

AFTERWORD

BY GABRIEL KUHN

GERONIMO'S *FEUER UND FLAMME* IS A LEGENDARY book within the radical German-speaking left. When the original edition appeared in 1990, it was not only the first history of the autonomous movement, but also the first theoretical assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. It triggered heated debates, some of which were documented in *Feuer und Flamme 2. Kritiken, Reflexionen und Anmerkungen zur Lage der Autonomen* [Fire and flames 2: critiques, reflections, and commentaries on the autonomen], a collection of texts inspired by the book and edited by Geronimo and unnamed comrades in 1992. In 1997, Geronimo added *Glut & Asche. Reflexionen zur Politik der autonomen Bewegung* [Embers and ashes: reflections on the autonomous movement's politics] to the previous volumes but the book never achieved the significance of *Feuer und Flamme*. In 1995, an updated and expanded edition of *Feuer und Flamme* appeared, which this translation is based on.

Feuer und Flamme was published at a pivotal point in German history. As Geronimo hints at in the final chapter, the reunification of Germany changed the country's political landscape significantly and hence also autonomous priorities and possibilities. It has even been claimed that the autonomous movement ended with the reunification of Germany, but it is difficult to uphold such a claim. The autonomous movement was never clearly defined and always based on radical activists identifying themselves as "Autonome." This self-identification remains—there are still numerous "autonomous centers," "autonomous groups," etc.—even if the forms of autonomous politics might have changed. In fact, with Autonomy Congresses organized in Hamburg

in 2009 and in Cologne in 2011 and a resurgence of “autonomous general assemblies” [*Autonome Vollversammlungen*] in urban and regional centers, there has been renewed interest in the autonomous movement, also among young activists. Maybe there is a breakthrough looming for the Autonomen in the near future after all? The continuation of the movement’s thirty-year history will show.

Parts of this history have been presented and analyzed in a number of books published since the release of *Feuer und Flamme*. In 1997, long-standing leftist publisher Konkret Verlag released *Die Autonomen. Ursprünge, Entwicklung und Profil der autonomen Bewegung* [The Autonomen: origins, development, and profile of the autonomous movement], a well-researched account by Almut Gross and Thomas Schultze. In 2001, Jan Schwarzenmeier self-published *Die Autonomen zwischen Subkultur und sozialer Bewegung* [The Autonomen between subculture and social movement], a book focusing on the history of the movement in one of its strongholds, the northern German university town of Göttingen. In 2004, Berlin’s Assoziation A released *Autonome in Bewegung: die ersten 23 Jahre* [Autonome in motion: the first 23 years], a superbly illustrated and designed collection of anecdotes, this time centered in Berlin. An informative chapter on the autonomous movement in Austria is included in Robert Foltin’s *Und wir bewegen uns doch. Soziale Bewegungen in Österreich* [We do move: social movements in Austria], published by Edition Grundrisse in 2004. Unfortunately, the unique and multifaceted history of the autonomous movement in Switzerland still awaits its documentation in book form.

As far as theoretical reflections go, the most notable titles were published in the 1990s by Frankfurt’s autonome L.U.P.U.S.-gruppe: *Geschichte, Rassismus und das Boot – Wessen Kampf gegen welche Verhältnisse?* [History, racism, and the boat: whose struggle against which conditions?] (1992) and *Lichterketten und andere Irrlichter. Texte gegen finstere Zeiten* [Vigils and other ghost lights: texts against dark times] (1994) included essential contributions to the autonomous debates of the 1990s and remain important reference points to this day. In 2001, L.U.P.U.S. published its last text collection, *Die Hunde bellen . . . Von A – RZ. Eine Zeitreise durch die 68er Revolte und die militanten Kämpfe der 70er bis 90er Jahre* [The Dogs Are Barking . . . From A to RZ: time traveling from the 1968 revolt to the militant struggles of the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s] (2001), a critical reflection on the goals and tactics of autonomous politics. L.U.P.U.S. also contributed to the influential book *Drei zu Eins* [Three to one] (1991), whose title essay by former 2nd of June Movement

member Klaus Viehmann and comrades introduced the concept of “triple oppression” to the radical German left.

There are two books that have collected the voices of numerous autonomous activists. On the occasion of the 1995 Autonomy Congress in Berlin, a group of comrades self-published *Der Stand der Bewegung. 18 Gespräche über linksradikale Politik* [The state of the movement: eighteen conversations on radical left politics]. In 2010, Unrast Verlag published *Perspektiven autonomer Politik* [Perspectives on autonomous politics], a collection of articles and interviews by contemporary autonomous activists contemplating the movement’s history, current state, and future possibilities.

The preferred outlets for autonomous debating (and arguing) were the periodicals related to the movement. There have been countless autonomous journals over the years, but *radikal* and *Interim* must count as the two most important. Both experienced a long history of criminalization and repression, documented in the book *20 Jahre radikal. Geschichte und Perspektive autonomer Medien* [Twenty years “radical”: history and perspectives of autonomous media], copublished in 1996 by a number of radical German publishing houses. After *radikal* had been on hiatus for years, a few issues have been released since 2005. However, they bear little resemblance to the discussion forum the journal once was. The future of the project remains open. *Interim* still appears biweekly in Berlin.

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The autonomous movement has certainly lost momentum since its heyday in the 1980s, when hundreds of squats seemed to promise the dawn of a new society, when black blocs could consist of thousands, and when the iconic face of a masked autonomous activist appeared on the cover of *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s most prominent news magazine. However, the movement never disappeared as an important political factor. As George Katsiaficas points out in his introduction, new focuses arrived in the 1990s, especially due to the rise of nationalist and neofascist sentiments in the wake of German reunification, both in government offices and on the streets. While squatting and, especially, antinuclear activism remained important, autonomous activists were now mainly engaged in fighting the extreme right and state racism. Antisexism and antihomophobia struggles, self-admittedly neglected in Geronimo’s account, also remained important

throughout the 1990s, as well as issues related to gentrification. The 1995 Autonomy Congress in Berlin, which drew several thousand participants, served as an indication of the ongoing relevance of the autonomous movement.

The late 1990s might have marked a low point in the movement's history, as it was not able to set a political agenda or intervene in social conflicts. Furthermore, it was weakened by bitter infighting. Nonetheless, even during this period, autonomous activists remained an important factor in a number of struggles, most notably antifascism and antinuclear resistance.

The Western alter-globalization movement instigated by the 1999 Seattle protests—whose infamous black bloc was inspired by years of autonomous resistance in the German-speaking world—invigorated the autonomous scene. During Europe's "Summer of Resistance" in 2001, mainly defined by the antineoliberal mass protests in Gothenburg, Prague, and Genoa, *Autonome* were highly visible. In 2007, a very strong showing at the anti-G8 protests in Rostock/Heiligendamm confirmed their perseverance.

Today, the autonomous movement shows both continuity and innovation. Out of the campaigns, activities, and characteristics featured in *Feuer und Flamme*, the following still constitute key elements of its politics:

"FREE SPACES" AND SQUATTING

The fight for "free" or "autonomous" spaces remains essential. The parameters have changed, not least due to the aggressive persecution of the squatters' movement in the 1980s, but Autonomous Centers [*Autonome Zentren*] all across the German-speaking world provide an impressive infrastructure for radical activists, legalized housing collectives [*Wohnprojekte*] continue to pursue the dream of alternative communal living (albeit today often criticized as "reformist"), and *Wagenburgen*—literally "wagon fortresses": encampments of old caravans, camper vans, house trucks, etc.—beautify just about every town with a noticeable radical community. There has also been a recent squatting revival, with struggles in smaller towns like Münster or Erfurt drawing a lot of attention. While still sometimes denounced as "escapist," "elitist," or even "bourgeois," the struggle for autonomous spaces to experiment with alternative forms of living and organizing remains a defining aspect of autonomous identity.

ANTINUCLEAR STRUGGLES

Geronimo dedicates a lot of room to antinuclear resistance in his book. While this is partly a reflection of his personal political background, it is also an indication of the historical importance of these struggles for the Autonomen. Antinuclear struggles have not only galvanized the autonomous movement throughout its thirty-year history, they have also brought it closest to other grassroots activists and broader networks of resistance. This holds true today.

Since the mid-1990s, autonomous antinuclear resistance has largely focused on the interim nuclear waste storage facility in Gorleben. Every year, a couple of thousand Autonomen join local farmers, environmentalists, and peace activists in disrupting the rail delivery of nuclear waste from a reprocessing plant in France. The unceasing protests have left a mark on the region as a whole. A number of Autonome have taken up residence in the area, commonly known as Wendland, which provides one of the most interesting case studies of autonomous activities reaching beyond the confines of a political subculture and altering the everyday life of entire communities.

MILITANCY

As *Feuer und Flamme* reflects, the autonomous movement has always been associated with militant activism. The *Hasskappe* [literally “hate cap,” a black balaclava], the black bloc, and sympathies for the urban guerrilla struggles of the 1970s and 1980s belong to its defining features. In fact, in the public eye the movement has often been reduced to these aspects. While this is clearly simplistic and while there have been numerous self-critical discussions about the possibilities and limitations of militant protest, speaking of “pacifist Autonome” still seems to be a contradiction in itself. In fact, there has been a notable increase in militant actions in recent years. For example, nightly arson attacks on luxury vehicles have become commonplace in Berlin and Hamburg. There have also been daring attacks on military targets related to the deployment of German troops abroad, on government institutions held responsible both for racist migration policies and for the dismantling of social services, and on police stations where particularly extreme incidents of police violence have occurred. In October 2009, three alleged members of the militante gruppe (mg)—which had significant support in the autonomous scene—were sentenced to prison terms of several years for a series of well-publicized attacks.

A few other issues that have characterized autonomous politics for a long time but have not been given much room in Geronimo's account (either because he saw them as less important or because they only became more important later) are antifascism, antisexism, and antiracism.

ANTIFASCISM

Antifascist ("Antifa") groups appeared all across Germany, and beyond, in the early 1990s, after the country's reunification had propelled nationalist and racist sentiments to new heights. Neo-Nazi and neo-fascist street gangs became ever more present and increasingly violent. Extreme right-wing parties entered city councils and provincial parliaments, and the political center moved toward positions that would have been considered clearly right-wing just a decade earlier. Many on the radical left feared an overall drift toward fascism and initiated resistance that ranged from denouncing racist rhetoric to physical self-defense. While these activities had certain success in the 1990s, the struggle is far from over. Extreme right-wing tendencies remain strong in the German-speaking world, and there are several "nationally liberated zones," in which migrants, punks, leftist activists, and whoever else doesn't fit the picture find it unsafe to walk.

Antifa politics today includes painstaking documentation of right-wing activities as much as coalitions with liberal antifascist groups and organizations. Antifa has become such an important factor in autonomous politics that it is often seen as a synonym by the wider public. While this is certainly exaggerated and while it denies the movement's diversity, many young activists do first get in touch with autonomous politics through Antifa groups.

ANTISEXISM

The autonomous women's movement has a long history, and critiques of male dominance, patriarchal structures, and sexist behavior have often been directed at men within the scene itself. Accordingly, women's groups have repeatedly pulled out of "mixed" contexts in order to live, work, and organize independently. Gender issues remain at the forefront of autonomous debates today and are passionately discussed at any bigger autonomous gathering. Many initiatives—from antisexist information campaigns via antipatriarchal men's groups to

gender workshops—attest to the subject’s continuing urgency. In recent years, queer culture has been of increasing influence.

ANTIRACISM

In connection both with the rise of nationalism and racism in the reunified Germany and the ever-growing focus on migration as a key issue in European politics, antiracist (“Antira”) struggles became central for the autonomous movement in the early 1990s and have been at its core since then. Often overlapping with antifascist politics, antiracist politics are distinguished by a focus on both the specifically racist elements of fascist culture and the structural racism implemented and endorsed by European governments. In practical terms, Antira politics often concentrate on support for non-European migrants as the most immediate victims of European racism—as targets both of neofascist street violence and of state-administered migration policies.

Whether any of these issues have caused rifts within the autonomous movement—as some claim—is up to debate. One development has done so with certainty.

In the early 1990s, once again in the context of German reunification, some groups within the radical left demanded a reexamination of Germany’s history and the left’s notion of anti-imperialism, especially in connection with the Israel/Palestine conflict and the notions of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Out of these debates emerged the so-called Anti-Germans [*Antideutsche*] who rejected classic anti-imperialist notions as naïve and reactionary, interpreted anti-Zionism as concealed anti-Semitism, considered “personalized” critiques of capitalism (“the evil capitalist!”) simplified and crypto-anti-Semitic, and understood traditional enlightenment values—individual liberty, secularism, social equality—as necessary steps toward communism. Their staunch defense of the state of Israel as a safe haven for the global Jewish community and a guarantor of democratic progress led, perhaps ironically for an unbending antinationalist movement, to parading Israeli flags at protests, often accompanied by the flags of the World War II Allies—the Soviet Flag, the Tricolore, the Union Jack, and, most commonly, the Stars and Stripes—purportedly as a means of provocation. In the worst cases, Islamophobia and bellicism ran rampant. On the other side of the spectrum, anti-imps (portrayed in Geronimo’s account) have shown open support for Hamas and Hezbollah and hailed figures like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as important allies in the fight against U.S. imperialism. While far from all the

groups involved in these tendencies considered themselves a part of the autonomous movement, the conflicts had an enormous impact on the scene, ruining friendships, splitting autonomous centers, and even leading to physical confrontations. Today, however, many autonomous activists have grown tired of the situation and a more encouraging future seems in sight.

Issues that have risen to new prominence in the autonomous movement in recent years are animal rights and climate change. Gentrification has steadily increased in importance. Most of the arson attacks on luxury vehicles are related to the issue. There has also been a growing focus on state repression, surveillance, and militarization—all related to the “War on Terror” and the ever-expanding domestic and international security apparatus.

Anticapitalist resistance has not been among the movement’s strong points in recent years. While it is true that the mass protests against WTO or G8 summits have helped revitalize the movement in the last decade, Autonome have failed to advance radical anticapitalism despite Germany’s ongoing economic crisis and the global financial meltdown. There are some initiatives, like “Payday!” [*Zahhtag!*], that have successfully organized protests at government employment agencies and unemployment offices, but in general the autonomous response to the crisis has been weak. This is, of course, not exclusive to the autonomous movement: the entire German left has had difficulties in presenting viable alternatives.

Apart from the inability to turn pressing social issues to political advantage, the autonomous movement has been criticized for various other shortcomings over the years. It has been accused of appearing exclusive and elitist, of lacking theory, of being urban and middle class, of glorifying militancy, and of being “lifestylist.” It has also been called a “one generation movement” due to the very high turnover of activists. Much of this criticism is valid. At the same time, there has always been critical self-reflection and serious efforts have been made to progress as a movement. Arguably, this constitutes one of the movement’s strengths and is one of the reasons why it has survived for over thirty years.

A special challenge that has recently arisen is the cooptation of autonomous slogans, symbols, tactics, and themes by right-wing youths. The so-called Autonomous Nationalists [*Autonome Nationalisten*] wear sneakers, baggy pants, and hooded sweatshirts, sport piercings and tribal tattoos, form black blocs, support environmental and

animal-rights causes, and change the “Good Night, White Pride” slogan into “Good Night, Left Side” while keeping the same logo. They also claim opposition to centralized party structures and try to present a “hip” version of Nazism. While the phenomenon has caused much confusion and soul-searching within autonomous circles, the boundaries are clearly drawn. Whether the Autonomous Nationalists will remain a fad among the right-wing youth or whether they will establish themselves as a lasting subculture remains to be seen.

Internationally, the autonomous movement has sometimes acquired mythical dimensions. This might be flattering, but myth and reality are two different things. There is no denying that the autonomous movement has its share of contradictions and flaws. Most importantly, though, it persists. Regardless of all the shortcomings and the challenges it has been facing, the German autonomous movement constitutes indeed a unique chapter in the history of the European radical left. It has developed enduring political principles, a well-established infrastructure, and a lasting cultural identity without party structures, theoretical canons, or pledges of allegiance. Many similar movements disappear within a few years or survive only in the form of small “vanguards” that turn dogmatic and sectarian. The Autonomen have defied this logic. Even as they enter their fourth decade, neither centralization nor homogeny is anywhere in sight. Geronimo tells us about their beginnings. Hopefully, no one will have to tell us about their end anytime soon.