Introduction

All over the world during the 1960s, movements led by the young radically challenged existing forms of political and cultural authority. With great optimism and energy, they attacked governments, militaries, institutions, ideologies, and common ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. The year 1968—that potent symbol of the 1960s as a whole—can be evoked by reciting the places where left-wing rebellion erupted with special force and drama: Paris, Prague, New York, Tokyo, Berlin, Saigon, Mexico City.¹

New Leftists were not only implicitly united across national boundaries by their shared opposition to oppression, their commitment to democratic participation, and their use of militant direct action as a means of protest; they were also consciously internationalist. In what amounted to a global crusade, students and youths throughout the world protested the Vietnam War. They assimilated dimensions of Black Power and Third World revolutionary ideologies, in which they saw near-universal appeal and relevance. They created an international protest culture organized around master texts, chiefly those of Karl Marx, Mao Tse-tung, and Herbert Marcuse, and “revolutionary” icons like Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh. And, in instances, they responded directly to the triumphs and failures experienced by their foreign New Left comrades. In their wildest dreams, they saw themselves waging a revolution that would overthrow both the U.S.-led imperialism of the West and the ossified, bureaucratic communism of the East.
Despite the global nature of 1960s rebellion, little has been done to probe the New Left's internationalism—the common aspirations of radicals in different settings and the synchronic quality of New Left activism generally. Instead, each country touched by New Left protest has produced a literature on the meaning and legacy of its "own" 1960s. As a result, neither scholarship nor popular commentary on the 1960s has helped us much to move beyond the imprecise sense that New Leftists forged an international zeitgeist of radical rebellion, or the simple observation that in a number of countries, similar things seemed to have happened at roughly the same time.²

This book explores the international character of New Left rebellion by focusing on complementary experiences in two countries: the "armed struggles" of American and West German radicals. Violence against the state is not supposed to happen—not in formally democratic societies that boast institutional channels for addressing the grievances of dissident minorities. Not in prosperous, technologically developed societies that provide most of their citizens with the opportunity to earn a decent living. And not, certainly, at the hands of well-educated youths of the middle or upper classes who have seemingly everything to lose and little to gain from attacking societies that have endowed them with great privilege and promise. Political violence, rather, is expected to be the last resort of the disenfranchised and dispossessed, fighting oppression in societies that permit them no other choice.

And yet in the 1960s and 1970s, middle-class white youths in the United States and West Germany took up arms in hopes of overthrowing their governments. Chief among the "armed struggle" groups in the two countries were America's Weatherman (later renamed the Weather Underground) and Germany's Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction), or RAF.³ In 1969–70, both groups began to wage guerrilla campaigns modeled on those in Latin America. Although their attacks on military, corporate, and political targets were meant to be the catalyst for larger armed revolts, neither group was able to attract more than several dozen members into its highest ranks, and their violence was a dramatic failure from a tactical standpoint. Yet Weatherman and the RAF provoked reactions vastly disproportionate to the violence they unleashed. They each became a potent symbol of both the extremes to which New Left rebellion had gone and the profound social and political divisions their societies experienced in the 1960s and 1970s. As both a cause and a symptom of broad-based crises of legitimacy, their violence constituted an im-
portant episode in the histories of their nations, of the developed West as a whole, and of global conflict.

Even so, their violence may appear far removed from the mainstream of the New Left. "Armed struggle" emerged in the United States and West Germany only at the tail end of the 1960s, and shortly before the New Left's decline in both countries. Most activists rejected violence as a political strategy, and many accused its advocates of corrupting the New Left's core values. Weatherman and the RAF were denounced by leftists in their own countries as everything from self-indulgent fools living out Bonnie-and-Clyde fantasies to "left-wing adventurists" hopelessly cut off from "the masses." Yet armed struggle was an extreme expression of ideologies, attitudes, and sensibilities deeply embedded in both the American and West German New Left movements. As early as 1967, New Leftists in both countries discussed the possibility of taking up arms. (America's Black Panther Party, formed in 1966, both preached and practiced from its inception the armed self-defense of African-American communities.) Though such discussions often remained at the level of speculation or fantasy, many activists took the prospect of violence very seriously. Some promoted violence as a means of self-defense against police assaults at demonstrations, but others advocated waging an actual guerrilla war. And in both countries, state repression, coupled with activists' declining faith in the value of peaceful protest, caused those skeptical about violence to seriously contemplate it and those persuaded of the need for violence to take the radical leap into action.

Weatherman and the RAF were only the best-known New Left groups to make this leap. In the United States, dozens if not hundreds of collectives—most often small circles of friends and fellow activists whose identities were never publicly revealed—committed bombings, arson, and other destruction of state, corporate, and university property in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though no fully reliable figures exist, one estimate counts as many as 2,800 such attacks between January 1969 and April 1970 alone. Such protest violence, combined with eruptions of civil unrest, prompted urgent studies on the causes and scope of political violence and the widespread sense that America was experiencing one of the most violent periods in its history. The RAF was joined in combat by the West Berlin anarchists of the "June 2 Movement"; by the Socialist Patients Collective, a group of psychiatric patients who formed armed cells; by the semi-underground Red Cells, formed in 1973; and by a slew of small, ad hoc "urban guerrilla" groups. However fresh the memories
of the Nazi era and the turmoil that had preceded it, violence was once again part of the German political landscape.

Given the extent of political violence in the United States and West Germany, it would be a mistake to view armed struggle as an aberration or as simply a fringe phenomenon. Although this view dominates commentary on the New Left, it minimizes the broader revolutionary impetus of the late 1960s and threatens to make scapegoats of those who acted on the prevalent rhetoric among radicals encouraging violence. More deeply, it serves in the present day to subdue or even repress potentially painful memories of how contentious the late 1960s and early 1970s were in the United States and West Germany. Focus on the margins of the New Left may therefore disclose something about its center—the principles, passions, ideals, desires, fantasies, and fears that defined young activists' consciousness and conduct.

Beyond what they tell us about 1960s radicalism, Weatherman and the RAF raise questions of enduring importance in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere. One set of questions concerns the origins, purpose, and effects of political violence: How and why does violence develop from within social movements? Under what conditions may violence not sanctioned by the state be considered legitimate? What, if anything, can it accomplish, and what are its special hazards as a form of political action? What can states do—and what may they legitimately do—to protect themselves from the threat of violence? In addition, the examples of Weatherman and the RAF pose questions for the contemporary Western left, however distant the issues and imperatives of the 1960s and 1970s may now seem: How can political and moral outrage be turned toward constructive ends? What are the possibilities of, and barriers to, solidarity across economic, racial, and national boundaries? What limits must social justice movements observe, such that one's actions remain consistent with one's values? As a student of social theory who finds societies most interesting when they experience crisis—when the legitimacy of established institutions and ideologies is widely questioned—I am keenly interested in the first line of inquiry. As someone committed to social change, my attention never strays far from the latter.

The recent World Trade Center tragedy has added urgency to a final set of concerns. For Americans, 9/11 illustrated the capacity of terrorism truly to terrorize. It also prompted the controversial restriction of civil freedoms, the further militarization of American culture, the killing of innocents by the United States and its allies in the name of fighting "terror," new wars, and the articulation of a new set of reductive frames
for understanding the world and America’s place within it—frames that may poorly serve the goals of security and peace. Troubled by all this, I seek from the past some insight into how to address profound conflicts of ideology and interest constructively and nonviolently, so as to strengthen the possibility of creating a meaningful and lasting peace, the foundation of which is justice.

New Left violence in the United States and West Germany has nowhere been systematically compared. Historians and others typically attribute the violence in the United States to qualities they present as specific to America: despair over the inability of peaceful protest to end the war in Vietnam; the impulse of middle-class whites, plagued by race and class guilt, to emulate “authentic” revolutionaries like the Black Panthers; a characteristically American preference for action over critical reflection; and the desire for instant gratification rooted in the ideology of the consumer culture. Weatherman, it is said over and over again, was a quintessentially American phenomenon, an American story. Conversely, scholars of the German 1960s and 1970s typically cite Germany’s historic illiberalism, principally its tendencies to political extremism and tradition of authoritarian rule, to account for the emergence of violence and the severe reaction it provoked.

In studies of “left-wing terrorism,” most often conducted by those who find it deplorable and seek to understand it in order to eliminate it, comparisons of violence in different countries have not been uncommon. However, the mistaken assumption prevails that New Left violence developed significant force only in the former Axis powers, Germany, Italy, and Japan, and not in the former Allied powers. The inference follows that the absence of established liberal-democratic traditions accounts for the emergence of violence in those countries, and that the United States, with its “mature” democracy, was spared such strife. This interpretive bias distorts the sense of the causes and scope of New Left violence, obscuring the similarities between the American and West German cases. It also implicitly reinforces two deeply ideological, inverted modes of historical analysis: American exceptionalism, which holds that the United States, as the West’s great democratic frontier, has largely escaped the tensions and traumas that have afflicted Europe; and the notion that German history has followed a “special path” (Sonderweg), dominated by a resistance to democratic values that has doomed the country to cycles of destructive violence. Neither view adequately captures the American and German 1960s and the internationalism of the New Left. Whatever its history and reputation, American democracy was not functioning ex-
ceptionally well in the decade, given the violation of the basic civil rights of African Americans and other racial minorities, fierce opposition to a war fought on the basis of government lies, and the widespread belief among the young that American democracy was a sham. Nor were the circumstances precipitating the RAF’s violence unique to Germany or shared only by societies with fascist pasts.

Focus on national experiences and narrow comparisons also inhibit an understanding of how the dynamic interplay of global and national contexts served simultaneously to unite and separate individual New Left movements. On the one hand, global opposition to U.S. power, mediated through Third World revolutionary discourse, gave ballast to the New Left’s professed internationalism. On the other hand, the American and West German armed struggles—particularly as they diverged in the mid 1970s—reveal the importance of national experiences in shaping individual New Left movements. In their inability to transcend their own cultures more fully and create political links across national boundaries, Weatherman and the RAF expose the limits to the New Left’s internationalism.

Much recommends the comparison of radicalism in the United States and West Germany. Following World War II, the two countries were both leading industrial democracies and among the world’s staunchest opponents of communism. The United States had tried to create the Federal Republic of Germany—West Germany—largely in its own image, and West Germany saw its alliance with the United States as key to both its survival and its redemption; adopting American values was to enter the modern family of nations and achieve the long-elusive “normality” so desperately sought after the catastrophe of National Socialism. America and “Americanism” were also focal points for criticisms of the Federal Republic. For West German leftists, to attack the United States was to condemn their own society. Conversely, Germany played a role in the minds of American activists, who often invoked Nazism to denounce their own government, whether for its “genocide” in Indochina or its “fascist” response to protest. Activists also made reference to Nazism to frame their rebellion. Just before a violent protest, a Weatherleader exclaimed, “We refuse to be ‘good Germans!’” (by failing to take a stand of militant opposition as their society grew more destructive). American and German activists alike described the postwar United States as the world’s arch-oppressor, as if it had taken over that role from the defeated Nazi regime. The narratives of Weatherman and the RAF, as they dovetail and then diverge, convey a larger story of Amer-
ica and Germany’s close alliance, shared destinies, interwoven cultures, and enduring differences.

With the barest hindsight, the notion of 1960s radicals waging successful armed revolutions in the United States and West Germany appears utterly fantastical. But for at least some activists in both countries, armed struggle had a compelling political basis. American and West German radicals were united, above all, by their mutual commitment to “revolutionary anti-imperialism,” whose main premise was that the prosperity of advanced industrial societies depended on the economic exploitation of developing countries, evident in the intensity with which the United States battled left-wing insurgencies in the Third World. Relatedly, an anti-imperialist analysis saw the decolonization movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as clear signs of a crisis of global capitalism.

New Leftists derived a mandate for revolution from Third World movements. Che Guevara’s global call to “create two, three, many Vietnams” succinctly conveyed that the greatest contribution First World radicals could make to Third World struggles would be to bring the war for socialism home to their own countries. Anti-imperialism also provided a way for the New Left to account for the absence of the conditions considered from a traditional Marxist viewpoint to be prerequisites for revolutionary change. Within an anti-imperialist framework, the working classes in wealthy societies could be seen as benefiting from the exploitation of foreign labor and resources. By extension, the initial or even primary impetus for radical change would have to come from new groups, among them students and intellectuals, who were not fully integrated into the benefits of the capitalist economy and absorbed by its ideology. However counterintuitively, anti-imperialism allowed for an indigenous revolutionary critique of affluent societies that had satisfied many of the traditional material demands of socialism.

Armed struggle was only one, highly controversial approach to political change. America’s Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)—for years the New Left’s most important organization—split in the summer of 1969 over strategies for broadening the appeal and increasing the power of the student movement. One wing asserted the importance of organizing the industrial working class by conventional means. The “Weatherman” faction, hoping initially that violence would awaken working-class youths to revolution, advocated armed struggle. In Ger-
many, the student movement dissolved in 1969 along similar lines, giving rise to a host of small, Marxist-Leninist parties and an armed struggle wing, led by the RAF.

The bifurcation of the leadership of the American and West German New Left has been widely recorded as the moment of the New Left’s self-destruction in each country. The intense factionalism precipitating the split left many New Leftists dispirited and unwilling to identify with any of the organized alternatives. My understanding of the split calls for appreciating the gravity of the dilemma faced by the New Left at the decade’s end. Some New Leftists in each country had become so convinced of their societies’ corruption that they saw revolution as the only answer. But the New Left in the United States and West Germany remained small. Politically isolated and facing overwhelming state power, New Leftists had both a political and a broadly psychological need to secure at least a body of theory or a set of narrative resources—a model or paradigm for change—ensuring that revolution was indeed possible.

Rejecting the antiquated Marxism of the sectarian left, proponents of violence appealed to Third World examples such as Cuba, where a small band of guerrillas had incited “the masses” to a near-spontaneous revolt. Weatherman and the RAF concluded that the assertion of revolutionary will could create a revolutionary situation where its “objective” determinants were lacking. Though this vision of their struggle was clearly errant, it did not result simply from naïveté or hubris. It also reflected the dizzying sense of possibility of the late 1960s—inspired, above all, by the implausible success of the Vietnamese resistance to the U.S. military—that tempted radicals to think the unthinkable, in defiance of established models of how social change happens.

Armed struggle was more than an approach to the daunting task of making revolution. It was also a vivid expression of the importance of militancy for New Leftists. At a political level, militancy sought to correct for the apparent ineffectiveness of conventional forms of protest. In an ethical register, it responded to conditions of moral emergency caused most forcefully by the destruction in Vietnam and the state’s often violent response to domestic protest. In existential terms, militancy provided a way of expressing outrage and living the substance of one’s values. Weatherman and the RAF also exemplified the hazards of militancy. Both groups, for a time, declared all opposition to armed struggle to be counterrevolutionary and embraced danger as a way of showing the depth of their sacrifice. Taken to extremes, militancy turned into a kind of mili-
tarianism that divided the left into a crude hierarchy of virtue based on one’s readiness to “pick up the gun.”

In addition, armed struggle was to function as the chief medium for forging new, revolutionary subjects who transcended their prior socialization and dedicated themselves totally to political struggle. In service of this ambition, Weatherman and the RAF engaged in radical experiments in self–re-creation. Their belief in the capacity of violence to transform its agent gave rise to a conspicuous tension that went to the heart of contradictions within the New Left. On the one hand, they saw violence as an act of extreme transgression or defiance. Objectively, it challenged the state’s power. Subjectively, it promised to free them from internal psychic restraints and provide an experience of politics in its most vital form. The guerrilla, within the mythology of each group, was an anti-authoritarian icon who embodied the mystique of the outlaw. On the other hand, Weatherman and the RAF aspired to overcome the individualism and decadence they saw as integral to consumer capitalism. In their views, the New Left itself reproduced these qualities in its libertine spirit and at times narrow concern with personal freedom. As an antidote, they sought to cultivate an appreciation of the collective enterprise and of the kinds of discipline required for their dangerous political work.

Their efforts, however, proved far from liberating. Weatherman initially used psychologically brutal rituals to suppress the individuality of its members in hopes of turning them into “tools of the revolution.”¹² The RAF, declaring that “the guerrilla is the group,” saw the revolutionary as a fully collectivized subject who had transcended the self in his or her complete submission to the demands of guerrilla warfare.¹³ The RAF toggled between an oppressive group-think and vindictive infighting. Both groups, at their worst, were rigidly hierarchical. Along with their rebel images, then, they projected a hyperdiscipline and severity jarring to many in the New Left. At root, Weatherman and the RAF embodied the peculiar unity of transgression and submission, self-expression and self-renunciation. But here the groups were only an extreme expression of competing desires in the New Left as a whole—the desire for radical autonomy, enacted through resistance to the norms of their societies, and the desire to dedicate oneself to a higher, collective purpose that demanded rigorous loyalty.

The American and West German armed struggles failed for essentially the same reasons. Like their Marxist-Leninist rivals, Weatherman and the RAF horribly misread their domestic scenes. The United States and
West Germany lacked the seething mass discontent and the near-total denial of democratic rights—both prerequisites for armed struggle according to its Third World theorists—that made revolutionary violence in some Third World countries transparently legitimate to so many of their citizens. Both groups fell victim to equally flawed, contradictory assumptions, between which they oscillated. In one emphasis, defined by an exaggerated pessimism, they saw imperialism as a monolith. Its power to absorb, delude, and dispirit its subjects was so great that no sustained internal resistance was possible. Effective rebellion could come only externally from Third World struggles, or, internally, from American blacks. Within this understanding, the New Left’s armed struggle was an ethical stand that answered a moral imperative of resistance and solidarity, and whose integrity did not depend on its political success or failure. Weatherman and the RAF thus removed political efficacy as a criterion for evaluating their efforts. The guerrillas’ “victory” lay simply in existing.

In a second emphasis, driven by an exaggerated optimism, the Weathermen and the RAF saw imperialism as on the brink of collapse. Resistance was everywhere—in the Third World certainly, but also in the institutional fabric of their own societies: in the schools, the military, the factories, the bureaucracies, halfway houses, ghettos, and working- and middle-class homes. Their violence, in this model, needed only to light the spark to ignite mass discontent into revolutionary conflagration. Both views, despite their apparent polarity, had the same effect: to discourage the difficult work of addressing, through redoubled efforts to educate and organize ambivalent populations, possibilities that lay somewhere in between.

If the armed struggles in the United States and West Germany had similar origins, their courses quickly diverged. In the United States, violence crested in the spring of 1970 in the wake of the killing of student demonstrators at Kent State and Jackson State universities, but then steeply dropped. The Weathermen, shaken by the deaths in March 1970 of several members making bombs in a New York City townhouse, abandoned plans for assaults on military personnel and police. Though the Weather Underground survived into the mid 1970s, it was not able to reestablish momentum on the left for violence. Never “broken” by the FBI, it disbanded voluntarily in 1976.
In West Germany, the armed struggle began in earnest with the formation in 1970 of the RAF, which along with other groups committed bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations. In response, the state waged a comprehensive war on domestic terrorism that entailed the killing of fugitives in shoot-outs, harsh treatment of RAF prisoners, and controversial measures to destroy what it saw as the intellectual and cultural roots of left-wing violence. The fall of 1977 was the high point of the conflict. The Deutscher Herbst (“German Autumn”), as it is often called, culminated in the hijacking of a German plane by Palestinian guerrillas demanding the release of RAF prisoners, the storming of the plane by German commandos, the apparent suicide in prison of several of the RAF’s founders, and the RAF’s murder of a leading economic official, whom it had kidnapped six weeks earlier. For much of the 1970s, the group was at the center of a grueling, high-stakes public drama in which West Germans played out their ambivalent relationship to democracy and authority. Only in 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and German reunification, did the RAF announce its cessation of violence.\textsuperscript{14} The group finally disbanded in the spring of 1998, declaring in a public statement what had for years been obvious: that it had long outlived its political relevance.\textsuperscript{15}

New Left violence in West Germany was, in sum, more deadly, more divisive, and longer-lasting than that in the United States. The very different trajectories of Weatherman and the RAF reveal how each group was shaped by and responded to its national context. When the New Left faded as a global phenomenon in the early 1970s, those contexts became all the more important in defining the destinies of individual New Left movements.

The Weathermen turned to violence largely in opposition to the Vietnam War and out of their desire to help militant blacks like the Black Panthers. These commitments lent an immediacy to their violence, irrespective of the group’s larger revolutionary ambitions. With its bombings of military and police targets, Weatherman was able to provide at least moral and political censure of the war in Vietnam and the state’s assaults on people of color in the United States. The group, in short, could moderate its approach to, and eventually withdraw from, violence with some sense of accomplishment. Former members typically concede that violence failed miserably as a revolutionary tactic but defend its integrity and limited utility as a response to the Vietnam War and to institutional racism.

Issues of identity contributed to the group’s restraint in another sense.
Weatherman’s desire to match the sacrifices of blacks and Vietnamese fueled the group’s initial belief in the singular value of violence. Weatherman’s violence, in this aspect, was a volatile and often vexed effort of members of the white middle class to confront and somehow renounce their structural privilege. In the mid 1970s, the Weathermen broadened their conception of revolutionary politics and reassessed what kind of practice would be most beneficial, given their backgrounds. Chiefly, they recognized the need to organize other whites, for which nonlethal violence and the distribution of conventional propaganda was a more promising approach than a literal guerrilla war. By the time the group asserted the need to build a mass movement, it was far too small and too isolated to play a leading role on the left. Nonetheless, by revising their sense of mission, the Weathermen avoided mistaking themselves for the causes they meant to serve.

West Germany, by contrast, was only very indirectly involved in prosecuting the Vietnam War and lacked a highly visible and vocal oppressed racial minority. Though German New Leftists bitterly opposed the war, they never felt as intense a sense of identification with the Vietnamese or responsibility for their fate as did American activists. As the number of immigrant workers increased in the Federal Republic in the 1970s, the RAF did little to make growing German resentment of foreigners an object of its protest. The RAF's armed struggle therefore always had a more abstract and protean quality than that of its American counterparts. Frustrated in its ambition of violent, communist revolution in western Europe, the RAF had few ways of claiming any real successes. Lacking a national subject of emancipation, the RAF also lacked a structure of accountability. This circumstance contributed to the group's strikingly self-referential quality, wherein the RAF saw itself as the sole wager of meaningful political struggle in West Germany. With the emergence in the mid 1970s of the “free-the-guerrilla guerrilla,” whose chief aim was to extort the release of jailed comrades, the RAF's campaign degenerated into what one critic called a “private war” with the state security apparatus.16

Weatherman and the RAF differed also in their ways of negotiating a tension between excess and limits. The Weathermen, on the verge of attacking human targets, instituted a prohibition on lethal actions. The Germans repeatedly crossed the threshold of lethal violence. Far more than a tactical difference, Weatherman’s and the RAF’s approaches to political murder constitute profound differences—perhaps the most important differences—between the two groups. Their comparison elicits a basic question of political morality: when and under what conditions may one
assume dominion over life and death and kill another human being on behalf of a political ideal or goal?

The Weathermen claimed to represent the promise of a society that would be more just and humane than the one they sought to destroy. At times, however, their rhetoric and actions belied this claim. In their early days, the Weathermen spun grisly fantasies of limitless destruction and planned attacks that would almost certainly harm “civilians.” Behind Weatherman’s recklessness lay a fascination with transgression and a desire to shock. Within a logic of excess, political murder could be seen as the ultimate transgressive act. But by contemplating or engaging in acts of brutality, the Weathermen reproduced qualities they attributed to their enemy and that they ostensibly opposed. The group’s challenge, then, was to develop an internally constrained practice. The Weathermen responded to the 1970 townhouse explosion by imposing limits on their violence. In short, they made the conscious decision not to be killers.

The RAF’s brutality, most pronounced in the mid 1970s and early 1980s, has been the object of intensive, if often highly speculative, analyses. Explanations range from the psychopathologies of the individual members, to the internal dynamics of the group, to the specter of Hitler returned in the RAF as his depraved children. The most promising interpretive framework highlights the influence of the fascist past on the political conflict of the West German 1960s and 1970s.

The RAF sought to punish Germany both for the sins of that past and for what it saw as their repetition in the present through such things as police repression and German support for American “genocide” in Vietnam. Here the RAF practiced a logic of vilification, in which it equated the political and judicial custodians of the Federal Republic with Nazi perpetrators. It thus felt an imperative to use any means available, including the murder of state agents, to bury finally the archenemy of political modernity. The RAF also employed, however unselfconsciously, a logic of vindication, in which armed rebellion now would compensate for the virtual absence of violent resistance in Germany to the Nazi regime. In this capacity, lethal violence promised to liberate RAF members from the psychological and political burdens of the past and break the chain of German guilt.

By practicing terror themselves, RAF members compounded their political failure with moral failure, while deepening their connection to the damage of the past from which they sought an escape. The RAF’s extreme violence also crystallizes the differences between the American and West German armed struggles. Weatherman’s violence was equally inef-
fective in bringing about the kind of social change it imagined. But by observing limits, Weatherman contained the cost of its choices. In one of the few statements of comparison between the two movements, Hans-Joachim Klein of Germany’s Red Cells lamented in 1978 that “the members of the guerrilla [movement] are no longer capable of acting like the Weathermen in the States. Of saying now we stop.”

The American and West German armed struggles differed, finally, in the reactions they elicited from their governments and societies. In the 1960s and early 1970s, U.S. security agencies employed invasive, illegal, and violent means in combating domestic dissidents, particularly the Black Panthers. The FBI aggressively pursued the Weathermen and other New Left fugitives. Yet its campaign against them was nothing in scale and intensity like the West German state’s assault on left-wing violence. Partially, this was a consequence of Weatherman’s restraint. Avoiding injury to persons, Weatherman never inspired the diffuse public fear that would doubtless have prompted even greater governmental wrath. In part, the Weathermen were granted a kind of preferential treatment relative to black radicals, who remained objects of fierce pursuit. But the Weathermen also benefited from a broad shift in the national climate in the mid 1970s. In the wake of the strife of the late 1960s, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, attention turned to the reestablishment of public trust in government and to reconciliation. Congress exposed abuses of power by the FBI in its pursuit of dissidents and acted to constrain its activities. Under this scrutiny, security agencies curtailed their campaign against the Weather Underground and generally let the group—now considered more a nuisance than a threat—fade into obscurity. Only a few underground Weathermen were ever captured, and those who surfaced voluntarily in the late 1970s and early 1980s served little or no time in prison.

The RAF and other violent German groups were objects of relentless vilification and police action. As in the RAF’s excesses, the fascist past figured heavily in the state’s response. The government and its supporters insisted that the terrorists were the authentic heirs of fascism, who, like the Nazi SA during the Weimar Republic, threatened a fragile democracy. Fear of communist subversion enhanced the imperative the state felt to use extreme measures to preserve what it saw as the integrity of Germany’s postwar democratic experiment. The means the state chose had mixed results. Though effective in capturing the RAF’s early leaders, antiterorist measures only deepened the RAF’s view of the West German state as fascist and its determination to attack it by violent means.
Students, intellectuals, and others extended sympathy to the RAF as victims of repression, fearing that antiterrorism threatened to turn West Germany into a police state, where the mantle of constitutionalism was used to mask an unreconstructed authoritarianism. In short, West German terrorism was a tortured form of Vergangenheitsbewältigung—a symptom of Germany’s difficulty in confronting and working through its Nazi past. Rather than shedding light on the conflict, the antifascist rhetoric of the RAF and the government contributed to excesses on both sides, demanding a new process of reconciliation.

A final index of the different impacts of Weatherman and the RAF on their respective societies is the degree and kind of commentary devoted to each group. Neither Weatherman nor the violence of the American New Left more broadly has generated a distinct historiography. Scholars most often discuss such violence as a small part of larger contexts and movements: antiwar protest, SDS, and the New Left as a whole. The dominant attitude toward Weatherman has been a highly critical or even dismissive one, reflecting both widespread antipathy to the group, then and now, and its limited resonance in American politics and culture. Many Americans who lived through the 1960s have few particular memories of the Weathermen, whose actions can easily fade into general recollections of turmoil. For small groups of mostly young rebels, the Weathermen have exerted an enduring fascination over the past two decades, though the group’s activities have typically been appreciated more as lore than as political history. Only with the recent release of the documentary *The Weather Underground* has the group emerged from the shadows of history into the light of public memory and popular culture.

The RAF, in contrast, has been the object of persistent reflection in Germany. Works on German violence include a 1985 bestseller, several biographies, and other popular histories, memoirs by former members, voluminous studies by government agencies and security experts, and all manner of scholarly treatments from the disciplines of political science, history, sociology, and psychology. The RAF has also made a strong mark on popular culture, inspiring movies, plays, paintings, museum exhibits, musical compositions, photo-essays, and countless TV and print retrospectives on the anniversaries of key events in its history. For much of the RAF’s early existence, the group’s leaders were household names in West Germany, where their fate approached a national obsession. Every
West German who lived through the peak years of the terrorist drama seems to have some vivid "RAF memory," whether seeing a wanted poster in a public place, hearing rumors that a fugitive was nearby, being stopped at a security checkpoint, or following harrowing moments in the conflict in the media.

The very different standing of Weatherman and the RAF in their nations' consciousnesses demands different approaches to their presentation. I provide separate sections on them that complement, rather than mirror, each other. In the case of the Weathermen, I furnish a textured account of the group's experience, drawing extensively on interviews with former members. In these, I have sought less a record of "the facts" of Weatherman's history than the reflections of former members on the political meaning of their experiences, as well as what they thought and how they felt when they entered, engaged in, and withdrew from the armed struggle. I appeal to oral history, then, for representations of the past generated through the subjective work of memory—with its exclusions, contingent connections, and spontaneous eloquence—and not for the "objective" reconstruction of the past. Given Weatherman's efforts to define itself through action, my analysis consists mostly of the close reading of events—of actions themselves as complex texts. I concentrate on the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Weatherman's importance was at its peak.

In the case of the RAF, I provide condensed narratives of key episodes in the group's existence until 1977, when the first era in its history came to an end. I am unable to use the methods of oral history with the RAF, many of whose members died in the 1970s; nonetheless, they achieved great notoriety, and ample material exists for conveying their experiences.

I favor juxtaposition over direct comparison of the two groups. Chapter 1, which explores the similarities in their origins, moves between discussions of the American and German settings. Thereafter, I treat Weatherman and the RAF more or less separately. This permits flexibility in stressing those issues and experiences most important to each group. All historical comparisons seek to have each "case" illuminate the other, and I hope to guide, but not rigidly control, that process of mutual illumination.

Some continuities of approach exist throughout. One is my effort to present both Weatherman and the RAF in competing and even contradictory ways. Analysts have commonly portrayed the groups in essentially pathological terms by describing their members as zealots, whose activism, beyond a certain point, had little to do with politics as such.
The groups' "ideology," within this framework, amounted to a delusional belief system built on an irrational contempt for their societies and the sense of themselves as a revolutionary elect, "chosen" to fulfill a world-historical mission. An observer of the American New Left who saw Weatherman as a "passionate aberration" concluded, "in a burst of almost religious enthusiasm, the Weathermen plunged beyond politics, which measures things in the here and now, to a higher realm where the student movement could not survive." German analysts have similarly charged that the RAF suffered from an acute Realitätsverlust, or "loss of reality," that doomed it to its destructive illusions. Understanding political violence then becomes largely an exercise in deconstructing superstitions and interpreting the behavior of what amount to cults.

A more layered perspective, developed largely by social scientists, sees violence like that of Weatherman and the RAF as an exotic form of political action that emerges at the far margins of legitimate politics and at very specific moments in the evolution of social movements. The agents of violence, in this view, retain a limited rationality, but their behavior remains on the whole pathological, driven by such structural factors as their isolation and the policing strategies deployed by the state. Issues of politics and morality generally recede in the effort to understand their actions.

I seek to restore a stronger measure of rationality and moral purpose to Weatherman and the RAF in order better to understand both their political histories and the complex nature of political violence more generally. Far from being simple zealots with more or less totally warped worldviews, members of both groups were driven by political conviction and a commitment to serve their ideals with radical action. In reconstructing their beliefs and the political cultures of which they were a part, I therefore do not confine myself to pointing out their flawed premises. I also stress the coherence of their beliefs within the context of their times, as well as the pathos of their core longing for a radically different and better world.

At the same time, both Weatherman and the RAF did have a driven and even crazed quality, which makes their histories at once so fascinating, disturbing, and difficult to fully comprehend. At times, the views of both groups seem to have been far removed from political realities, and their behavior to have exceeded the rational pursuit of distinctly political goals. Their members strayed far beyond the realm of "normal" politics into the rarefied world of the underground—a world of extraordinary danger, determination, fear, arrogance, trust, triumph, togeth-
erness, suspicion, exhilaration, and despair. At their worst, both groups violated their stated morality and, whether in word or deed, showed streaks of cruelty. Doing justice to their histories—as well to the experiences of those whom they offended, attacked, injured, and killed—means also understanding the radical nature of their practice and their many errors in political and moral judgment. Gaining this understanding is not primarily a matter of deciding where politics ends and religion begins, where the rational and irrational or good and evil separate, or how conviction can be clouded by delusion. Rather, it requires appreciating how seemingly religious longings—for a transcendent future, for societal perfection, and for a sense of ultimate purpose—may infuse politics and culture; how the rational and the irrational may coexist with political conflicts; and how desires, dreams, and delusions may feed and confound one another.  

With both Weatherman and the RAF, my strongest accent is on the mutually informative relationship between research and theory. Though I draw on the insights of social movement theory—which provides elaborate models of how social movements and certain forms of protest emerge, evolve, and decline—I do not speak its distinctly sociological causal language. I work instead with other forms of theory, principally varieties of critical theory, ethics, and psychoanalysis. With these, I develop political, psychological, moral, and existential perspectives on forms of political behavior that may ultimately resist even the most carefully wrought explanations. Psychoanalysis is commonly used to interpret the psychology and behavior of individuals, and it could be fruitfully applied in this way to Weatherman and the RAF. I use it, in a somewhat different fashion, to explore the often hidden logic of collective political and cultural processes.

The German-born Jewish Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who fled to America during the years of Nazi rule, holds special value for my study. In the 1960s, Marcuse became the great intellectual patron of New Left movements the world over. Addressing audiences in the United States and West Germany, he embodied the New Left's internationalism and serves as a bridge between the two national experiences I consider. Marcuse, in addition, provided powerful insights into the structure of postwar societies, the promise and failings of the New Left, and ethical questions raised by its militancy, always informed by his analytical rigor and uncommon commitment to hope. I therefore both treat Marcuse as a historical actor and draw on his ideas to think through the tensions and conflicts of the era.
The fiercely controversial nature of New Left violence introduces a final challenge—one enhanced by the shocks of our own era. Political violence, especially when committed by agents other than established states, summons strong passions and invites blunt assessments. Much of the commentary on Weatherman and the RAF has been organized around extreme binaries that suggest that the groups were necessarily one thing or the other, with the negative view clearly dominating most historical commentary. This divide is evident in basic choices of terminology and possibilities of judgment: Were the Weathermen and RAF members “terrorists” or “urban guerrillas”? Villains or heroes? Crazed or courageous? Was their violence, in the last instance, wholly unjust or in any sense justified? Yet these stark polarities, rather than providing sound options for judgment, obscure the complex and even paradoxical nature of the meaning and legacy of both groups. The events of September 11, 2001, by deepening the antipathy of Americans to all violence labeled “terroristic,” have likely made the impulse to categorically condemn the antigovernment violence of the 1960s and 1970s swifter and more severe. But all forms of violence are not equal in their origins, intent, and effects; and labels, whatever their promise of moral clarity, can distort what they seek to describe. Going beneath surface passions, while retaining a connection to the deep passion for justice animating the movements of the 1960s, yields a different set of questions and answers.