

The Post-Autonomous Rebels: Amoebic Militants in the Post-Revolutionary Times

Bob Kurik

bob.kurik@fhs.cuni.cz

Charles University

Prague

When doing a long-term ethnographic research between 2008 and 2015 with a leaky but stabilized cluster of 20 to 25 militant youngsters from autonomous circles of German radical left, it was discovered that the so called post-autonomous turn took place in many parts of those circles in the last two decades. To discuss the turn in details is beyond the scope of this paper (see Kurik forthcoming), so let me just outline some crucial points relevant for my argument. Post-autonomous protests, as the term indicates, follow up from the *Autonomen* which emerged in Germany from 1970s – that is in a period of revolutionary disappointment of “the long 1968”. Political philosopher Pavel Barša and sociologist Ondřej Císař (2004) consider this period crucial for entering what they call post-revolutionary times which are defined by a switch in revolutionary strategy from offensive conquest for power to defensive prefiguration. And prefiguration – that is a combination of confrontation and creating emancipatory alternative here and now on a small scale – is precisely the strategy adapted and deepened by the *Autonomen* as they focused as much on direct street confrontations with a state and capital through riots of so called Black bloc as on building network of squats, autonomous centres, bars, kindergartens, publishing houses etc. Besides, the *Autonomen* shifted a localization of the crucial sphere of revolutionary struggle moving it from factories and workplaces to neighborhoods, housings and everyday life. Whereas the *Post-Autonomen* pick up on this autonomous strategy of prefiguration in the sphere of consumption and leisure time, they differ from the *Autonomen* over several issues such as transforming Black bloc from subcultural lifestyle to a tactic or focusing on a solidarity work in neighborhoods. Whereas the *Autonomen* created autonomous infrastructure of squats and centres and situated the crucial locus of prefiguration within their walls, the *Post-Autonomen* strive to distribute this strategy out of the walls and build and organize counter-hegemony with people through the everyday work in neighborhood. In this distributive sense, contemporary post-autonomous circles keep alive, eventhough transformed, the spirit of prefiguration – the revolutionary strategy in post-revolutionary times of the West.

What intrigued me while analyzing these rebels was the visibility of the post-autonomous turn in architecture of their militant practices as well as in composition of their subjectivity. Following youngsters into riots, jails, universities, the Internet, parents houses as well as on solidarity trips to Mexico, Israel, Denmark or Greece, I have discovered that researched youngsters acquire *the amoebic art of living* as they manage to switch between political shapes of citizens arguing into the revolution with words and seditious Black Bloc rioters operating in anonymity and communicating the revolutionary message through direct actions and their images. In other words, as being educated at universities mostly in social sciences, criticizing anti-intellectualism of an older generation of the *Autonomen* and coming from the middle class and from Germany self-promoted as *Land der Ideen*, amoebic youngsters believe in the power of words and discussions. Post-autonomous militants communicate in a Habermasian public sphere talking people over to the revolution during for example solidarity work in city neighborhoods. From the other side, these

rebellious youngsters keep changing their shape of communication, acquire seditious and disobedient bodies with different affective and kinetic registers, and argue as well for the revolution beyond the verbalized discourse through mass direct actions of Black Bloc in the streets. The amoebic composition of the revolution argumentation thus entails words as well as stones, talks as well as riots and their images.

In such a versatile architecture of militant life, one of the crucial techniques to acquire is switching between different political shapes, that is the process of shaping oneself, which eventually led me to use the term amoebic. Using an example of dis/appearing as a Black Bloc, I have detected and outlined in my dissertation (Kurik 2015) four crucial axis of such versatility – communication, body, in/dividuality and appearance. One of the crucial functions of the switching is simply tactical – it enables amoebic militants to distribute and assemble different shapes in a political terrain based on a separation and demarcation of legal and illegal sphere. As far as an action radius of contemporary revolutionary youth in Germany touches both of the spheres, youngster subjectivity is formed as amoebic in which the techniques of shaping increase the possibility to keep disconnected unrecognisable and non-documented collective body of a Black bloc from civil ID of individualized body.

However, the amoebic switching of post-autonomous rebels from contemporary Germany reveals, I believe, something more than tactical issues only. It provides, as I try to show in this paper, an interesting insight about what does it take to keep alive the idea of revolution by rebellious youngsters in specific historical time defined in the Old Continent not only as post-revolutionary times, but from the millennial turn onwards as well as times of the post-political consensus.

Rebellious ways out of the Post-Politics

When the Soviet world collapsed in late 1980s and early 1990s, the public discourse at the Old Continent was overfilled with claims about ends of utopia, ideology, history or revolution. It seemed like the post-revolutionary turn after the long 1968 to defensive strategy of prefiguration was followed by and multiplied into thesis of the end of revolution whatsoever in the long 1989. Usually, those end claims were infused with affects of relief, joy, satisfaction and grace. But such sentiment was not the case of few-in-numbers but influential group of Western intellectuals which refused the fatalistic thesis and started to analyse it critically. Authors like Rancière (2004), Mouffe (2005) or Swyngedouw (2008) and others scrutinized the thesis as being part in the West of what they termed the post-political consensus “*built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system, parliamentary democracy as the political ideal, humanitarianism and inclusive cosmopolitanism as a moral foundation.*” (Swyngedouw 2008: 19) Besides, they shared an effort to enliven against the post-political status quo issues of radical politics, tasks for rebellion, possibilities of emancipatory revolutions for the 21st century (e.g. Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Although these authors offer different answers, frames and contingencies about rebellious potentials, they share at least two important epistemological as well as ontological points of departure. First of all, they are all professional intellectuals employed by elite universities and research institutions of the West whose answers embody similarities of their shape – they are usually discursive, analytically structured, framed in a language of political philosophy and theory, presented in articles and books published by prestigious Western publishing houses. Second, they share, as already indicated, anchoring their answers in a particular ontology of politics which is engined by a search for possibilities and conditions for revolutionary change. In other words, their outcomes are rather ontological than empirical (Koch and Beveridge 2017: 35).

From an empirical point of view, however, such cohort of leading intellectuals represents only one socio-political kind of people in the West searching for a rebellious way out of the post-political consensus. Such cohort is connected to a particular style of professional-intellectual life which is forged through practices of theoretical reasoning, lecturing, writing, reading, discussing, talking at events etc. However, there are different kinds of people, different styles of life with different practices and different lifeworlds cultivated around similar search for a revolutionary way out of the post-political consensus. And it is precisely this alterity which keeps interesting me in last decade as

I try to unravel and present few of these rebellious worlds inductively using anthropological research. In other words, my point of departure is rather empirical than ontological. I'm particularly interested in researching those rebellious kinds of people who on one side share grassroots approach of autonomous politics from below but on the other side differ in geopolitical localizations of their respected struggles. To be more concrete, over the last 10 years, I have been researching this issue in three different contexts – within the neo-zapatist network in post-colonial Mexico, among the anarcho-punks in post-socialist Czech Republic and among the post-autonomous militants in reunited Germany which has become a geopolitical superpower in the World again, first time after the WWII. As indicated above, I'm targeting in this paper. But through which questions?

From Revolutions to Revolutionaries

I dissect the rebellious worlds under investigation through these research questions: Who is a contemporary revolutionary and how is s/he made? What one has to do in order to restart the idea of revolution for the 21st century? What kinds of commitments and requirements are connected to such efforts? What sorts of ethical and aesthetic styles of life and formations of selves are forged around revolutionary practices? As such questions indicate, I'm particularly interested in the making of revolutionaries in the post-political times – that is in revolutionary selves and lives and not in revolutions per se. Thus, despite a dominant current within anthropological studies of revolution favouring a macro-structural perspective with a strong Marxist line, my focus is on a revolutionary subjectivity beyond Marxist understanding of the collective subject of change. In doing so, I lean towards the anthropology of revolutionaries inspired by the work of Michel Foucault.

It was in the 1980s when Foucault shifted his interest from a revolution as a technology of government and discourse to ethics, aesthetics and dramatics of life of modern revolutionaries: “*Revolution in the modern European world was not just a political project; it functioned as a principle defining a certain mode of life*” (Foucault 2011: 184). Although Foucault has never realized any empirical research of revolutionaries, his conceptual toolkit is challenging to absorb as it enables to study reconstitutions, stylizations and cultivations of one's self once entangled with a revolution. Therefore, one can start asking following Foucault's example of modern revolutionary, what does it take concerning an art of living to be revolutionaries who rather “*prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey*” (Foucault and Faubion 2001: 450)? Foucault connected modern revolutionary activities with issues of commitment and dis/balance between certainty of obedience and risk of death as he understood them as a matter of a combatant “*life devoted wholly or partially to the Revolution*” (Foucault 2011: 184).¹

The Post-Autonomous Rebel

What entails to be a revolutionary changes in time and space and requires various techniques and skills of resistance, different formations of self as well as different cultivations of ethical and aesthetic life – from an agitator among workers skilled in the rhetoric art, via a bomb-throwing anarchist dexterous in explosive making, rural partisan knowing the terrain very well, to a revolutionary student from the 1960s willing to set off for “a long march through institutions”. When speaking of contemporary Germany, the post-autonomous revolutionaries represent the dominant variation of a revolutionary self of radical left embodying yet another militant subjectivity developing in the post-war history of the country alongside the Marxist-Leninist self, the New Left subject, the urban guerilla figure or the autonomous squatter mentioned already in the beginning.

1 He detects three great forms of a militant life. First, there is a revolutionary life, which aims to be invisible, and is formed in a secret sociality (associations, plots, movement beginnings, etc.). Second, there is a revolutionary life, which takes instead a form of a visible and established organization, aiming at the political arena (institutionalization, revolutionary trade unions, or political parties). Third, there is a revolutionary life where militancy means a style of existence, which breaks with the norms and habits of a society by scandalously exposing them as unacceptable and unbearable. Together with this, such life “*must manifest directly, by its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence, the concrete possibility and the evident value of an other life, which is the true life.*” (Foucault 2011: 186) To sum up, there is a sociality, an organization, and a style of existence, which form major components of the revolutionary life. They emerge in different times, merge with each other until today producing particular revolutionary styles of life and selves.

What makes the revolutionary subject of amoebic militants unique, I believe, is that it operates with more political shapes mastering the art of switching.

But what does this amoebic way of doing politics and the tactical function of switching reveal about a risk and commitment connected to forming a militant self in contemporary post-political times in Germany? The stake of the contemporary amoebic revolutionaries in Germany differs and follows different logic of a risk than the abandoning-former-life-and-facing-death commitment of modern revolutionaries outlined by Foucault. In Germany, the last historical example of such death-facing commitment of revolutionaries was seen in lives of urban guerilla members from 1970s such as Ulrike Meinhof from RAF. Meinhof left her children and set out for a one-way journey to live in illegality with no way back. The journey ended up with her death in a prison in 1976.

When I followed amoebic youngsters on their trip to Israel and Palestine in the beginning of 2012, we ended up in a Palestinian refugee camp close to the city of Bethlehem. A local guide telling us a story of this particular place as well as more general story of Palestinians in resistance toured us through the camp. When passing by graffiti in Palestinian flag colours, the guide stopped and started to talk about the figure of martyr and the honour to die in the “fight for freedom of Palestine” and to be killed by the enemy. Anti-nationalist youngsters disagreed with him – not only refusing the whole idea of dying for a nation or the concept of martyrdom, but as well impugning to imbue with positive values the idea of dying for better cause in general. On the way back from the camp, one of them told me “*I don't want to die fighting for the revolution or fighting against the enemy.*” “*What is good in that?,*” he asked me rhetorically. Before I could say anything he recalled the new example they know from antifascist circles in Germany. “*I mean, check out the growing Salafism in Germany. As antifascists we were used to some kind of moderation when fighting neo-Nazis and the same for neo-Nazis when fighting us. But Salafists? They give a fuck about moderation. They are willing to die. How to resist them then?*” he again concluded with an open question he did not have the answer for.

What kind of risk then is connected to amoebic techniques and practices of resistance beyond question of life and death? From one side, amoebic militants live in the post-political times of liberal democracy where free speech is guaranteed and therefore they can criticize freely and talk over to revolution “*without the risk of being imprisoned or even killed*”. From the other side, riots are not considered legal and therefore the risk of being a rioter is different – higher and even calculable through the penal code, court and practices of evidence. To mitigate this risk, the riots are wrapped in a whole alternative security network where cosmology of collective security of left radicals is put in practice as opposed to liberal cosmology of security seeking for individual troublemakers and embedded in the state (Krøijer 2013). Legal teams, solidarity networks for left radical defendants or prisoners like *Rote Hilfe*, movement resources etc. - all these institutionalized structures are designed to mitigate the risk connected to a left militant participation in riots and other kinds of direct action.

Now, what does this mitigated risk reveal about the amoebic revolutionaries in post-political Germany? One day I discussed with some youngsters revolution and asked about their familiarity with texts of Rosa Luxemburg. One of them responded: “*I know them only a little. But what stays in my head from reading them is her optimism and belief that the revolution was just about to succeed. Even more, she was hundred percent sure that revolution would come as it was inevitable. Her victorious spirit is what I remember. But today? It seems so far away!*” “*This is also the reason why I was super-interested in the Zapatistas,*” said one researched militant and continued “*They brought the revolutionary hope back to the game. It is not auf der Tagesordnung, but it is possible.*” He used a German phrase *die Revolution auf der Tagesordnung* he knew from texts about student movement of the long 1968 in Germany when many radical students actually thought that the revolution was just behind the corner.² An that is not the case of nowadays. The revolution is off the table but post-autonomous youngsters refuse to get rid of it once and for all and instead forge their

2 In contrast Theodor W. Adorno disputed this vision much to the annoyance of revolutionary students (and in disagreement with Herbert Marcuse) and instead, tried to show that there was no revolutionary situation (see Adorno 2005a, 2005b, Adorno and Marcuse 1999).

attitude towards it. From one side, the *Post-Autonomes* approach revolution beyond triumphant and heroic optimism or even historical necessity, but from the other side strive to avoid scepticism, cynicism, defeatism or resignation. Instead, they search for ways updated for the present how to keep alive and preserve the idea of “small ‘r’ revolution” in their amoebic practices of a small scale radius of distributive prefiguration in neighbourhoods as well as Black bloc riots. The contemporary task is not an offensive one – that is how to win, not even a defensive one, but rather minimalist one – that is how to rise a hope for a revolutionary change and keep it alive in practices.

Thus, amoebic self and way of doing militant politics refer to sort of a revolutionary minimalism not only in post-revolutionary, but as well in post-political times. Amoebic youngsters mask not only due to immediate tactic, because they are not sure that the revolution will soon (if ever) come. Why to risk a lot from losing once life to a long-time imprisonment for something which is so far away? The post-autonomous militants are committed to keep the idea of revolution alive in their political practices costing them a huge amount of energy every week, but in the same time they keep some sort of distance – what if the revolution, after all, won't come during their lives? Contrary to the older Red Army Fraction, the post-autonomous militants avoid one way journey into illegality, an either-or question considering revolutionary commitment as well as a risk of dying or a life imprisonment. They as well differ from one way journey towards illegality of the *Autonomes*, whose task was to build a “dual power” of networked squats and live as parallel lives as possible in autonomous quarters of big German cities. Instead, amoebic youngsters skilled in the shape shifting keep more possibilities open for one's life trajectory. It is precisely this amoebic character of post-autonomous youngsters which mitigates the risk of being captured or even imprisoned and enables them to perpetuate and continue what they do in more shapes and on more fronts. It is my argument though that such amoebic style of life is not only relative to tactic per se, but that the amoebic composition reveals the minimalistic attitude towards revolution through which the militants try to enliven and preserve an actualized idea of revolution for 21st century. However, if the revolution is still postponed a couple of years or even decades, the post-autonomous rebels tired or incapable of shaping can rest and take a deep breath while living comfortable lives. Their back up doors remain open.

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