

CIVIL SOCIETY, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND POPULAR
POLITICS IN THE RHINELAND, 1800–1848:
MID-ATLANTIC GERMAN HISTORY SEMINAR

Seminar at the GHI, April 24, 2004. Speaker: James Brophy (University of Delaware). Conveners: Marion F. Deshmukh (George Mason University) and Christof Mauch (GHI).

The semi-annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar was held at the GHI on April 24, 2004. James Brophy presented his paper, part of a larger book project, on “Civil Society, the Public Sphere, and Popular Politics in the Rhineland, 1800–1848.” In his paper, Brophy sought to “establish firmer links between research on bourgeois civil society and the emergence of popular participatory political culture.” He examined *Bänkelsänger* and songs perceived as subversive that were sung at festivals and fairs. He described song sheets sold at taverns, the planting of liberty trees, and the selling of trinkets identified with issues of liberalism. One important item of reading material that Brophy described in depth was the house and folk calendar. In what most would regard as an apolitical listing of lunar cycles and planting advice, Brophy found “enlightened social attitudes” interspersed with folkloric miscellany. He discussed Johann Peter Hebel’s *Der rheinische Hausfreund* as a case study of the growing popularity of its form and its attempt to train “readers into a participatory form of reading that allowed them to reflect on the political choices of the day” in the *Vormärz* Rhineland.

Brophy also examined the popular political song, sung in various venues such as peasant houses, taverns, festivals, and churches. He described the singing of the *Marseillaise* and songs about Napoleon (sung with both positive and negative intent). He posited that patriotic songs “act as a yardstick to measure the longevity with which the unfulfilled hopes of 1815 resided in popular culture,” especially at the gathering of 30,000 at the Hambach Festival of May 1832. Religious festivals such as carnival and parish celebrations were also public spaces for loosely organized political criticism that government authorities often noted. Brophy observed that during these occasions, soldiers and civilians often came to blows: He was able to document fifty-six instances of soldier-civilian fights in the pre-1848 period.

The final section of Brophy’s essay discussed consumption of political ideas through the sale and marketing of trinkets, such as music boxes, cups, mugs, hats, plates, and other items. Thus, by detailing the various

ways in which the popular classes, as distinct from the bourgeoisie, participated in political activities, Brophy strove to offer a more differentiated view of popular political culture in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Following Brophy's summary of his work, a lively discussion ensued. Questions were raised regarding the chronology of popular culture in the period before the establishment of political parties, with participants asking if some of the activities Brophy described have a history predating the French Revolution. Other comments centered on the history of almanacs and their varied uses. After an extended discussion, the meeting adjourned. The next luncheon and meeting of the Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar will be held on Saturday, November 13, 2004. Astrid M. Eckert, Research Fellow at the GHI, will present her research in progress, tentatively titled "The Transnational Beginnings of German *Zeitgeschichte* after the Second World War." For further information, please contact Prof. Marion Deshmukh, Department of History and Art History, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030 (mdeshmuk@gmu.edu).

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