

West German Anarchists on the Autonome

Interview

Elizabeth Kemp

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FE Introduction

During the massive European anti-nuke demonstrations of the '70s, at squatter defenses and other actions across the Continent, shadowy groups of angry militants, often dressed in black, masked and armed with slingshots and stones became a common sight.

They were labeled "autonomes" and exhibited a discontent with tired leftist "protest" movements as well as a marked readiness to confront the police with violence in an attempt to go beyond the limits of bourgeois civility. They spoke of a desire not only to be autonomous of the dictates of capitalist society, but of all previous political movements including those in the anarchist tradition.

The following is an interview with three people active in West German anarchist circles who discuss the differences between autonomes and anarchists. It was conducted earlier this year in Berlin by Elizabeth Kemp, whose article on the German autonomes appeared in the Winter 1988-89 FE. [See "The Next Generation of Autonome?" FE #330, Winter, 1988-89.]

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Elizabeth [interviewer] Ralf [interviewee] Joachim [interviewee]

Elizabeth : I'm trying to understand the split between anarchists and Autonome here. Where did the Autonome come from? When did they first appear?

Ralf: The history is that in the early 70's we had a movement in West Germany called the Sponti Movement. That Sponti Movement I would say is the source of the Autonome Movement that began in the late 70's.

Elizabeth : You seem to have more individualized groups here in West Germany than we have in the U.S. Can you imagine why this is?

Ralf: Everybody's looking for a way to go. Because people have seen in history that there's not one way which is correct or don't see one correct way, they are looking for their own way. So they try to make politics in a lot of different ways.

Elizabeth : This idea of "finding your way" is, I think, particularly German. The expression is very common here.

Ralf: Well, we have a history here in Germany which is very authoritarian. The people were told all the time, "You have to go this way," "You have to do this," "You have to live like this," and now there's opposition. Because our left radical history is cut, this opposition tries to find out what has happened before the war and tries to find, without that history, new ways which are good for today.

Joachim: One main point was 1968. That's when the history of the New Radical Left in Germany began.

Ralf: It was the post-war generation. It was also when the old history was rediscovered. We didn't have any history here in Germany because in the schools you weren't told anything about Nazi fascism.

Nazi fascism had destroyed all opposition here in Germany. Tens of thousands of German people were killed by the Nazis for political reasons. In the concentration camps, in prisons, on the streets. Now we have a left movement. Nobody before knew what a left movement was.

Fascism destroyed all materials, all books. The books we have are the books we found in some old bookstores. Books which were brought back by people who emigrated. We had to and still have to reprint a lot of books because they were all destroyed during the Nazi fascism, and the continuity of the left movement was destroyed with them.

The anarchists were never really strong in Germany. For a short time after the first war in the so-called revolutionary times of 1919, there was an anarcho-syndicalist movement which had somewhere between 130,000 to, some books say, 300,000 people. But at the end of the Weimar Republic, there were only 17,000 organized workers in that movement.

Elizabeth : What happened to them?

Ralf: I think that all of those people split into other groups.

Elizabeth : Why don't you call yourself an Autonom as opposed to an anarchist?

Joachim: It doesn't say in what direction I go. It just says what I'm against. Autonomy means working against the State, and that we are trying to organize ourselves. But it doesn't say in which way exactly. In my opinion, the anarchist movement is reaching beyond this. As a Radical Left, it's possible, for example, that I would stay patriarchal. Or that I work in a factory as usual, and in the evening I work leftist. But as an anarchist, in my opinion, it's not working this way. It's positive thinking. It's not enough to just criticize.

Elizabeth : That's funny. I once asked an Autonom this and she said the same thing in reverse—the anarchists are just against government. They are only reacting.

Joachim: I don't see a big difference between anarchists and Autonomie. There's not a written, formulated autonomous policy. Naturally we as anarchists are also Autonomie, It doesn't matter how you name yourselves. More important is to find a way to deal with the things at heart.

Elizabeth : Have you ever felt drawn towards the Autonomie Movement?

Ralf: No. I think that when you are an anarchist you are naturally an autonomous person. You don't need to call yourself an Autonom because it's in this theory and way of living anarchy. That you are an autonomous individual. For me it's a way of life. Anarchy is not a dogma or something, it's just the way you are living.

Elizabeth : Every time I go to a demonstration here in Berlin I want to run away. Hide. It's so horrible. It feels like there are a lot of authoritarian people who use the microphone and subject you to their speeches. Some blow whistles to tell you when to run ahead.

Ralf: At demonstrations, we often have the problem that the Autonomie are used by the so-called Anti-Imperialists because they are very strongly organized and autonomous groups are not. We as anarchists have problems working with groups like this.

Elizabeth : Does violence create a problem when you're in a mixed group?

Ralf: We are often at demonstrations on the edge of a knife—violent or not violent—because the police hate us. If they see the possibility to knock us down, they do it. At every demonstration there's an agent provocateur of the police there. They very often begin to throw rocks at the police. Then the demonstration becomes violent.

We know the fascists are working closely with the police. The Nazis themselves are not the problem. The danger is the connection between the Nazis and the police, or Nazis and politicians.

For lots of people it's like an adventure going to demonstrations, or smashing some windows or so. They let out their hate and their frustration, but it's not political acting. It's only for themselves. For me, I'd say it's not a revolutionary action. It's a bourgeois way of individualism. They don't think about the need of doing something, only think "Do I enjoy it?"

Elizabeth : What's your vision for the future?

Ralf: My vision for the future is political and mental development. That means for me to try to live together and act together in an anarchist way. That means if we live and act together, we live and act against the system.

I think there are many people who don't know about anarchist ideals, and we must tell them they exist and that there's another possible way of life which has a long history. What is very important for us is to develop a model of living which the people can imagine.

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