

Why mind the Weather? Karin Bauer, ed. *Everybody Talks about the Weather – we don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*. (New York: Seven Story Press, 2008)

**Eve Kalyva
University of Leeds**

Everybody talks about the weather, the movie theatres, 'freedom' fighters and 'terrorists' who must be contained at all costs if we are to protect our way of life. But what way of life is that?

This edited collection offers to the English reader an elegant translation of Meinhof's writings published in *konkret* magazine between 1960-1968.¹ Its 24 articles show the development of Meinhof's arguments and writing style in a rough chronological order, and pivot around Germany's external and internal politics, imperialism (especially in relation to Israel, Iran and Vietnam), women, student actions, the role of the media, political awareness and resistance. The book includes a preface by 2004 Nobel Prize literature winner Elfriede Jelinek, an introduction by the editor Karin Bauer and an afterword by Bettina Röhl, Meinhof's daughter and journalist – the latter included in exchange for the publication rights to Meinhof's work.

Karin Bauer's highly informative introduction traces key elements in Meinhof's life, from her childhood to the media icon she became, concentrating through her writing that comprises the main body of this book on her political commitment to social criticism. Setting things in context, questions regarding the nature of political struggle rose through the constant repression of the people's democratic rights in the German Republic by a series of Emergency Laws including censorship, the use of the army for internal affairs and database keeping of the citizens' political beliefs. Further, Bauer adds, and amidst Vietnam and other revolutionary struggles throughout the world, the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg by the police on 2 June 1967 consolidated the student movement. SDS leaders Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Juergen Krahl wrote on methods of political protest and guerrilla activities (pp.40-41) and the motto of the day was 'We, too, are being beaten every day in Vietnam' (p.47), while against the uprising social groups stood 'the armed Auschwitz generation' (p.42).²

Meinhof's first two articles of this volume lay bare the militarized German state, which was officially occupied by the Western Allies until the Paris Accord of 1955 and since then under the NATO directive. Here, discussing history and living conditions was a taboo constantly misrepresented by the press, manipulated by the Cold War propaganda and entangled in social guilt that seriously threatened people's freedom by covering up truly fascist operations.³ Therefore, political responsibility becomes paramount, Meinhof maintains: 'We can't allow ourselves to be burdened by guilt, which will silence and neutralize our response to the revolutionary struggle of the Vietnamese people' (p.47).⁴ For Bauer, the fight of the RAF – the fight of six against six million, as the Nobel Prize laureate Henrich Böll called it – could not be won but the Federal Republic had much to lose: the establishment of a liberal democracy after the fall of the Third Reich, and the education and integration into the political process of a new generation that asked questions and demanded reforms (p.17).

As Bauer explains, Ulrike Meinhof was a well known figure of the German Left and a journalist with an extended intellectual circle, writing for magazines, radio and television shows on nuclear disarmament, civil rights and Vietnam and seeking 'to expose, advocate, and fight for political freedom and social justice' (p.17). Moreover, *konkret* magazine where Meinhof wrote between 1959-1969 and was editor-in-chief between 1961-1964 was an important voice of the Left, subsidized by the German Democratic Republic until 1964 and reaching at its peak in 1968 and 1969 a monthly circulation of 230,000, initiating debates and helping to build an intellectual community (pp.27-29). (Or it produced political agitprop for the Communist East, influenced students against capitalism and the west in general and spread hate propaganda as part of a plan of installing a world-wide dictatorship to which the front was the young journalist Meinhof as Bettina Röhl claims.⁵)

In such an atmosphere of outrage, frustration and paranoia, Meinhof's critical voice stands out incisive and precise. Being a public figure, various voices speak of Meinhof as the most distinguished German woman since Rosa Luxemburg, a sign of hope for humanity killed by the German conditions, a woman who wanted to change the system and became its victim, the product of the German circumstances, a revolutionary martyr, a ruthless terrorist (p.16). Bauer informs that when Meinhof was

found dead in her prison cell in Stuttgart- Stammheim on 8 May 1976 under disputed circumstances, protests and riots took place in Germany and major European cities, bombs exploded and more than four thousand mourners gathered for her funeral, including members of the liberal establishment, intellectuals, artists, publishers, activists and dignitaries of the Protestant church, along with police and agents of the Federal Bureau for the Protection of the Constitution (p.15). In her afterlife, Meinhof became the subject of works by Gerhard Richter and Joseph Beuys and she was portrayed in musical, theatrical and literary works (pp.90-93). As for the press of her time, Meinhof featured as a brain-damaged, fatherless and unsatisfied mother who turned to violence. Thus it seems, Bauer notes, that the real scandal for the popular press was the rejection of a traditional female role rather than militant violence (p.72).

It is considered an educational privilege to be able to perform well in debates where minute shifts in position are the effect of a mere proximity of appearances rather than any essential difference. Believing that one can clearly see the stakes at hand while constantly being reassured that everything is within one's reach, there is no need to test anything against the conformity of a blissful lifestyle. For of course, who would need to state the obvious?

At the level of the reader, this book may be hard to follow, given that Meinhof's columns are critical rather than descriptive and they appear to take certain things as 'given'. To an extent, context becomes accessible via the useful editorial notes; yet most importantly, Meinhof's compact writing style manipulates the presumably 'given' in order to draw attention between the lines for both groups of readers, of then and of now. According to Bauer, Meinhof's columns exposed the underlying ideological positions in the arguments of journalists and politicians (p.49). For set against the demagogical or blatantly fanatic media rhetoric, there can be no readymade solution to the difficulty of maintaining a clear political view. 'One day', Meinhof warns us, 'we will be asking about Herr Strauss the same way we now ask our parents about Hitler'.⁶ And mythological concepts, a reference to Roland Barthes is useful here, postulate a certain degree of knowledge of reality where meaning is already complete, emptied and impoverished of any history or memory.⁷

At a social level, Meinhof's voice is that of questioning and critical thinking rather than

being the 'other side', as if one can stand outside any 'conditions' and hide behind comfortable subject/object separations that isolate responsibility. Especially in a state that under the guise of democracy and consumer capitalism pertained fascist tendencies, Meinhof's 'Counter-Violence' reads,

where fascism is still seen as one episode of hooliganism, a momentary lapse in the German spirit, a misfortune of German history, a stroke of fate that had no source in society, and maybe did somehow somewhere have 'a sublime purpose,' which was just pursued with the wrong methods.⁸

In 'False Consciousness' (1968), Meinhof challenges the traditional position of women reified through the institution of marriage and consumerism, and explains how a demand for equal rights that no longer puts into question the conditions of inequality that exist between people merely demands equality within inequality now applied systematically: the female worker with the male worker, the female editor with the male editor, the female member of parliament with the male member of parliament. While debates and discussions that are reduced to slogans do not contribute to changing people's awareness let alone the power relations that rule them. At the level of the author, Meinhof's columns refuse any 'given' objectivity the empowered journalist might claim and become gradually self-criticizing. Against the disorientating strategies of the press exciting bourgeois respectability, the innocence of the system, the order of things and its vague engagement by controlling and withholding information – as with the assassination attempt against Dutschke and the 'assassination attempt' against the visiting US Vice-President Hubert Humphrey⁹ – it becomes public service, Meinhof asserts, to reveal the hallow of the German democracy.¹⁰ TV shows that presumably hunt down criminals reassuring the public that something is actually happening and in which it has an active role, not only employ the 'criminal' as a new hate object after the Jew, the Communist and the student, but by turning people into informants test the extent to which fascist methods can still control and mobilize the public.¹¹ The truth, Meinhof argues in the extremely vigilant 'Columnism' (1968), is that columns are commodities, governed by the profit factor and the prestige factor, the former measuring the readers' orientation and the latter the equivalent aura of independence, courage and so forth that a column gives to the

whole newspaper. A fraud for the readers and a personality cult, the columnist has a fenced-in freedom and is kept individual and powerless, while publishers internalize the conditions of the market and editors the publishers' focus on profit; to this opportunism, Meinhof notes, *konkret* was no exception.¹²

At the heart of every political struggle and in order to consolidate a mass movement lies the balance between raising wider awareness of the real living conditions and initiating action towards changing them. This is a historical as much as an enabling question: not one that cannot be answered but one that must constantly remain in check, as long as one is part of a society, so as to retain both a sense of direction and purpose – as subsequent RAF generations were accused of losing. Despite any dominant bourgeois moralizations through the glamorized sounds of rock music, fast cars, toy guns and typewriters engulfed in cigarette smoke as seen through our theatre screens, the readings of Meinhof's life and work take up value only in the face of political struggle.

This is not a moral book; it does not offer an easy and prescriptive way out of thinking things by dismissing the RAF or any other social group conveniently labeled 'terrorist' or 'handful of criminals' leaving us with a suitable and orderly view of past and present. The value of this book – apart from the obvious that once opposition to state violence is indiscriminately and opportunely tagged along with a 'terror' prefix and any political action rendered 'irrational' or 'irrelevant' we can all go home and rest assured that democracy is being served – lies in its presence as a historical document especially within the very limited English publications on the topic. 'What has happened will happen again. Power relations have not changed', Meinhof writes,¹³ exposing the historical mechanisms that formulate, enable and maintain the demagogy of terror in all its spectacular legitimations and in particular the function of the press in the creation and manipulation of social consensus – a clear view that seems much of need today than ever.

Notes

¹ The selection was made from *Die Würde des Menschen ist antastbar: Aufsätze und*

Polemiken and Deutschland Deutschland Unter Anderm: Aufsätze und Polemiken (both from Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1995).

² Der Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund (The Socialist German Student Union) was founded in 1946 and disbanded in 1970. The first quote is by the SDS president Karl Dietrich Wolff's speech at the Vietnam Congress, West Berlin, February 1968 with more than 5,000 people attending and seen as inaugurating the student movement; from Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentbewegung: Von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail 1946 bis 1995, vol. 1* (Hamburg: Rogner & Bernhard, 1998), p.298. The second quote is by Gudrun Ensslin, RAF leader; from Gerd Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt: Unsere kleine deutsche Kulturrevolution 1967-77* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001), p.383.

³ Ulrike Meinhof, 'Shadows of the Summit Pointing West' [1960], pp.101-09 and 'New German Ghetto Show' [1960], pp.110-20. The latter discusses the booklet *The Red Book (Rotbuch)* published in 1960 by the so-called 'Save the Peace' committee aiming to unmask the Communist infiltration and providing name lists of possible suspects.

⁴ Quoted in Mario Krebs, *Ulrike Meinhof* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988), p.149.

⁵ Bettina Röhl, 'Icon of the Left, Propagandist, and Communist', Afterword, pp.256-63 (pp.257-58; p. 261).

⁶ Ulrike Meinhof, 'The Hitler within You' [1961], pp.138-42 (pp.141-42). Franz Josef Strauss (1915-1988) was Federal Minister for Special Affairs under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Federal Minister of Nuclear Energy in 1955 and Defence Minister between 1956-1962 (Karin Bauer, 'Introduction', note 19, p.95). Strauss brought a libel suit against Meinhof and *konkret* for this article, which never went to trial because the court in Hamburg found no substance to the claim (original note, p.142).

⁷ See Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Jonathan Cape (London: Vintage, 2000), pp.109-59 (p.117). Original emphasis.

⁸ Ulrike Meinhof, 'Counter-Violence' [1968], pp.234-38 (p.235).

⁹ Regarding the former, more than 45,000 people demonstrated in many cities and the SDS declared Dutschke's assassination attempt the result of a systematic hate

campaign against progressive and democratic forces by the Berlin Senate and Springer Press where headlines such as 'Stop Dutschke Now' circulated by its neo-fascist *Deutsche Nationale Zeitung*. Regarding the latter, the press reported the protesters' throwing pudding during Humphrey's visit as an 'assassination attempt'; Karin Bauer, 'Introduction', p.48 and note 1, p.232.

¹⁰ See Ulrike Meinhof, 'Water Cannons: Against Women, Too' [1968], pp.214-23 and 'Napalm and Pudding' [1967], pp.229-33.

¹¹ Ulrike Meinhof, 'File Number XY: Dissolved' [1968], pp.224-28 (p.228).

¹² Ulrike Meinhof, 'Columnism' [1968], pp.249-54 (pp.249-50; p.253).

¹³ Ulrike Meinhof, 'From Protest to Resistance', [1968], pp.239-43 (p.240).

We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof Paperback " Jun 3 2008. by Ulrike Meinhof (Author), Karin Bauer (Author, Editor), Bettina Rohl (Afterword), Elfriede Jelinek (Preface), von Flotow, Luise (Translator) & 2 more. 4.8 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews. Given this fact, "Everybody Talks about the Weather" is an excellent addition to the available literature. Unlike others works on the group and its various members, this entire work comes straight from the mouth of one its most influential members. I don't mind a critique, but the sophomoric and bitter tone of the article rob something from the content. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in this era of German history or the foundations of the late 60's urban guerrilla movement. Read more. We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof. We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof Paperback " June 3, 2008. by Ulrike Meinhof (Author), Karin Bauer (Editor). Visit Amazon's Karin Bauer Page. Find all the books, read about the author, and more. See search results for this author. Are you an author? Ulrike Meinhof has long stood as an enigma to many in the West who can't wrap their heads around why a successful, middle-class, journalist would help to launch a group of Marxist guerrillas. This work should clear up much of the speculation that currently circulates. Meinhof's hostility to bourgeois values, the Vietnam war, and Germany's failure to come to terms with the legacy of National Socialism is clear throughout the entirety of her pre-RAF journalism. We don't have the freezing cold conditions of North America reaching -30 in the winter, or the danger of typhoons and hurricanes sweeping the roofs off our houses, and neither do we have 50 degree climates creating frantic forest fires. So why do Brits feel the need to talk about our low risk dull weather all the time? Experts claim that at our location on the globe, we have a very unpredictable and frequently changing climate. This is what can cause us to have brand new weather points to talk about every couple of days or even daily! It is known that the British use unusual sayings to talk about the weather. Test yourself to see if you can understand or guess what these sayings mean! 1. "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight" "Red sky in the morning, shepherds warning".