

# An interview with Karl-Heinz Dellwo: 68 – Aborted Liberation

## Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

**Dear Karl-Heinz Dellwo, thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us - which will be part of our issue on the fiftieth anniversary of May 68 and its consequences. To begin: Could you tell us a bit about the overall context of May 68 in Germany? In what way was this perceived as a political event, especially against the background of Germany's past or in which way did the German past overshadow what happened in the late 60s?**

Seen from today or from back then? Independent from one's age: if one is inside a historical break, one only perceives the immediate, precisely the break, precisely that something fundamental is happening. One is not yet in the analytical dimension. What was the particularity of 1968? Well, obviously that something happened in a large part of the young generation, the post-Nazi-generation, which abruptly made it clear to her where one belongs and where one does not. One belonged to those who wanted to change everything and not to those who, even if perhaps reformed, wanted to continue the world of the past. Suddenly, the idea of another world was concrete, it was there and it was liberating, a new breathing, a slashing of the mist of habits. And it brought with it the necessary virtues for the departure: boldness, courage, overconfidence, complete loss of anguish of authorities and traditions, self-assurance and confidence in a world that was not ours.

**Maybe to follow up: could you elaborate or tell us something about the differences and peculiarities of the German May 68 events and then later on in the "German Autumn" in comparison to the events in France and Italy? One difference is clearly that in Germany the post-68 period was also characterised by an armed struggle. It would be interesting to add that for instance, in the UK, there was no such a thing as "May 68 events" - strikes and other forms of political protests happened much later.**

One can neither separate the *German 68* nor the *German autumn* from the particularity of German history, precisely that of Nazi-fascism, of the biggest world war of all times, of the enslavement wish of other people, the annihilation of Jews and the extinction of all people that were declared unworthy to live, and of ethnic minorities like the Roma or Sinti. The ethnic community was in Germany as real as in no other western country. A kind of German ISIS-society. Almost all were somehow involved in the crimes of the system. This is why hardly anyone wanted to touch the past and to reveal his or her own interest in it. From the old, Nazi shaped majority society, there was after 1945 only denial and repression, with the consequence that the first generations afterwards were charged with the

responsibility of processing, and also – here someone like Claus Koch (“1969. Three Generations – One History”) is right: each defrayal of the experiences of the older generation by the younger was excluded (from any such processing by the former). So, something that otherwise should be ordinary between the generations. The only option was the rupture and a new beginning. This makes a difference even to Italy, the other European country with a mass movement that arose from below: here the resistance against the system was not defeated as in Germany. Here there was in the Resistenza a partisan experience that participated the different fractions of society – and a big communist party. In Germany there were as resistance a few heroic individualists like Georg Elser, small groups like the White Rose, some communist underground and the German National coup attempt of the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, whose agents wanted to get rid of Hitler to negotiate with the western allies, hoping they could oppose the Soviet Union together. From this emerged the new Federal Republic of Germany a few years later, and here the old Nazis could again persecute communists and in 1956 prohibit the communist party. This generation was basically unteachable. Not by its own experience nor by external events. It continued, simply in changed clothes. Its intra-psychic, fascist, internal construction remained the same.

In Italy, the contradiction which seized the whole world in the 60s passed over into the armed struggle. Yet it remained bound to the working class for a long time. Also, the armed groups became what the RAF was from the beginning: proxies of the class, instead of being its expression. That is clear in the Moro-action. This is a very interesting phenomenon because it indicates certain objective inevitabilities. In France there was no such development. There, one could not deny the working class its historical role. This is what the youth and student agents like Cohn-Bendit felt out, and this is why they did not take certain steps. In the German Federal Republic, this was totally different. The working class was expropriated from all fundamental politics. It had morally discredited itself through its participation in National Socialism and even returned as loser from the war, a double humiliation. Sponsored by the social democratized unions and the Social Democratic Party, it had bid goodbye to its own political demands and had fled into the political void of the distribution struggle. It tried to compensate for its self-inflicted damage through reconstruction [*Wiederaufbau*]. Instead of emancipation thus the concept of superposition. But we recognized the real character underneath. It was not addressable for the 68-movement, and those who tried it could not go beyond a caricature of the working class. May 68 in France was probably the strongest west-European event in its time. Because the working class participated in this event with millions, with factory occupations and militant struggles, the radical minorities outside of the factories did not get the idea to take the leadership of the

revolutionary struggle from the outside. In May 68, the French working class renewed its political authority.

England has in turn its own tradition. They did not have a Musolini, no Petain, no inner resistance. Against fascism they were politically and morally on the right side. And they also had a strong working class, especially in coal mining, which was certain of its role as counter-force in society. It regulated class struggle. The struggle against racism and war, especially the Vietnam war, was also led by the youth, but that alone does not change into an attempt to force the revolution.

**You were rather young then, you were 15 years old in 68, so it might be a little hard to evaluate this. But in retrospect, would you think that there was something that you would identify as genuinely new in what happened around May 68?**

I was 16 years old in May 68 when I participated in my first rally. “1968” had addressed me in our household already in 1966. Living at what seemed to be the end of the world, having the feeling of being excluded from all life that came to me through music and fashion from abroad, through a discussion that the family physician Mrs. Dr. Läßle had with my father, the message reached me that her son was prosecuted for an enormous amount in damages because of a blockade of traffic in Cologne. I did not know what he did and did not know anything about the specific concatenations, but I was totally fascinated by it and was convinced in advance that everything for which he was prosecuted was right.

“1968”, if we stick to this cipher, encountered in adolescents like me an open space of yearning, and it was for me linked to the hope to participate in something different, and for an end of loneliness. This is probably what was new for me in this departure. The world around me that I knew, I did not want and suddenly there was a new one, not only as a dream but as concrete possibility. In this moment the world around you becomes an unjust one, a withholding one that you only want to leave behind.

**It is rather easy to discern that there were clearly some libertarian elements associated with the May 68 actions (we are thinking of people like Langhans and the like, maybe the whole German Kommune?) But this is not a German specificity. Whereas the German specificity of the event seems to come to the fore if one takes a look at the particular sequence of events that led, inter alia, the death of Benno Ohnesorg in 1967 (during the visit of the Iranian Shah) and of Rudi Dutschke in 1968. So, what is, if any, the novelty of the events around 1968, and maybe in Germany, particularly for**

**you? Was this perceived, by you and others, as the state just showing its oppressive face or was there more to it - in other words, what did Dutschke and Ohnesorg stand for (to use a formulation coined by Alain Badiou)?**

Benno Ohnesorg stands in general for one of the many of the 68-movement, because of his age, certainly with a more precise consciousness than I, as an iconic figure. With his politically covered-up murder by the police, he above all stands for the brutality and militarization of a society honed in on coercion and order which overpowers all opposition. Dutschke, in contrast, stands for political articulation and for the political rhetoric of departure, for the damnation of the real-socialist constraints and for the struggle for a new socialism. In 1968, the state was not perceived as a different state but rather more discernible. The emotional relations that one has to the world as a kid or adolescent suddenly got a conceptual articulation. Irrespective of the fact that, in the beginning, these relations are bulky and intermingled on all categorical levels. The state became more discernible, as well as the newly-hoped for counter-world. And all reformists became discernible, those that wanted to capture us and expropriate us from our self-positing right to antagonism and separation from the old society. The openly right-wing and old-Nazi forces in society were easy to recognize. In social-democracy, the fraud occurred in the guise of our defence. Each of its reforms would, in the end, be paid twice by those to whom it was sold as a great social progress. There was, in 1968, for a historical moment, a glimpse of an immensely attractive counter-world that was in difference, and even in contrast to, the solidified real-socialist counter-world: a social life that beyond certain, not yet overcome, necessities proceeded from the individual as social subject.

**What could one say from the German perspective about the thesis espoused by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, namely that what the generic name “May 68” designates is nothing but a further productive differentiation of capitalist dynamics? Such that this event - and obviously even against the intent of most of its active proponents - brought previously non-activated or privatized creative potentials of everyone into the cycles of capitalist value production. Jürgen Link calls this flexible normalism (in short: you can look like a bum, with green hair and wrecked clothes, but you can be a successful software programmer these days). The norm itself becomes a flexible product of economic and cultural processes of constant productive re-differentiation. There is thus no outside of the norm anymore when norms are themselves flexible (and so integrative that they immediately absorb resistances).**

**This ultimately leads to a system which is ever more apt to adapt whatsoever form of resistance and turn them into a productive new form of oppression - an oppression that is not even any longer experienced as oppression. To reformulate and abbreviate this: what do you make of the claim that May 68 was the moment when collective and individual creativity was commodified? Also, do you think there is a difference in how May 68 manifested in Germany and in other places?**

What will become of something that happens, of an event, is, as you know, not what comprises its whole potential. What is correct is the diagnosis that the pandemonium of “May 68” became, above all, a new, productive dynamic of an expanding commercialization-cycle of capitalism. That life – and thus that commercializable something – which, from its perspective previously lay idle, the “private human being” as it were, was brought to commercialization. Even private life is today commercialized. And you are fully right: this is today not even experienced as oppression.

The particular thing about 1968 was that it created a new “outside”. Even though, to my mind, it was still driven by the long historical wave of the October Revolution – and some of its forms of expression indicate this, like the new fetishism of the proletariat and the K-groups – it was also a contradiction of its own. The individual was no longer posited as an agent of a new world to be erected, but was supposed to already be its expression. This is what philosophers, or philosophical actors as Marcuse or Krahl, made more precise. Its own contradiction became there the expression of a new appearance of a counter-sovereign against bourgeois society. This is historically, after the October Revolution, the first time that this happened in the western world. The “outside” of which I am speaking, or the “counter-sovereignty” of which the sovereignty-researcher Gesine Hindemith spoke in a common discussion years ago, became concrete in 68. Without this, 68 would today in fact only be a short-lived event, a small generational excitement that was no more than a convenient thrust for the modernisation of capitalism. But it took over a decade until the real fractions of society were again covered up by means of reform and application of force – but also by means of self-deligitimization of the armed groups, as last representatives of a real claim to counter-power and counter-sovereignty – and that the departed post-war-generation was driven into fundamental adaptation and integration.

Instead of devaluing 68 now completely, I would prefer to here talk about aborted liberation. We already talked about it: In face of a working class which just had renewed its authority in class struggle through its unity and militancy, the student actors of May 68 in France conceded to resign into the second rank as it were. Here, the old role of the working class was

newly recognized, with the consequence that one's own social processes, that were immediately directed at the revolutionary transformation of the whole life and that drew its particular force from it, had to be deferred. This is a surrender, or something that I rather call an abortion, of the liberation struggle. This abortion also took place in the Federal Republic of Germany after the short summer of protests and teach-ins. But in a different general framework: Here the proletariat was not a class-struggling force. While the stepping back of the student youth in France corresponded to the reality of class struggle, in the Federal German Republic it was rather the anxiety of historical responsibility. This is why these political illusory movements arose: "March through the institutions", or the emergence of diverse new student K-groups. With this, a central social event of the 68-movement, the sublation of the separation of subject and politics, but also the attempt to somewhat reconcile knowledge and practice, was negated and continued on a different level.

But the question of liberation was raised, and had become so concrete in societies, that it had a real weight. It remained, even after a bulk of the actors that admittedly took the primary contradiction to capitalism as expression of their own identity, in everyday life, slowly but steadily sunk into the reformed new conditions of existence. Even the most extremist among them faded with age. But this question's persistent existence explains why the armed groups could, for a long time, count on the solidarity of the 68ers.

**To follow up from this, it is often said, not only by sociologists as Boltanski and Chiapello, but also by philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, that the events of May 68 indeed helped capitalism reproduce or reinvent itself. The struggle was centered on the three "essential" pillars of capitalism: family, factory and education. As the result of the revolts and riots, each domain was transformed into post-industrial or post-modern capitalism, or even post-Fordist form of organization. How does this argument apply to the German situation and particularly what happened in the aftermaths of the political actions of the RAF? Do you think that the RAF's actions brought a new phase of police control over the population in the West Germany (introduction of ID's, etc.)? Like, it reached the opposite of the desired effect. Or do you think that it made just visible what in one way or the other was already there (even though not quite as apparent)?**

As I said before: the adaption of the 68-movement is obvious. That which determines people today, in a dimension already foreclosing any sense in which one could still talk about an "I", is the all-encompassing

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Volume 5 /  
Issue 2

state of consumption and commercialization which is the result of this adaptation - that historically one has to consider to be the defeat of a struggle. Yes, you are right. This is what happened to it. But it was never the intention of this departure to become what it became.

I cannot treat the problem or the question of the RAF on the level of state action or reaction. Where the struggle emerges, there is also a response. Where there is inters, there is also a way. The interest in the police state I take only to be marginally determined by the actions of resistance or the general frictions within the system. You know yourself that the reference to "organized crime", or to individual offences and crimes as they are also committed by refugees, is fully enough to transform the police and legal system and for agitating the public. The interest in the police state springs, in my view, from a production that becomes increasingly fascist and that needs the corresponding state for it. I am tempted to agree with those who claim that we should call today's production fascist. The all-encompassing commercialization of people has posited a world that structures him and her so that the coercion from outside which destroys him becomes his inner desire. This is one part of humanity. The other becomes increasingly a surplus-population which capital, because of its gigantic technological progress, does not even need as slaves. They are just superfluous, progressively have no place in the world, and for them the camp is the condition of existence and with it the reduction to bare life of which Agamben has spoken for years. Probably, we need a different concept because the designation "fascist" is too much afflicted by a certain past, but I do not yet have it.

**How would you depict the link or relation, if it is one, from the events of surrounding May 1968 and what then became infamous under the name of the RAF? Could the former not but lead to the latter, or would this be a misconception (as this is not what happened, say in France)?**

The RAF is, for me, a compelling consequence of 68: there are always some remaining who cannot assume the abortion of liberation because the assumption of this abortion is for them synonymous with self-annihilation. The RAF is, in a certain sense, the flight forward from a truly felt liberation. And we already talked about the difference between the Federal German Republic and France.

**What is often referred to as left-wing terrorism, or armed struggle in the form of urban guerilla, was characteristic or rather present predominantly in the countries with a Fascist or Nazi past. If this is the case, what are to your mind the reasons for it?**

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Volume 5 /  
Issue 2

It is obvious that in the countries in which a version of fascism took power before it was disempowered from the outside – Germany, Italy, Japan – the armed struggle appeared in a particular existential manner. Here, the need of separation [*Trennung*] – the hyphen [*Trennungsstrich*] of which everyone talked – was greater than in other countries. There were also armed groups in the USA or France or Great Britain. But none had the existential dimension which had developed first in these three mentioned countries. When one looks at the Federal German Republic, through the denial and concealment of the crimes of National Socialism, in which the whole society was collectively enmeshed, the responsibility for reflection and processing the guilt was transferred to the next generation.

**Can you tell us a bit about your formative years? You started your political militancy as a member of a squatting unit, and only later, after a year of imprisonment, you became a RAF member (of the second generation). What was the cause / what were the causes of your political radicalism? What did generate what Adorno would have called the addendum (*das Hinzutretende*) which makes the present state of things so unbearable that one must interfere?**

What are formative years? I believe that my formative years were in school my 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade where I opposed in a mute but infinitely stubborn resistance the adjustment attempts of the old-Nazi teacher that I despised and made into my enemy [*befeindet*]. During the house squatting that I prepared as a 20 year old, all separation processes already took place, and it was decided that we do not want to belong to this society. There, we were already in the phase of forming a political articulation. The year in prison afterwards, because of this house squatting, was hard, contingent on isolation and violent collisions, but we anticipated this experience and it was no shock anymore. I would have perceived an integration into the existing conditions as total self-betrayal and self-annihilation. Without having it at hand conceptually, we knew that, as future stands before us, one in which the whole life is the property of capital, one has to be at its disposal and will be commercialized by it. The “addendum” of Adorno is not the accumulation of misery, but rather precisely the certainty that there can be a different life than the social one.

**Can we talk a bit about the RAF? We are curious to learn, from your perspective: How was it organized at the level of command - we are asking as once, some time ago in an interview of which you were also a part and that took place during your prison years (with Roger Willemsen) it was stated that there is only one RAF but there is no main control center. How were the cells/units organized with regard to the**

**“centre”, if there was one, how independent were them and what assured the unity of the whole?**

The RAF – that was the founding generation. It was imprisoned in 1972. Maybe the group found its real collective identity back then in prison. The prison, and the isolation inherent to it, is also a place where unambiguity and decisions are demanded. You cannot manoeuvre there, at least not for long. Those who did not allow for a sober insight into their situation sooner or later have fallen into orbit of the enemy.

What concerned our structure: We acted autonomously with regard to the prisoners but we unambiguously referred to them. Back then, we would not have done anything against the will of those prisoners that we recognized as political cadres. What concerns my own experience with these cadres – I here certainly talk above all about those later dead prisoners in Stammheim –, they always pointed out to us that we must ourselves know why and how we fight. A letter of Gudrun Ensslin always remains in my memory: “I cannot tell you why you must fight, I can only tell you how I solve contradictions and if it is correct, you recognize something in it.” The RAF was too small personnel-wise to necessarily need a “cell-structure”. On a short notice this may have been different for individual actions, but as political form of organization this would have been hypocritical.

**Could you also tell us a little about how this affected the trans-generational aspect (something that were quite important in the revolutionary movement in China in the 60s). So how was it organized and what role played the trans-generational dimension of an emancipatory organization, bringing older and younger people together?**

Certainly, there was a difference between those who came immediately from the politicization processes of 1968 and us. In the same way that there was a fundamental difference in the politicization processes between us and those that were mobilized by us and came after us. The ease of joining a great social departure was lost over time. The departure languished, the confrontation objectified into a power struggle, into the acceptance of its inherent logic which easily moved from the political to the military. A grave political problem was repressed or existed without being recognized: with the defeat of the USA in Vietnam, followed by its retreat and flight, a central politically-mediating thread of our own practice broke away. The reference to the now ended war-imperialism no longer really explained our own war. The normal state of the system became thus a problem of the revolutionaries. But we did not succeed to transform and delegitimize it in the attack. For this, a concrete counter-social horizon would have been needed, whose absence the people perceive as loss.

This problem was finally concealed by taking state power as our reference point. But precisely only concealed, not resolved.

**Did the second generation of RAF members follow the doctrine of Marighella? Who else were RAF's theoretical influences, of course, apart from him? Also, it seems that after Meinhoff's arrest, the RAF didn't pursue much of a "theoretical" elaboration of its actions, or did it? Could we say that, in the last instance, the arrest of the RAF's "theorist" was one of the reasons for major problems in the organization?**

I think all this is far too abridged. Already to say that Marighella could be linked to a doctrine, I think, is doubtful. Marighella, as most of the new revolutionaries of the anti-colonization-era, wanted to break away from the class-struggle-dogma of the communist parties that had become static, and from their apparent objectivism. Europe was not South- or Central-America, neither culturally nor with regard to the social structure of its population. One had to find new ways here as well as there. They only could be international and therein had some general congruences, but there was no transfer from here to there. The RAF did see itself from a certain moment on as fighting on the outer lines of the capitalist world system. The inner lines of this global struggle was, for it, composed by the liberation movements. We did assign them an avant-garde function, as it were. Because in the metropolises, a politicization of the inner class contradictions of the existing political lines of demarcation to the political front did not work out for a number of reasons – this is why most of the 68ers aborted the collective self-liberation – it appeared necessary to occupy something like the role of the partisans who, in the backcountry of the enemy, work towards its weakening. If they were more theoretical in prison than outside – this may be and may be explained by the conditions of struggle in the prisons but also by the different times of politicization, or by the different concatenations of politicization. Presumably, they were theoretically only grounded differently. But the militarization, and the flight forward which would become more overt from 1975 till at least 1977, was also promoted by the founders of the RAF and was also their responsibility. I do not here see any fundamental contradiction. Despite the often mentioned reference to Mao Zedong and his "Long March", the prisoners in Stammheim knew that the once posited thesis about the function of the city-guerrilla in the metropolises – "small motor that activates the large motor" (Ulrike Meinhof) – ultimately remained a thesis and was not suitable for reality. Prisoners like me suspected this, too, but would not admit it. Here lies also the reason as to why the Stammheim prisoners in October 1977 made the offer to the Federal Government to not return to the Federal German Republic and to not continue the armed struggle after an exchange of Schleyer. This was nothing less than the

offer to end the armed struggle. To reach this, everything was put in the balance. The Federal Government did not want to, and maybe Wehrmacht-lieutenant Helmut Schmidt finally wanted to also win a war, as Breloer also once said.

**It seems a recurrent criticism that the RAF didn't have a kind of a positive vision, an idea, for a post-capitalist, or post-imperialist German (or beyond Germany) society. While the first generation did undertake actions opposing the Vietnam war, against the presence of the US troops in Germany, et cetera, the following generations of the RAF aimed to a large extent with their political (terrorist) actions on the release of the RAF prisoners. Is this impression correct (you may have heard this quite a few times before)? Was there an idea of a post-capitalist society? If not, was there an idea of a transitory organizational period from which it should come from, something comparable to the dictatorship of the proletariat, or something of that kind?**

This is correct – but also a quite old hat. By reproaching especially the RAF with this, one insinuates that this political vision could have existed somewhere else. This I can see today even less than back then. In comparison with all other left-radical groups, I can only recognize that the RAF is still today politically tabooed and criminalized by the media and state. I was assigned by the journal "Der Freitag" to write an essay about the RAF in October 2017, and then the chief of culture was too cowardly to print it. No one gave rise to a questioning of the ruling conditions in such a radical and uncompromising way, and clung to it, for as long as the RAF. Even today, it seems unbearable to ask why there was here such a fundamental break with society.

Certainly, there are ideas of a future society that we would not have denoted as post-capitalist, but rather a post-socialist society. Real-socialism was admittedly rejected as a society to strive for back then, but fundamental determinations like socialization of productive capital was shared by us, and many of us thought that the bureaucratic administration of people is by those means surmountable. I know some of us who indulged in the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a mediating stage to the pre-stage of a communist society. I was not very convinced by this. I was rather close to the insight that both historical figures, the bourgeois as well as the proletarian, too, cannot be a goal and must be sublated. But this was not very decisive back then, because it was ultimately all fictitious. I was one of those people who did not want to stipulate in detail what comes in the form of a new society. It should be socialist, determined by collective structures, maybe a council democracy

in the transitory period, but above all it was nothing that could be conceived of in a circling, but something that should be born in a revolutionary process in the first place. Andreas Baader wrote at some point in this time: “The aim of the RAF is to dissolve the RAF” and also that it is “The aim of politics to dissolve politics”. That has impressed me in its radicality and complied to me.

**One of your organizational tools was a kind of unconditional solidarity (especially in your prison years) with your fellow militants. For example, no deals with the state (for improved conditions) as long as one of you was being held under worse conditions. On the one hand, this solidarity seemed to be relying on the assumption that the political power of a group exceeds that of its members, on the other, it nonetheless seems to demand a strict discipline from each and every one of you. Was the idea of political discipline relevant for you (in this context and in general) and if so in what way?**

The core problem was after all the following: those who seriously spoke of a necessity of revolution were confronted – especially by the people who were integrated into the system – with the claim that they will sometime anyhow make their arrangements with the capitalist system. Whoever follows them (that is us) or does something with us, is stupid and will, in the end, foot the bill. On the second day of my imprisonment in the prison of Cologne-Ossendorf, when I was fetched for my solitary yard exercise and was putting my shoes on, there was a guard in the doorframe looking at me and he dropped the line, more as a question than as a sentence: “Well, would you do it again today?” There it was, this catholic certainty that following a sin there must be remorse. I did not answer to it, because I never talked to guards, but it did touch the fundamental question of betrayal in the departure. It is correct: to those who wanted to fight and wanted to continue fighting, we were unconditionally solidary. For those who could not do this anymore we have looked for a solution, unless they were overruled. This unconditionality of solidarity is indispensable, gratuitous, and unavailable. This is not demanded, you have it. Whoever does not have it already has betrayal in his or her pocket, because he binds his or her reliability to the stance of the other and so relativizes his or her decision and responsibility. Each egoism dissolves the coherence of the group at the other’s expense. Who draws the hyphen of separation [*Trennungsstrich*] or posits an antagonism can only do this on the basis of irreversibility. This is, in fact, also a crucial component of one’s political power. Anyone whose life is more important than the common cause would only be a caricature of a revolutionary. I would call this insight, not discipline. Discipline one develops when facing certain requirements of everyday life, questions of security, reliability in arrangements, control of

emotions in the state of confrontation, etc. – but not in face of the question if one’s own decision is irreversible. This does not come as an exigency from the outside, but from inside oneself.

**Everyone heard or read of the “Commando Ulrike Meinhoff”, or “Holger Mains Commando” (in which you were involved in Stockholm 1975). In what way and why did you use the proper names of individual members of your organization? We guess it would be wrong to consider martyrdom an element of your actions, but could you explain why this would be the wrong category (or maybe we are just mistaken)?**

We did call us “commando Holger Mains” because we wanted to make clear politically that this dead prisoner will not simply disappear in the morgues of the system, that for everyone who dies in the struggle, ten more will follow. I think this is easy to understand. On another level, this reflects also the guild of the survivors in face of the dead comrades. They remain an eternal obligation. Back then, I never thought of the category of “martyrdom”. On the other side, one cannot, as we did, occupy an embassy in Stockholm or later fight in a hunger strike without the readiness to sacrifice oneself. But the aim is not to mobilize others with one’s own death. The readiness to die only expresses the contempt for the life-circumstances to which one wanted to draw a hyphen [*Trennungsstrich*]. One is mobilized through one’s own action. One would die, but only if it is unavoidable.

**Could you also say something about the relation between political / emancipatory practice and theory in the RAF? Did you try to draw theoretical lessons from your political interventions, especially the ones that failed (with people imprisoned or killed, etc.)?**

Yes, sure. I have, for example, thought through a thousand times our action in Stockholm, its genesis, my participation, our actions. But also the actions of others. Even today this happens to me often. I think that all of us drew many doctrines from it. But this is not the place to formulate them. The armed struggle of an avant-garde, the concept of a city guerrilla in the metropolises, ends here. Otherwise, it has always played a very great role in our discussions, but also in our reflections that we passed on to the outside.

**We are asking this amongst other things, because there is this famous opinion poll, we believe from 1971, where about 25% of the German population under 30 stated certain sympathies with the actions of the RAF (in comparison to**

**today where being labelled a “terrorist” will immediately crush all sympathies imaginable). But this situation changed dramatically. When and why do you think this happened?**

Back then, we liked to often quote this opinion poll ourselves against this compulsive attempt of politics and the state apparatus to turn us into criminals and to de-politicize our struggle. But it did not have any great internal significance. One cannot really rely politically on such a thing. This rendered an atmosphere in society, a solidarity with all that fight, because the people saw themselves inspired by 68 to change many things in their life. Such moods reflect a moment, but not a whole life-decision. The state and the media have done a lot to change this mood. A rabble-rousing of sympathizers that even declared a political moralist and humanist like Heinrich Böll to being a supporter of the concept city guerrilla, or all these secret service campaigns like the “Sam-7 assault on full football stadium”, “nuclear in the Lake of Konstanz”, “hostage taking in Kindergartens” etc. to turn the population against us. In the end though, the transformation of the atmosphere into, in part, open hatred as in 1977 was caused by the RAF itself. Its military severity was no longer politically mediated after the end of the Vietnam war. Gurdrun Ensslin wrote internally back then that the RAF – here mainly related to the actions against the Vietnam war, later related to the collective under the conditions of the prison – had a “moral ticket”. Reconsidered this obviously was indicated a political limit and weakness, it recognized from where the acceptance and solidarity towards us came. The 68-left has since then deserted to the system. One could do K-groups and at the same time work for one’s bourgeois career. One could do extra-parliamentary movement that only seemingly wanted to send a striking leg into the parliament. One could be radical and militant in a one-point movement, like in the anti-NPP movement and could remain more or less silent with regard to the whole system. One could be state-monopoly-capitalism-social-democrat to overcome capitalism “from within” etc. – but one was always still reminded by the RAF that one, in truth, once wanted a revolution and the destruction of capitalism. It had, no one could deny this, prompted the question of the system and posed its whole own life against it. With its flight forward strategy, military severity, or with its actions that destroyed legitimation, like the co-organization of the kidnapping of a vacationist plane, the RAF had then torn the remaining but thin relationship to the 68-movement and separated itself from it. 1977 was the decisive year, and after Autumn 77, the great open run towards integration into the system and into reformism began. The same phenomenon one finds incidentally also at the end of the Paris Commune. After the defeat for many comes the arrangement, for others the flight, if they are still able to flee. At the end the RAF failed at itself.

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Volume 5 /  
Issue 2

**And when and why do you think the RAF policies, strategies, agendas, practices reached a limit point? Was it there from the very beginning (as many would argue today) or did it emerge immanently as a certain practical deadlock (some say it is when there was the first “innocent” victim, a policeman)? Or is the relation more complex, as someone like Žižek claims with regard to the relation or non-relation between Lenin and Stalin: with the move to the Stalinist state, he states, this very state will have been a political implication of Lenin’s position (which does not mean that Lenin always was already Stalin but that one cannot simply play the game of separating the good Lenin from the bad Stalin, whereby one would be able to avoid confronting the real and difficult problem). How is your perspective on this conundrum with regard to the (history of the) RAF?**

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Volume 5 /  
Issue 2

The first innocent victim was Benno Ohnesorg. If one reduces everything to the Federal Republic of German, you can of course easily say that it was all from the beginning doomed to fail. But there was a worldwide political earthquake. The erosion of the post-war order, the failure of the US-American military doctrine, the anti-colonial struggles, the cultural revolution in China, May 68 in France, later the revolution in Portugal and the overthrow of the dictatorship in Greece, significant revolts like that of feminism. For us this was a situation where historically something like a window opened up, or a door, and had to try to push it open. It would have been traumatic for the whole left, for anyone who hoped for a fundamental transformation, if that had not been attempted. The armed groups in Europe have as representative for the whole left of the metropolises that, at least from the mid-60s, demanded the end of capitalism, implemented the influential fantasy of revolution into their practice and demonstrated in their failure the now-accepted fact that the times are obviously not ripe enough. Now, one could, without feeling that one has betrayed one’s own history, practice adjustment. But independent of the question of ripeness: what should those who recognize something unliveable in present social relations do? I think it is very complex as well this point you address by reference to Žižek on Lenin and Stalin. Lenin was not Stalin. Such an equation corresponds to the interest of the anti-communist rabble-rousers or sometimes also to that of the renegades whose alibi is called “theory of totalitarianism”. A discussion with them is not worth it. But the construction of socialism in one country was accompanied by nationalization, and with it, the submission of the revolt, the subsumption under the constraints of power, that did not come from the outside but were self-positing. Stalin turned submission to these constraints into a daily political exigency – which consequently placed him into the position of a forced administrator, satisfying his reactionary desire for power. Lenin

probably would have moderated this system of constraints that was linked to the construction of the state differently; certainly he would neither have organized show trials nor have the old comrades executed. But he would not have escaped the constraint as method of state construction.

To say this differently and explicitly against the attitude of many bourgeois intellectuals that just want to rescue their own incapacity to act: there was no “good” Ulrike Meinhof and no “evil” Andreas Baader in the RAF. There were probably differences in the direction of armed politics. Ulrike Meinhof sent me her regards and announced that: “Stockholm is the Điện Biên Phủ of Social Democracy.” She had, this is what her greetings told me, with this absolutely no problems. Certainly, she also wanted to stand by my side in prison. Andreas Baader has supported me several times in a different manner. After the decision to enter the armed struggle, there was no turning back anymore, because also the power that we had attacked left no other way as that of complete submission or that of continuing the path to an unambiguous end. Once all bridges are burnt, one must win or perish.

**Maybe this also offers a chance to address one of the political hot potatoes as it were, namely the question of political violence and, and this is the even hotter potato, the question of the victims of this very violence. We know that one reply that some (former) activists of the RAF gave to this concatenation is that there were not only the victims of the terror of the RAF but the very existence and reproduction of the capitalist system generated victims on a mass scale (as in African countries). This implies, as you recently argued, that there is a responsibility of for example the heads of state (say the heads of the German state, Schmidt, and others, were co-responsible for or at least tolerated the overthrow of the Argentinian government and the elimination of a huge number of anti-government activists). So, there were rather invisible victims of what Marcuse called structural violence (that is always constitutive of any system) before there was the violence of the RAF that produced a specific visibility of structural violence. And in this sense, the situation was comparable to a war situation, if we follow some of the RAF rhetoric (and obviously this is one possible interpretation of what class struggle means, a militaristic one, yet a possible one - or as Foucault once said, a lot of Marxist thought about what “class” means in class struggle, very few though offered an interpretation of what “struggle” means, well, one could say, at least the RAF did that). Yet, somehow this seems to introduce a peculiar primacy of violence into the understanding of**

**political action - or rendered differently and more precisely, maybe this introduced a too unified understanding of what violence in politics is. Someone like Žižek for example argues that a kind of universalist peaceful protest can be more violent than a visibly violent one (obviously, it can often also be just too impotent). But were there reflections of this kind involved in your political practice?**

I have previously also belonged to those who answered the accusation that the RAF had to take responsibility for several victims with reference to the victims of the systems, to the victims of structural violence, to poverty, wealth, domination or lost foundations of life, etc.

Holger Meins was an unarmed victim while in captivity. The choice to starve as a human being in isolation, or to die in a hunger strike, thus in a struggle for one's own self-affirmation – the production of this condition is an expression of a moral and political perfidy of those who sat back then in the corresponding positions of power. In my youth this was, for me, the legitimation, to take civil members of embassies as hostages. Today, this discourse that is mainly defined “morally” is only of a limited interest to me. Any decision that justifies itself primarily through the actions of the enemy does not escape its social weakness. This also holds for the other side.

When the breaks have been accomplished and the bridges are burnt, the question of the application of violence must be subordinated to the question of whether it is truly without alternative, and on the other, if it really opens a process in which it advances something of social and emancipatory nature in society.

The exception is obvious, when the war is open. When the war is normal, death is normal, too. This state of exception explodes all previous civilizational rules. This is the state in which the world is today. Violence is today pervasively linked to reactionary goals. This was different in the middle of the last century. There the application of violence against the back-then dominant conditions was linked with a new step of emancipation and social liberation.

**The RAF, if we are not mistaken, did collaborate with Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLO - who helped the Lufthansa hijacking action). But, did it also have any relation with, say, Brigade Rosse in Italy or other left-wing armed groups in Europe and elsewhere? We are asking this question because we are interested to know what role internationalism played for you.**

I met some members of the Red Brigades in prison and we are friends. One of those brigades had, around 1977, met then-RAF members in Paris. He told me that there was the mutual intention of solidarity and of mutual support but that one did not really find a common ground, because the Red Brigades, due to the large struggles of the Italian working class, were still very close to the factory and the proletariat as historical subject. Our group from 1975 had above all contacts to the Palestinian organisations. I think all armed groups claimed for themselves an internationalist dimension. All were with regard to their political determination anti-imperialist. But the RAF knew that she would be lost in advance if she were not a part of an internationalist structure.

**You are now editing what you call a “library of resistance” with your publishing house, Laika. Can you tell us a bit about the idea behind it (we were reminded of what Alain Badiou once called an “encyclopedia of exceptions”)? It seems you aim to thereby generate a left or emancipatory rendering of the history of emancipatory or left organizations and actions (and thus not leave those actions and group to the interpretation of the other side or deliver them to oblivion), is this the primary aim?**

The original idea for the publishing house LAIKA was to publish documentary movies on the great world-wide departure from the midst of the 60s. Movies that are very suitable to revivify the counter-social potential of that time. Of course, this is directed against the unspoken, yet openly pursued, law to wipe out all recollection of the possibility of another life in a world that is capitalized through and through. Part of the destruction of the world by the total commercialization of all life having become a dogma is also the destruction of remembrance and the production of existences that are without history.

**Is this also a way of coming to terms with the failure(s) and defeat of the RAF (this question does not imply a stupid version of sublimation, in the sense of first you try it for real and then you do it intellectually, first weapons, then books and movies)?**

No. The publishing house is no reply to the failure of the RAF. In a certain way, it formed contingently. I started beforehand to do documentary movies. Through this work, I met my colleague Willi Baer and from these discussion that idea of the publishing house arose, that then extended. Personally, it is for me part of the attempt not to despair completely and to still do something that seems meaningful.

**Could you, to end, draw a balance sheet, your own evaluation of the political (and not personal or whatsoever) failure(s) of what came out of the May 68 movement and especially the RAF? What kind of insight / part of it would you consider to still be of contemporary relevance for us (apart from the insight, which never was one, that one simply cannot change anything anyway so we should learn not to try)?**

If we want to draw a balance sheet, we would have, in my opinion, draw one of our own social life today. It then ends horribly. The camps have returned, even if without gas chambers, but for infinitely many people still exterminating. We already touched upon the surplus-population in our conversation before. Wars are endemic with the consequence of destroyed states like Libya or Syria with unbelievable numbers of victims. Evictions, too. The relation between Israel and the Palestinians will at one point probably be defined as the battles of Verdun: a nationalism that became senseless on both sides. In the metropolises, more and more people become insane and believe they find, in the resurrection of fascism, a rescue against the permanent threat of downgrading. The readiness to numb oneself to the dreadful living conditions in the world, to accept mass poverty in the world or mass deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, increasingly brutalizes the intra-psychical structure of the people. The state has amassed a power potential that, already in its potential, must be designated as fascist. A part of the political elite here, as in Europe – Viktor Orban, Matteo Salvini, Horst Seehofer, Sebastian Kurz, etc. – must already be called in their attitude radical right-wingers, if not fascistic. Not to mention Trump at all. All collectives destroyed, today the human being seems to be as disempowered as never before. An effective counter-movement is not in sight. If one reflects on this longer, only the over-auto-expansion of the system seems to contain a way out - but at the price that all of us will first suffer through its self-destruction.

The neoliberal processes have become the subject of history. That which before had determining character, like the national state, the federations, or transnational institutions – all this is usurped by the economic processes that run on themselves. The subject of history is thus virtually delivered to the non-subjectivity of the global market. One of the reason why such reactionary figures as the above-mentioned are raised to power: they are supposed to establish sovereignty in the world of objects, but they only lead us to believe [*vorgaukeln*] in it.

The idea of an “outside” is lost. I take this to be catastrophic. It came into the world with the October Revolution, has solidified and disappeared in 1989 from the global stage. The new outside of 68 has been lost at some point in the 70s and has outlived its time in small minorities. Everything

seems occupied by capitalism. This makes it, in fact also easier: we reject everything that is connected to it. The “hope of hopelessness” of which Žižek speaks, or the attitude of “inoperativity” that Agamben has thrown into our thought – somewhere there, in the complete rejection of today’s conditions lies our future.

Translated by Frank Ruda  
Dundee/Hamburg/Prishtina

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Volume 5 /  
Issue 2