

**THE SUBVERSION OF POLITICS:  
EUROPEAN AUTONOMOUS MOVEMENTS AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF  
EVERYDAY LIFE**

by George Katsiaficas

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for Ron Brazao  
and  
Ingrid Schmidt-Harzbach

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**MAP**

to be sent in the near future

## Abbreviations

AD	Direct Action (France)
AO	Workers Autonomy (Italy)
AL	Alternative List (Germany)
Antifa	Antifascists (Germany)
APO	Extraparliamentary Opposition (Germany)
BBU	Federal Association of Citizen Initiatives for Environmental Protection (Germany)
BZ	Occupation Brigade (Denmark)
CDU	Christian Democratic Party (Germany)
FR	Female Revolt (Italy)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
LC	Continuous Struggle (Italy)
MI	Metropolitan Indians (Italy)
MLD	Women's Liberation Movement (Italy)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NOW	National Organization for Women (U.S.)
PCI	Communist Party of Italy
PL	Front Line (Italy)
PO	Workers' Power (Italy)
RAF	Red Army Faction (Germany)
RA RA	Antiracist Action (Holland)
RB	Red Brigades (Italy)
RZ	Revolutionary Cells (Germany)
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society (U.S.)
SDS	German Socialist Student Federation
SPD	Social Democratic Party (Germany)
UDI	Union of Italian Women

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Finally, despite the invisibility of the autonomous movement in the U.S., activists in Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco and elsewhere provided me with motivation to continue and concrete proof of the relevance of my project.

## PREFACE

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, the pace of history accelerates to velocities previously thought impossible. In the last two generations, world population increased more than in all the rest of our species' life. Not only is history's speed today extraordinary, but its direction is wild and unpredictable. At the beginning of the 1980s, who could have foreseen that by that decade's end, there would be 15 nations where one Soviet Union had existed, and one -- not two -- Germanies? Looking back on the end of the Cold War and the immense geopolitical transformations thereby accomplished, nearly all observers give credit for these changes to Mikhail Gorbachev or to impersonal forces like the expense of the arms race, the Chernobyl disaster or crisis in the Soviet Union's political economy. Left out of our understanding is the role of popular movements -- grass-roots initiatives like the disarmament movement which grew from locally defined problems. Searching for direct solutions, thousands of people constituted themselves as social forces which helped stimulate world leaders to act by providing them with a sense of the necessary and a glimpse of the possible.

One of the claims to greatness of the United States is its freedom of press, yet for over two decades, European autonomous social movements have been practically invisible in both the mainstream and much of the alternative press. As a result, Americans' understanding of European politics is largely confined to the arenas of parliaments and guerrillas, to votes and violence. After the dispersal of New Left social movements of the 1960s, media coverage on this side of the Atlantic included the electoral successes and failures of socialist governments in France, Spain, Portugal and Greece, the rise and fall of Italian governments, and the emergence of the Green Party in West Germany (ecologists whose victories in elections could not be ignored). Occasional space was given to the spectacular actions and subsequent arrests of armed groups like the Red Brigades in Italy, Direct Action in France and Germany's Red Army Faction. After the Cold War ended and neo-Nazi violence erupted, extensive airtime was granted to it.

Left out of the news on Europe, however, were popular, direct-action movements in Italy, Holland, Denmark, Switzerland and West Germany, movements composed of thousands of activists who refused to be confined to the ranks of mainstream politics or marginalized as guerrillas. They were a motor force driving both the parliamentary upsurge of the Greens and the armed struggle that has plagued German political life for more than two decades. Besides being a driving force of others, their militant resistance to the arms race, nuclear power, patriarchy, and the housing shortage transformed single-issue struggles into an autonomous movement whose aspirations were to transform the society as a whole. These social movements -- known today as the Autonomen in Germany -- are independent of political parties, and their adherents would have nothing to do with established forms of politics. They seek the subversion of nation-states and their representative structures of government and would replace the existing world system with anti-systemic forms of participatory democracy that they believe would facilitate greater individual and community control over everyday life.

I cannot help but wonder if some form of censorship was partially responsible for the lack of attention paid to these movements. When neo-Nazi and skinhead violence broke out throughout Europe, the media afforded fascists wide coverage, and their electoral parties regularly received attention in the pages of daily papers. As my readers will discover, the German police often turned a blind eye on neo-Nazi violence, while the American media made it seem almost typically German. The opposite was true with respect to the Autonomen: The German police brutally attacked them even when they tried to protect victims of skinhead violence, while the American media ignored them. Many significant events, including massive and militant demonstrations against high-ranking American officials, were never reported in the American media in any detail. To give just two examples: When President

Ronald Reagan visited Berlin in June 1987, the autonomous movement mobilized 50,000 people in militant demonstrations that were restrained only through illegal police actions like cordoning off entire sections of West Berlin. The American media reported next to nothing about the demonstrations or this state of emergency approved (some say ordered) by the American military officials who then governed West Berlin. When 25,000 people assembled to support Reagan -- half the number that had demonstrated against him -- American television viewers were shown prime-time footage of the president's speech to a crowd of cheering Berliners, hardly an accurate image of what had transpired. In November of the same year, two policemen were shot dead and nine were wounded by a breakaway group during a demonstration against a new runway (called Startbahn West) at the international airport in Frankfurt. The news media sensationalized the story of the shootings, carrying it widely without providing any context. Never was it mentioned that one of the key reasons for the runway being built was to meet NATO (i.e. U.S. Cold War) needs. Six years to the day before the shootings, there was hardly any mention of the 150,000 people who marched peacefully against Startbahn West, nor did the media cover the subsequent building of a village of huts from the trees which were felled in preparation for the new runway. When the police brutally attacked this village after hundreds of people had lived in it for months, thousands of people defended it from the police onslaught, but Americans heard nothing substantial about it. As I followed these events through phone calls and sporadic bits of information in the alternative press, once again the media's relative silence was a second story.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulties which the media have in discussing the Autonomen are matched by the incapacity of some political analysts to comprehend the reasons for or meaning of autonomous movements. Many Americans find it incomprehensible when German young people portray the new world order as nothing more than a more efficient and seemingly democratic version of Hitler's thousand year **Reich**. It is taken for granted that Germans want national unity and that they are loyal and obedient citizens. Nothing could be further from the truth with regard to the Autonomen: They prefer regional autonomy to national unity and to live as human beings in a world community rather than as citizens of the German state. Americans with the interest and ability to write about post-war European politics ignored extraparliamentary movements in part because of their conception of politics as electoral. Parliamentary campaigns are of more interest than demonstrations because the former deal with power while the latter often revolve around marginalized youth. The American mass media, relying as they do on foreign celebrities and government officials for much of their information, made guerrilla actions into spectacles, turned them into Hollywood movies, CNN sound bites and front page headlines, simply because events like the kidnapping of an American general or murders of wealthy bankers make good copy, while social movements composed of homeless young people taking over abandoned buildings and fixing them up apparently do not.

Governments expend tremendous energy denying popular movements legitimacy rather than heeding their emergence as a sign of an outdated social order in need of transformation.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, the states' strategy has been simultaneously to criminalize and coopt extraparliamentary movements, and to some extent, this strategy has paid dividends in the form of the semblance of stability. But as I rediscovered during each of my trips to Europe, the Autonomen were far from neutralized, and, in Germany at least, new generations of activists have taken over from previous ones. Social movements are a window through which we can glimpse the essential nature of society. My experiences in the New Left taught me this. The civil rights movement illuminated racist aspects of American society that no one wanted to look at; the anti-war movement and counterculture revealed the imperial arrogance of power and the ways it constrained our freedom; the feminist and gay movements showed how much our everyday lives are conditioned by unconscious structures of power and brought these structures into

question. Like the earlier workers' movement, these movements posed an alternative path for society to take. Although they failed to change society as much as they hoped, they nonetheless altered prevailing customs and institutions. No one would be more surprised than I if the Autonomen were able to help radically transform Germany in the next decade or two. No matter what their future may be, however, their history provides us with sometimes startling insights into German culture and politics.

This book is not a comprehensive history of autonomous movements. Seeking to portray them in their own terms, I have relied on my all too infrequent trips to infuse my understanding, and my presentation is unsystematic, almost a snapshot picture of the movement's continental character. From 1979 to 1981, I lived in Berlin for 18 months and wandered extensively on both sides of what used to be called the Iron Curtain. I returned to Berlin in 1988, 1991, and 1993, each time traveling around from my base in a *Wohngemeinschaft* (group house) with friends in Kreuzberg. Contained here are impressions of a social movement whose identity defies the increasing incorporation of all aspects of our lives within a unified framework (the modern world system). While the latter may sound abstract to those unfamiliar with radical critiques of one-dimensional society, I hope that by the end of this book, readers will understand what Jürgen Habermas has called the "colonization of the life-world" -- as well as the Autonomen impulse to resist that dynamic. All too often, we accept the superiority of the American way, and one of my goals is to provide North American readers with an understanding of the autonomous critique of American-style democracy and consumer society.<sup>3</sup>

With the publication of this book, the sequel to *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*, the project I began there is brought into the contemporary period. My interest in spending so much of my life writing about social movements has developed out of my own involvement in them. My participation in movements has been crucial to my analysis and choice of topics. While I sometimes feel part of the European movements I discuss, there is another moment at which I feel quite alien to them since their construction of racial identity is so different than in the U.S. As children, we all eventually learn that we belong to a particular race. As adults, few of us have the opportunity to experience a change in this aspect of our lives, yet that is precisely what happens to me every time I go to northern Europe.

For those who are unaware of it, racial identification in Germany depends more upon hair and eye color than skin hue. Despite my being Greek-American, many Germans take one look at me and think I come from Turkey, a country which provides Germany with hundreds of thousands of immigrants who all too often are discriminated against, attacked and, since the reunification of the country in 1990, murdered. For me, Germany's system of racism means that I am periodically denied service in restaurants and occasionally encounter verbal assaults in the subway, on the streets and in the Tiergarten (particularly when accompanied by German women). It means being careful when alone, wary of the mean-spirited mindless for whom brutalizing foreigners has become a new national sport.

Having grown up within the U.S. army, I had the opportunity to travel the world while I was a child, and the experience was so pleasurable that I have never stopped. Throughout much of the world -- the Middle East, Mexico and most of Europe -- I blend in quite easily and experience public space from the inside. In Germany, however, I am necessarily an outsider because of my Mediterranean features. I lived in Germany for over five years as a child, but I first became aware of how racial identity is constructed there while checking into a hotel in Lüneberg in 1979. When the two clerks asked me where I was from, I produced my American passport and answered "California." With quizzical looks on their faces, they huddled together to inspect my passport. "Oh, you're Greek," they announced. "No," I responded, "I was born in Texas and live in California." "But your name is Greek," and they insisted, I was from Greece. I let this incident pass, writing it off (along with the hotel clerks) as weird.

But over the next 18 months while I studied at Berlin's Free University, I was regularly harassed on the street, told to go back to Turkey, and once attacked when I was with a Swiss woman. Even among Germans sympathetic to foreigners, I felt patronized on a regular basis.

My strategy for dealing with overt racist intrusions evolved from confrontation in the beginning, to sheer avoidance, until I finally hit upon a gambit suited to my own temperament. Whenever I was accosted by a German chauvinist, I would find a way to tell long and involved stories about the beauty and hospitality of my "native Turkey" and how much I longed to return. My stories always succeeded in arousing the interest of my would-be assailants, and by the time I had finished, these fellows were enraptured by my tales. When I then proceeded to invite them to come to my home in Izmir and experience for themselves the hospitality of my family, their gratitude was worth my patience, and I felt that my time had not been wasted since I had thoroughly deceived and simultaneously neutralized would-be hooligans.

Not all potential confrontations were so easily defused. Although I was lucky in avoiding violence, once I was compelled to face down two would-be attackers by standing my ground while a Swiss friend stood behind me. She had given some retort to their verbal harassment and ran off when they came at us. I caught up with her and put her behind me, instructing her not to run any further. Turning to face the onrushing attackers, I invited them to a beating and stood my ground. After several minutes of circling, inane profanity, and taunts designed to draw me away from my friend, they finally backed down and took off into the night. I happened to run into one of them a few weeks later in Moabit, the neighborhood where we both lived. He invited me into his house, and as we sat together smoking in his room, he gave me a gift to "welcome" me into the neighborhood where I had lived for nearly a year. Never did physical violence visit me, not in 1981 nor on my more recent trips. What is new in the 1990s, however, is the insistence of friends on walking me to the subway late at night lest I meet unwelcome guests on my way home.

Despite my luck, plenty of others have not been so fortunate. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and reunification of Germany in 1990, racial attacks dramatically increased. The outbreak of neo-Nazi violence claimed over 80 lives and caused thousands of severe injuries, developments that dramatically changed the context and focus of the autonomous movement.<sup>4</sup> In many instances -- such as during the pogrom in Rostock in 1992 -- they were the only ones ready to confront the neo-Nazis in the streets, and the casualties and arrests they suffered are one indication of the price they pay for failing to conform to the more accepted norms and values. While I will not attempt to predict the future, I do insist in this book that progressive Germans be accorded their proper place in history. Without their risks and sacrifices, there is no doubt that German political and cultural life would be even more repressive than they are today.

To be sure, we in the U.S. have our own brand of racism that grew out of our history of slavery and genocide, and many African-American friends have commented on how much they feel freed from oppressive racial apartheid when they go to Europe. More African-American men today languish in jail in the U.S. than attend colleges, and inner-city African-American communities are impoverished islands amidst a sea of plenty. Yet there is little doubt in my mind that we are far ahead of Germany (and I dare say, much the rest of Europe) in at least talking about these issues. One could point to both trivial and sociological facts to verify this assertion. In any German variety store, packages of chocolate cake sandwiching whipped cream are regularly referred to as "nigger kisses" (*Negerküssen*). European notions of national identity are themselves archaically racialistic. The boldness with which Germans flaunt their racial categories and assume their correctness is nothing short of astounding. More than once, progressive Germans explained to me that I am a different race than they.

There is such a widespread belief that Mediterraneans are a mixture of the "pure" African and "pure" Aryan races that I assume this idiotic notion is part of the outdated school curriculum in Germany. In my view, there is only one race, the human race, and our diverse appearances derive from thousands of years of adaptation to various environments, from accidents and chance -- but not to the mixing of originally "pure" races. Race is a socially-constructed category: What better proof could there be than my changing races when I arrive in Germany?

In 1993, when there were daily attacks on innocent people and frequent murders of immigrants and activists, Germany felt like the southern U.S. during Mississippi summer of 1964 (when civil rights workers were murdered for trying to help southern Blacks register to vote). Fascists were again being worshipped by a sizeable minority in Italy, the racist National Front in France had become a fixture, and neo-fascist groups grew in importance from one end of Europe to the other. In Anglo-Saxon England, the *New York Times* of October 25, 1993 reported a Gallup poll which found that two of three Britons do not want Gypsies as neighbors, one of three rejected Arabs and Pakistanis, and 27% of those surveyed did not want to live near West Indians. Slightly fewer (24%) rejected Africans as potential neighbors. A similar poll in the U.S. found that 12% of people preferred not to share a neighborhood with blacks.

Although this relatively progressive character of the U.S. may come as a surprise to some, it should not. Over a century ago, German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and his most famous student, Karl Marx -- despite their immense differences on religion, politics and most worldly matters -- agreed that America was the land of the future. So much of the world today is affected by American corporations and culture (particularly our music and cinema) that we often lose sight of how important the U.S. has been to progressive politics. May 1 is celebrated throughout much of the world as the international day of workers, and although few people celebrate it in the U.S., its origins as a modern holiday are in the struggle for the eight-hour day in Chicago. For most people, our Black Panthers are a distant memory, but groups in India, Palestine and Israel (as well as senior citizens -- the "Gray Panthers") appropriated the name for themselves.

As the Americanization of the world proceeds at a pace more rapid than anyone understands, anti-Americanism has been one response. In Germany in the early 1980s, when U.S. and Soviet troops still occupied the divided country and short-range nuclear missiles threatened to obliterate it, anti-Americanism was widespread. At times, it became obvious in painfully important ways, yet it was also a great source of comic relief when it appeared out of ignorance or simply as fashion. I could not help but chuckle when Germans most hostile to me because they thought I was Turkish would turn around and welcome me with open arms when they learned I was from the U.S., or conversely, when some of those most friendly to me when they thought I was from Turkey, a foreigner whom they wished to put at ease, became noticeably unfriendly when I told them I was an American. In the 1990s, as U.S. troops left Germany, anti-Americanism largely disappeared among its previous advocates at the same time as it was adopted by the extreme Right, whose dreams of Germany as a world military power are frustrated by the new world order ruled by Washington.

The above personal observations give some indication of the obstacles that exist in relationships between Germans and Americans, obstacles which help account for Americans' lack of interest and knowledge about Germany -- with the notable exception of its Nazis -- as well as for many Germans' reciprocal ambivalence about the U.S. I hope this book serves as a bridge between the two countries. As will be obvious, it grows out of collegial relationships and trusting friendships, without which it would never have been written.

## NOTES Preface

1..Apparently in Great Britain as well, the media carried the stories of these shootings quite prominently after having ignored the popular movements leading up to them. Two authors of books that mention the Autonomen introduce them into their narratives for the first time only because of the Startbahn shootings. See Sara Parkin, *Green Parties: An International Guide* (Heretic Books, 1989) p. 138. In *Televisionaries: The Red Army Faction Story 1963-1993* (AK Press, 1994), Tom Vague refers to the Autonomen as a "new wildcard development" in 1987 despite their having existed nearly a decade before that point in time.

2..As Green leader Petra Kelly observed: "Extra-parliamentary activity is an important part of the parliamentary system, even if only in sounding the alarm." While we can appreciate her insight, her statist bias should also be evident. For her "Every new law means a change to the system." *Fighting for Hope* (South End Press, 1987) p. 3.

3..I use these terms with reservations since "American" should refer to all people who live in North and South America, and "North American" should include Canadians and Mexicans. The simple fact is that there is no single word that refers to the people of the U.S. As my friend, Felipe Ehrenberg, pointed out to me, U.S. should stand for Untitled State, since "United States" could just as easily refer to the United States of Mexico.

4..The number of deaths attributed to neo-Nazis may be as many as 90 at the end of 1995. See *Reunited Germany: The New Danger*, a **Searchlight** special issue in association with **AntiFa Infoblatt** (1995).