied ethnology and completed his PhD in 1971. From 1974 to 1985, he edited the anarchist magazine *Unter dem Pflaster liegt der Strand*. His book *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization* (1978), initially rejected as a *Habilitation* at the University of Zurich, became a bestseller in Germany; by 1980, a fifth edition was already in print. While his book was not well perceived in academic circles, Duerr claimed that he had enjoyed a talk about his ideas given to a “Mannheim Association of Housewives”.⁵⁴

The book – 160 pages of text, and another 340 pages of footnotes and bibliography – is a challenging and puzzling work. On one level, it presents a perplexing variety of stories about witches, werewolves, shamans and other more or less mystical issues that resembled the “nonordinary reality” Castaneda had described. More importantly, however, the book is an attempt to theorize the space “in between”, that is between “wilderness” and “civilization”, and how an understanding of this space “on the fence”, as it were, would be possible. As many other authors discussed here, Duerr was critical of social scientific thinking. A scientific approach to the world, “for example in the laboratory”, considered, he charged, the “disenchantment” of the world as a way to get to the “*naked truth*”: “Reality is thus devoid

⁵² See for example Arnold Graf Keyserling, “Kriterien der Wassermannzeit,” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981), 155.

⁵³ Herbert Röttgen and Florian Rabe, *Vulkantänze: Linke und alternative Ausgänge* (Munich: Trikont-Verlag, 1978), 126.

⁵⁴ Duerr, *Traumzeit*, 10. See also Ina van de Kerkhof, “Interview mit Hans Peter Dürr: Können Ethnologen fliegen?,” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981), Martin W. Lüdke, “Wildnis und Kultur: Ein Versuch, die ethnologische Beschreibung der ‘unvernünftigen Vernunft’ zu beschreiben, und ein kurzes Gespräch mit Lothar Baier über Hans Peter Duerrs ‘Traumzeit,’” *Unter dem Pflaster liegt der Strand* 6 (1979), Helmut Krauch, “Romantische Wissenschaft? Ein Interview mit Hans Peter Duerr,” *Unter dem Pflaster liegt der Strand* 6 (1979). On Duerr and his role in “alternative ethnology”, see also Rosa Eidelpes, “Gegenkultur: Zur Rolle der ‘Primitiven’ für die Zivilisationskritik um 1900 und die ‘alternative Ethnologie’ um 1980,” in *Lebensreform um 1900 und Alternativmilieu um 1980: Kontinuitäten und Brüche in Milieus der gesellschaftlichen Selbstreflexion im frühen und späten 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Detlef Siegfried and David Templin (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2019).

of colors, of a voice, of ears.” The scientific view categorized, ordered and hence oppressed the colorful variety of the world; the scientist, Duerr noted, “neither respects nor loves things. He casts a net over them and dissects and categorizes them. The things are rubricated, controlled and cleansed of anything that sprawls beyond the loops. The things cry, but the researcher does not see any tears.”⁵⁵ Grasping “the alien” with a scientific mind required “de-alienating” [*entfremden*; the word literally means rendering something “un-strange”, which is of course a play with the common meaning of the word that is translated as “alienating”] it, that is, making it less strange, familiar and thus understandable.⁵⁶ Notably psychology, a discipline that did concern itself with strange states of mind that might point beyond the boundaries of civilization, rather guarded these boundaries, explaining any extraordinary experience as a mere “projection”. For psychologists, “the dissolution of boundaries [between civilization and wilderness] is an indication of a mental disease”, Duerr wrote.⁵⁷

Reconstructing “archaic” modes of thinking, Duerr sought to recover an approach to the world that fundamentally differed from scientific thinking. Whereas scientists dissected and categorized the world, it was the dissolution of boundaries that characterized archaic thinking. Duerr thus stressed diverse forms of transgressions in his discussion of witches and shamans. He told stories of exuberant festivities during which priestesses with naked feet walked over glowing coal without burning their skin, of Dionysian orgies in ancient Greece in which particularly women and slaves participated, and of a “flaring up of sensuality” in late medieval times when the social order was unsettled and “life turned more sensual, passionate, looser and intense”.⁵⁸ These were times “between the times, when the old time was over and the new time had not yet began”. During such moments, “things stand outside normality, the order is turned upside-down and, at the same time, threatened in its existence.” It was a moment of struggle between “the forces of order and chaos.”⁵⁹

Duerr interpreted such ritual moments as a return to an original state of being [*Ursprung*] when “the separation of things” collapsed.⁶⁰ In particular, these were moments when the boundary between the realm of civilization and the “wilderness” beyond civilization collapsed, not least between a form of inner wilderness that was part of being human, but oppressed in civilized society. A werewolf for example was, according to archaic thinking in Duerr’s understanding, a human being capable of dissolving the “boundary between civilization and wilderness ‘in himself’”.⁶¹ Archaic cultures had thus the ability to explore “nature”, including human nature, in a much deeper sense than modern science. But, importantly, the goal was not gaining knowledge of what lay beyond this boundary. Rather, Duerr argued that by sitting on the fence a deeper understanding of “our” reality would be possible. Castaneda’s initiation into the world of the Yaki Shaman was thus not an initiation into “his [i.e. the Shaman’s] world”, but “into the anthropologist’s world”. It was not about entering a “different reality”, but about an experience “of that different part of *the* reality.”

⁵⁵ Duerr, *Traumzeit*, 139f.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26, 40, 67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58, similarly 60.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

The goal of “transgressing boundaries” was, in other words, not to become “a brujo, a sorcerer who can travel thousands of miles in a second”, but to “become conscious of himself and his way of life”.⁶² Ultimately, then, Duerr did not argue for “going native”, but called for experiences of transgressions that “shatter” the “cultural identity of the anthropologists.” In such moments of insecurity, the inner wilderness might become visible.⁶³

Dissatisfied with scientific understanding of the world, which included critical theories such as Marxism, numerous activists and thinkers on the alternative left turned to spiritualist thinking. Whereas the scientific worldview dissected, categorized and thereby impoverished the world, the spiritual worldview transgressed those boundaries; it was, they believed, more holistic. Myths, fairy tales or stories about shamans that defied an easy analysis promised to provide access to this world hidden from an analytical gaze. Not least, the turn to spirituality provided the basis for a different approach to politics.

Living in Harmony: The Politics of Leftist Spirituality

In the introduction of *The Return of the Imaginary*, editors Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen told a mythical history of the global New Left. They first invoked William Blake, “the great visionary of the turn of the century [around 1800]”, who had described the God of the American and French revolutions as Orc, an anagram of Cor, meaning heart, to then claim that a human being, Che Guevara, had been their revolutionary God in the 1960s. Whereas Orc had been an imagination of Blake, Guevara was an actual human being who turned into a Messiah for revolutionaries across the world. He was joined by Ho Chi Minh – “the old man and the warrior, East and West, the big mythological heroes not only of all colonized, but also of the rebellious youth dans la tête de la bête.”⁶⁴ The third man to join the revolutionary “triumvirate” was Mao Zedong, and together they became the “party of order in the European and North American revolutionary camp.” But there was also a “revolutionary party of disorder”, born in “sunny California”, that included Bohemians and Hippies. Their gods were Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary. Whereas armed groups such as the West German Red Army Faction had represented the party of order, the party of disorder was represented by communes, freaks and rock music. But soon enough, the left, simply called “movement” by Thurn and Röttgen, started to decay and dissolve, and a multitude of “monsters that threatened the established order” emerged: the gay movement, lesbians, men’s groups, and “the never ending swarm of psychological exhibitionism”, a reference to consciousness-raising and therapy groups.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., 127f.

⁶³ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁴ Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen, “Eine notwendige Einleitung,” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus, 1981), 10.

⁶⁵ On these groups Häberlen, *Emotional Politics*, 172-185, Maik Tändler, *Das therapeutische Jahrzehnt: Der Psychoboom in den siebziger Jahren* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 282-321.

Some people joined spiritual sects, others prayed to “God of rape Charles Bukowski.” And with that, everything seemed to be over, a total intellectual confusion.

“And then the strangers came”, Thurn and Röttgen continued their story: not aliens from far-away planets, but from the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains, of the Amazonas, the Himalaya and the shores of the Niger. They were Tibetan monks, American Indian tribal chiefs and Jamaican bards, figures who manifested themselves in the concerts of Bob Marley or the writings of Carlos Castaneda. They brought mind expanding [*benussseinserweiternd*] drugs and taught methods of meditation “so that the brains [of the white youth] were once again open for extra-logical events.”⁶⁶ For a first time, a sense of unity re-emerged: “In their images and allegories we sensed that it’s possible to dance the highs and lows of the soul – instead of being torn apart between them.”⁶⁷ Thus Thurn and Röttgen came to realize that only when old antagonisms collapsed would the beginning of a new world be possible: the old and the young, history and the myth, dream and reality, the left and right side of the brain, progressive and conservative politics, the masculine and feminine had to reconcile for this to happen.

In a somewhat similar vein, Thurn and Röttgen wrote an afterword for Sergius Golowin’s book *Magical Present*, published by Ulcus Molle: “The scale fell from our eyes: Our dreams became crystal clear.” Fighting the political enemy, they had become just like it, they had realized. “Our rigidity, slogans, categories, buzzwords reflected Leviathan’s rigidity. We were chained to the same world.” They did not give up the “joy of fighting”, but the position from which they fought changed radically. “We returned into the diversity, or rather, we ran towards it.”

Our raids lead us everywhere, everywhere there is something to be regained, rebegged [*zurückzubetteln*], reconjured [*zurückzuzaubern*]. We wrest the myths from fascism, which it has defiled, concepts such as friendship, homeland [*Heimat*], nature, which it has besmirched; from the nobility [we wrest] the feeling of respect, courtesy and courtly love [*Minne*], which it has lost; from the Church [we wrest] its most beautiful and most dishonorably treated daughter: mystics; from the vagabonds [we wrest] their freedom and neglected creativity to wed them with ours. In the books we search for feelings and vibrations that lust for [*danach leben*] to be lived and jittered.

And so they imagined a long and cumbersome journey, staring “here and now”, with the “magic ship berthing in our body’s bay.” It would be a journey leading (back) into a *Heimat*, a “magical present”, a “newly versed world”. They would continue the fight against a “dream-destroying present, hostile to humans and nature alike”, and still demanded “the highest honor of rebellion.”⁶⁸

The texts by Röttgen and Thurn, though certainly exceptionally excited but also somewhat obscure, give an idea as to why leftists considered spiritual ideas to be politically meaningful

⁶⁶ Thurn and Röttgen, “Einleitung,” 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁸ Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen, “Nachwort zu Sergius Golowin: Magische Gegenwart”, in *Ulcus Molle* 9/10, 1980, 66-67. See Golowin, *Magische Gegenwart*.

and important for their struggles. After the waive of terrorist attacks by the Red Army Faction in the fall of 1977 and an increased pressure from the state, leftists were trying to find a way out of a political impasse.⁶⁹ Spirituality was such a way. It promised a critique not only of modern, technical civilization, but also of how the left itself was entangled in this civilization. In this sense, turning to spirituality was indeed a radical alternative. The desire for unity and a holistic understanding of the world had implications for the forms and fields of political struggles. Spiritual politics called for developing harmonious relations with nature, with oneself, and not least with the community, which is why leftists sought to recover a notion of *Heimat*, usually associated with right-wing politics.

Living in harmony with nature was a central goal for many leftist New Age authors. Importantly, this required not only an environment-friendly life-style, but a spiritual connection with the earth. Stan Steiner for example noted critically that the environmentalist movement lacked a spiritual foundation. “And I ask myself how someone wants to save the world who does not a spiritual connection with it. After all, they cannot really love Earth.”⁷⁰ Along similar lines, Otto Betz argued that fairy tales have a “rebellious” dimension, because they teach a certain “respect” for all living creatures, but not for authorities. To give an example, he cited an unnamed fairy tale in which the horse told the boy to dismount and to guide it towards the side, lest it tramples down the ants. In return, the ants are grateful and offer their help.⁷¹ And in an interview with Robert Jungk, a well-known futurologist in West Germany,⁷² Röttgen and Thurn called for “communicating with plants and animals”, a communication that would not be linguistic but poetic. As it was difficult to find places for such a communication in modern urban society, it became important to “sense the grass growing out of the concrete as a fairy tale”. Thus the grass in the metropolis gained a different “dimension”, as it carried “the entire rebellion, the protest” in itself, Röttgen and Thurn argued. Jungk agreed and gave a personal example: going into the forests at night, something that provided him with a different experience. “You feel the wind [with your skin] and in the morning the thaw.” He emphasized “tactile experiences”, which might be understood as a way to communicate with nature.⁷³ Moving from nature to the entire universe, Kurt Schnauthiel praised Zen Buddhism in *Ulcus Molle* for its ability to “dissolve the subject-object-separation”, without in any way explaining what that meant, facilitating a “unity with the entire cosmos”, something that was beyond human understanding.⁷⁴

Doug Boyd’s *Rolling Thunder* made a similar point. In Rolling Thunder’s mind, the “inner nature of humanity” was identical with “nature of the universe”, and hence man could

⁶⁹ On the German Autumn, see in addition to the work by Karrin Hanshew, only and with further references Petra Terhoeven, *Deutscher Herbst in Europa: Der Linksterrorismus der siebziger Jahre als transnationales Phänomen* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016). See also “Forum: 1977, The German Autumn,” *German History* 25 (2007).

⁷⁰ Quoted by Thurn and Röttgen, “Einleitung,” 15f.

⁷¹ Betz, “Geschichten aus dem Wurzelgrund,” 53.

⁷² On Jungk see Elke Seefried, *Zukünfte: Aufstieg und Krise der Zukunftsforschung 1945 - 1980* (Berlin; Boston, Mass.: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015), 125-153.

⁷³ “Gespräch mit Robert Jungk,” in *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären: Märchen, Magie, Mystik, Mythos, Anfänge einer anderen Politik*, ed. Christiane Thurn and Herbert Röttgen (Munich: Trikont-Dianus Verlag, 1981), 59-61.

⁷⁴ Kurt Schnauthiel, “Zen-Buddhismus”, in *Ulcus Molle* 9/10, 1979, 18-20.

understand his own nature by understanding the universe. Putting this point more radically, Boyd claimed that “the inner essence of human beings is identical with the essence of the universe.” Yet, the “technological, materialist way of today’s Western society”, which he deemed “the most unnatural way of life” in human history, threatened to disrupt the connection between human beings and nature. “The people of this society have alienated themselves from the trees, birds, insects, from all the animals and plants and even the weather. That is why they are also so alienated from their own self.”⁷⁵ Rolling Thunder, Boyd reported, equated the “submission of nature” with the oppression of individuality. In his mind, the increasing disregard for the “laws of nature and the human soul” resulted in an ever-increasing amount of complicated and oppressive laws that prevented “self-government” (*Selbstbestimmung*).⁷⁶ Rolling Thunder called for treating the earth as a living organism that could fall ill, and that indeed had fallen ill, just like a human body. The problems the world was facing were nothing but an “utterly natural reactions to fight off and cure the disease.” And just like the earth needed curing, so did human beings, including some of those who actually wanted to protect the environment but in fact mistreated their own bodies by ingesting anything that would put them “on a trip”.⁷⁷ Healing the earth and healing the human body therefore went hand in hand. This would require a true understanding, which was not simply learning all the “facts” from textbooks. Rather, true understanding started with “love” and “respect”, Rolling Thunder claimed: “Respect for the great spirit; because the Great Spirit is the life that is infused into everything, into all living beings and plants, even into stones and minerals.” What was therefore needed was not simply a vague feeling or attitude, but a “way of life”.⁷⁸

Other books about American Indians similarly blamed Western society for having lost touch with nature. In his *The Vanishing White Man*, published in German translation in 1979 by Dianus-Trikont, Stan Steiner compared the Hopi way of agricultural production with Western exploitation of nature. Whereas Western society depended on technologies and machinery, such as cars and petroleum, and would soon be governed by computers, the Hopi had perfectly adapted to adverse natural conditions. They lived in harmony with nature without being depended on technological inventions.⁷⁹ According to Steiner’s account, American Indians regarded themselves as part of nature and thus related differently, in a more sensual fashion to it. An American Indian would “listen to a foaming stream that is sounding soft in his ears, and he would tell about these miraculous sounds.” White men, by contrast, would look at the stream and think about how to make the “damned water” work for them with dikes and turbines.⁸⁰ Just like Boyd, Steiner too complained about humanity’s alienation from nature. Man’s attempt to “bring all life on earth under his control” had made him “a stranger in his own country” who did not consider himself “part of the natural and everlasting ecological harmony.”⁸¹ American Indians, by contrast, had “felt at home [*geborgen*]

⁷⁵ Boyd, *Rolling Thunder*, 97.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 52f.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 64f.

⁷⁹ Steiner, *Untergang*, 12f. For a similar comparison between Western technological civilization and tradition American Indian ways of life in accordance with nature, see Stiller, *Naëstsàn*, 9-12.

⁸⁰ Steiner, *Untergang*, 33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

in the secrets of the Great Spirit.”⁸² At least until the arrival of the “white man”, they had lived in harmony with nature. And finally, this harmonious relation with nature had, in Steiner’s account, social implications: for Hopi, human values such as friendship and love mattered more than material wealth.⁸³

Developing a more harmonious relation with nature also required working on the self. New Age magazines published detailed instructions for bodily technologies of the self that would help practitioners “cure” and understand themselves.⁸⁴ At least for some authors, this had an explicitly political dimension. Bruno Martin for example wrote in the magazine *Hologramm* that facing the “throes of the New Age”, it was necessary to “act politically”. Yet, this would neither mean seeking to gain power and influence nor resisting, but “to commence with small work, which starts with ourselves.” Martin believed that “this kind of spiritual labor, that strives for a unification of inner and outer aspects, is an expression of a new stage in the development of humanity and this planet.”⁸⁵ “Spiritual group experiences” could create such a sense of unification, Corinne McLaughlin wrote in the same magazine. The experiences created “an ecstatic feeling of freedom” that affected participants who “let go their long lasting fear of being open for others.” At least “for an hour or a day”, a “deep and timeless desire for unification with others was fulfilled.”⁸⁶ And Dagmar von Garnier claimed in an interview with *Hologramm* that dancing was a bodily practice that could help particularly women gain access to their “spiritual potential”. Being entirely “with herself” would allow them to feel a particular kind of quietness, von Garnier argued, that was “harmony, a bit of safety, genuine happiness, being authentic.”⁸⁷

The accounts of American Indians also emphasized how important working on the self was. Doug Boyd for example told numerous stories of bodily and mental self-cleansing. Together with Rolling Thunder and a few other comrades, he took a nightly bath in a hot dwell out in the wilderness. The “smell and warmth” of the hot mud soaked their bones. “Tense muscles and moods relaxed, while the mud began to tear at our bodies. Ambitions, plans, hopes, concerns, doubts and fears crept through our fingers and out through our toes. [...] Time and movement came to a halt. The quiet presence of the group-consciousness seemed to fill the soundless universe.”⁸⁸ Boyd stopped thinking, only “empty conscious” existed, and even this was about to “dissipate, to disappear into the night”. He recalled what Rolling Thunder had said previously: “The beginning is the self-cleansing, that’s the first step. [...] You cannot cleanse the body without cleansing the spirit.”⁸⁹ Just like the experience of collective

⁸² Ibid., 149.

⁸³ Ibid., 12f.

⁸⁴ See the work by Eitler, “Alternative Religion.”, ———, “‘Selbsteilung.’”, ———, “Körper.”, Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 823-825. The left-leaning esoteric magazine *Hologramm* for example published such instructions.

⁸⁵ Bruno Martin, “New Age Politik”, in *Hologramm* 23, January 1981, 5-6.

⁸⁶ Corinne McLaughlin, “Gruppenbewusstsein und feminine Energie” in: *Hologramm* 9, May 1978, 3-4.

⁸⁷ “Denn die Weisheit ist beweglicher als alle Bewegung: Ein Gespräch mit Dagmar von Garnier über Tanz, Frauen und Spiritualität. Zusammengestellt von Marianne Oehlmann-van Nes”, in *Hologramm* 28, January 1982, 18-20.

⁸⁸ Boyd, *Rolling Thunder*, 113.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 114.

dancing Dagmar von Garnier had described, bathing in nature created a sense of spiritual unity with other human beings as well as with nature. Such spiritual cleansing had also a healing impact, as Rolling Thunder explained. An infection for example was a “spiritual pollution”, and hence healing required more than an understanding of the body, but an understanding of the deeper, spiritual causes of the pain.⁹⁰

Finally, the interest in fairy tales and local myths also led leftists to a rediscovery of *Heimat*, a concept notoriously popular amongst conservative or even right-wing thinkers, roughly translatable as “homeland”, with a distinctly nationalist connotation. The book *Nicht nur Bäume haben Wurzeln* (Not Only Trees That Have Roots), also published by Dianus Trikont in 1981, provides a drastic example of this turn to *Heimat*. The authors Nicola Schulz and Karl Heinz Albers, born in 1949 and 1950 (they do not say who is born in which year) described themselves as leftists who participated in the revolts around 1968. Yet, they now realized that there had to be “something right” about what the “right-wingers, the villagers, the squares [*Spießbürger*], the fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, the Sunday speakers, and so on, thought, felt, did and represented.”⁹¹ They wanted to understand their “past”, to look into conservative positions and what they had to offer for a building a new social order, rather than restoring an old one.⁹² Reflecting on conservative thinking, they stressed the need for human beings to be rooted (hence the title) in traditions, to build upon the legacies of the past.⁹³

In line with spiritually inspired leftists authors, Schulz and Albers criticized modern technology that disrupted people’s relation with nature. Somewhat reminiscent of Stan Steiner’s critique of modern agriculture, they described how a farmer sitting on a “110 PS John Deere tractor” would not feel the ground below him and would not even notice the “hare cowering in a furrow” while killing it. By contrast, a peasant with a weaker tractor still had to use his physical strength to keep the machine on track and might even notice the hare; and still a few years earlier, the peasant had to work with a bull to plough the field, giving the hare enough time to flee. At the end of a day of working on the fields with a bull, the peasant would feel “his heavy legs and arms” from working on the “crumbly, hard, loamy, damp, rough, soft and stony” earth. By contrast, the farmer sitting on the powerful tractor did not feel his body at the end of the day, except for suffering from back pain due to sitting all day, and neither did he feel the earth in its diversity below him. Instead, his hearing suffered from all the noise the machine produced.⁹⁴ Schulz and Albers also defended the search for a positive understanding of *Heimat* that gained momentum in leftist circles. The “rediscovery” of “dialects” or the “history of neighborhoods and villages” was, in their mind, a form of resisting the “further uprooting in the mobility society”.⁹⁵ Even in a post-capitalist society it would be necessary to provide people with a sense of both spatial and intellectual

⁹⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁹¹ Nicola Schulz and Karl Heinz Albers, *Nicht nur Bäume haben Wurzeln: Eine Streitschrift für einen Rückschritt zum Fortschritt* (Munich: Trikont-Dianus Verlag, 1982), 10.

⁹² Ibid., 26.

⁹³ Ibid., 31f.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 117f.

Heimat to have a “holistic” [*ganzheitlich*] identity. In that society, the peasant girl from a provincial village would still feel uprooted, they predicted, as an art student in Hamburg.⁹⁶

In a world that was, according to leftist activists, fragmented and divided, in which people had lost touch with their selves, with nature as much as with heritage, spiritual traditions promised a reestablish a sense of harmony. In particular for leftists tired of the confrontational politics of the 1970s, such ideas seemed like a viable alternative. What this meant in terms of practices, and practical politics, often remained elusive. To live in accordance with nature, some moved to the countryside where they worked on alternative farms and rediscovered their *Heimat*, while others engaged in collective meditation exercises, yoga or dancing to connect with their selves and the universe. Whether all of this was still political was up to debate. Indeed, a number of leftist critics argued that the turn to spirituality was a turn away from politics.⁹⁷

Conclusion: The Appeal of Spiritual Politics

“Come with us, said the donkey, we’ll find something better than death anywhere”, read the invitation to the famous TUNIX (literally, “do nothing”) congress that attracted some 15,000 leftists from all over West Germany to West Berlin in January 1978.⁹⁸ After years of confronting the state in various campaigns, many within the leftist scene felt frustrated and looked for alternatives. For some radical leftists, participating in the Federal Republic’s parliamentary democracy seemed like the best option; they went on to found the Green Party, which in the coming years succeeded in influencing (West) German political culture in a way that went far beyond their electoral successes.⁹⁹ For other leftists, spirituality looked like the way forward. Fairy tales, accounts of American Indians and Shamans offered a holistic and harmonious understanding to the world that science and technological rationality failed to provide. At the same time, such stories provided leftist readers with accounts of extraordinary experiences that transgressed the boundaries of the normal, that disturbed the usual order of the world and that were in that sense subversive as well as liberating. These desires for holistic knowledge translated into new political visions. Whereas leftist politics had been characterized, these authors argued, by thinking in terms of conflict, spiritual politics centered around ideals of living in harmony – with nature, with the community, and with oneself. Thus political change had to start at an individual level, with people attempting to live such a harmonious life, rather than challenging existing powers.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 120f.

⁹⁷ See only G. Rossi, “Der Tanz um einen erloschenen Vulkan,” *Das Blatt* 123, 23 June – 6 July 1978, 25, Joachim Bruhn, “Unter den Zwischenmenschen,” in *Diktatur der Freundlichkeit: Über Bhagwan, die kommende Psychokratie und Lieferanteneingänge zum wohltätigen Wahnsinn*, ed. Initiative Sozialistisches Forum (Freiburg: Ça-Ira-Verlag, 1984). For more general critics of the turn to irrationality within leftist circles, see Häberlen, *Emotional Politics*, 133-120.

⁹⁸ On Tunix, see, with further references, *ibid.*, 226-234, Michael März, *Linker Protest nach dem Deutschen Herbst: Eine Geschichte des linken Spektrums im Schatten des "starken Staates", 1977-1979* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 203-244.

⁹⁹ Mende, “*Nicht rechts, nicht links, sondern vorn*”.

Such a turn to spirituality might seem odd for a political movement that had, a mere decade ago, so much believed in rational arguments and scholarly thinking. Indeed, it might seem questionable if such thinking was still leftist. Of course, not all leftists made this spiritualist turn. Herbert Röttgen, editor of *Trikont Dianus*, is a particular extreme example. Yet, he was not alone, and spiritualist ideas proved appealing for many in the left, as the list of contributors to *Die Rückkehr des Imaginären* shows. Authors frequently stressed their leftist political biographies, their dissatisfaction with traditional leftist politics, and that they considered spiritual thinking as a solution to the conundrums the post-1968 left faced. This turn to spirituality thus questions narratives of the post-1968 left that stress rational arguments or participatory democracy. For leftists turning to spirituality, something else was at stake: finding a way of life that would be harmonious or, as Sven Reichardt argued, “authentic”.¹⁰⁰ The fascination with spiritualism can thus be understood as part and parcel of a moment when old, confrontational forms of politics were rapidly losing appeal and were replaced by a politics concerned with questions of self-hood. Spiritual politics were, to quote Michel Foucault, part of the struggles that attacked “not so much ‘such and such’ an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power”, namely a power that determined “who one is”.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Reichardt, *Authentizität*.

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 781.