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The autonomists

Perceptions of societal change among radical left youth

Germany

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Executive summary: This case study tries to summarise perceptions of societal change among a group of young people that, despite being referred to in this report as ‘the autonomists’, cannot be easily categorised as a single homogeneous group. The focus of study in fact combines a number of scenes and structures of youth and adolescent groups (which include also adults) from different parts of Germany that can be categorised – in accordance with interviewees themselves -- as ‘antifascists’, ‘squatters’, ‘autonomists’ or ‘post-autonomists’, ‘communists’ or even simply ‘left-wing’, ‘extra-parliamentary left’ or ‘emancipatory left’. All of them are in deep conflict with societal norms and values.

The gap in research on the autonomists arises from their portrayal ‘as quintessentially violent or ready to use violence as part of a strategy to criminalize them’ (Scherr, 2015). Correspondingly, there is still no research on the autonomist or the extra-parliamentary scene which does not prejudge the outcome or are multiperspectival. Almost all academic studies focus on aspects of militancy and violence. This is always the point of departure of extremism research on politically left-wing scenes.

In contrast the key interest in this study centres around: a) contexts of individual motivation or rather socialisation into the formations; b) contexts of conflicts experienced and collective reactions to these in the form of actions and the associated issues of stigmatisation and criminalisation; c) innovations and the effectiveness of personal and group-specific engagement or rather political actions; d) ‘questions of meaning’ with regard to the individual and group-specific added value of the actions and the engagement.

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1. Introduction

In this report, the term ‘the autonomists’ is used as a short hand. Many of the young people presented here would distance themselves immediately from such a classification and that is recognised and respected. This short hand is adopted because it is considered important to write about the issues, aims and views of what is, in practice, a heterogeneous group of politically engaged (young) people who are active in a broad range of scenes and movements of the ‘left’. These young activists might be described most broadly as ‘the extra-parliamentary left’, or more specifically as ‘radical left-wing’, ‘extreme left-wing’, ‘autonomous’, ‘post-autonomous’, ‘anti-fascist’, ‘emancipatory left’ or simply ‘left-wing’. One respondent in this study, for example, described the extra-parliamentary left as a:

[...] heterogeneous construct that people place under the left-wing scene [...] And that’s what makes it so difficult. Because the left-wing scene just isn’t an organisation. Because it’s made up of such a lot of different groups, perspectives, factional disputes, ideas about the future, societal models. It’s so diverse. (Heike)

It follows that whenever the term ‘autonomists’ is used in this report, what is referred to is, in fact, individual scenes, partial scenes, groups and structures as well as associated individual activities and actions that must be set in their own respective settings and used always in the plural.

This clarification is particularly important given that mainstream discussion in the media is quick to subsume such left-wing oriented demonstrators as ‘autonomists’, as soon as the form of their demonstrations moves away from customary marches. Moreover, the history of the ‘extra-parliamentary left-wingers’ or the ‘radical left-wing movement’ is almost always seen in the context of alliances, networks and interdependencies with *Antifaschistische Aktion* (Anti-fascist Action) groups (Langer 2015), themselves constantly changing in response to national, regional and local changes in society.

According to Farin (2015: 19) the majority of autonomists view themselves as ‘particularly resolute radical elements of other social movements’ (Anti-Nuclear Movement, neighbourhood initiatives, anti-fascism, anti-racism etc.) that are also prepared to take illegal action. The fact that the majority of ‘autonomists’ today are perceived as younger people associated with the anti-fascist action, or ‘antifa’, groups (cf. Langer, 2015: 12; Farin, 2015: 16), is a result of right-wing radical movements becoming stronger since the fall of the Wall. Moreover, following the influx of refugees to Europe and Germany and the subsequent increase in xenophobic demonstrations and other activities in the whole of Germany and Europe there were counter reactions from the anti-fascists against the right-wing popular movements. If we are to believe what we read in the barely objective scientific literature on the autonomists, their internal debates and discussions are centred around anti-nuclear policies and issues such as globalisation, racism, neighbourhood policies, gentrification, anti-fascism, militancy and, in particular, around gender relations (not only) in their own scene (cf. Haunss, 2013: 31). These are the ever-present burning issues of autonomist debate. A common view within the scenes and structures is that the inequalities and discrimination at various levels are brought about by the capitalistic social system and its balances of power (Elias 1969):

It’s basically all about power relations, that’s the point. [...] the people have always been ruled by the few. Whether in feudal society or the Church. It’s really all about power

relations. I mean, it seems so abstract, but capitalism was also created by people. And capitalism is simply an existing, self-reforming system. (Ulrike)

The battle against the structures of inequality is fought within in the scene. The aim is to lay the foundations for everyone to live without existential worries, in freedom, autonomously, and free from discrimination against skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, religion or lifestyle etc.¹

In Germany ‘the autonomists’ can probably be understood at the moment to be one of the few scenes of (in particular) young people who, in conflict with the political and economic order, are overtly politically engaged and protest against them and are consequently exposed to serious criminalisation and stigmatisation. In this empirical report, we interviewed activists from the various scenes described above, such as the antifa, about the issues concerning ‘autonomous, self-governed’ living, self-governed cultural creation, political theory circles, the fight against social injustice, work with refugees etc.

The origins of the autonomists go back as far as the 1970s and the differentiated discussions of the subsequent years within the movement have been clearly documented by activists from a historical perspective (cf. Geronimo 1994; Langer 2015). Hitzler und Niederbacher (2010: 152) avoid any clear statement about the social origins and educational milieus of the supporters of autonomism, but do state that there is a clear predominance of male activists who determine the gender relations within the scene.² Farin (2015: 22-3) doubts that the autonomists are a youth movement or youth culture, stating that membership reaches into advanced adulthood. At the same time, the scene is strongly characterised by youth culture and mirrors the differentiation of current youth culture styles.

Due to the extreme difficulty of access (see below) the intended inductive approach to the topic had to be adapted to a partially deductive, partially inductive one, i.e. a great deal of information on groups and scenes was gathered from internal media, observations as participants at events and the compilation of research journals and from other secondary sources. It can be said that almost as a matter of principle there is a refusal to provide information for research and to the media or there is a logic of exploitation and the relative scepticism towards further contact with the outside world and cooperation with civil society institutions and actors and this has resulted in a paucity of research on the extra-parliamentary left. The reasons for this are relatively easy to discern and were very clearly communicated by the statements of the interviewees (see Section 3). First of all many activists distance themselves from clearly definable categorisations (see above) and proclaim their individuality and autonomy, which can be interpreted as serving to underline their own political position and the distinction between them and outsiders and other

¹ At the end of one group interview, three interviewees expressed a desire for ‘world peace’, ‘justice’ and ‘independence from power relations’. The Free Workers Union (FAU), which has close links to the scene, described the inequalities and explained that they exist in their own structures: ‘in exactly the same way as capitalistic exploitation, homophobia and sexism, racism and anti-Semitism, nationalism and social stigmatization are all constituents of a network of diverse power relations which form part of our lives. They’re also to be found within [...] movements that view themselves as emancipatory. Freeing ourselves from these types of power relations is a task that begins among us and in the immediate environs’ (<https://fau.org/ueber-uns/>).

² The number of anti-fascists and autonomists in Germany is estimated to be around 6,000. With regard to the growth in numbers it can be assumed that the number of new arrivals roughly equals that of leavers. According to these estimates, most activists are aged between 16 and 30 (Eichholz under jugendszenen.com; as of 4.1.2018). The same figures are quoted by Hitzler and Niederbacher (2010: 151-2). The current Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution (2016) of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (2017) refers to an increased number of ‘left-wing-extremist-oriented persons’, estimating these at approximately 28,500, but without giving a more precise definition.

political actors and groups. This individual application of political persuasions to their own actions – also called ‘first-person politics’ (see below) – makes it equally difficult to speak from the individual perspective about others, or groups of others and their political foci.

Additionally, they are opposed to any research into their own structures for fear of being observed and under surveillance and ultimately also for fear of being criminalised by government police forces. Finally, the aims specific to small and local groups and the methods of their activities are always designed to prevent easy access from outside. This means that many of the groups organised at the local to regional level refuse to cooperate with civil society organisations and parties. If there were still national networks in their own ranks a few decades ago, this is no longer the case. The political aims and methods have been differentiated and political action is now taken locally and regionally (Keller *et al.*, 2013: 126-7).

The issue of surveillance and spying has a prominent position within the scene. Attempts at ‘chatting up’ by ‘spies’ of Office for the Protection of the Constitution and by the infiltration of informants into their own structures³ make it in principle always possible for internal matters to come to the surface that could lead to prosecution. On the one hand, this permanent fear of being observed (which actually still takes place today) makes it very difficult for people entering these structures for the first time to be accepted into the scene and, on the other, makes it virtually impossible for empirical researchers to gain almost any kind of open access. This situation applies to all local groups and scenes. In this context, some expressed a fear of being criminalised, which could result from the surveillance described above; but also from bugging, from the reading of non-encrypted internal communications, or alternatively, from the undercover surveillance of offences or even from the incitement by undercover investigators to commit an offence during demonstrations.

This mistrust appears in a context whereby many politically active groups belong to the extra-parliamentary left, who, unlike the so-called rest of the population, carry out (albeit non-programmatic) ‘educational work’ which opposes the repressive logic and repressive dynamics of the system. The forms of this educational work are multifaceted, but also ultimately give rise to feelings of being constantly observed and criminalised. At the same time, this conspiratorial view of the outside world promotes the solidarity of the In-Group. It is an almost foregone conclusion that belonging to the In-Group has to be achieved through long and continual involvement.

In this way almost all research is accused of reflecting the logic of exploitation of a social system which is perceived to be repressive and therefore also to duplicate this and thus to serve the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the police surveillance authorities. Accordingly, the ‘*Antifa, Kritik und Klassenkampf*’ (‘Antifa, Criticism and Class War’) in Frankfurt took an intensive and critical look at an excellence cluster researching ‘International Dissidence – Rule and Criticism in Global Politics’ at their own university. The participating ‘3rd generation of the Frankfurt school’ – which with its prominent representatives Horkheimer and Adorno (1969) contributed significantly to theory formation and a critical consciousness within the scenes which still endures today – was also accused of serving state exploitation logic⁴. The study of the topic

³ Several of these ‘spies’ have been uncovered in Hamburg in the past few years. Following this, research was carried out within the scenes and the actions of the undercover police officers described. For details go to <https://enttarnungen.blackblogs.org/>.

⁴ see (<http://akkffm.blogspot.de/2016/12/01/zur-debatte-um-unseren-text-achtung-exzellenzcluster-will-linke-strukturen-ausforschen>)

area left-wing militancy at the University of Göttingen, which has been running since 2017, also met with strong resistance in the left-wing radical scene, which countered with a protest under the slogan 'Abolish the Office for the Protection of the Constitution' against the investigation and its alleged use by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Paul, 2017)

The empirical work presented below also suffered greatly from these instances of suspicion towards the intentions of research work⁵, for example, when making contact with one activist he remarked that he would never support a project financed by the EU: 'I prefer to do real politics rather than say anything to people from the European Parliament' (Fieldwork diary, No. 3, 15 June 2017).

The gap in research on the autonomists is particularly due to 'portraying the autonomists as quintessentially violent or ready to use violence as part of a strategy to criminalise them [...]' (Scherr, 2015: 348). Correspondingly, there is still no research dealing with the autonomist or the extra-parliamentary scene which do not prejudge the outcome or are multiperspectival. Almost all academic studies focus on aspects of militancy and violence. This is always the point of departure of extremism research on politically left-wing scenes, which is then also received by police forces and the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The functions and roles of researchers partially overlap, when some of the researchers are (getting) employed by the intelligence service (cf. Farin, 2015: 24).

The G20 Summit, a major event for the extra-parliamentary left in Europe, took place in Hamburg at the beginning of July 2017 – right in the middle of the empirical phase of this project. This was accompanied by large-scale protest by approximately 20,000 people. The media reported a violent escalation by some groups of protesters as well as the police. Before the summit, the left wingers had taken many preparatory measures and held meetings to plan their action at the protests (see Fieldwork diary, No. 7, 15 June 2017). Following the event many demonstrations were held in protest at arrests, and the arbitrary and violent actions of the police during the G20 summit, demonstrations which still take place today.

There was a period of about five days after the event where all large formats of the national media contained relatively one-sided reports about the radicalism and militancy of the protesters and the corresponding reactions by the police. In addition to numerous arrests of protesters, the most wide-reaching consequences for the left-wing scene were the prohibition or rather switching of the Internet platform 'indymedia.linksunten', which was a central information portal. Moreover, a public, nationwide internet manhunt for a number of protesters by the Hamburg-based police unit 'SOKO Schwarzer Block' (= Black Block) was installed. Both were met with vehement criticism in the left-wing political camp. The ongoing public discourse in the mainstream media about militancy and violence from the left and the feeling in the left-wing scenes and groups of repression and criminalisation made it even more difficult to gain access to them and to carry out the empirical work.

Through the inductive approach to the topic of the extra-parliamentary left and their predominantly young protagonists, including participatory observations, participation at events, the study of internal publications and communications, attempts at establishing contact and finally

⁵ A very large amount of time which had been planned for the empirical work was spent on the mostly fruitless search for interviewees. Approximately 45 different groups of left-wing radical activists, antifas, experts and propagandists in the scenes were contacted via contact forms in their own forums, via Facebook and by e-mail, and approx. 20 individuals were contacted personally and motivated to take part.

by means of open interviews, the key interest to emerge centred around: a) contexts of individual motivation or rather socialisation into the formations; b) contexts of conflicts experienced and collective reactions to these in the form of actions and the associated issues of stigmatisation and criminalisation; c) innovations and the effectiveness of personal and group-specific engagement or rather political actions; d) 'questions of meaning' with regard to the individual and group-specific added value of the actions and the engagement.

In this way, we were able to address a number of fundamental characteristics and issues of interest of the scene-specific structures, which came up repeatedly and were dealt with or discussed in the various settings at different levels of intensity and from different perspectives. These include, for example, the interdependencies of theories and activities, public relations organs of the scenes or rather resp. their openness to outsiders, and also discussions about methods and mode of operation. It was also possible to derive individual points of view about belonging to the group and the level of personal engagement.

2. Methods

During the phase of empirical data collection, we conducted semi-structured individual and group interviews, undertook participatory observation and analysed secondary sources. These included 16 interviews with 22 scene members, two expert interviews with a lawyer and a filmmaker, and 14 research diary entries that were written during the research and participation in various events. In addition, we wrote two memos and made records of participatory observations of scene-specific events as well as during occupations of properties and during one major and one smaller demonstration. A radio broadcast by an Antifa group was also included in the analysis. Furthermore, we considered a programme broadcast by the German TV channel ZDF, which reported on the militancy of the autonomists in the wake of the G20 demonstrations; a film about anarchistic projects in Europe and a film on the topic of militant antifascism. Finally, photographs taken by the interviewees on the topic of 'political activity' and a few photographs taken by the author of housing projects visited were included in the analysis and coding of the data. The same applies to flyers made by scene members in preparation for the G20 summit, for an event to commemorate anti-fascists murdered in the Third Reich, a flyer for International Women's Day, a flyer for the occupation of a property by an autonomous trailer group and a flyer on a long-standing trial about racist murders in Germany (NSU). Additionally, although not documented as such, we regularly took note of blogs, home pages, Facebook pages and tweets of various activists and groups on issues relevant to our research for information purposes and used them only in part for documentation purposes.

All of the interviews were conducted with the aid of the interview guide in face-to-face situations and an audio recording made. In total we recorded 2081 minutes of interview material, which we transcribed and analysed, resulting in a text of 289,877 words (approx. 1000 pages). The written material – research diaries, interview transcripts and flyers – were coded using the NVivo software and clustered according to topics. The material was coded into a total of 201 thematic nodes. The participatory observations and participation in events accounted for a total of 20 days of fieldwork.

The age range of the protagonists we interviewed was extremely large and reflects the heterogeneity of the scene: the youngest interviewee was 15, the oldest 42; the median age was

25.8 and is lower than in Farin's interview recording (37), which also criticises a youth culture perspective in the analysis (see above; 2015, 22). The interviews were conducted in Northern, Southern and Eastern Germany. Its explorative character, the ethnographic-qualitative methodology, the choice of the interviewees and the analysis of their statements mean that this study cannot claim to be a representative portrayal of the extra-parliamentary left in Germany, but it is an attempt to describe situational areas of focus and some characteristics of the political and social engagement of the protagonists.

The reasons for the extraordinary difficulty in gaining access to the area of the extra-parliamentary left has already been described above, the access that we did manage to gain to perform the interviews was achieved through professional networks of social workers involved in open advisory work against right-wing extremism, through personal sources and disseminators in the scenes, by asking people who had already been interviewed about accessing fellow campaigners and through open enquiries with individuals and groups.

All interviews had been planned ahead and appointments were kept by both parties. Some interviews were carried out in the homes of the protagonists, some in the interviewee's office and some in public buildings. Almost all of the interviewees agreed at the end of the interview to discuss the findings of the study. All interviews took place in an air of mutual sympathy and respect, with some interviewees taking part in lengthy discussions about issues relevant to the study either before or after the actual interview. We still have loose contact with one group of activists and we attended this group's events even outside of the empirical phase.

When establishing contact, the researcher introduced himself as sympathetic to their activities and spoke about his own involvement as a youth in the Punk scene. Although the involvement of the researcher in similar political activities has never been as strong as that of the interviewed protagonists, and his belonging to relative similar scenes and groups is more than 20 years ago, he had no problem in establishing first contact and he knew about the types of events and most of the political ambitions that have been communicated in the empirical material. Nevertheless second contacting and further communication was not that easy. This might also be explained by the age difference between the younger activists and the older researcher. The researcher has been influenced strongly by his own youth cultural involvement and supports the protagonists ideologically with their antifascist's ambitions. Furthermore he has a strong sympathy for their reflection on all forms of social inequality. Nevertheless the researcher tried to organise and describe the empirical material as neutrally as possible, also taking into consideration that he does not agree with a number of methods of the political activism and that he dislikes some of the In-Group characteristics mentioned by the interviewees and that are described below.

For the most part the informed consent of the interviewees to take part in the study was gained verbally before the appointed date for the interviews and also recorded at the beginning of the interview. Issues which would have led to ethical or moral conflicts for the interviewees and the interviewers were not broached in the interviews.

3. Key findings

3.1 Social Demographics

All 22 of the interviewees were young people from educated backgrounds; the gender ratio - 12 men and 10 women - was almost equal. Some of the interviewees spoke of having politically interested parents, a number of whom were politically engaged or positioned explicitly on the left. In Eastern Germany some also characterised the anti-fascist attitude of their grandparents or a few older teachers as influencing their socialisation. All of the interviewees were German nationals; none had an immigration background. Three of those questioned were already parents, the others childless and all but one had gained the *'Abitur'* (University entrance level qualification) or were aiming to achieve it at grammar school. Those who were in work worked mainly in social professions, such as in (socio-) pedagogical areas. Other interviewees were at university or, as mentioned, were still at school. A smaller group was unemployed. A number of these young people still lived with their parents, the rest in shared accommodation, flats or in their own property. No-one commented voluntarily on religion or religiosity. It may be presumed that many would regard themselves as atheists.

3.2 Settings

The interviewees were members of different types of groups. The groups and scenes can be classified using terms such as anti-fascists, anti-racists and activists involved in refugee support, (post-) autonomists, house and land occupiers, members of alternative lifestyle groups, feminists and producers of alternative cultural forms. In the local context, each of the interviewees resided in certain alternative 'cultural centres', self-managed cafés, housing projects and information points, or alternatively, felt they were part of them. In regional and national contexts they were very well networked by means of similar projects and organisations, with some networks crossing the border into other (EU) countries. Visits by comrades to France, Palestine and Turkey were mentioned. In addition, there were, and still are, wide-ranging and national networks that report on their own activities, in particular via their own websites, blogs, tweets and to some extent Facebook postings. Additionally, the news and comments of many other activist friends are multiplied via twitter, links on their own websites and Facebook. Inside the groups, internal communication is usually via mail distributors, newsgroups and twitter. E-mails are encoded with a pgb key, so it would only be possible for outsiders to approach the groups using an E-mail encryption programme⁶.

3.3 Socialisation

The interviewees clearly described socialisation into the groups and scenes and the motives for being politically engaged respectively to be included in the activities. Almost all of those we questioned made contact with the scenes via their peers not without having political interests beforehand.

I'd already been interested in politics for a long time, even at school. And then I made contact with people in groups through friends. The main reason was that I had grown up in the neighbourhood where a lot of Nazis lived and I just didn't like the idea of my friends being attacked by them. And what do you do, when your friends get attacked?

⁶ While setting up the interviews, many groups were contacted via unencrypted e-mails, Facebook and the contact forms (not always available) on the respective websites – for the most part without reply.

You defend your friends. And what's the best way of doing that? By getting organised, because you won't get anywhere on your own. And that's sort of how I found my way in. [...] Yeah, that's how. (Bernd)

The influences of youth culture also play a role in political socialisation: 'I started to listen to punk rock pretty early on, German punk, too, which was, of course very anti-establishment [...]' (Gustav). What is more, some made reference to experiences while doing (volunteer) work with refugees and youth work organisations. Here they came across structures of social inequality, xenophobia, marginalisation and discrimination. Some of these experiences made a great impression on them with regard to their political views and motivated them to take part in political activities.

I found the hate that people feel and clearly express towards refugees, for example, shocking. So, as this so-called wave of refugees came in 2015, how many right-wing-minded crimes were committed against those people, against their accommodation. How much hate there was, it really shocked me. And we gave support in [name of city] to this initial accommodation where the people had arrived and were completely exhausted after an incredibly long journey. [...] But in any case, right-wing-minded people had been there before us and run around and verbally abused, insulted and spat at these people who were completely exhausted from fleeing their own country, some of them not even knowing where they were. I've rarely [experienced] such terrible things, so I really found it shocking. And that's not the only thing that happened. There were a lot of people who set refugee shelters alight and accepted that people would die, just because they think that they and their country are something better, I don't get it. It shocks me over and over again. (Tatjana)

The massive flow of refugees since 2015 helped to increase the number of members in the groups and scenes. For the most part locally organised groups of helpful young people wanted first and foremost to help the refugees. They often operated under the slogan 'refugees welcome', organised themselves independently, outside of civil society or Church-run assistance structures, and took action in solidarity under the banner 'direct action', for example by 'standing at the station at night giving out hot drinks' and 'organising ferry tickets and letting people sleep here' (Gustav).

This readiness to help was given additional impetus by xenophobic groups being organised at the same time, some of whom were openly racist both verbally and in their actions. They helped the scenes of autonomous and anti-fascist groups to grow in numbers:

But just after the wave of refugees after 2015 there were many young people about to do their Abi [school-leaving exam at age 19], just before, just after, aged 18 to 20, who got involved, went to the station and collected donations, bought stuff, helped with the language and so on. Young people came along and they're still taking part. All as a result of the anti-racist network in [city]. [...] It was just set up at that time. And that was just a breath of fresh air. (Anton)

These anti-racist networks cooperate(d) very closely at the local level with the anti-fascist groups, for 'Antira always creates Antifa things anyway' (Rosa), and couple(d) their activities with a genuine criticism of the capitalistic system. EU foreign policy in particular together with its

member states was (also) heavily blamed for the misery of the refugees. Two protagonists went firstly along the Balkan route and the second time to Greece to provide on-the-spot help. They paid for the travel costs with donations raised at a party they had organised themselves.

I said, we couldn't sit here in [city] and give them something to eat here, we have to go to them. And then Josef set off a week before me and I went a week later and we travelled around the various borders. [...] there we were [...] in the plane to Thessaloniki and we spent three weeks in the camp. And there we cooked food and served it up to the people, played with the children stuff like that. And everything alone, without the group, just us two friends. [...] This camp survived because of us and continues to exist today, because we fed the people there, because we gave them back a daily routine. (Ulrike)

3.4 Solidarity

A cross-cutting issue that appears implicitly and is mentioned explicitly in all interviews is solidarity. Within the groups and scenes solidarity is lived, experienced and praised as a counter measure against a society characterised by the erosion of solidarity together with its' capitalistic and consumption-oriented social order.⁷ The dichotomy of community vs. society, as already described by Tönnies (initially in 1887) is very clearly understood in large parts of the left-wing scene and communicated as such. Politics, the economy, the media and advertising (re)produce – in the view of many of the interviewees – a competition which at the same time causes and reinforces social, ethnic and gender-related inequalities and therefore also entails the erosion of solidarity with the socially more deprived, with marginalised groups, ethnic minorities, refugees, people whose sexual orientation differs from heterosexual norms, and with many other groups. On the other hand, in the respective scenes, groups and politically-oriented networks relatively like-minded people live together in solidarity within a community:

If everyone has the chance to develop freely, of course without restricting anyone else and if everyone shows solidarity to each other, then many problems would be solved, because there wouldn't be a capitalist system like the one we have today. That's not based on equal rights and there wouldn't be any right-wing extremists or Nazis, because they aren't based on equal rights either. That is the maxim by which I deal with many things. (Lothar)

In order to counter the subjectively perceived individual sense of powerlessness in the capitalistic system or neo-liberal economics system – such as being socialised and 'sandwiched' in a consumption-oriented system – and to confront the impotence felt by the individual, people living together in solidarity, which encompasses as many aspects of community life as possible, such as living, consuming, producing and distributing goods, cooking, and taking part in discussions, to name but a few, is proclaimed as an alternative small-scale social plan:

It's more a question of creating an alternative. So many people don't know how to realise their full potential, or just how much power they have regarding their own actions and when they plan to do something. [...] it's about promoting this self-

⁷ For example, 'our alternative is called solidarity' was (and still is) the slogan under which the extra-parliamentary left protested against the federal party conference of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) on 1 December 2017 in Hanover (cf. [https://: unsere-alternative.org](https://unsere-alternative.org)).

determination and saying, I have an idea, normally I wouldn't be able to put it into action, because I haven't got the financial means, but there's a place where I can put it into action, simply creativity and the will to live and the ability put things into action and also to be able to be at the disposal of other people (Frauke).

Accordingly, in some autonomist houses and cultural centres there is the maxim that guests do not have to consume anything in order to participate at events and 'people with meagre financial means shouldn't be excluded. Everything we have comes from donations' (Steffi). A central role of this alternative is the idea of realising an autonomous way of organising leisure time, which includes personal consumption patterns, cultural production and information transfer – as an alternative plan that is as independent as possible and stands in partial opposition to conditions in which (youth) leisure time, culture and the media operate and disseminate relevant information. In addition to the solidary pursuits of these aims, the 'uncapitalistic' DIY maxim also plays a role. Implicitly it is always about 'guidance on self-help and having given the people the opportunity to be in a place which is as non-capitalistic as possible' (Frauke) and for them to produce culture, organise leisure time and acquire information about social developments themselves.

In effect, the forms of interaction characterised by solidary behaviour are seen as a small-scale alternative against individualisation and competitive thinking in the system. This behaviour is deployed as a pattern for interaction forms outside of the groups, in order to show that it is 'possible to do things differently. And so I think of events at schools, or I run a holiday camp, always in the summer [...] I try to set an example. That we are always there for each other, regardless of what or who the other person is.' (Lothar). The idea of realising alternative, solidary behaviour forms is also always associated with concrete action and follows the maxim 'set an example on a small scale'⁸: 'That's to say, not just talk about it, but actually set an example and work together with people' (Frauke). Moreover, solidary behaviour is linked to rules and codexes of 'political correctness': 'For me, 'correct' means that you show solidarity. That you don't laugh at people because they live on the streets. That you don't wolf-whistle at women and that sort of thing [...], but that you take care to show solidarity' (Bernd).

On the site of a former factory that was occupied in order to create a space for young people in accordance with the aforementioned ideals of autonomous leisure time organisation, cultural production and knowledge transfer, the following behaviour guidelines were formulated and publicised:

The basic principles that we follow: pro do-it-yourself, pro solidarity, and the pursuit of openness in the sense of participation from outside are things we strive for and encourage. Anti-capitalistic, cost-covering economic activity, anti-profit driven, ecologically sustainable. In order to protect the free space, the following views are neither desired, nor tolerated here. People exhibiting the following behaviours that we find intolerable and transgressive will be asked to leave: racism, sexism, anti-semitism, right-wing populism, profit orientation, sexism, disrespectful mocking, patriarchy, homophobia, verbal abuse without subsequent apology, physical abuse against people and animals. Furthermore, there are no special rights for individuals or groups. (Frauke)

⁸ From an historical perspective, it is the Hardcore Punk movement of the early 1980s, amongst others, who initially proclaimed similar maxims and also the DIY concept in the USA (Büsser, 1995).

These written rules represent a code of behaviour ‘of political correctness’, which could be valid in nearly all organisations of the autonomous, self-governed houses, info points, bars and event centres. Solidary and respectful forms of interaction can therefore be described as generally observed behavioural maxims in the groups and scenes, and in their organisations, and should represent constants that can be relied upon by the members.⁹ The concept of grass-roots democratic decision-making within the almost hierarchy-free community is lived, communicated and defended outwardly and inwardly: ‘If someone wants to get rich or become the boss, it doesn’t work that way. And when people begin to feel under pressure from others, then they close up pretty quickly. Because everyone insists on their own freedom’. (Frauke)

The experience of solidarity and the affirmation of belonging to a community increase the feeling of attachment to this In-Group:

And you gain from it, because you experience an intense kind of solidarity. I don’t think I’ve ever been part of such solidary organised groups, not in my entire life, [...] which also gives you a strong sense of unity, which is nice. (Tatjana)

At the same time, there is an increased feeling of individual well-being. This is experienced within the respective community, but also contributes to having this sense of well-being outside of the community, too:

Then I was there and life was great fun and had a real meaning. And even in times of stress and when it was exhausting, we enjoyed a kind of freedom that I had previously never felt. And community and emotional security, that I had never known. It was like therapy, doing something I love and sharing it with others [...] I still feel it in my heart and I want to experience it again. Above all this idea of solidarity. (Frauke)

The solidarity experienced within the community also then functions for the interviewees, as a motive on the one hand to continue to be active within the group and on the other to conceptualise solidarity as an alternative plan, starting point or method of social change:

Then I said: ‘Okay, they just stand-, they practise just what I imagine, that we stand by each other and are there for each other, somehow.’ And that somehow led to me saying: ‘Yeah, with the group we can somehow bring about change in the structure of society. Because somehow they’re already living it to an extent. And simply put things into action, as far as possible.’ And essentially that led to me staying. (Lothar)

However, some also expressed criticism of the principle of unconditional solidarity within their own scenes. On the one hand, this maxim can be accompanied by a certain group pressure, to which not necessarily all involved want to be subjected. On the other hand, solidary human relations are an aim which, in the mind of some, has not yet been achieved within their own groups:

I would only say that we’re not doing it yet, I mean, not within the left-wing scene, the extra-parliamentary left. I believe that we always act as if we’d found the philosopher’s

⁹ None the less, continuous discussions and theoretical arguments in particular about sexism, racism, anti-semitism etc. within the groups and scenes themselves are part of the discursive development of autonomous left-wing groups (Keller *et al.*, 2013; Langer, 2015).

stone and our relationships were oh so solidary, but ultimately that's not the case, because many in our circles are lonely, many have financial problems to deal with. And this happens again and again, because it's so often there in society as a whole. And so this idea of solidarity means now having a common subculture, or getting together in housing projects, yeah, I'd say that, but that's just what I think. So therefore I find that should also be possible for people who don't want to live in solidary relationships and for me, there's always too little of that in my own environment. (Criz)

3.5 Structures, Theories and Actions

Theory and practice in extra-parliamentary left-wing politics are mutually supportive components of autonomist motives for, and structures of, their actions, though there does not seem to be a rigorous logical sequence from theory to practice (and back). One doctrine of autonomist left-wing politics states more or less that all actions have a political meaning and effect. This applies equally to social contexts and micro-social structures. The individual is also affected by this, for 'Private matters are political' (Bernd). This viewpoint embraces reflecting on one's own (privileged) life circumstances, such as members of the white urban middle class with a particular educational biography, which together with a large number of other variables should always be open to consideration and reflection. In particular gender relations, feminist viewpoints on these and sexist forms of behaviour and images of women are a constant topic of discussion and dialogue within the scenes, which concentrate not only on relations in their own structures, but also in society as a whole. An older scene member spoke of a certain redundancy of the dialogue in their own structures: 'At some point, after about two or three years, I became frustrated by the repetition of the topics, like discussing sexism for the third or fourth time' (Jonna). From a long-term perspective of their structures, however, she later put things into context and mentioned positively, that the quality of internal dialogue and critique had improved:

The left has changed, too, now we have such things as wide-ranging discussions about internal sexism, anti-Semitism - also really serious, racism, and looking back over the years a lot has been done about and what I have previously said was impossible [laughs]. They are always small steps, of course, but now things are happening... (Jonna)

Feminist views of autonomous left-wing and anti-fascist politics have had more prominence in the scenes since at least the 1990s and manifest themselves, for example, in the establishment of queer feminist groups, the LaDIY festival culture queer feminist groups or of feminist Antifa- (FANTIFA) or Female-Antifa groups (herausgeber_innenkollektiv 2013; <https://fantifafrankfurt.wordpress.com/>; see below). The battle against sexism and the inclusion of feminist perspectives with regard to the internal structures mirrors the development of the general feminist women's politics that look into external micro- and macro-social structures. Feminist perspectives are a central component of extra-parliamentary left stances and analyse, criticise, and fight against the power mechanisms in society that repress and constrict people, and force them into conventional life patterns and biographies, in order to then once more reproduce these power structures. These societal power and repression relationships must be fought against and the genuine lack of power of individuals in this system removed: 'I feel mega restricted and powerless [...] against major powers, large entities, which tell you how to live and only if we really do something can we lose this feeling of powerlessness' (Frauke).

The interviewees see these repressive power structures in, for example, not just social differences and in gender-specific, ethnic-related and origin-related discrimination, but also in the unequal treatment of homosexuals, in all forms of xenophobic structures and systems, in the administration of justice and in the very justice system that criminalizes them; they criticise the social capitalistic system in all of the forms mentioned above. The political actions that characterise the struggle are justified by these perceived areas of conflict. Ultimately, however, the capitalist economic system consists entirely of subsystems that cause discrimination and inequality, from which the individual and the collective objective of political work are derived. Significantly, the interviewees also spoke of 'political work', 'neighbourhood work', 'work with new recruits', and 'refugee work' when describing their activities.

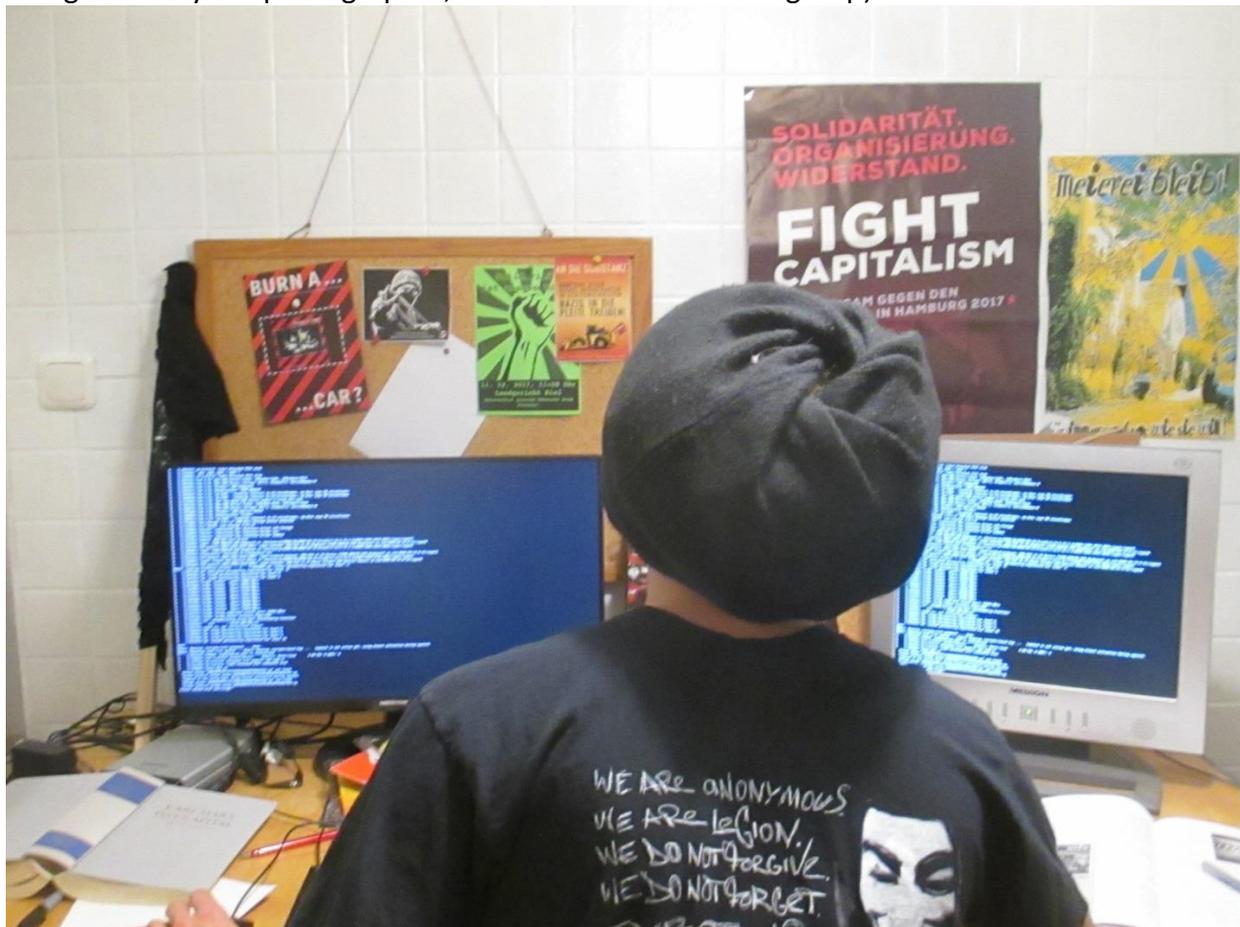
For the purposes of systematisation, the political and scene-related activities of the interviewees and the people we contacted when arranging the interviews can be roughly divided into three areas:

(1) The establishment and maintenance of their own infrastructures: including alternative living in vehicles, the occupation of houses, factory sites and properties, and the concurrent fight against house-building policy and gentrification in the respective city, the mail-order delivery of their own music, clothes and accessories, the organisation and running of informative and cultural events, programme planning in autonomist housing, working with the Rote Hilfe (legal assistance for victims of arbitrary police and judicial action, and threats), technical support at concerts, communication with representatives of the city in matters pertaining to their own structure, the collective renting and self-administration and organisation of programmes for info-centres, alternative cultural and events centres and bars. For many activists, the first visit to these houses was their entrance into the scene:

(I thought) what kind of a house is that and was interested in it and got to grips with how it all hangs together, I mean, not just seeing the events area, but the whole thing and what's behind it all, politically and so on. [...] and then it just happened that at 15 I got in to a whole lot of left-wing projects through music. (Anton)

Most of the organisations are – at least at the local Level – closely networked and familiar to each other, so that contact with and entrance into one area often entails entrance into another area. The character of events, excluding concerts and parties, is very structurally similar in the scene: 'at the beginning of the year, for example, we held a number of events [...] a bit like Antifa-Cafe [...] each one with food, vegan food, that we cooked ourselves and brought to the events' (Jürgen).

Plate 2: An activist decodes messages from the local neo-Nazi scene (permission to use this photo was granted by the photographer, a member of the activist group)



(2) *Local and Regional Actions*: The struggle and the work against 'the right' or against 'Nazis', against political parties, events, individuals or groups of a right-wing extremist or xenophobic nature are important areas of activity. These take place both in the office and on the street. An activist of the Antifa described his work as an educational task:

Gather quite a lot of information about Nazis and then just to pass it on, and publish it, as required, when something urgent crops up somewhere. And of course, get out onto the streets and make sure that Nazi propaganda is removed. We understand it as a bit of an educational task, too. We go on air with Antifa-Radio, and now and again we also make speeches. And now these *Stolpersteine* (art project by Gunter Demnig in memory of Jewish citizens murdered by the Nazis), it's not just a matter of cleaning the stones, but also of raising awareness about what happened. (Ferdinand)

In particular the desk work, the investigative and extremely dangerous research into structures and members of the local neo-Nazi scenes, right-wing populist parties, and racist groups together with their supporters are all activities that are often completely overlooked in the public eye and in the media. The results are brought to the public's attention by the local media or by the police:

If you have an insight into the work of the OPC, you see that they really do acquire a huge amount of our information. [...] Their work's alarming and diletantish. I mean, what the police and the VS do. When you see what kind of money they have available to them, that they're also covered legally, when you then compare, we do it all voluntarily and if anything

we get hassled for it [...] and in their case, that's simply a disgrace. Some put their hearts and souls into it, and for those who get paid for it, for them it's just a job. We do it out of conviction, our lifeblood is behind what we do (Peter).

Plate 3: Graffiti against Nazis (permission to use this photo was granted by the photographer, a member of the activist group)



Other anti-fascist and anti-racist actions at the local level include not just (over)painting and spraying of graffiti, removal and application of stickers, support and cooperation in local 'associations against the right', the observation of xenophobic developments at schools and the contacting of fan groups in the football stadium, but also organising autonomist structures to help refugees and holding benefit- or solidarity events for (e.g. the Kurdish) freedom fighters abroad. At the same time, youth work is carried out in the local neighbourhood:

We do a lot of our work on the street. There's a lot of Nazi propaganda, such as swastikas daubed all over the place or different kinds of right-wing stickers and so on. [...] and then part of it is of course to go off and get rid of them somehow, and then put our stuff up around the neighbourhood. Whether that's graffiti-based art, or street art, we make our mark. But that's just one thing. The other is regularly talking to people in the local area or immediate neighbourhood, communicating, talking about sport, there where you just meet up with people. [...] it's important to me to have conversations with people who live in the same area as town as me. Where am I supposed to do it if not there where I live? There, where I know about the problems, there, where I know, the people are at *tipico* [betting office] or at the mosque, yeah, where do I go to hand out flyers? At the bookie's or at the mosque. (Bernd)

Recruitment work is also part of the neighbourhood actions described above, i.e. through discussions and through 'solidary' and empathetic interactions, members of the scene attempt to get young people on board and convince them 'that [we] chase Nazis out of the area' (Bernd) and that ideally they could be interested in their political work and become actively involved. This goes hand in hand with the prevailing sense of mission within the groups and scenes and the conviction that they are 'doing the right thing', as young people when they take up a position against misanthropic ideologies and groups:

If you find it somehow stupid, when you think something's stupid, then speak up, plan it, do it. Because if you just stand around for thirty or forty years and then think: 'Ahh, I should have done it back then.' Then you kick yourself and think: 'Yep, shite! And somehow we now have the AfD [Alternative for Germany – populist party from the far right] as the strongest party' or something like that. (Lothar)

At the same time, approaching youths and other younger people in the neighbourhood in view of the currently perceived lack of interest in political and social issues is regarded as extremely difficult: 'Luckily, I haven't got any Nazis or anything or any other kind of idiots in my class, but there's a total lack of interest in politics' (Peter). Attempts to motivate and raise awareness among young people are not always easy tasks, even if the conditions for a low-level approach are in place: 'Even if there are now and again people at concerts who actually seem to be a bit more open, it's still difficult to motivate them to anything more than just going to a concert' (Susi). Recruitment work is also necessary in smaller towns and cities, and in rural areas that are characterised by out-migration,¹⁰ also to maintain the size of the group.

Most people move to [city B], very few still live in [city A]. This means, even when we have active people, at some point they move away as well. The age at which people start to take in interest in politics is usually around the 14, 15, 16 mark and this is the time when they could get involved, relatively minimally, this means we have the problem, which we need to address, of ensuring that enough people stay, so that we can continue to be active. (Ferdinand)

Other actions in local and regional contexts are the production of posters and banners, the organisation and holding of demonstrations against neo-Nazis, right-wing extremist political parties and their structures, against police brutality and the arbitrariness of the justice system, and demonstrations for the creation and maintenance of areas and structures of alternative forms of living: 'First I go on a "vehicle pitch" demo and tell the mayor he should move himself [...] do something (sic) for people living in vehicles, for alternative living in general' (Anton), then a few days later in a smaller, neighbouring town I'll demonstrate against the recently empowered AfD party:

It's not a whole lot different in [city B], [...] there was a refugee shelter, initial reception or something and then the AfD [...], mobilised itself and they demonstrated against it and as a [person coming from city A] I had to go there again and demonstrate against them and somehow air my views against them, or just show the normal population they were in no danger from the refugees, that we could sort of be

¹⁰ With a partial growth in the population as a result of the temporary influx of refugees and partial and parallel growth in xenophobic movements and the corresponding increases respectively growth of political parties of the politically extreme right spectrum.

cool with them, that we don't need to go around shouting hate slogans, but that we can somehow get along with each other. But then it started up again, there were preparatory meetings, they mobilised themselves again, there were massive demonstrations. (Anton)

The protagonists also mentioned activities such as the active participation and cooperation in programme planning and content planning of the programme and concert groups, in the design of Antifa-Cafes and info centres and the cooperation in theory and reading circles and archives, as well as in the design of workshops or participation in national congresses. In addition, activists in Eastern Germany decided to take the initiative and rent a public building for use as a youth club and to run it as a registered society. Other protagonists started a neighbourhood project in a deprived suburb; the aim here is to raise the awareness of the entire population and provide information to them on the subject of housing policy as the cause of inequality. Ultimately, both initiatives are based on the idea of 'bringing a bit of substance into the left-wing extra-parliamentary scene' (Gustav), and not just to cover the youth phase [...] but also to include the problems of older people, where it's often to do with health problems, but also loneliness and care, but also paid work' (Criz).

Furthermore, one activist also mentioned her engagement with animal rights and explained that she took part in the liberation of animals from mass slaughterhouses. Finally, she described 'skipping', the use of food that has been thrown away but is still edible, as a form of first-person politics: 'I often go skipping and I think that, too, is a political thing. Absolutely. And it should be raised politically, too' (Steffi). Another activist in the sample commented as an individual in his own name on the postings of supporters of racist parties and groups on their personal Facebook pages.

(3): national *actions, networks, and communications*: as already mentioned in the introduction, one event that took place during the investigative part of this study, which involved national protests and the corresponding communication and organisation structures, was the G20 summit of the leading industrial nations in July 2017 in Hamburg. Reference was made to this in many of the interviews, with the participants focusing in particular on police brutality, or the arbitrary actions of the police, or the massive police presence and the criminalisation and stigmatisation of the protestors by the justice system and the media: 'The whole thing was a state anti-terrorist exercise, of that I'm sure' (Ulrike). At the same time, militancy and the sense and purpose of causing damage to (private) property were the topics of discussion.

Both the meeting of the politicians and the massive protests together with the damage to property and the in some cases brutal treatment of protestors by the police, as well as their militancy produced a wide range of different realities in the media – in particular in hindsight¹¹ - and left residents lost and perplexed regarding the sense of and the location of the events (Fieldwork diary, No. 10, 20.07.2017). The interviews evaluated the protests very differently from each other: many of their views revolved explicitly around the response of the media:

¹¹ E.g. 'ZDF Zoom: Autonom, Radikal, Militant', was broadcast on 21.08.2017, a few weeks after the event, and promoted stigmatisation on the subject of militancy and propensity to violence in the left-wing scene (cf. under: <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/zdfzoom/zdfzoom-autonom-radikal-militant-100.html>)

A later film portraying the demonstration from the perspective of the protestors 'Ein Festival der Demokratie' (A festival of Democracy), and financed by crowd-funding, deals mainly with police brutality during the demonstration and suggests that the confrontational methods of the police led to an escalation of events.

At some point I spoke to a friend. [...] ‘er, what actually came out of the G20 summit?’ He replied: ‘No-one heard anything about it in the news at all. You just saw a few pictures. But what they actually discussed, well you really have to look quite hard, [...] and there are one or two pictures that’ll probably ensure that such a thing never takes place in Hamburg again’. (Lothar)

It’s just a case of who, who wins the battle of the pictures and of the street. Er, it’s pure muscle flexing [...] the G20 riot was also muscle flexing on both sides (Gustav)

Other national activities include international collaborations and congresses that exist in the scenes and are sought after. Interviewees told of visits to activists in Kurdistan, in Turkey, in Palestine and in France. One house occupier spoke of visitors from all over the world in her (cultural) project.

Moreover, of particular significance is the information exchange via social media within the scene about political developments and news, which are usually local or regional, but which are acknowledged nationally. These include the continuous updating of their own websites and blogs and linking these with issue-relevant tweets (blogs, websites and Facebook postings etc.) from associated scenes and structures. Facebook and in particular Twitter are important real-time forums for providing information about current developments or demonstrations. The protagonists also explained how they created and edited online radio programmes that broadcast relevant information.

3.6 Theory and Practice

The extent to which the described activities are founded on and justified by socially critical theories and utopias was interpreted and communicated by activists individually or from within local scenes and circles. The sequence of personal political actions, which are mostly carried out in the local context, are in many cases viewed and substantiated against the background of developments in society as well as in foreign policy. Many believed that improvements needed to be made with regard to the theoretical basis of their activities: ‘I’d somehow like to have the whole thing about our self-image put into concrete terms a bit again really. But we will do the whole thing again as part of a bit of theoretical work, because that’s important to us’ (Emil). The organisation of groups and circles that offer theoretical work and corresponding events is regarded as in need of improvement, and the demand for theoretical work within the scene, according to one estimate, had dropped off:

But I think it’s dying out already. Anyway, we had almost exclusively young people in the autonomist centre between, say, 18 and 30. But I think it’s starting to die out. Because in the beginning everyone is there, and then somehow, half way through hardly anyone comes anymore, because for many it’s too complicated and no-one can be bothered anymore. And everyone has something better to do, and so on (Josef).

There is a relatively low demand for theoretical work particularly in university towns, where on the one hand there is more emphasis on theory in some scenes and groups, but on the other, there is less thirst for theoretical knowledge due to course content: ‘If I already have to read Marx at uni, then I have no desire to do Marx here in the circle. Or if I already have a seminar on masculinity at uni, then the last thing I want to do in my spare time is think about masculinity

theory' (Criz). All of the interviewees found the circles in which theory work is practised to be strongly male dominated and entail a new kind of machismo within the scenes: 'These days macho blokes are really frowned upon. They still exist, but in a different form. They're not so much the muscle-bound types any more who come out with the cool quips. They're more likely to be the sort that has read a particularly large amount of Adorno' (Rosa). In a number of statements, the communication style at these reading circles was regarded as problematic for new members and described as male-dominated: 'It tends to be men who have the opportunity to grapple with theory, or the confidence to communicate it, perhaps because they're, I dunno, not so knocked back by things that happen to them' (Criz). On the other hand, getting to grips with political and social theories is described as a task for the individual that can be performed alone and not necessarily in a group context: 'That's something I always do for myself and on my own' (Ulrike). At the same time, tackling theories is accompanied by individual self-authorization and personal self-empowerment (see below): 'I think that every Adorno text that I have read with someone else has taught me a lot. Made me smarter, the poetry, the language, absolutely, I would never deny that' (Jonna).

The majority of the issues and theories discussed relate to society as a whole. It is anti-fascism in particular which, for various reasons, forms a central point of reference and constitutes an 'overlap' (Benjamin) of engagement in the scenes. This may be understood as a reaction to the global emergence of right-wing populist trends: 'Well, at this very moment in time, in view of the swing to the worldwide right, this simple connection of anti-fascist and autonomist groups through the social media is necessary of course, because this reaction just has to take place everywhere' (Josef). For many, getting to know local antifa organisations is their gateway to the formations: 'Antifa became important relatively quickly' (Gustav) or: 'in the beginning I naively went on a few antifa demos' (Benjamin). The types of actions are attractive in particular to younger, and not just male, sympathisers: 'when I was on my first demo, and ran for the first time, I thought, "wow, great, I want to do this for the rest of my life". And then the big boys, who wear masks and don't give a shit, just pile into the cops' (Cora). Some also felt that left-wing extra-parliamentary politics are often, and too quickly, reduced to anti-fascist actions: 'left-wing means anti-fascist. Well, that's also a good start, I think, but for some reason it often doesn't go any further, so that the only thing that really [qualifies as] left-wing or where you feel you sort of have a common identity, is the hatred of Nazis or the German mob' (Benjamin).

Marxism and Feminism are also important theoretical reference points. Ultimately, it is just as important to pay attention to the development of different political trends and objectives into genuine extra-parliamentary left-wing politics that unite them. The issues of these politics were presented as interdependent. Their common perspective focuses on the capitalistic economic and social system:

I really do find it extremely important [...] with the connections. I think that at some point it plants itself firmly in your head. In the beginning you do a bit with human rights, and a time comes when a lot of people assume that capitalism is the be all and end all and that it no longer makes any sense at all to tackle separate problems, because capitalism has to be fought and in the end everything else drops out of the picture. I am critical, but somehow there is something to it. When I think about the exploitation of animals, for example, that's connected with capitalism, as well. Everything's got to be bigger, got to have more; it's all part of the same thing (Steffi).

As outlined above, the primary standpoints of the criticism of this system are antifascist, Marxist and feminist in particular, all of which have their own separate movements and supporters, so the challenge is to combine them.

One of our biggest challenges is of course to unite these various struggles. It's a mistake just to swim around in your own little pool. And when you look around now and see all the things that need to be done. That's the LGBT movement, that's the refugee movement. Of course the anti-fascists etcetera here in Germany, too. We've got to try to unite these struggles, so that we can generate as broad a base as possible, as well. That's not always easy, of course. Two different groups have two different approaches and opinions and so on, which is why there are so many different groups (Josef).

The political activities, which are based on theoretical knowledge, initially have the abstract aim of improving the life circumstances of many people in general. In this way, the protagonists become implicitly involved in the improvement of the situations locally and therefore of their own situation: 'I don't just fight for others, but for myself, too' (Criz). Explicit reference was made to the balance between theory and practice.

For a while I just did theory, and then I noticed of course that I was just going round in circles. And, you know, Marx and Feuerbach's theses, philosophers and so on, the thing is, we have to change things and at some point I noticed, you can read all you like, but if you don't have a connection with things, in truth you can still learn a lot from it. [...] Just practice alone, that doesn't get you anywhere, but when you you're very well versed in theory, but don't do anything, that doesn't get you anywhere either. (Peter)

But it's equally wrong in my opinion, when people turn up to every demonstration and just start shouting their heads off, there's not a lot of theory involved in that. I therefore believe that both are very important. (Steffi)

It is not easy to apply the theoretical work to the subject matter, however, and some respondents commented on the problem of production and communication of knowledge in social theories: 'And then you sit in one of those sessions and try to do all the things you learned at university, apply it to the subject matter for once, and it just doesn't work, so you ask yourself, 'What's the reason for this?' Perhaps they teach you the wrong thing at uni' (Criz). The synthesis between both poles seems easier when 'practical experiences' are sought and made abroad in an 'independence movement'¹²:

And I actually met people over there, who either used to be, or still are, active in the PKK. A lot of people. And I was very happy to. I don't mean I wanted to go into the mountains and take active part in the fight, but just experience it, see it. And maybe also to look at how solidarity works, is possible, from outside of Germany (Rosa).

Finally, there was criticism within their own ranks of the relatively unchallenged reception of anti-globalisation theories - also supported by US president Donald Trump:

¹² Four of the twenty-two interviewees had been to Kurdistan, Palestine and Africa for these reasons.

And it's often the case, especially with left-wing people too, where you think they're actually okay, that they fall into conspiracist milieus because even they can't put events into context and don't understand anymore. For example, people who very quickly cross over into right-wing conspiracy theories. Take the anti-capitalistic criticism of large concerns for example. Take the Rothschild family as an example, who are held responsible by right-wing propagandists for everything that goes wrong. Those who sit with their finger on the money printing machine and so on and so forth. (Josef)

3.7 Against Capitalism and Globalisation

There is a pervasive awareness within the groups and scenes of social inequality, discrimination and unequal treatment on the basis of skin colour and gender. The inevitable result of this is the guiding principle of solidarity with the disadvantaged and the repressed. These disadvantages are understood in exactly the same way as the state forms of repression, which are often quoted in the same connection, as causal phenomena that are inherent in the capitalist system or in the individualistic and 'solidarity-eroding' 'dog-eat-dog' society' (Tatjana).

So, first of all everything's really great in my life, I've got medical insurance, my mum might be a single mother, but she earns enough money so that I have enough to eat. I'd say that this place is pretty good for young people, if they don't think too much. And that's the problem, I'm 16 and I know I don't want to stay here. It's unfair that things are so good for me, because I live off the back of millions of other people. (Cora)

As already mentioned, the basic idea of solidarity with repressed and disadvantaged people or the battle against the causal structures is essentially connected with self-reflection on the individual's privileged circumstances. These include, for example, a person's level of education, their own economic situation, place of residence, skin colour and other variables. Many of the protagonists therefore felt duty bound to become politically involved or to speak out against causes of the inequalities: 'For me, as the great grandson of Nazis, who has had a privileged upbringing here, [I felt a sense of] responsibility to open my mouth' (Bernd). Primarily in anti-fascist oriented formations, the duty to become politically active is a response to Germany's Nazi past: 'it is not embarrassing to be antifascist, on the contrary, it's actually embarrassing in a country like Germany, with its history and the current shift to the right, if you don't hold anti-fascist views and are not correspondingly (politically) active' (Ferdi). This moral responsibility is accompanied by a mission: 'those who at least are generally speaking on our side, we have to reach out to them, we have to win them over, enlighten them' (Rosa).

The level of personal involvement in the respective political and scene-specific activities is a yardstick for others and for self-positioning within the scene. At the same time, it flags up less politically-active (young) people: 'They [the non active] wouldn't risk suing someone for criminal damage or trespassing, just somehow to keep up the squatted area for the trailers. They'd find that a bit too much' (Anton). In- and Out-Group(s) are often separated by political attitudes and opinions: 'At some point I started to think less of people on my list of friends who didn't share my opinions' (Cora). These separations are often intended and result in the mission to become actively involved in politics and society, and to voice their opinions about them. The responsibility for airing their thoughts is also justified as being necessary for social development: 'What really

gives me complete satisfaction is the fact that I know, when in 200 years someone takes a retrospective look at our era, we'll be the ones being talked about' (Ulrike). For some of the protagonists, the strong connection of the political activities of individual groups with the personal analysis of socio-political issues results to a certain extent in self-empowerment and self-aggrandizement: 'You feel a bit morally superior; you shouldn't though, because no-one has a right to universal morality' (Steffi). At the same time, the individual view of the political activities – the 'politics of the first person/the personal is political' – is meaningful for many protagonists:

Some day when I'm old and someone asks me: 'Well, what did you do there?', I don't just want to say I read the papers and got a bit wound up. I want to be able to say: 'Yeah, I just went onto the street.' And at least be able to say: 'I gave everything I could', (about) what I saw at that time, did what anybody could, to try and somehow change it' or at least to say that I don't agree with it, even if it was most likely not to change anything (Lothar).

It was also mentioned that they had a harder time than other people in their daily, active involvement with social problem areas (the out-groups): 'Because there are a lot of people who don't get involved with the issues at all, sort of close their eyes to them. I think that they have an easier time of it than someone who gets involved in such things' (Tatjana). The intense individual involvement and the continual examination of inequality issues was described as being part of their lives; 'it's our life' (Steffi); 'yes, our hobby, I'm not interested in anything else' (Ulrike). However, the impairment of personal well-being also plays a part: 'I recently found myself at half six in the morning being sucked in by a video about a hospital that had been bombed, because I'd been watching the news, and then I thought 'wait, get up first' (Ulrike). The objectives of political engagement – according to the interviewees – vary between system upheavals in the direction of a communist, anti-fascist or anarchist social system that functions without power-based exploitative pressures and does not repress people.

I'm an anti-capitalist and I believe that capitalism has to be defeated, only I think it's important what you said, with these power relationships. Just because we don't have capitalism anymore, it doesn't mean that everything's cool. Because communism was crap and the feudal system was crap. I believe that it just doesn't work when people rule over people, rule over them as they do. I dunno, perhaps we need a council democracy or anarchistic communism, something like that. You could talk about it for weeks on end, about the possible alternatives, but these power relationships per se. People rule over other people, more or less. That's the problem, whether it's capitalism, communism, the monarchy, whatever. (Ulrike)

At the same time many interviewees expressed reservations about whether these system upheavals could be achieved: 'my secret aim, which I will surely never experience, is that we no longer need state structures, because we can sort everything in the community' (Rosa). Achievable changes can be found, however, in small-scale, local and in personal contexts: 'This striving for a better society [...] if we just try it on a smaller scale' (Emil). Some believed they should also consider micro-social contexts outside of their own formations: 'Society [...] cannot be changed *against* people, but only *with* them and we have to begin on a small scale' (Criz).

3.8 Gender and Feminism

(Queer-) feminist perspectives and discourse about gender, gender categories and gender images, sexism, transphobia and also homophobia are – as already indicated at various points – core fundamental areas of autonomous or extra-parliamentary debates, which relate not only to developments in society as a whole, but also to ones in their own formations: ‘My impression is that feminism and the autonomous scene are inseparable. So much so that it would be unthinkable to imagine them apart - a scene that is finely sensitized to the issue’ (Heike). A great deal of importance is attached to these perspectives and issues within the scenes when, for example, evaluating sexist behaviour in their own groups, dominant vocabulary used by men in the groups, or male-dominant behaviour at demonstrations: ‘I wouldn’t say just now that the left is any more sexist than the rest, not at all, and still a lot of people get worked up about it’ (Jonna).

The belligerent behaviour of a lot of men at demonstrations also leads to rejection in their own formations: ‘it’s the classic antifa-macho type who [...] estranges a lot of women with antifa connections’ (Rosa). The way these male actors interact with others in the scenes is seen as hierarchical dominant behaviour and therefore evaluated negatively: ‘the blokes who talk to you when you’ve got some info or other, but otherwise they don’t wanna know you. It’s not a nice way to treat people’ (Rosa). The internal arguments also lead to bigger conflicts that can even lead to the dissolution of entire groups: ‘the biggest was the antifa-group which broke up recently because of internal struggles. Mostly it was a case of dealing with sexism’ (Benjamin). Questions about what is defined within their own formations as sexual violence and who is revealed as the violent aggressor in particular, lead to arguments about who has the power to define this. Negotiating this territory generates, in some cases, significant demonstrations of solidarity on both sides, but also

to massive fights which go all the way up to a house meeting of autonomous centres. And everyone has to decide whether this person can still continue to be part of things or not. And this is done without due process [...], because a lot of people don’t trust the state and so this kind of thing doesn’t go to court and we try to settle it internally (Heike).

Another current development in the formations was described as a ‘very, very, radical form of queer feminism’ (Rosa). This was not free of conflict either, since it reflected the fact that ‘there are simply very, very complex conflict situations’ (Rosa), which equally lead to inclusions and exclusions. ‘And then come the trans people again and they say ‘hey, we want our own lavs, as well’ (Jonna). Some of the protagonists remarked that there was a strong reference to the sensitivities of some individuals to be seen in the current trends of queer feminism that would lead to discussions and exclusions. The discussions and exclusions are centred on gender categories, positions of power within these and also precisely these individual sensitivities: ‘That’s a direction that I don’t like much. All of my sensitivities are always a little bit everyone’s business and all I ever experience is trauma and violence. And everything is sort of rolled out into the tiniest detail and talked about’ (Rosa). Ultimately, the gender categorisations determine both the (queer) feminist perspective of their own group and the affiliation to it:

And then it was about someone that was supposed to be excluded - by this plenary assembly. Because all over the place they don’t want to accept that feminism and transgender are also part of it. Because there’s the opposing movement again, you see, who call themselves radical feminists, who say ‘just because we do feminism, it

doesn't mean that we have to declare our solidarity with every Tom, Dick and Harry. What we do, want to do is politics for women. Because they still do exist - they're still around, those women. We're part of it, we're affected by it, and we have different problems to trans people. And we don't want everything we do to have to be opened up, for trans. What we want to do is pure feminism.' And that is a position that we find almost untenable, unless we want to be lynched. [...] in the meantime, both have to go hand in hand, so to speak. Because the political position is always to oppose exclusion and oppose marginalisation as well. And we don't want to create shelters that do just that. (Heike)

The exclusions, arguments and divisions of individual groups within the scene also came to light, for example, at a national congress of the FANTIFA (see above) in 2016 and flared up over the congress topic of 'masculinity', but also over the opening of the congress to 'all genders', over accusations of structural racism and the alleged pedagogical incompetence of some workshop organisers and the organising team.¹³ However, at the same time inclusive projects are being initiated and practical ideas generated elsewhere, that do indeed attempt to bring together the various gender categories:

We do FLIT, women (F for *Frauen*), Lesbians, Inter, Trans [...] Without cis-men¹⁴, really. Football [...] that was launched by two women, I think. Who came from the... , at least one of them came here from the women's team, from a club in the city. And couldn't be bothered anymore with the performance thing. And so she said: 'I just want to play football, with nice people.' And now it's a mixed team. That really is all we want, not to have blokes standing around on the pitch, or blokes that go to boxing. And the women do the administration work, or stuff like that. We don't just want to have our aspirations on paper alone. (Rosa)

An apparent contradiction between aspiration and reality in feminist perspectives appears in the dealings with and the partial and indirect exclusion of mothers with children in some scenes. Mothers with children are tolerated in the scene's structures ('there's even a child in our shared flat'- Jonna), but there seems to be little understanding for mothers and their everyday burdens and also little practical and moral support: 'there really is a lot of hostility towards children, you see it, too, that people drop out when either a job comes along or children. Because it simply can't be done'. (Rosa)

3.9 Criminalisation, Stigmatisation and the Legal System

As already outlined in the introduction, it may be said that there is a high risk of 'criminalisation' as soon as (young) people actively take part in actions and demonstrations in the so-called 'left-wing radical' spectrum. There is widespread fear within the scenes of being spied upon and/or criminalised by the police and intelligence services. These fears, justified on the grounds of

¹³ For information about the programme go to <https://fantifakongress.noblogs.org/programm/>; an interview with the organising team, go to <http://www.univie.ac.at/unique/uniquecms/?p=5392> and on criticism of the criticism at the congress go to <https://de.indymedia.org/node/9712>

¹⁴ Cis (= the here and now) stands for 'those who identify with the gender they are born with and also live by it' (Rousparast, 2017).

verifiable first-hand experience¹⁵, are accompanied by the extremely dangerous possibility of being observed and, at worst, intimidated and attacked by right-wing extremists:

Criminalisation, exactly [...] because that's also a threat to my existence. I mean, I've been doing the work for a good 12 years and I'll continue to do so. But this fear, you know, it's with you all the time. So, on the one hand it's the fear of personal persecution by Nazis, that's why I moved out of [Name of city], because they really did stand outside the front door, drive by and threaten us, set light to a friend's car, smash the windows, stuff like that. [...] and it's the anti-fascist structures that get criminalised in such a big way, and sometimes you just have to belong to an anti-fascist group for people to complain to the police about you. (Fred)

This is the reason for the relatively clear-cut refusal to communicate with outsiders, albeit the degree of isolation varies from scene to scene. Incidences of repression and attempts at criminalisation that had already been experienced, reported by comrades or featured in internal scene publications¹⁶ trigger a general and deeply anchored mistrust of methods employed by the police and the legal authorities: 'so if I kinda shove a policeman, I get three months in jail. If he shoves me, I hold out my hands, I get done for resisting arrest. Again I get three months in jail, minimum sentence' (Bernd). All of the interviewees had been subject to unjust, partly brutal treatment by the police and the legal authorities. The actions of the police appear to be arbitrary at demonstrations in particular:

On the other hand, there are also things where I just think, I just don't understand it, because it's always our side that gets criminalised and I've also been on Nazi demos, where we've had stones thrown at us and the police Anti-Conflict-Team has said: 'Just move away a bit from here, because they're throwing stones.' And then I said: 'Then you just go in there and sort out the people throwing the stones.' If we'd done it, we'd have been arrested straight away. (Tatjana)

This kind of injustice felt and experienced by the interviewees including judicial hypocrisy and unequal treatment¹⁷, police brutality, spying, surveillance, observation, criminalisation and attempted criminalisation, but also negotiations with local authorities, as well as entire policy areas and topics at the local, regional, national and international Level¹⁸ creates, as such, a large

¹⁵ See the documentary 'Im inneren Kreis' (In the inner Circle) directed by Morar and Obens (2017) and funded through donations ; cf. also footnote 2.

¹⁶ Within the formations people try to arm themselves against this kind of criminalisation, preventively, and through intervention and rehabilitation. The *Rote Hilfe* (Red Aid) is a national association which provides legal and financial supports to activists and political prisoners (cf. Fieldwork diary, No. 2, 18 March 2017; Fieldwork diary, No. 7, 15 June 2017).

Numerous demonstrations take place at regular intervals against repression. One demonstration, for example, was called: 'United we stand! Together against Repression and authoritarian Formation!' The aim here is to express solidarity against repression 'around "Political Prisoner Day". We will show through the demonstration that the state calculation of criminalisation, intimidation and separation will fail.' (<https://unitedwestand.blackblogs.org/>)

¹⁷ A lot of (inter)national attention is still received today by the NSU trial about the murders of migrants by an extreme right-wing terror group and the cooperation of this group with intelligence organisations of several federal states.

¹⁸ Amongst other aspects, the interviewees mentioned gentrification, housing policy and the lack of infrastructures for young people at the local level, as well as the lack of resources at schools at the regional level and refugee policy at the (inter)national level. The common view on political phenomena – as already outlined – is one of social inequalities and their causes. Causes are ubiquitous racism and fascism, which on the one hand perpetuate social and ethnic inequalities, and on the other, also has its breeding ground there.

gap between activists and the democratic social system or rather system of values. Once sensitized in this way, the protagonists very critically observe and evaluate the activities of the police and their investigations into activists: 'the police moved in really heavily and penned them in and frisked them, some as young as 13 or 14, and [made them] strip (sic) down to their underwear in the rain and in below-zero temperatures. So yeah, really hard repression' (Rosa). Police operations are always placed in the context of (local) politics: 'the state authorities do everything they can to remove young people from public areas [...]. If young people hanging around in town becomes a problem to which the only answer is heavy police intervention, we ask ourselves absolutely seriously: in which city do we want to live?' (Emil) In the interpretations of the respondents the police operations also reflect capitalistic exploitation interests, as they protect the properties of large concerns and companies and, particularly in the local context, are identified as 'this gentrification thing' (Rosa).¹⁹

The stigmatisation of activists by the media can be described as relatively explicit. The image projected by the media, particularly in reports about demonstrations, is one of stone-throwing, militant and masked anarchists, who stand in the Black Block, among like-minded anarchists, behind banners dressed in black, their heads and faces covered so as to hide their identity. As a consequence, 'it's often the case when you go to a demonstration as an anti-fascist that you are immediately judged to be part of the left-wing violent mob that's come to trash the place' (Tatjana). Moreover, many of the activists are troubled by the bias of media reports, especially when they report on the protests, but not the reason for them:

They talk about the future in African countries and not a single African country was present. And instead of feeling outraged about it and instead of the media [...] being outraged, they're outraged about someone setting light to a car. You do all you can for a better and fairer world, and then you see the word 'Riot-Barbie' in the BILD [tabloid newspaper]. (Steffi)

The cliché of the violent left-wing mobs is gladly employed and also leads to conflicts between the generations in families: 'My gran is quick to think that I run around in a mask and beat people up and stuff, or I dunno. Load of rubbish' (Ulrike). The lack of understanding about other people's perspectives and the mainstream reporting in the media about the activities and protests is deeply rooted and is criticised in the conviction that they are taking the right approach:

When you have to listen to what a lot of people understand left-wing and radical to mean! Well, I believe what we are really all about is completely normal human understanding. For me radicalness might begin with the ideology that I follow, but not when I stand up for people and stand up for everyone being treated equally, without separating them by skin colour, by appearance, or by sexuality. This strange understanding that so many have. (Josef)

¹⁹ We reject a city development policy that ignores people, has been privatizing the infrastructure and municipal buildings for years, has closed allotments and swimming baths and therefore taken them out of public usage. Instead, we want an increase in the number of free spaces (...) made possible. There must be places where alternative ideas, self-governance and political autonomy can be made possible' was how a group of vehicle-dwellers expressed their demand for free spaces and their conflict with local authority housing policy (cf. schlagloch.blogspot.eu; Field Diary No. 6, 02.05.2017).

Being left wing is anti-authoritarian. Being left wing simply means fighting for justice, for a free society, and that should be a matter of course. But it's somehow not the case and I don't know why. Beats me. (Ulrike)

The conflict-ridden relationship with the media is a continuum within the scenes, because a large proportion of the mainstream media promotes normative moral values, serve capitalistic exploitation interests resp. criticizes them per se in the rarest of cases as such and therefore also reproduces structures of inequality. These perceptions of the respondents are mirrored in their understanding of a similar role played by the legal system: the intelligence services, police, laws and their interpretation, courts and prisons are all under general suspicion of criminalising activists and repressing the extra-parliamentary left-wing, and playing down or ignoring their own shortcomings and mistakes. This misconduct is supported to a great extent by the media and the prosecution in particular of offences²⁰ committed by activists at demonstrations and other actions are perceived as excessive, unjust and pointless: 'even on reflection, I still think that most of the repression of left wingers is totally absurd and totally over the top, I can't get my head around how they arrive at some of their decisions' (Jonna). The perceived focus of the legal bodies on left-wing extra-parliamentary structures was also admonished: 'Intelligence services, hmm. Well, hmm. That's such a double-edged sword, too, so no way, you think, it's about time you did something about the AfD or at least some of its people' (Emil).

3.10 Isolation vs. Openness

The relatively strong solidarity of the individual scenes and formations has already been dealt with in detail in the Introduction. Cooperation and communication with external institutions or with municipal organisations has in some cases been categorically refused, but in others there has been contact with local associations or discussions held with representatives of the respective local authorities. There are many different reasons for this isolation which range from the fear of criminalisation and state repression in the form of spying and surveillance by government authorities, through to observation and physical intimidation by 'enemies' from the right-wing extremist camp²¹. The way in which these serious fears should be dealt with is coordinated in discussions and is not always undisputed by the protagonists:

But I believe a lot of it is also a kind of power fantasy, that you feel more important than you really are (laughs). I think you have to remain realistic and such things often shut new people out, such as when you only ever meet up in a plenum where everybody knows everything about everybody else, how are you supposed to bring in new people? And then everyone complains about young people being so crappy, they're no longer interested in us. Yeah, and then I also think you really have to be realistic and be open and have open meetings, in cafes, as well, you just have to live with the fact that the police have spies, but that's better than scaring off young people. You just can't afford to do that, either. (Jonna)

²⁰ Militant clashes with neo-Nazis at their demonstrations and marches and at similar actions are justified in the scenes as necessary and as the (self) defence of the population and are also documented (cf. Jirát, 2018 and the documentary 'The Anti-fascists' (Öberg and Ramos, 2017), which looks at the situation in Sweden and Greece).

²¹ One activist reported that a few years ago there had been a 'quite active, crazy Nazi group' roaming around his city, that 'did some sharp-shooting' on an occupied house, which is also the cultural and events centre of the local Antifa group (Gustav).

On the one hand it is very difficult or even impossible for outsiders to gain access to the scenes or groups, on the other the groups and scenes have a great sense of mission and are correspondingly able to communicate a lot of information and distribute products about their respective political concerns and planned activities. This contradiction between aspirations and reality is a subject of deliberation in the scenes and raises criticism of their own 'public-relations' methods:

That is also my biggest criticism of the extra-parliamentary movement, that they cut themselves off from those that they are actually trying to convince, and in such an identity-centred way, I mean that also rejects them, because 'they're the bad ones now' or 'they're the ones that haven't checked it out or don't do things right'. And even if that were the case, the rejection approach wouldn't be the right one. (Criz)

This internal criticism was formulated similarly in three different cities by three different group members and follows 'post-autonomous' (Gustav) ideas of reaching the broadest possible segments of the population with one's own policies and educating them about structures of social inequality in present-day society.

We try over and over again to make more contact with normal people in inverted commas, which is something that to my mind the extra-parliamentary left has failed to do in the last few decades. It's up to us to pull ourselves out of it and say goodbye to ideas like 'we are the autonomous left and everyone's got to do what we do' (Criz).

In the broadest sense, the described methods to achieve openness are those of neighbourhood work, which supports the effort to raise residents' awareness of their own political concerns by means of speeches and proposals that are of interest to them. By setting up permanent services - such as social advice and assistance services, exchange platforms or courses and sports activities - support and assistance as well as information and leisure time services would be made available to interested residents of the respective neighbourhoods.

A further internal point of criticism of the external representation and communication of their own concerns, which was described as being 'difficult', is their social, and for the most part, academic origin. This can lead to messages also being expressed in the academic language employed by the majority of the protagonists, who, it was also felt, only organised people like themselves. The character of the outwardly communicated anti-racism and anti-sexism, moreover, also failed to connect with those outside their 'bubble':

I don't think we'll come out of the bubble like this, always organising the same grammar school kids and students, because there's no connection at all to the level of consciousness of the class; it's so crap, the majority of Germans are simply racist and have images of women in their heads that are just not cool. (Benjamin)

The issue of what possibilities and strategies could be developed within their own structures, e.g. contacting young people living in precarious situations or with an immigration background, was broached openly. There was also a lack of ideas about 'actually how to deal with the problems that these young people are faced with objectively here' (Benjamin). Additional difficulties were evident in devising suitable ways of accessing persons in precarious situations and overcoming 'the fear of crossing the threshold'. As in conventional areas of politics, there is a gap between the

politically thinking strategists and a large proportion of the population, which – as stated above – also has education, milieu and habitus-related causes:

But the other major problem, I think so too, is that it's exactly this comfort zone that actually shouldn't be violated. And that we sit down and say yes, it's really important for us to reach other people and it's really important that we organise other people. But when it comes down in concrete terms to which people that could be and what problems they could bring with them, then it's better to say, okay, no, it's probably better that we have fewer people, because it could become really hard work. And that leads to new problems that we couldn't have envisaged until now. And above all, it also means that with what we've achieved, I dunno, with standards, like we don't tell sexist jokes, maybe we need to broaden our horizons a bit so that we can integrate new people. (Benjamin)

Others, however, said explicitly that people who did not share the same world view would be excluded from events and discussions and ultimately also from participation in the group's or scene's formations. This applies in particular to issues, topics, questions and attitudes with regard to religion in general, Islam and anti-Semitism, which apparently are not afforded open discourse at their own events and in their own ranks:

We've then, of course, excluded them [headscarf wearing Muslima] when we've had critical discussions about Islam, we don't want anything to do with Muslims then, I mean not with devout Muslims. So when we talk critically about other religions, people are simply excluded who are believers, their background of course is irrelevant. But when someone still says, I believe in god, then there's really no hope for them in our group (laughs). So it's often very thematic of course or we talk about anti-Semitism, then a lot of groups are excluded. (Jonna)

This diversity in the attitudes to questions of openness and reaching out to people outside of their own structures ultimately also reflects, however, the heterogeneity of individual autonomous groups that act on their own behalf (as outlined in the Introduction). Across many local borders there does appear to be a significant need for improvement with regard to external contacts and reaching out to outsiders. Many events and actions only reach like-minded people and remain, so to say, in their own ranks; it's a case of 'preaching to the converted':

Recently, a couple of us held a (talk on the) Basics of Criticism of Religion [...] It was great to be invited. But it all just stays among the lefties. I don't know what it'll be like when in thirty years' time people look back, if it'll be a bit more pluralistic. Regarding ethnicity, origin, social class, or whether it will be just the same (Jonna)

At the same time, hierarchical structures – which in accordance with the scene's self-image should not really exist - were clearly identified by the interviewees – and the experience-based knowledge of older activists seems in some cases to complicate equal communication with outsiders.

A lot of people are very confident and very sure of their ability to take action and that makes it difficult to arrive at and gain entry and also to be accepted there [...]. It really is like that, not just for outsiders, but among us, too, to some extent. (Frauke)

Moreover, some of the interviewees hypothesised – independently of each other – that individual or psycho-social aspects, such as fears, feelings of insecurity and powerlessness, could play a role in the isolation of outsiders from local structures:

At a psycho-social level it has a lot to do with insecurity, I think. I don't believe that people who are on the move and active are absolutely stable, I think they're just as insecure as everybody else, I'd say. Perhaps they're even a little more insecure and that could be why they've chosen to seek refuge here, [...] I'm glad that such a place exists where they can maybe somehow feel a bit more secure, but that's exactly why the isolation is so big, because it's some way to being a refuge from the load of crap that's happening elsewhere. (Criz)

3.11 Empowerment and Involvement

The individual benefits that the interviewees generate from their social commitment and political pursuits are clearly evident. All of those we questioned spoke implicitly or explicitly about their individual learning process that resulted from their activities and interactions both within their own structures and with people and institutions outside of them, and about how their experiences have empowered them personally: 'And everything I learned in the time I was there, you couldn't learn it in ten years at university' (Frauke). This 'personal further development' (Rosa) comes, for example, from managing pragmatic and organisational tasks, from reflecting on occurrences and interactions within their own scenes and from analysing historical and everyday political events in local and (inter)national contexts, but also to correlate these with (system) critical theories:

I believe that I've learned more in the left-wing than I did in my two periods of study, stays abroad and everything put together, so I believe that what I can do today, what I can do at work what kind of person I am to my friends, I learned it all in the left. (Jonna).

The interviewees referred mainly to the experiences they had had which had afforded them a lot of 'self-reflection and self-criticism' (Jonna), making some feel 'more aware of what I want for myself and what goals I want to achieve', but additionally, that they 'could learn about the political work too, how society functions' (Criz). This individuation is regarded as something that is only possible from a privileged situation: 'that also backs up my theory that politics is also simply a luxury [...] I thought, okay, I'm well off enough, now I can get involved in saving the world [laughs]' (Jonna). Another, male, activist expressed it in a different way:

I could also take the time – and that had a lot to do with the privilege of studying, as well – to think about what I actually want and what I enjoy, what interests come from inside me, and exactly, that's something that political work helped me with, to understand a lot of things, but also about myself, I don't just mean the self-reflection thing alone, but also to understand myself. (Josef)

The deep involvement of the activists in their areas of activity and formations entails a strong identification with the political subject matter, which is then pursued further in private contexts that are so to speak outside of the scene. In the history of ideas, the concept of 'the personal is political' (see above; Haunss, 2004) is based on the feminist movement of the 1970s and describes in radical left-wing contexts a strong relationship between the prevailing political issues and topics

and the individual. Analysis and change are seen as being equally important for both the individual and society: 'For me, it's also politics to say, I'll take a look at myself - myself, and not just them over there, or them out there. But to look at what's happening with me. For the private is political' (Bernd). Correspondingly, a few men spoke of how they actively analysed gender roles privately or in groups:

[...] to look at the social position actually determines how I think and feel. So for the most part it was an analysis of my own masculinity. And so we (formed) a group – which still exists – where we just got together once a month and took a bit of a look: what problems have we got at the moment with our masculinity? What holds us back? How do we hold others back? (Criz)

The results of this kind of self-reflection are then taken back into the scenes so that the issues can then be addressed collectively:

So, it's a lot to do with changing yourself, too, the broken authority in ourselves. I don't think it can be disclosed and defeated in this society, but at least to the level where we don't get in each other's way with it, sort of within our own movement I mean. That's it, [...] to take a look at the sexism in your own movement. (Criz)

Individual empowerment is not only based on self-reflection, but also on the exchange of ideas with kindred scenes, including those abroad: 'of course we know about various projects in various countries and have possibly also been there' (Frauke). Ideas are exchanged on different topics in organised workshops, meetings and congresses, other forms of interaction include online and face-to-face in local contexts. The latter also promote the individual sense of well-being of the protagonists and are simply fun: 'I really enjoy it. Firstly, to work together with people who want the same thing. To realise that whenever we do something, we can learn from each other' (Josef). They learn from each other in the group, but also from interaction with others:

I also came into contact with refugees, we hung around a bit and also had a drink [laughs], [...] one group I'm in contact with, realises that someone is looking out for them, that they can also join us in a game of football, you know, that someone can show they care now and again, and chill with them, it's fun. (Jürgen)

In general, the older ones are duty bound to keep an eye on the younger ones, assume responsibility and take on the role of mentor. It is highly probable that the 'young generation' will grow with the challenges:

Especially at the beginning, when they are still new and also a bit hesitant, but the longer they're there, yeah, exactly, the more responsibility they take on. Yeah, the more confident they are, and it's great to be able to really teach them something, [...] and I somehow always feel like I'm a bit of a minder. On the one hand that's a bit to do with my age, and also because of [...] my self-image. (Emil)

The motivation for being engaged in the groups and scenes and being politically active is also linked to thoughts of personal learning and empowerment. The activities and abilities demanded by everyday working life are felt to be unfulfilling: 'my present job is not intellectually satisfying, so I always find it cool if you can let off steam with an issue. Yeah, it really is cool when something

works at some point and you achieve something for somebody or other' (Ferdi). The examination of (system) critical issues is perceived to be important. There do not seem to be the same possibilities for examining (system) critical issues with the corresponding thematic focus at the same depth outside of their own scenes and groups:

It also really means a lot to me, to keep my mind active. I am curious about stuff and why things are the way they are. Why do young people go to IS? Why do they do that when they live in a society where they could have everything they want? Why are such religions on the rise? But that doesn't really take the world any further forward, of course, it's more a case of individual education, and of course enjoying a culture of discussion [...] (Jonna).

Individual involvement and engagement in the specifically developed political areas of action and projects is for some so strongly pronounced that they renounce a classical working biography:

And so we start, but we're also aware that it's a longer-term project and for the last few years our planning has revolved around the search for a real strategy for changing society, so, five to ten years [...] and it's clear to us all that this form of politics is not just for show, something we do every two or three days, but a large chunk of our lives [...]. Unfortunately, I have little experience of feeling effective and receive little recognition, so I can't say that I pursue this or that career and sort of do this or that for society and... Well, when I'm talking to people and I say I do political work, I find it difficult to put it across, or I feel the urge to sort of sell my contribution, what I do, although I actually find it stupid (to do that). (Criz)

All the activists who are so deeply involved in their projects unanimously expressed the feeling that they enjoyed these activities and that the activities gave them a sense of individual fulfilment and purpose.

4. Conclusions

The empirical insights outlined above have given us numerous points of reference for deeper analysis. Primarily these are the individual access paths, socialisation patterns and also the motivation for young people to join formations of left-wing autonomous groups and become active in political and social issues, articulate alternative plans and ideas in order to further developments and changes in society, i.e. social transformation. These micro-social perspectives on the scenes and formations of the autonomists or the extra-parliamentary left fill a gap in research (Haunss 2013, 40; Gross 2015, 367); the initial findings, which are to be explored more deeply, are presented in this report. In this context, individual empowerment comes from active participation in the various activities in the groups, which for some activists can indeed be a foot in the door to (alternative) gainful employment. The individual connection to, and benefits of, their own political engagement was emphasised clearly – in hindsight, too:

And no-one can take that away from me, regardless of what I do in the future, I'll always be able to draw on these experiences and this strength. Everyone should do it; somehow kick out this powerlessness and then feel what strength you get from that. That was cool [laughs]. (Frauke)

The research material also indicates which micro- and macro-social phenomena are experienced as conflicts and therefore also entail reactions in the groups. These include the empowerment of right-wing populist movements and crimes committed by right-wing radicals as a result of the influx of refugees²². Finally, relatively detailed references are made to the formations and group-specific conflict situations in individual scenes. The actions and demonstrations that take place there, take place simultaneously in various cities and in a very similar form. These inside perspectives coming out of the groups also provide a clue as to why the extra-parliamentary left receives only passing attention in many places regarding their political intentions and their 'penetrative power'. The almost total lack of communication with outsiders, the meagre links to 'bourgeois' and civil-society organisations and actors can be traced for the most part back to external sources of danger; this was substantiated by the statements of the participants. Additionally, the formations in small groups and the doctrine of 'the personal (or private) is political' play a major part in the low level of public perception:

It does actually have a lot to do with the attempt to politicise the private that some have got a bit carried away with, and we've lost sight of some things. I believe that the attempt to politicise the private is necessary, important, and it should also be done, but I get the impression that in the meantime, every practice that there is there, stands for its own [...] Thus there's no longer such a mediating authority in your own thinking. (Criz)

The protagonists in this study outlined their individual acquisition of knowledge about political and macro-social relations, their knowledge of social theories and theories of social upheavals, and their learning of left-wing-autonomist political practises and methods. At the same time they can be read as evidence of the individualisation theorem of lifestyles together with their multitude of options and individual life decisions, and attitude patterns in adolescence towards daily life and politics as discussed in the social sciences by Hitzler and Niederbacher (2010) and critiqued by Helsper (2012). This 'scene-internal' individualisation and gathering of knowledge – of the mostly academically socialised and 'privileged' (Bernd) activists – is also the reason why the 'first person (the private)' - the individual – cannot and does not want to speak for all in their respective very heterogeneous group. For this reason also, the impact on public perception remains so minimal. At the same time, however, and paradoxically, these individualisation tendencies are read as a phenomenon of capitalistic society which is characterised by social inequality and are also criticised as such.

The focus in the social sciences and in the media on forms of militancy and the violent nature of left-wing groups which has prevailed hitherto (Glaser, 2013, 12) obscures the thematic diversity in the scenes. It was only possible to take a cursory look at the diversity of political issues and positions in this study, but it does, nonetheless, attempt to look at the extra-parliamentary left from a different angle. The hitherto and also current focus of the social sciences (see Introduction) on militant phenomena in radical left-wing contexts reduces the extra-parliamentary left to only a few attributes and reproduces a 'constructed truth' (Berger and Luckmann, 1969) that already exists in the media and in public perception. In the self-perception of the autonomist scenes, violence and militancy are far less important than they are in the perception of the public (cf. also Haunss 2013, 36). The views outlined in this document paint the picture of decidedly reflective

²² The former must therefore be the reason why the offences which appear in police statistics under the rubric of 'left-wing extremist' crimes and acts of violence have risen since 2009 (cf. Glaser 2013).

individuals, scenes and groups, who intensively, discursively and actionistically, grapple with their own (internal) and external (in society) structures. At the same time, these groups see themselves subjected in varying degrees to strong stigmatisation, clear risks of criminalisation and also to attacks from the extreme right-wing camp. Violence²³ and militancy against individuals was rejected by the majority of the interviewees. Structural violence within their own scenes, which manifests itself in unofficial hierarchies and dominant behaviour, is also being refused. In the 'militant left' segment issues are examined discursively using their own methods and justify their own readiness to use violence by arguing that they are only as violent as the rest of society:

Especially in the militant left, of course, the debate is always about violence. And intentionally so, in order to decide when to use it, and when not to use it. But it's a more critical debate [...] And that's the big difference [...]. Take football, for instance, there it's hoards of men who get drunk every weekend and let off steam and are clearly inherently violent. Hoards of drunken men, and unfortunately, it's the same every week in night clubs. (Gustav)

Finally, the findings outlined here also highlight the 'the self-evaluation' of the protagonists' own activities. None of the protagonists believes in a social upheaval, a revolution, or 'some sort of alternative system, [...] there are still groups who are pro communist, yeah, I still like the idea, but no-one believes in it anymore, not really, our issue is capitalism and it will stay that way until society falls apart' (Jonna). If anything, the interviewees were reluctant to speak about their participation intentions, as in the contexts of the street-based social work and the autonomous project work outlined above, where the protagonists are more concerned with reaching a wider segment of the population: 'in the meantime, I don't really want expand the scene any further [...], I really just want to do politics, yep, do politics [...], the problems this world is faced with, just sort of be involved in the discussions, tackle them, and, of course, simply to make the world a better place' (Gustav).

5. Future Analysis

Future analysis with a cross-case perspective across the different groups in the Culture and Politics cluster within the PROMISE project can be viewed as an attempt to investigate common frames and patterns (contexts) of individual motivation or rather socialisation to join and engage in different youth groups with their different – and common - political intentions and societal targets. This micro-sociological perspective could help provide indications about which variables are supporting individual political engagement. In the case presented here, information about the influences and stimuli of the autonomists can be grouped together and were communicated explicitly or implicitly through:

- Peers;
- families - including parents and grandparents;–

²³ Violence – not only in the left-wing scenes described above – also serves individual self-discovery and self-empowerment, as a test of one's own limits or to satisfy the desire for adventure. Pertinent youth studies point out that politically motivated violence is only exercised by a very small minority of young people. In the majority of cases violence is not the consequence of intentional action, but the result of interaction between demonstrators and the police (cf. Kühnel, 2015).

- school curricula;
- media reports about social developments (in a positive stimulating manner)
- media portrayal of youth groups (in a negative, stigmatising manner)
- youth cultural styles, codes and messages.

This perspective must be accomplished by a macro-sociological approach that takes into account societal and political developments and structures which affect young people either directly (e.g. at the local level) and/or indirectly (e.g. at the national or transnational level). By making a cross-cultural analysis from a macro-social perspective it is possible to identify and cluster (patterns for) contexts of conflicts experienced and to filter collective reactions to these in the form of activities and engagement. One of the key moments that made young people become aware of the case of the autonomists and get into conflict (again) was the empowerment of right-wing populist movements and crimes committed by right-wing radicals as a result of the influx of refugees. The same holds true for the widespread and organised racial hatred towards foreigners, and especially refugees, that seems to have been rising ever since then.

Looking from this cross-case perspective at the effectiveness of personal and group-specific engagement (or rather political action) and their potential and perceptions of social change, it is possible to investigate where the young people from the different cases (try to) form an alternative to the existing social order. This research perspective should focus on the methods of the different cases, their means of communication and ways of addressing others, including their expressed willingness to participate, questions of the inclusion and exclusion of others, the formulation of alternatives and the level (local, regional, national, global) they are targeting.

A hypothesis that might be explored - and which combines the micro- and the macro-sociological perspective whilst being induced from the empirical material gathered - might be formulated as follows: young people with a stimulating and positive educational background experience key moments of conflicts and social change intensively and both feel a need and the urge to fight the cause for minorities as a result of their own privileged situation (i.e. their social and educational background).

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7. Appendix: table of respondents' socio-demographic data

Respondent pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education	Employment	Residential Status	Family Status	Ethnicity	Country of birth	Religion
Anton	25	M	High school	Self employed plus works as a sound engineer	Living independently alone	In relationship	German	Germany	-
Bernd	22	M	Currently at university f/t	Part-time	Living independently	Not married	German	Germany	-
Lothar	26	M	Completed university bachelor	Full-time	Living with fiancée	In relationship	German	Germany	-
Tatjana	28	F	Completed university bachelor	Full-time	Living with fiancée	In relationship	German	Germany	-
Jürgen	19	M	High school	Pupil, still attending school	Lives with his parents	Single	White	Germany	-
Susi	18	F	High school	Pupil, still attending school	Lives with her parents	Single	White	Germany	-
Ferdi	29	M	High school	works as a teacher	Lives independently with three kids	Single (divorced)	White	Germany	-
Jonna	34	F	Completed university bachelor	Part-time	Living in shared flat	In relationship	German	Germany	-
Frauke	25	F	High school	none, was a student but stopped studying	Lives with her parents	Single	White	Germany	-
Emil	22	M	Studying political sciences	None	Living in his own flat	In relationship	German	Germany	-
Luzie	15	F	Attending school	Pupil, attending school	Living with her mother	Single	German	Germany	-



Criz	29	M	Stopped studying	None	Living with two others flatmates	Single	German	Germany	-
Rosa	33	F	University degree social sciences and Islamic sciences	None	Living with her daughter (8) and a female flatmate	single	German	Germany	-
Steffi	18	F	School exams after 10th grade	Takes care of an old person with dementia twice a week	Living with in a shared flat with two flatmates	relationship	German	Germany	-
Ulrike	23	F	University studying political sciences	None, student	Living with in a shared flat	relationship	German	Germany	-
Josef	23	M	University studying political sciences	None, student	Living with in a shared flat	Relationship	German	Germany	-
Heike	40	F	University degree social sciences	academic	Living with her daughter (4)	single	German	Germany	-
Ulli	18	F	High school exams	Works part time as a cashier	Living with in a shared flat	single	German	Germany	-
Heiko	29	M	Vocational training	Works as a courier	Living with in a shared flat	single	German	Germany	-
Peter	29	M	University degree	Works as a pedagogic assistant	Lives in a rented flat	single	German	Germany	-
Gustav	29	M	University Bachelor degree	Self-employed running a mail order	Living in a shared flat	Has a girlfriend	German	Germany	-
Benjamin	27	M	Studying	student	Living in a shared flat	Has a girlfriend	German	Germany	-