

Lost in Translation

Debating radical political culture in Germany, the UK and beyond

ihc Since its beginning, Shift Magazine has been in some kind of dialogue with the radical left in Germany, infusing the current theoretical discourses from over here into UK activist theory. However little has been said about the activist practice in this country, its political culture and how it may compare to that in the UK. While I am myself regularly shifting between projects and actions in the UK and Germany I felt quite happy seeing that, what could be loosely called "anti-national theory" entered the activist stage in the UK. Just as over here, in the UK I was not rarely surprised by quite shallow and foreshortened critiques. However theory itself does not say anything about political practice. Yes, there is a "strong autonomous Antifa movement" in Germany but the question is whether it furthers an emancipating political

culture and practice beyond or based on its interesting theoretical output. Looking at the political culture in Germany generally and its parallels to that of the German radical left more particularly (especially that of Climate Camp 2008 in Hamburg and the autonomous movement), this is highly questionable. Therefore, an inter-activist dialogue about this issue is absolutely vital. There have been unnumberable occasions where I spent time with friends in political projects over in the UK, where I thought: "These are so absolutely simple and obvious principles. Why don't they get it done over here?". Hence there are a couple of differences (somewhat intertwined) between the political cultures, which are by no means absolute, but need to be addressed:

1. Organising Ourselves

Movement leaders, closed conspiratorial groups, activist cliques and institutionalising and appropriating the movement, leading to exclusion and alienation instead of open, empowering and transparent processes. Monopolising power, resources, skills and knowledge instead of sharing them freely and actively. Both of these are obviously practices many of us would deem contradictory to our politics. However these are commonly seen in the (radical) left in Germany and beyond. Attac, solid' (youth group of The Left party), autonomous groups and more unaligned elitist movement cliques appear wherever a hot topic emerges (G8 2007, ClimateCamp 2008, COP15 2009) and seem to push these politics, while the process and media groups seem to be pre-determined for this. Another alternative is to create completely unaccountable parallel structures all together.



3. Direct Action

Choice 1: Antifa-Demo in town. Frightening barking of some kind of incomprehensible slogan, firecrackers exploding in a crowd of potentially interested folks, the banners shielded by heavy police lines. No flyers at hand. Choice 2: "BlockX". Like a herd of sheep you are steered towards the fence surrounding the summit, not really knowing what you are doing, while at the same time the press speaker of Attac or some movement "leader" explains why "the movement" is so great. And if the "leader" gets detained he_she will get an exclusive, personified solidarity campaign. No real choice, ey? How about thousands of people in small affinity groups, well-trained beforehand, swarming around stinging the system here and there, wherever they are, with their well-prepared blockades, lock-ons, occupations, sabotage or whatever? Sadly far from reality in Germany where empowerment all too often seems to be a foreign term. I am looking towards the UK climate action movement and gain a little hope...



2. Making Decisions

If it comes to seemingly "accountable" decision making the "plenary" is the most widely used "method" in Germany. It's not quite defined but ask a leftist here and he_she will tell you it sucks. As there are mostly no hand-signals, no impartial and well-trained facilitators and no proper decentralisation, it takes ages, the rhetorically most eloquent and loudest get their way on the agenda and hence the afore mentioned informal hierarchies determine the outcome. It's a joy to see that in the UK, activists seem to get closer to the ideal: Making decision on the lowest level, with those who feel affected with a clear and horizontal decision making process, like well-facilitated consensus.