

The concept >>commune<<

About counter power and how we built it up.

Introduction

In the three decades in between 1945 and 1973, the western, capitalistic world experienced the "golden age of capitalism" (Eric Hobsbawm). After the destruction of World War II, the infrastructure of big parts of the world needed to be built up again. This reconstruction though went further than simply the recreation of what had been before the war, so that the capital ratio acquired numerous new fields of the societal everyday life. From the triumphal march of the automobile, that for the first time went beyond the USA, to the industrial production of food, to an immense expansion in the use areas of electronic devices. This "economic miracle" created - with, on the one hand with full employment, on the other hand mass appealing (which means: cheaper) production of goods - an until then unprecedented standard of living for big parts of the population.

Not only the ruins gave way for the economic miracle, but also the big disappointment that both of the World Wars brought with them, which seemed to fade in favor of a new optimism and faith in progress. For to shake up the people - unfortunately at first the ruling ones and only decades later the regular people - it needed a new economic crisis. At the latest since the oil crisis in 1973, a new strategy was tested by the ruling class. To neoliberalise the economies of some emerging markets, one didn't shy away even from military coups: Chile (1973), Argentina (1976), Turkey (1980). After the neoliberal experiments turned out as a big success for the ruling class, from the 1980s onward the "social partnership" in capitalist centres have been terminated from above.

Since then, the system offers the wage-earners less and less, also in the richest parts of the world. Through "rationalizations" and displacement of production to different parts of the world, where the working power is way cheaper and working conditions are way worse, since one decade came a big expansion of the low wage sector. Furthermore, the class war from above did intensify - the flexibilization of the working conditions and the introduction of Hartz-IV in Germany marked essential milestones on the way to a solidification of a new societal order, in which the gap between rich and poor, no matter if the economy goes well or poorly, is systematically growing. The harmonic world of the "golden age" has been history for decades, but for decades the radical left is failing at the task of giving an appropriate answer to the new situation, to oppose by class war from below the class war from above, that goes above defense fights and acts against the ruling economic and political system.

In the meantime, the societal fractures in the Federal Republic of Germany are getting deeper. A survey of the "Edelman Trust Barometer" of the year 2017 showed a big mistrust of big parts of the people against elites of economics and politics. The majority of the surveyed perceive supervisory board chairmen of companies as well as politicians as implausible. "You can no longer deny or gloss over it: We have - as well in Germany - a deep, long-living, widely anchored trust crisis", commented during this time even the boss of Edelman Germany, Susanne Marell. One would have to deal with a deep antipathy against "those up there", trembled the main magazine of the German upperclass, the FAZ¹.

Not only in surveys but also in the daily political work, you can sense it: People are getting angrier. And there are good reasons for the ongoing estrangement of the system and its political and economic managers. The **income inequality** between down here and the capitalistic profiteers above did **aggravate drastically**, if you listen to a study created by 100 international researchers of

1 FAZ: www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/weltwirtschaftsforum/vor-dem-wef-umfragen-zeigen-niedriges-vertrauen-in-eliten-14670396.html

the year 2017². We live in a society in which 1.1 million people (in FRG), even though they are working, need to get extra money from the state in order to be able to survive. We live in a society, in which more than 4 million people fall into the Hartz-IV-system of forced labor and sanctions. We live in a society in which more than 4 million people grow up in poverty.

Precarious working conditions, social isolation and loneliness, the continuing price increase of living space in big cities - and finally the twilight years in poverty. For refugees, migrants and women*, this all-day life is even more dramatic through doubled and tripled suppression.

This is the reality in which a lot of people need to live within this country. That the established parties, that have broken every pleasant-sounding election promise, lose esteem, is as well understandable. As the skepticism towards the self-declared quality media, that find themselves in the ownership of a handful of big media concerns or the state.

This crisis of trust holds a **big chance for the extra-parliamentary left**. Because the scepticism about the ones above is not only a correct assessment of the situation, but a beginning of class consciousness. Of how we tried to react to these challenges and which experiences we made in the meantime, this paper is about.

The left and the society

A big part of the left, including us, has gone far from their own population. The withdrawal into lofty debates and moral self-exaggeration came with the isolation of the society. Often everyone outside of their own bubble would be perceived as unalterably bad. The "mob" would be seen primarily as a threat.

Out of one's own weakness grows a faintness. One didn't have the confidence anymore to change the society altogether, and doesn't really believe it can be changed to something better. One wants to flee into supposed protected spaces or even support the elites with the conservation of the status quo.

We want to break with this perception. It neither matches with reality, nor is it "left". **We are a part of the suppressed classes within this country and as such we want to do politics**. We don't want to fight against the existing racism, antisemitism and sexism also in the suppressed and exploited as distanced commentators from another world, but in common struggle. The as workers, unemployed, young, female* or as refugees victimized humans of this country are our brothers and sisters.

This, though, requires the reclamation of sociality within the revolutionary left - and with it a full change of our politics. We need to be able to politicize and sharpen the problems that the people have. And we need to find mutual answers, that build up and strengthen beginnings of counterpower here and now.

That means to convey the goal of a revolution through the daily struggles. To go into those struggles without that goal, always means to stay reformistic. We refuse to be the doctor at the sickbed of capitalism. Vice versa, though: to talk permanently about revolution without taking part in real struggles equals an empty utopia without any power. We need a process of a political approach, for a long-term perspective to develop mutual ideological lines, a long-term strategy and a flexible tactic following from this.

For some of us, the debate of what such a strategy could look like began a few years ago, at first within the group radikale linke | berlin. Into this discussion, several perceptions went.

- - The extra-parliamentary left has mostly lost the relation to the population in Germany and for that doesn't play a relevant role in the political landscape of the FRG.
- - To work towards that deficiency, we must - that's how it is being formulated in a temporary position paper - build up "real counter power" that should be established by "continuous work on and with the base"³.
- - To be able to do that work, as it's said in the paper, there has to be build up an organisation that is "capable of acting".
- - The fragmentation of the radical left also has a cause in the lack of a mutual promising project. This fragmentation needs to be overcome by a mutual praxis and mutual content debates.

The at first theoretical orientation towards base work in districts, factories and (sub-)culture went into several campaigns - inter alia "social center 4 all" - and the founding of "Bündnis für bedingungsloses Bleiberecht" (alliance for the unconditional right to stay). Real action leading from it only came by the building up of the "Kiezkommunen" (district communes), at first in the Berlin districts of Wedding and Kreuzberg/Neukölln, following the "Selber machen (Do it Yourself)" congress in 2017.

Kiezkommunen as the smallest units

The main idea is based on the revival of the concept of councils out of the tradition of the worker's movement. **Councils** have been battle organs of the class against fascism, war and capitalism. At the same time they served as **germ cells of a new form of democracy and self-administration**, in their frame people were able to take their matters into their own hands. This double function is based on a dynamic concept of socialism, that we find within the traditional communist council movements as well as in the Kurdish movement, the Spanish anarchists or the Italian autonomous people.

We want to build up institutions that are **geographically restricted, but thematically universal**. When we speak about building up "communes", then it means that we want to create institutions to, in small territorial units (neighbourhoods, districts, factories) enable structures of self-administration.

This means the **Kiezkommune** should take care of all matters in their district: social questions, renting and working struggles, antipatriarchal struggles, the building up of social meeting points, youth work, antifascism. Within the communes, if necessary and with appropriate size, there should be formed so-called **committees** that are responsible for certain fields.

This regional work alone though remains limited. In the medium term, city-wide, German-wide, Europe-wide mutual organizational connections have to be created. The idea is this: the communes and committees should be organized in **federal district councils, then in city councils, regional and national councils "from below to above" via imperative mandatory**. Mutual actions/campaigns et cetera can be planned on the respective responsible instances through the delegates of the communes and performed by the communes.

The political sense is: through the creation of new social relationships, the access of the state is about to lose territory step by step. The self-administration of the society should be strengthened.

As well historically as in the present, there are numerous examples of revolutionary movements that have been organised like this or alike. From the worker's, soldier's and women councils in the years after the first World War in Germany, the sowjets at the same time in revolutionary Russia, towards the "resistance committees" (direnis komiteleri) of the Turkish revolutionary group Devrimci Yol, the district committees of the Italian "lotta continua" in the 1970s to the contemporary construction of a new society in the Mexican Chiapas or the north Syrian Rojava. From all those examples - their failures as well as their successes- we can learn, none of them we can copy.

How organs of counter power are being built up is dependent strongly on the concrete situation. The advantage is that in the respective district communes that those comrades are organised, are the same districts where they are living and/or working. They know the social dynamics, have a social surrounding and know about the problems of the neighbourhood. Though the concept includes a **mutual coordination of the communes, the local politics is being made by those who know best how the respective district is functioning.**

Popular way of working

If we work like that, we're being confronted by very concrete challenges. Since the majority of the extra-parliamentary left in this country has taken itself back from society, we need to newly relearn the work with and within the society. The first step is the identification with the right topics: what does really move the people within the neighbourhood? Based on which topic it is possible to organise the people? Which stratum/class of the population we want to reach? What are the topics that have anti-capitalist potential? In the course of this it is also about finding their own subjectivity within those struggles again, to identify with them on a personal level and to reflect our own behaviours, our dealings with each other and our own positions within the society.

Not only the content is a challenge, but also the form. How do we speak so that we are being understood? How do we deal with contradictions? How do we present ourselves, our demonstrations and our spaces? How do we write understandably and how do we organise possibilities to take part at the daily political work?

In the districts, the creation of social meeting points, that should also convey a political culture, plays a big role. Open cafés, that at the same time are spaces where the neighbourhood can turn to us with their problems of which we can work on together; sports rooms for the mutual training and learning of self-defense; spaces for the autonomous self-organisation of women; spaces of collective education and discussion - whatever the needs are in the concrete area.

To create such infrastructure or to make already existing infrastructure usable for political work is, from our understanding, one of the first necessary steps in the process of building up district communes. Because to already shape and create such spaces offers a great range of collective participation possibilities.

Initiative force and base

Those that are starting to coordinate to build up the respective base institutions, we call "initiative force". Their task should be to push the idea of self-administration forward and to work out its moments against exploitation and suppression. The "initiative force" in the course of this is not an exclusive circle that stands over "the masses". It is nothing more than the collective organisation of those that are ready to make the first steps. Their main task therefore is to make themselves expandable by developing, establishing and incubating revolutionary ideology and, according to that, a culture of collective living together into wider parts of the population.

Therefore though, those comrades that regard themselves as "initiative forces" carry a special responsibility. They need to become examples in the way of how they live and deal with each other. No one will trust those ones, that are not able to find solidaric dealings with each other, to awake such feeling in whole neighbourhoods and factories.

One can not become an initiative power by only calling oneself out as such. It is, rather, important to work at the overcoming of one's own mistakes and weaknesses together. That implicates the developing of mutual revolutionary values, as well as conflict coping within the collectives. Collective-hostile attitudes such as patriarchal behaviour and liberal egoism has to be counteracted collectively.

If we actually do want to give people hope into a radical left again, we need to begin to take ourselves seriously. The successes that will come by that will again strengthen the pleasure of fighting for the freed society.

Base organisation and counter power

When we do work at the base, we must not lose the big picture at the same time. At the very end, the enemy is connected internationally, and most of the problems that are coming up locally can not be solved there in the long-term. If, for example, the struggles against "rent sharks" or their concerns stay punctually framed, they can not be successful permanently. Besides, the development of this form of consciousness doesn't usually get past the problem that the respective affected people want to solve "their own" problem somehow, and afterwards turn their backs towards the political protest.

That's why from the beginning on, the construction of local organs of counter power should come with coordination and connection on a broader level. We noticed that in Berlin, as well as nationwide and internationally, a lot of movements exist that work on a similar realignment of revolutionary politics.

Counter power means a couple things to us; at one hand the ability, to prevent things, that we do want to prevent. When a fascist demonstration doesn't go through the kiez, that is counter power. When the new hotel can not be build, that is counter power. When a concern has to take back a termination, that is counter power.

On the other hand, counter power doesn't only consist of preventing, but also of constructing and developing. When we can organise our own living together, that is counter power; when in the district not the cops but the commune is being called to solve conflicts, that is counter power; when we can ensure our reproduction work collectively, that is counter power.

For counter power to evolve, there is a need for the developing and conveying of a revolutionary consciousness. An idea is only going to be a real force when it moves a lot of people.

Counter power develops through the construction of fighting organs that are at the same time germ cells for a future collective self-organisation of society. However we call that - commune, council, committee - and wherever we build up such organs - schools, districts, universities or factories - we build up a new point into a net, that we need to spin globally, to reinvent a left that is capable of acting.

Counter power and dynamic understanding of socialism

Our understanding of counter power has nothing to do with only becoming comfortable in the here and now. It is not only about building up small islands of freedom and being satisfied by that.

Rather than that, it builds up on a dynamic understanding of socialism. "We never approached the socialism utopian. It never was for us something very far away. We rather would behold, how freedom, equality and socialism are to become reality. How can we start to realize those principles of hope within our life? We did always have hope and utopias, that we did not want longer to project on future generations. Instead, we started to realize our hopes and utopias in the here and now", wrote the revolutionary Sakine Cansiz.

The destruction of state and capital can not be understood as a coup that comes out of nothing. Much more, before that there is a long process of shifting of power relations. "The state is a relation, a relationship between people, a way of how people do act towards each other; and you destroy it by entering into other relationships, by relating to each other in a different way", wrote Gustav Landauer while the Bavarian council republic 1919⁴. It would be about "creating institutions that build up a true community of the people".

That the ruling class will suppress such creation of different relationships bloodily as soon as they become dangerous to them, was also shown at the council republic of which Landauer did write. In the end, an attack of the rulers against the construction of counter power will come at a certain point. Until they are not fully and totally deprived of power, this construction remains provisional. A dynamic concept of socialism therefore always includes the necessity of full self-defense.

Internationally and locally

From the beginning onward, internationalism - the exchange and connection with revolutionary movements in different countries - needs to be bounded in revolutionary praxis. We can restrict ourselves neither in our analysis of suppression and exploitation relations on a national frame nor in the development of strategies against such. At least a Europe-wide coordination of base movements with revolutionary approach needs to be created.

Moreover, the connection to bigger movements with the same claim - f.e. the Kurdish freedom movement or the ones of the Zapatistas - is a duty. Those revolutionary processes are constituting today the foremost front against imperialism and re-rising fascism. To defend these is a duty that we also have on the smallest level of our own construction process. At the same time it is clear as well: the most effective solidarity that we can practice towards other movements is the change of the power relations in Germany itself through the construction of a revolutionary movement.

Without at the end world wide counter power, revolutionary movements won't succeed on the long term.

Questioningly we advance.

radikale linke | berlin

Kiezkommune Wedding

Kiezkommune Kreuzberg-Neukölln

Kiezkommune Friedrichshain

4 From our perspective though, the state is not only a relationship between humans but also a material relation