

## **The 'Autonomous Nationalists': new developments and contradictions in the German neo-Nazi movement**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the action repertoires, symbolism and political ideology of the 'Autonomous Nationalists' (Autonome Nationalisten in German) that have emerged as a sub-cultural youth trend within the German extreme right. Agitating within a landscape of networked, extra-parliamentary neo-Nazi organisations, Autonomous Nationalist activism forms a specific subsection within the German extreme right that copies the styles, codes and militancy of anarchist and radical left activists. A political analysis of its texts and slogans reveals a self-definition as 'anti-capitalist' and 'national socialist'. A particular mobilisation potential beyond the traditional and party-political forms of extreme nationalism is fuelled by an openly displayed confrontational militancy, mostly directed at anti-fascist and left-wing groups and individuals, and by strong counter-cultural aspects. The article analyses how this emphasis on individual forms of expressions and rebellion appears to stand in contradiction with fascist understandings of organisation and has put the movement at odds with the established neo-Nazi scene in Germany.*

### **Introduction**

When the first Autonomous Nationalists began adopting the stylistic elements of left-wing and anarchist counter-culture, many organised fascists rejected this as a temporary sub-cultural fad. However, the social phenomenon of young people, mostly men, forming black blocs and engaging in violent and militant street demonstrations against 'global capitalism' has taken a foothold within the neo-Nazi spectrums in Germany, Belgium and Holland as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. Certainly, more traditional and populist politics remain central to the extreme right movement in Europe. The Autonomous Nationalists present more of a fringe phenomenon, yet they make for a particularly rich case study due to the strategic and conscious use of symbolic codes, its elements appealing to youth culture, and the reactions they have provoked both within the traditional organised fascist movement, and amongst anti-fascists and the democratic public discourse. What is more, noting their networked and horizontal appearance, their focus on DIY and counter-culture, and their anti-capitalist sloganeering allows for a particular and critical angle from which to examine the contradictory nature of such themes and methods in the neo-Nazi movement.

We can situate the emergence of the Autonomous Nationalists as resulting from within organised militant fascist groups in some urban centres, especially in

Berlin, at around the beginning of the 2000s. It is thus important to note the specific situation of post-reunification, which in Germany had led to new forms of organisation within the neo-Nazi scene. Whereas in the early years after reunification disorganised networks of fascists dominated the headlines, soon new forms of militant street organisation appeared, especially the network of the *Freie Kameradschaften* (the free fellowships). These are groups of extra-parliamentary significance that seek to establish themselves as political actors outside of the more traditional political party approach coming from the main far right parties, especially the NPD (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschland*). The less rigid structures and the tendency towards avant-garde and disestablishment politics allowed for a situation where new trends, analysis and symbolic codes could develop unchecked by the established channels of fascist agitation and free of the structures of party politics.

The Autonomous Nationalists thus provide a greater appeal to nationalist youth, especially around the topic of globalisation. They mirror the internationalist language of the global justice movements with their own nationalist rejection of globalisation. However, as we will see, they employ a particular 'globalist' approach to their mobilisation and political expression – one that makes ample use of imagery and rhetoric borrowed from radical left and alternative subcultures; a fact that undermines their claims to give expression to the 'no global' and anti-multicultural perspectives of nationalist and neo-Nazi youths. The internet here proves vital for propaganda and recruitment purposes, with many Autonomous Nationalist groups using social media, blogs and youtube videos to promote their activities to potential supporters.

This article is based around a content analysis of several such websites. It detects a self-understanding that is deeply contradictory, for example in terms of the opposition of nationalism and globalisation, movement and party, rebellion and *realpolitik*. In terms of primary sources, the paper takes accounts of Autonomous Nationalist events from the German media as well as from anti-fascist and educational resources. This is combined with an analysis of the self-presentation by Autonomous Nationalist groups on internet platforms, and content analysis of their banners and slogans. Secondary analysis is taken from the few scholarly accounts of the movement in German language, as well as further studies of recent developments in German extreme nationalist discourse and action repertoire.

After a descriptive and illustrative account of several demonstrations and actions that involved Autonomous Nationalists, the article looks at three aspects: first, it accounts for the stylistic and symbolic elements of Autonomous Nationalist action repertoires, describing them as a response to, and adaptation of, alter-globalisation and anarchist militancy on demonstrations. Second, it investigates the movement's ideologically-justified perspective on violence against 'political enemies'. Third, the article offers an assessment of the political ideology of Autonomous Nationalist mobilisation as driven by the concern over anti-globalist and anti-multicultural themes, which are being approached from a distinct ethno-pluralist and sometimes antisemitic angle. This allows us to

return to the question of contradiction of organisational form and political content in our conclusions.

### **Locating the Autonomous Nationalists**

It is certainly the case that in terms of numbers of supporters and active organisers, the Autonomous Nationalists remain a fringe phenomenon on the German extreme right. Nonetheless, their influence has slowly grown. While in 2007 the Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution still counted only about 200 individuals as belonging to the Autonomous Nationalist scene (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2007), in 2009 the figure was estimated to lie around the 400-500 mark, making roughly 10 percent of the organised neo-Nazi movement (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2009). The agency's first report was titled "a militant fringe phenomenon", whereas the 2009 report no longer made such mentions of a fringe, instead focusing on increasing militancy. In one of the latest reports in 2011, for the state of Brandenburg alone, police estimates counted some 320 individuals as belonging to the militant organised neo-Nazi spectrum, with 160 of them belonging to the Autonomous Nationalist scene (Scharf 2011: 79).

Beyond simple capacities and numbers, however, the Autonomous Nationalists matter politically. Their appearance and rebellious attitude raise questions beyond the specific contexts of the German far right, and can even help us rethink themes of rebellion and resistance that we identify as progressive and as belonging to the left. Firstly, autonomous nationalism as a political tendency certainly punches above its weight. It has influenced and sparked debates within the German far right, as well as within fascist youth movements in other European countries. As such it opens up questions over the future of fascist organisation in Europe, at a time when network politics appears to exert stronger mobilising factors than traditional organisational structures. Second, it highlights the importance of rebellion, counter-culture and globalisation-critical attitude for an ultra-nationalist perspective.

The latter also impels us to question certain presuppositions held about the autonomous left and alter-globalisation movement. For example, to what extent are DIY attitudes, horizontal organisation and rebellious counter-culture necessarily defining characteristics of New Left-style politics? Is the endorsement of such principles by youth movements of the far right an example of simple imitation, or are more fundamental connections to be made? I will return to these questions as I discuss the Autonomous Nationalists' use of symbolic codes, street-based violence and political ideology.

### ***Stolberg, 12 April 2008***

450 neo-Nazis march through the town of Stolberg, close to the Dutch border. Many are masked, provoke scuffles with the police, and attempt to reach the neighbourhoods where most of the small migrant population lives. They are

running five hours late, after advance stop and searches by police led to confiscations of dangerous objects, amongst them sling shots and an axe. Scuffles also break out between the demonstration stewards, mostly members of the NPD, and several of the 'autonomous' protesters. At the end of the day, according to anti-fascist sources (Blockieren 2012), there are 31 injured and several dozen arrests. The demonstration came just one week after a group of German men clashed with a group of 'migrant youths' in Stolberg after a night out. A German was killed in the fight. Nationalists in the area accused the attackers of 'anti-German racism'. This is also the theme of the demonstration ("Murder, Mourning, Resistance"). A spontaneous march had already attracted 160 neo-Nazis on the day after the incident.

The Stolberg marches are now annual events, organised by the NPD. They count amongst the larger regular neo-Nazi events drawing participants not only from Germany but also from neighbouring countries such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands. And they have become important events for Autonomous Nationalists who form a large section of the demonstrations. While the demonstrations are now tightly regulated, both by the NPD organisers and the police, Autonomous Nationalists use the mobilisation for activities before and after, in Stolberg and in nearby towns. Anti-fascist reports mention attacks on social centres in the area as well as physical assaults on counter-protesters.

### ***Dortmund, 6 September 2008***

More than 1,000 Autonomous Nationalists assemble in the Ruhr Region town of Dortmund for the fourth annual National Anti-War Day. Many of the banners are in English. In speeches, nationalists decry the attempt of 'speculators and globalists' to take control of world affairs, while the 'peoples of Europe' and the world suffer. They declare opposition to 'war and capitalism', to American global hegemony and cultural imperialism. Their chants demand 'National Socialism Now' and they pride themselves as being free and autonomous from nationalist membership organisations. The day is specially targeted at non-German nationalists who participate from various countries. There are groups from Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the Czech Republic. Some of the speakers have come from as far away as Russia and Bulgaria, and a message by a Palestinian activist is read out, condemning the Israeli occupation.

### ***Hamburg, 1 May 2008***

The NPD has organised one of its regional Labour Day marches in Hamburg. 1,500 neo-Nazis take part, many of them belonging to the militant spectrum of the *Freie Kameradschaften*. Amongst them are between 300 and 500 Autonomous Nationalists. Repeatedly they form blocs to break away from the official demonstration route, attacking counter-protesters and bystanders. Several journalists are assaulted and their equipment targeted. Police later release a statement declaring that they regarded 80 percent of the marchers as 'prepared to use violence' (Zand-Vakili 2008). Journalists report the attacks on

them as ranging from spitting, kicking and throwing punches to attempts to grab camera equipment and verbal (death) threats. Photos, names and addresses of journalists appear on neo-Nazi websites in the days after with calls to further intimidate them. While this is not a new development within the violent-prone extreme right scene, what is reportedly new is the co-ordinated attack on individual journalists by groups of up to 30-40 activists, dressed in black and masked to hide their identity. Moreover, in Hamburg this was carried out within view of NPD politicians and other leading neo-Nazi organisers.

These examples of Autonomous Nationalist agitation and street presence indicate that the movement has succeeded at questioning and undermining the established action repertoires of the extreme right that had stressed discipline and order as priorities for public appearances. This has led to tense relationships with other spectrums of the neo-Nazi movement. The Autonomous Nationalists did not emerge within a vacuum or even a lull of extreme right organisation in Germany. They entered a political milieu that was dominated, on the one hand, by the political party formation of the NPD, and on the other, by the extra-parliamentary organisations of the *Freie Kameradschaften*.

The relationship to these established groups has been incredibly volatile, at times marked by open hostility from both sides and especially from within the party, and at other times mutual tolerance and acceptance (see Sager 2011). References to youth rebellion and counter-culture puts the Autonomous Nationalists much at odds with otherwise organised fascism, the latter often putting emphasis on internal discipline, hierarchy and orderly appearance. No appeal is made to the broader public, to public opinion, or to national electorates. In contrast, there is a marked contempt for the 'ordinary public' that follows the 'inauthentic' and 'mind-numbing' leads of elite culture. This brand of fascism, then, appears as a social movement not so much in a populist sense but as a minoritarian and elitist strand that challenges liberal democracy as much as it rejects traditional nationalist politics.

Accordingly, some groups within this movement assert their 'autonomy' from the existing, established structures and organisations. The group *Autonome Nationalisten Salzgitter*, for example, writes:

Autonomous activism is a promising new strategy of offering active political resistance. The stiff structures of parties, fellowships or associations are far too vulnerable to state repressions and attacks by the political enemy (*Autonome Nationalisten Salzgitter* 2012).

They explain that in their immediate past, leading activists were repeatedly arrested, propaganda material confiscated, and concerts and other events prevented from going ahead. They complain that this could result in a drastic quieting down of nationalist activities in certain local areas.

As a loose/independent grouping of activists we try to avoid such ramifications. There are no leading political figureheads whose arrest could jeopardise the group, there are no membership lists which could make us vulnerable to repression – as we are no association or similar you cannot simply ban us like certain *Kameradschaften*, we aren't easy targets for the political enemy and yet we are always present through our Autonomous Activism (which has many forms)! (Autonome Nationalisten Salzgitter 2012).

For the politicians of the NPD as well as many within the skinhead scene, the Autonomous Nationalists posed the question of strategy for the success of extreme right ideas within the general population. Do black blocs on demonstrations against welfare cuts attract or repel potential supporters? Initially the reaction from both the spectrum of the parliamentary party and the *Freie Kameradschaften* was one of complete opposition. With the success of the Autonomous Nationalists to attract young people to the cause, and continuous scandals that rocked the NPD (suspicions of widespread infiltration by security services, fraud and financial misdemeanours), an increasing number of activists and groups belonging to the extra-parliamentary milieu of the neo-Nazi right implicitly or explicitly changed from opposition towards tacit support. Eventually, changes within the leadership of the NPD allowed for a more ambivalent relationship with the black blocs of the Autonomous Nationalists, to the extent that even within the NPD certain factions and individuals called for the acceptance of black blocs on demonstrations.

## **Style and symbolism**

We aren't simple-minded thugs with skinhead, bomber jackets and combat boots up to the knee. We are young people like you, from the heart of our country. We carry pride in our hearts and hope in our eyes. We fight to ensure that the future will be better than the conditions that we have now. Germany will sparkle like fresh dew in the morning (Autonome Nationalisten Haltern am See 2012).

This self-description on the website of one Autonomous Nationalist group, with similar statements on many others, nicely sums up a rationale for the new style as well as its contradictory nature. While it is described as an attempt to escape the traditionally alienating image of a previous generation of neo-Nazis, it nonetheless promotes a new counter-culture that is explicitly posited against the mainstream. Younger activists claim that they feel alienated by the sub-cultural attire donned by a previous generation of neo-Nazis. The looks, music and behavioural attitudes associated with skinhead culture no longer speak to them. On the other hand, activists also make the claim that the rejection of skinhead fascism is tactical. It is an attempt to blend in, to be approachable as young people like all others. They see themselves as belonging to the 'middle of society', at least in terms of backgrounds and style. The following paragraphs

that describe the conscious building of a sub-cultural milieu and identity, ranging from music to fashion, certainly contradict such claims. Autonomous nationalism gains credibility with certain sections of young Germans not because of its image as stemming from 'the heart of the country', but through its antagonistic and rebellious attitude at the fringe of the extreme nationalist movement. Its public presentation on demonstrations and other activities that are portrayed frequently via websites, blogs and youtube videos clearly mark them out for their attempts to form a scene with its distinct codes and practices.

Black blocs of Autonomous Nationalists first publicly appeared on neo-Nazi demonstrations in Berlin around 2003/2004. Since then they have built networks of activists and groups that combine aspects of rebellious youth culture with extreme nationalist and National Socialist ideology and street presence. There are dozens such groups represented on the internet, with most describing themselves as part of a youth movement, and sometimes stating their activists' ages as ranging somewhere from between 16 to 26. Nationally within Germany they have built a coherent and homogenous identity mostly through the use of counter-cultural symbolism and action repertoires. They are thus part of what Roger Griffin has termed the 'groupuscular right', the post-1945 phenomenon of a myriad of small and often short-lived assemblages which constitute networks of political ideology and social and cultural identity where 'revolutionary' (or palingenetic, to use Griffin's term) variants of fascism and National Socialism continue to thrive. Maintaining its distance from the 'official' and populist far right, "the groupuscule has the Janus-headed property of combining organizational autonomy with the ability to create informal linkages with, or reinforce the influence of, other such formations" (Griffin 2003b: 30, see also Virchow 2004, Sommer 2008: 310).

The emergence of the groupuscular movement of autonomous nationalism is related to the particular context of the neo-Nazi scene in re-unified Germany. The 1990s saw a rise not only of neo-fascist organisation, primarily through the party political platform of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschland* (NPD), but also of more militant and movement-political expressions of extreme nationalism, xenophobia and antisemitism. Where we can witness the (re-)emergence of a self-proclaimed 'national-revolutionary' movement, this has helped to put renewed emphasis on 'social-revolutionary' politics in some neo-Nazi scenes. German militant neo-Nazis are often organised in so called *Freie Kameradschaften* (free fellowships). We find here an 'anti-capitalist' self-understanding (Schlembach 2008) that can be traced back to the 'left wing' of Hitler's NSDAP party and in particular to the ideas of Gregor and Otto Strasser and to the leader of the SA, Ernst Röhm. From the 'national-revolutionary' perspective, those men formed part of a revolutionary, anti-capitalist wing within the NSDAP, with the aim to replace a class-based society with a socialist and 'culturalist' (*völkisch*) economic system. While connections to the NPD exist, the *Freie Kameradschaften* employ more militaristic, street-based methods (see for example Röpke and Speit 2004, Virchow 2004).

In Germany, the Autonomous Nationalists form a sub-section within this milieu. Within it, they seek a more alternative lifestyle and counter-cultural political expression. The most obvious and apparent feature of the Autonomous Nationalists is manifested in the aesthetics of its street presence (see for example Schedler 2011a). While the post-reunification neo-Nazi scene in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s was dominated by skinhead culture, the 2000s saw a diversification of styles, brands and clothing labels.

Most strikingly, the movement has adopted and appropriated the stylistic approach of left-wing counter-culture, especially the look of the black blocs of the *Autonomen*, anti-fascist and radical alter-globalisation movements. A typical demonstration of Autonomous Nationalists will see activists dress in black hoodies or windbreakers, black baseball caps, leather gloves and sunglasses, similar in style to many anti-fascist activists. Political banners and slogans give similar impressions of sub-cultural rebelliousness. Often they are written and chanted in English. The fonts sometimes resemble those of graffiti art known originally from the American Hip Hop scene. Gone are the letters of the traditional German fonts that are widely used in the European and North American skinhead movements.

The Autonomous Nationalists' representation on the internet and in user-controlled social media is no different. Music that underlies myspace pages or youtube clips is often sung in English. Yet, their lyrics betray them to be part of international fascist music networks, such as Blood and Honour. The typical politics of these songs would treat topics such as honour and patriotism, the defence of European civilisation, or the unity of nationalist movements. But music genres that act as bonding and identity-forming within the extreme nationalist youth culture have equally undergone adaptation (see Raabe and Langebach 2011). In the early 1990s this was predominantly rock music. In the late 1990s and early 2000s the repertoire of fascist bands diversified markedly. In part, youth culture accepted a return to more traditional German folk music, while on the other hand American influences of heavy metal bands created a new fascist metal genre, the NS-Black-Metal. This diversification not only allowed for new styles and genres to emerge, but also for the acceptance of a non-commercial DIY music scene and a more sceptical view of personality cult and stardom. Here, this shift was already characterised by the appropriation and reinterpretation of music and lyrics associated with left-wing anti-establishment bands and labels.

All internet sites run by Autonomous Nationalist groups stress the aspects of DIY and autonomy from commercial music labels, from profitable clothing brands or from established political organisations. They include links and thematic sections on topics ranging from 'anti-capitalism' to 'autonomy', and often redirect to sub-cultural sites with explicit National Socialist content. They might feature pictures of graffiti and street art, stencil kits to download, stickers to print and order, or nationalist music to download and to buy online. The website of the Autonomous Nationalists North Thuringia, as just one example, entails such links and references. Under the entry 'activism' we find solidarity



campaigns with fascist groups and movements in other countries, self-shot videos of the group's activities, as well as other campaign and boycott materials. The entry 'do it yourself' has information on organising demonstrations, computer and internet security (remaining anonymous when posting online and protecting computers against hackers), as well as guides on making stencils, poster and banners. The section called 'scene' has links to other nationalist groups, related blogs and recommended music (Autonome Nationalisten Nordthüringen 2012). Such focus on DIY, autonomy and modern youth culture is repeated on dozens of websites by Autonomous Nationalist weblogs and websites. They give clear hints and advice on which aesthetics are admissible in the scene. Some go so far as to call for boycotts of well known neo-Nazi clothing brands that produce clothing abroad. They attack them for selling out and turning into 'capitalist companies' that sell overpriced clothing and abandon the German youth into debt and into 'interest-rate slavery'.

Other than the visual and aesthetic elements that characterise the Autonomous Nationalists on public demonstrations, there is also a level of militancy and often a conscious display of 'machismo' or aggression that separates it clearly from the rest of the neo-Nazi spectrum, at least in terms of public appearance and enforced discipline on demonstrations and rallies. The Autonomous Nationalists display a level of spontaneous aggressiveness that is expressed by black bloc participants in attempts to provoke at least a symbolic confrontation with the police or left-wing counter-protesters. Black blocs remain clearly demarcated from other extreme right marchers by banners, slogans and stylistic attire (at times this can lead to clashes within fascist demonstrations themselves). To understand why Autonomous Nationalists rather cherish this separation, it helps, perhaps, to understand the term autonomy/autonomous as signalling independence not only from state and party-focused politics but also from other organised sections of the fascist movement. It is an attitude mainly of rebellion against what are perceived as established and establishment channels of political expression. In the following section I look more closely at the ideological justifications for the Autonomous Nationalists' rebellious, militant and often violent repertoires.

### **Violence as political ideology**

The recent discovery of an underground cell of armed extreme right activists in Germany (the National Socialist Underground), and its high profile trial for a number of murders, has reinvigorated discussion about neo-Nazi violence. While neo-fascist political parties are struggling to establish themselves more prominently in Germany's political landscape beyond the *Länderebene* (regional level) due partly to the hurdles presented by Germany's electoral model and failed modernisation strategies (see for example Rensmann 2006), militant organisations of the extreme right continue to pose a threat in their role of street-level militants.

Since reunification, there has been a wealth of research about racist street violence perpetrated by Germany's extreme right. Here, most research and media attention has focused on anti-foreigner violence triggered by high-profile attacks, riots and murders of asylum seekers and other foreigners such as those in Rostock, Mölln or Hoyerswerda in the 1990s (for example Atkinson 1993, Heitmeyer 1993, Kurthen et al. 1997). These were characterised by a passive tolerance, and in some cases participation, by bystanders, and thus a blurring of the boundaries between organised extreme right activists and nationalist locals and youths. Violence here became more generalised than that perpetrated by 'activists' with connections to the resurgent fascist movement. There have been convincing attempts to explain these events of the 1990s as caused by psychological, social or opportunity factors (for example Willems 1995, Koopmans and Olzak 2004, Koopmans 2006). In particular, the concurrent changes to the right to claim asylum in the Federal Republic, perceived as political concessions to the street violence, contributed to boost the confidence of the extreme right. With an increasing state awareness and repression of extreme right activists and organisations, racist violence in Germany has been conceptualised as a result of grievances or opportunities, mainly perpetrated by nationalist youth gangs with spontaneous attacks against foreigners.

The case of the Autonomous Nationalists is different. Violence is justified ideologically. More often than not it is directed not against foreigners but against political adversaries and pre-organised, combined with political propaganda and a presence on street demonstrations and in cyberspace. Anti-fascist documentation tells of large numbers of pre-meditated attacks on left-wing social centres, party headquarters or demonstrations. As a particularly striking example, an anti-fascist group in Dortmund, Westphalia, has registered a number of attacks on a bar known for its alternative audience (*Autonome Antifaschisten Dortmund* 2008). They include at least ten separate incidents associated with this bar in the years 2006-2008. The attacks ranged from physical assault on customers, some of them using weapons such as batons and pepperspray, vandalism with graffiti, or window-breaking. The majority of these were associated with activists from the Autonomous Nationalist spectrum and at times coincided with the mobilisation to larger neo-Nazi events in the area.

To understand the portrayed militancy and forms of violence perpetrated by activists organised in these autonomous neo-Nazi networks, analytical frameworks that stipulate the importance of causes such as (youth-)cultural and social context, grievances or opportunity structures are insufficient. The forms of extreme right organisation that we focus on here present a different picture. This is not to say that anti-foreigner violence is not persistent; however there has also been a 'specialisation' of violence, one that is politically mediated and justified with reference to National Socialist political ideology, anti-capitalism, self-sacrifice or discipline (see for example Griffin 1999, 2003a, Virchow 2007, Sommer 2008, Funke 2009). On closer examination, this form of militancy is also distinct and functions on a different level from the organisational forms adopted by anarchist and radical left *Autonome* where they use black bloc tactics on demonstrations. The critical and self-critical movement-internal

debates around the topics of violence, gender roles and equality that are a persistent feature of the latter are almost entirely absent from the counter-cultural scene of the Autonomous Nationalists. It is in this context that much of the German scholarship attached to 'extremism studies' problematises the comparison (e.g. by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) of neo-Nazi violence and militant anti-fascism (see Häusler 2011).

Violence on street demonstrations, but also outside of those, is thus a central and politicised aspect of the Autonomous Nationalists agitation. It directs itself against the police (as forces of the liberal-democratic state), against those that think or look differently (punks, the left and trade unionists) and against foreigners or immigrants. Much of the more organised and targeted violence however is directed at anti-fascists, especially socialist and anti-fascist youth organisations. Here the Autonomous Nationalists organise around the label of 'Anti-Antifa' to reveal and publicise names and addresses of socialist and anti-fascist youth members who can subsequently become targets of personal attacks or attacks on their property.

This change of focus has an impact on the analysis of both actors and action repertoires. First, the extreme right actors are considered distinctly ideological *and* sub-cultural. The Autonomous Nationalists see themselves as part of a 'national resistance' movement with political motivations that go much further than anti-foreigner sentiments, moving towards engagement and/or endorsement of Nationalist Socialist thought. Second, the types of violence are different and diverse: more than the attacks on foreigners and asylum-seekers, violence typical of the contemporary neo-Nazi movements include attacks on political opponents, football fan clubs, and even rival far right activists.

The style and militancy of such political activity are not accidental. References to anarchist or autonomist politics have become commonplace, as have Che Guevara t-shirts and Palestinian symbols such as the *keffiyeh* scarf or the national flag. They do not simply champion the ideas of national liberation and the 'self-determination of peoples' but express an aggressive rebelliousness directed against the state and democratic politics. Displayed acts of violence, especially against political opponents, are justified politically. In what follows we will see how autonomous nationalism makes no or only rare reference to notions of popular racism but rather seeks forms of expressions that are deliberately targeted at a young nationalist audience.

### **Political ideology**

On one level, the Autonomous Nationalists subscribe to an imitation of autonomous and anarchist lifestyle and repertoires without giving up the traditional extreme right focus on immigration and national identity. More than that however, they have constructed a political framework within which ultra-nationalism and a hatred of multiculturalism goes hand in hand with agitation against globalisation and capitalism. The political content of banners, flyers,

websites or chants reveal a number of ‘enemies’ that range from American foreign policy to Islam and the anti-fascist movement.

As such, while their focus on action and activism as well as the adoption of rebellious codes and rhetoric appear ‘modern’, what passes as political theory propagated by the movement remains decidedly ‘traditional’ in its references to National Socialist ideology and the far right concerns with immigration and multiculturalism. Where Autonomous Nationalists do use a more ‘radical’ rhetoric than that espoused by the NPD and many organisations of the extra-parliamentary extreme right, this is often summed up in their anti-systemic slogans against capitalism and imperialism. Most activist websites describe their adherence to stylistic codes and autonomy as primarily tactical, rather than ideological. For example, on their website the Autonomous Nationalists Wetzlar state that:

Autonomous Nationalism refers to a form of action, which has been developed within the nationalist movement in recent years. It does not denote a distinct worldview. The basic thought behind it is a kind of ‘Do it yourself’ activist; so somebody who is politically active and creative, without having to be tied to a specific organisation (Autonome Nationalisten Wetzlar 2012).

The statement goes on to explain the black bloc as a tactic against police surveillance allowing for anonymity and insists that the movement is an attempt to break out of the sub-cultural politics of the neo-Nazi scene.

Despite this insistence that references to the politics of autonomy are only tactical, rather than ideological, the form, style and methods of autonomous nationalism clearly stand in an ambivalent relationship to its political content. Many activist websites and blogs list a number of ‘concrete demands’, linked to a distinct worldview, which we could categorise as (a) populism, (b) ‘anti-imperialism’, and (c) ‘anti-capitalism’:

### **Populist anti-foreigner positions**

Amongst these, Autonomous Nationalist demands include the death penalty for paedophiles, an immediate end to all immigration, a tightening of asylum legislations, and the removal of ‘criminal’ foreigners from Germany. These certainly are shared by the broader extreme nationalist movement.

### **“Anti-imperialism”**

Autonomous Nationalists demand ‘freedom and sovereignty’ for all ‘nations’ or ‘peoples’. Here the German term *Volk* is used to describe an ethno-pluralist vision of the world. In the German context, ethno-pluralism expresses itself as a demand for the promotion and ‘safeguarding’ of national culture and hence a clear opposition to multiculturalism. One group clarifies:

...in nationalism we do not only see sovereignty for the Germans – but also that of all peoples! Thus we would never take the liberty to deny the equal status of other nations, and we distance ourselves clearly from chauvinistic ideas, because only strong nations can set boundaries for capitalist globalisation (Autonome Nationalisten Wolfenbüttel & Salzgitter 2012).

If ‘authenticity’ is the marker of a nation, then ‘inauthentic’ nations are denied the ‘right to self-determination’. Here, the ethno-pluralist position is focused especially on the United States and on Israel. Feeding on the antisemitism of fascist ideology, Israel is singled out as a state that should not have the right to exist. Accordingly, all independent nations must liberate themselves from the secretive and ubiquitous (read Jewish) influence of America, Israel and its Jews.

The specific anti-imperialist conception of Germany is one that seeks a revisionist understanding of WWII history, or a rejection of the ‘cult of guilt’ where the German nation is understood as the victim of war. As an example, Autonomous Nationalists support and organise commemorations of allied bombings on German towns and seek to make connections with local populations by ‘mourning’ for the fallen German soldiers and ‘civilian’ victims. The largest one of the commemorative events takes place annually in Dresden (the myth of Dresden), where Autonomous Nationalists participate in one of the largest neo-fascist marches in Europe.

### **“Anti-capitalism”**

Autonomous Nationalists seek to abolish what they call the ‘capitalist market economy’. Capitalism is here understood simply in terms of the market and the exploitation of the ‘national working class’ by ‘speculators’. Their demands somewhat echo that of social-democratic parties, with the protection of the welfare for children and pensioners high on the agenda, as well as the guarantee of employment for every German. This does not signal the complete abandonment of an anti-communist platform, however. Rather, Autonomous Nationalists subscribe to a ‘third position’ platform, wanting to see National Socialism in the place of the capitalist market.

What is usually perceived to be a left-wing progressive or even revolutionary agenda needs explanation when it is taken up by actors of the extreme right, especially in the context of the re-emergence of capitalism and globalisation as central themes within the neo-Nazi discourse (see Sommer 2008). Rather than seeing this approach as simply a right-wing tactic to engage with ‘topical’ concerns, Bernd Sommer explains this as both a shift towards answering the ‘social question’ as well as a return to the Nationalist Socialist agenda of the NSDAP’s Strasser faction (see also Armin Pfahl-Traughber 2006, Schlembach 2011).

Sommer mentions recent far right efforts, by the NPD and violence-prone neo-Nazi groups including the *Freie Kameradschaften*, to incorporate environmental, anti-war and anti-globalisation themes into their activities – for example during NPD-organised demonstrations against the G8 summit that took place in Germany in 2007. These, he writes, should not be seen as isolated or one-off incidents. Rather, they signify a move “by extreme-right organizations in Germany to establish anti-capitalist and anti-globalist issues at the centre of their political agendas” (Sommer 2008: 306), and thus to shed the image of a single-issue movement with a sole focus on immigration and race. This strategy has attracted new supporters and voters, especially in regional elections to state parliaments in the East. Sommer describes a shift in the NPD’s political agenda during the past 30 years as one from anti-communism to anti-capitalism. This programme of modernisation has become manifest in the party’s political activities with a focus of propaganda directed at Eastern areas of high unemployment and attempts to establish welfare and labour movement themes as right-wing issues. The 2004 federal laws (Hartz IV) to liberalise the national labour market and cut welfare spending provided a fertile platform from which to approach voters who had become alienated from centre-left and centre-right parties alike. The success – if moderate – of this strategy has given the NPD impetus to continue making forays into tackling ‘the social question’.

Other than the NPD, the *Freie Kameradschaften* themselves operate along an anti-globalisation logic. Sommer describes campaigns, some of them supported by the NPD’s youth wing, that posit the national community against the exploitation by the free markets. In their style, too, these campaigns and loose organisations have departed from the Old Nazi looks that used to characterise the scene during the 1990s. Yet, in contrast to the positions of the Autonomous Nationalists, their texts still speak of strict discipline and honour codes, and make no mention of DIY or autonomy. Importantly, fascist and antisemitic perspectives are incorporated, not abandoned, in this analysis. In fact, for Sommer (2008: 312), “we soon find evidence that, under the surface, racist antisemitic and xenophobic sentiments are still at its [the extreme right critique of globalisation’s] heart.” More than that, they are actually intrinsically linked.

It would be a mistake, thus, to regard the adoption of left-wing positions as simple attempts at imitation. It is certainly true that strategic concerns will play a role, especially where elections are concerned and where traditional racism and prejudices have little appeal. However, the significance of ‘anti-capitalism’ for neo-Nazis is real (see also Schlembach 2008). It is true that the lists of demands and policy suggestions put forward by Autonomous Nationalists on their websites do not represent a political programme in the sense of presenting a set of policy proposals like that of the NPD. Rather their agenda may be reduced to a ‘meta-political’ reference to the themes of nation, race and community. It incorporates an uneasy mix of xenophobia and antisemitism, albeit one that expresses itself primarily as ethno-pluralist.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to attempt a discussion of neo-Nazism as a movement that provides a challenge to globalisation and

capitalism. However, we can characterise the extreme nationalist position as tied to romantic forms of ‘anti-capitalism’, for which capitalist globalisation is perceived as the destroyer of national community. But more than simply on uneven globalisation, a message which is also promoted by more established far right groups (such as the NPD), the Autonomous Nationalists focus on capitalism (Virchow 2011). This extract from a group’s website is an example of how this ‘critique of capitalism’ presents itself:

In a rotten age where capitalism has become synonymous with the enemy of the people, anti-capitalism has become one of the most important aspects of our resistance... Our economy does not serve the people; it serves an absolute minority, at the people’s cost...

Unemployment and the flight of jobs are only the beginning, the environment already suffers from eco-damaging effects of the economy of profit, values and traditions become abolished by Americanisation, wars are fought – under pretence of democratisation – to increase the influence of capital over free nations – until only ‘fast-food-chewing’ consumers are left – a nation directed by consumption, which abandons its protection and thus throws its people under the bus of international capital (Autonome Nationalisten Wolfenbüttel & Salzgitter 2012).

It is true, of course, that the adoption of left-wing and Marxist symbolism is not a new ploy by fascist movements (Wamper et al. 2011). Italian fascism, for example, made use of the songs and myths of the labour movement and gave them a national twist. Against the orthodox Marxist interpretation of fascism as the mere reactionary agent of finance capital and bourgeois interests, a “consensus” (see for example Griffin 2012) in fascism studies now stresses the revolutionary aspect of – at least parts of – the NSDAP, Italian fascism, and fascist movements elsewhere.

This is not necessarily an anti-Marxist position. Moishe Postone’s analysis of reactionary anti-capitalism as a ‘foreshortened’ critique, for example, is firmly rooted within an analysis of capital valorisation and the critique of commodity fetishism (see Postone 1986). His argument points to the anti-modern character of German antisemitism and National Socialism, which brought Jewish banks and businesses into a connection with technological rationalisation and a conspiratorial understanding of international finance capitalism. However, Postone also acknowledges the factual alliance of fascism and German industrial capitalism. His argument somewhat follows that of Horkheimer and Adorno who write that Jews “are the scapegoats not only for individual manoeuvres and machinations but in a broader sense, inasmuch as the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to them” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 174). The national socialist positions of the Autonomous Nationalists thus betray a continuing underlying antisemitism, one that upholds a romantic image of national communities and juxtaposes this to an allegedly intangible, global and

opaque sphere of Jewish interest in international business and government, with a prime focus on the United States.

It is certainly the case, as Sommer states, that the fundamental difference between the extreme right critique of globalisation and the progressive critique lies in the concept of the national. Fascist critiques invariably return to the question of the nation, whether in abstract – such as in romantic conceptions of national communities or ‘nationally-liberated zones’ – or in concrete proposals on immigration or employment rights for foreign nationals. However, looking back at the ethno-pluralist positions outlined above, this nationalism is not simply one of domination over others.

In its rhetoric, the Autonomous Nationalist opposition to globalisation is very similar to that found by Sommer in the NPD and the *Kameradschaften*. If anything, it is even more extreme in its rejection of ‘the system’ and established institutions. According to its own logic, nothing is gained by taking control or winning votes in parliament. The German state itself is so corrupt that only a revolutionary movement can overcome it and put in place a new national order. For Sommer thus, resistance to globalisation by the far right is not just a question of tactics but reflects the opposition of the national to the global. He concludes:

Although it formulates its opposition to globalization in different ideological terms to those used by radical left groups, its resistance to attempts to dismantle the welfare state and to globalized capitalism is still *not simply* a political strategy but something that genuinely forms part of its core agenda (Sommer 2008: 316, emphasis on the original).

This understanding of anti-globalisation themes as embedded within far right thought and practice offers opportunities to rethink and reformulate the critiques of globalisation as offered by left-wing, progressive movements. Few studies of the latter even acknowledge the presence of nationalist and extreme-right discourses on globalisation. Many put a focus on progressive activism, on an ‘alter-’globalisation movement, that presents solutions which are non-hierarchical and internationalist. They point to the networked structure of global anti-corporate movements and would see them as spearheaded by bottom-up and grassroots activists who have rejected the traditional faultlines that underlined orthodox Marxist understandings of capital. Despite the stated heterogeneity of local experiences, most accounts of alter-globalisation make such movements appear remarkably characterised by commonalities.

The typology used by Amory Starr in her book *Naming the Enemy* was an early, notable exception to this trend of excluding nationalist tendencies from the anti-corporate movements. Summarised in the descriptor ‘delinking, relocalisation, sovereignty’ she includes authoritarian and religious nationalisms. This category should then be able to hold extreme right-wing and fascist critiques of globalisation. Yet, it is precisely on the grounds of their non-populist anti-



authoritarianism and horizontally-networked appearance that the Autonomous Nationalists do not fit into a stream of religio-nationalist authoritarianism that opposes globalisation through localism and conservative ecology. Their 'horizontal' and 'autonomous' ways of organising show that such methods are not necessarily unique reserves of the progressive left. And the connection of such methods of organising with their political outlook upon a radical nationalism also insinuates that we need a more sceptical treatment of nation and community sovereignty than that put forward in Starr's account. The notions of autonomy and sovereignty that Starr (and many others in the movement) attempt to rescue from the allegations of essentialism and fascistic nationalism (Starr 2000: 200-222) would need a reassessment. The positive aspects of autonomy movements can no longer unequivocally include such forms of activism that direct themselves against 'their' state and official nationhood. The Autonomous Nationalists in Germany remind us that essentialist nationalisms do not necessarily come in the form of being affirmative to state and capital. The claims to sovereignty, community and nation against neo-liberal globalisation can be genuinely fascist and national-socialist.

### **Outlook and conclusions**

After its initial 'avant-garde' status in Germany's bigger cities, autonomous nationalism now appears to have a mobilisation problem. The Berlin group that began the trend has reduced its activities to Anti-Antifa actions, unable to set the agenda in the local neo-Nazi scene. With the NPD campaigning against globalisation and the excesses of capitalism, and militant fascist organisations engaged in historical revisionist campaigning, the initial spheres of action have closed.

While racist violence is sometimes seen as an East German problem, the Autonomous Nationalists' strongholds now are in the West, especially the region of Westphalia. Estimates are of about 200-250 active individuals regionally, with most activities around the conurbation of Dortmund. In 2008, 21 active groups could be counted, in addition to 15 less active ones in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (Schedler 2011b: 195-97). Activist groups here are networked both regionally and with other groups in Germany and abroad. The strength in number is due in part thanks to the conversion of former NPD activists (especially those coming from its youth section). Autonomous Nationalists here have become leading actors in the regional neo-Nazi scene with black blocs forming the front rows of most nationalist demonstrations. The neo-Nazi scene of North Rhine-Westphalia maintains close contacts to their equivalents in Belgium and the Netherlands, which explains why autonomous nationalism has resonated most clearly in these countries.

There are even small groups and individuals in England that have flirted with the ideas and action repertoires coming from Germany, albeit entirely unsuccessfully. The 'English National Resistance' existed around 2009-10. A

video, very much filmed in the style of those by German nationalist action groups, shows them handing out DIY music CDs outside schools ('Sounds of Revolution'), stickering lampposts and flyposting. It ends with the slogan 'Support your local Autonomous Nationalists, because actions speak louder than words' (englisharebest 2010).

A more recent outfit, the Autonomous Nationalists UK state on their website that "We want a new world; a world without Capitalist exploitation, government oppression, wars for oil, racial conflict and environmental desecration" (ANUK 2010), where they pose with complete 'black bloc' outfit including Palestinian scarves to hide their faces. They currently link to seven (seemingly inactive) local groups, primarily in the North and North West of England.

Autonomous Nationalists as a new generation of National Socialists see their own role as giving a political direction to young people and newcomers to the militant neo-Nazi scene in Germany. For this purpose, the dusty image of the brown-uniformed SS men is regarded as an obstacle. The new extreme right offers an image that is cool and modern, its political heritage of fascism hidden behind – or rather expressed through – contemporary rhetoric against globalisation, and it even borrows freely from the realm of radical left symbolism. Fewer and fewer young radical nationalists want to be forced into combat boots and bomber jackets or similar clothing that clearly out them as adherents to fascist ideology. It is this presentation and reinvention of sections of the radical right in Germany and elsewhere that has been successful in attracting a number of new youth activists to the ideology and at times to violent activism.

The Autonomous Nationalists make special efforts to integrate foreign activists into their activities in Germany. This, together with the use of new social media and the English language, results in a fast dissemination of ideas and repertoires to other European countries. Also, while the early strongholds of activism in Berlin and other major cities have seen activities decline, today the strength and focus of the movement lies on more provincial agitation, especially in the Ruhr Region where they have built strong and active groups. Again, the use of social media has allowed them to reach youths in more remote areas who would otherwise not have been confronted with neo-Nazi ideology.

The Autonomous Nationalist scene remains largely isolated from the more classical power structures within the extreme right, dominated by the NPD and the *Kameradschaften*. They are tolerated more than accepted within the mobilisations. Yet, they do give an impetus for traditional party politics to modernise itself and have had influence beyond the German extreme right in other European countries. They have fostered an autonomous sub-culture from within which they can act without the need for NPD support, showing they are capable of organising their own actions and demonstrations, or to act at the periphery of larger neo-Nazi mobilisations. However, while certain groups still attract newcomers and several Autonomous Nationalist events continue to attract large numbers of participants, there are certainly shifts. Some of the formerly leading individuals within the scene are dropping out. Several of them

publicly denounce or ridicule the autonomous appearance and activism, and instead seek realignment with more established channels of the extreme right. As such it is to be expected that the milieu will further retreat into counter-cultural politics where its identity can be maintained, while numbers and capacity would shrink.

The clashes with established extreme nationalist tendencies and organisations are in part due to the problematic of mobilising around a contradictory logic, revolving around a largely individualising and networked form of organisation whilst advocating a fascist politics of national community and order. A key theme that emerges out of our emphasis on this contradiction is the question of modernisation. The phenomenon of the Autonomous Nationalists could be read as an attempt to modernise the neo-Nazi movement in Germany and elsewhere and to make it more appealing to rebellious youth cultures. However, while it is clear that this process is part of a move towards a more pronounced differentiation of fascist organisational methods – certainly in the sense of technological, stylistic, and cultural change – politically neo-Nazism entails various anti-modern elements. Schedler and Häusler (2011: 316) offer this table to show the limits of neo-Nazi ‘modernisation’:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Autonomous Nationalists</b>	<b>Fascism</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	Individual self-determination	<i>Volkish</i> community
<b>Lifestyle</b>	Pluralisation of lifestyles	Organic unity of the <i>Volk</i>
<b>Identity</b>	Disintegration of static identity patterns	Unity of <i>Volk</i> and individual
<b>Individualisation</b>	Hedonism	Asceticism
<b>Aesthetic and symbolism</b>	Bricolage	Unity of form and ideology
<b>Modernity</b>	Contemporary orientation	Rejection of ‘bourgeois decadence’
<b>Corporeal performance</b>	Post-modernity	Military uniformity
<b>Positioning</b>	Anti-bourgeois habitus	Representation of the ‘ <i>Volk’s</i> Will’

We might analyse the stylistic elements of the Autonomous Nationalists as an aspect of social-cultural identity construction that does not follow any homogenous pattern but is rather influenced by a society of rapid information flows (use of social media, blogs, video), dynamic cultural trends (music and clothing brands) and the individualisation of expression and organisation

(networks, autonomy and DIY). This 'postmodern' aspect of the Autonomous Nationalists' appearance is markedly at odds with their ideals for fascist organisation: the organic unity of a national community and the de-individualisation of society through discipline and leadership (*Führerprinzip*).

With this in mind, we can also reflect more critically on the meaning of 'autonomy' for the Autonomous Nationalists. Unlike the radical left-wing connotations of the term that implies emancipation both from market logic and from forced participation in a national collective, autonomous nationalism seeks nationalist independence from globalisation. However, the principles of networked, decentralised and individualistic organisation stand in complete opposition to the stated aim of a national organic order. Whereas for parts of the radical and anarchist left autonomous organisational forms are inherently connected to the construction of a participatory and non-authoritarian society – a congruence of means and ends – the form and content of autonomous nationalism are in obvious conflict. This gives us further indication that a possible future avenue for many Autonomous Nationalists could be the return to a more hierarchical and party-political formation.

One way of analysing the Autonomous Nationalists would of course be as an imitation of forms of action and representation that we know from Western global justice movements. It would suggest that such progressive movements have had impacts beyond their immediate audiences and have provoked right-wing imitations, alluding to a success of counter-cultural strategies within such movements. On the other hand, the relative ineffectiveness of the Autonomous Nationalists at building a movement of the scale of what we have seen on the left shows that the relative success of global justice activism was not down to the styles it adopted. Many of those that have stressed the bottom-up and grassroots nature of the global justice movement have implicitly or explicitly celebrated this as inherently progressive. The horizontal, autonomous and 'transnational' politics of the Autonomous Nationalists puts this into question. More importantly, however, we have made the case that this is not just a matter of imitation. This is not to say that imitation does not play a role. However, anti-globalisation themes are genuinely represented within the spectrum of the far right. To some extent, the styles and codes are a contradictory reflection of such political stances. More than assessing the effects of style within the progressive global justice movements, we have taken this as a cue to reopen questions over the progressiveness of alter-globalisation themes. Notions of nation, sovereignty and community, as well as of rebelliousness, need to be re-examined in the light of right-wing versions of the same.

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