

## CHAPTER 1: FROM 1968 TO AUTONOMY

The now legendary sixties movements did not die, they never existed, at least not within the temporal confines of a decade. After all, it was in 1955 that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the back of the bus, and in 1977 that the Italian counterculture crashed head-on into the forces of order. These examples could be regarded as atypical. More often than not, the civil rights movement and *Autonomia* (the Italian autonomous movement of the 1970s) are not described as part of the New Left, however globally it is defined. They were not contained by the 1960s and are usually thought to have existed independently of other movements that continued to build from the New Left: feminism and ecology as well as the anti-intervention, peace, and gay liberation movements. In my view, despite the common definition of these popular upsurges as single-issue or national movements, their discourse and actions were often systematic and universal, and they were part of the world-historical social movement of 1968.<sup>1</sup>

1968 was a pivotal year in world history. In nearly every country of the world, spontaneously generated movements erupted that profoundly changed their societies despite their relatively rapid dispersal. Although understood as national movements, they existed as much in relation *to each other* as to their native contexts. Taken as a whole, they constituted a lasting period of global transformation, marking the crisis of industrial capitalism and its passage to what can be called its postmodern phase.<sup>2</sup> Like 1848 and 1905, 1968 was a year when emergent global movements were apparently defeated only to have a long-term impact of immense significance. The animating principle of the world spirit of 1968 was to forge new identities based on the negation of existing divisions: in place of patriotism and national chauvinism, international solidarity; instead of hierarchy and patterns of domination/submission, self-management and individual self-determination; in place of patriarchy and racism, egalitarian humanism; rather than competition, cooperation; rather than the accumulation of wealth, attempts to end poverty; instead of the domination of nature, ecological harmony.

Within the movement, certain organizing principles distinguished New Left movements from previous ones. These principles marked the break between modern and postmodern social movements. Although the heroic period of the movement, roughly comprising the two decades from 1955 to 1977, is over, the unfolding of its process continues today. Even considered in isolation, severed from their roots in the 1960s, the feminist and ecological movements base themselves on the New Left impulse to change everyday life. Precisely because the New Left of the 1960s was where this logic first developed, I consider it world-historical -- as ushering in a transvaluation of norms and values. As Umberto Eco put it in 1986:

Even though all visible traces of 1968 are gone, it profoundly changed the way all of us, in Europe at least, behave and relate to one another. Relations between bosses and workers, students and teachers, even parents and children, have opened up. They'll never be the same again.<sup>3</sup>

If he had considered the effects of the New Left in the U.S., Eco could just as well have said the same thing about the relationship between the races, between men and women, and between gays and straights.

I do not mean to imply that the process of social change is linear. At the beginning of the 1990s, the pendulum of history swung in the reverse direction of 1968. Rather than an integrating

principle animating the broad strokes of world history, its opposite appeared: a segregating impetus to recapture identities based on blood ties, a validation of historically determined hierarchies and divisions. Although isolated clusters of activists continued to be painting fine brush strokes according to the logic of the New Left, the New Right patterned the major images. Whether observed in skinhead violence internationally and the anti-immigrant sentiment sweeping the globe, in the sexual counterrevolution and the stigmatization of people with AIDS, in ethnic violence in Bosnia, or in Operation Rescue's attempt to restore male control over women's bodies, we could find the negation of the 1960s liberatory impulses. In the gang violence in American inner cities, we could see the social cost we all pay for the government's suppression of the Black Panther Party. In the struggle by some gays and women for the right to participate in combat, we could see the near antithesis of radical feminism and gay liberation. Their political orientation was once formulated within a gender-based critique of violence and a discussion of sexual repression as one of the root causes of war. Reconstituted as a "new" social movement, some varieties of feminism and gay liberation demanded women and gays in combat, not the abolition of war.

### **The European Context**

While Europe and the U.S. are both subject to the same segregating world spirit of the 1990s, upheavals associated with the end of the Cold War in Europe have no counterpart on the American side of the Atlantic. German reunification profoundly transformed that society, certainly changing much more than the context and trajectories of opposition movements. In addition to this difference, there is a longer term divergence between the societies. The consolidation of a post-New Left opposition in Germany -- a movement visible in the spectrum of groups from the Greens to the Autonomen and the Red Army Faction (RAF) -- did not occur in the U.S. Despite thousands of activist groups within the anti-apartheid and Central America anti-intervention movements, the environmental movement, the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment, gay organizing and the Rainbow Coalition, fragmentation defined each of these formations, and it could not be accurately said that there was "a movement" in the U.S. In Germany there was. Part of the reason for this was undoubtedly German identity. In Europe, nationalism plays an entirely different role than in the U.S.. There it divides the continent into distinctive zones, while here, it unites an even larger region than all of Europe.

In Germany, the question of whether or not there is continuity between the New Left and the Autonomen is not as easily answered in the affirmative as it is from a distance. Many activists from 1968 experienced a profound break between the sixties and the more radical autonomists of the 1980s and 1990s. At the end of the 1970s, political scientists Martin and Sylvia Greiffenhagen maintained that "The history of the protest movement is ruptured, there appears to be no continuity with the activities of present-day extraparliamentary groups."<sup>4</sup> Slowly but surely after the decline of the New Left, new types of popular opposition groups formed. Activists from the 1960s were influential in some of the groups, but for the most part, they were veterans of a university-based movement, and their issues of concern--the war in Vietnam, reforming the universities, and the build-up of the state's repressive forces (the Emergency Laws of 1968, the *Berufsverbot*, and *Radikalenerlass*)--were far different from what motivated the next wave of activism. By 1980, a movement existed which was clearly more radical and bigger than that of the sixties. The new movement was more diverse and unpredictable and less theoretical and organized than was the

New Left. Despite their differences, they shared a number of characteristics: anti-authoritarianism; independence from existing political parties; decentralized organizational forms; emphasis on direct action; and combination of culture and politics as means for the creation of a new person and new forms for living through the transformation of everyday life. As in the 1960s, the regional differences in German society were reflected in the new movement's character in various parts of the country. In the early 1980s, thousands of people built barricades and fought police all night in Frankfurt to demonstrate their support for the national liberation struggle in El Salvador. A call for a similar demonstration in Hannover drew more than 2000 people -- including many left-wing Turks -- but less than 50 interested people turned out to march for El Salvador in West Berlin.

Most younger activists looked upon sixties people as having accommodated themselves to the existing system or even gone over to the other side. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, star of the May '68 revolt in France and later a Green government minister in the city of Frankfurt, had his speeches disrupted and his life threatened by members of the autonomous scene because of their perception that he sold out. To be sure, prominent Greens have established comfortable niches as professional members of a loyal opposition, and some of their former national leaders have been rewarded with university professorships in a society where such positions are rare and require high-level political approval. Even within the Greens, some people looked on the "monoculture of the '68ers" as having excluded younger activists from the party.<sup>5</sup> Many Autonomen regard the 1968 generation as nothing different than all the rest of the dead weight of the past, "weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living." More than anything else, they laugh at the outraged innocence of the New Left symbolized by the flowers put into the barrels of National Guard rifles in Berkeley and of Russian tanks in Prague. For the New Left, "the whole world was watching" as the modern epoch, one of expanding democracy and rising expectations, came to an end. More than anything else, the new radicals are distinguished from the New Left by their orientation to themselves -- to a "politics of the first person" -- not to the "proletariat" or the "wretched of the earth."

Many of those who personify the 1960s for younger generations regularly fail to comprehend the changed context, preferring instead to denigrate the Autonomen, referring to them as "agents provocateurs" (as Petra Kelly told me in 1985) or even worse -- as neo-fascists and anti-Semites. Hostile to the Autonomen, the German media pay sympathetic attention to the older generation of activists. During commemorations of the 20 and 25th anniversaries of 1968, the media (which once vilified and red-baited the New Left) celebrated its activists' paternalistic pronouncements regarding the younger generation of activists, for example, that their violence had nothing to do with the "decent" protests which occurred in the 1960s.

However we frame the debate about continuity in Germany, both sides regard the Autonomen as a movement -- whether or not it is continuous with 1968. Unlike France, the U.S., or Japan, in Germany a radical opposition movement was able to regenerate itself among new generations of young people in the 1980s. The autonomous movement first appeared in Italy in the 1970s (the topic of Chapter 2), but after it was defeated, activism there largely ceased. In the 1960s, riots regularly accompanied the visits of American presidents to Latin America, while in the 1980s, it was in Germany that appearances by Reagan and Bush caused such conflicts to break out. Despite their mobilizations against American presidents, autonomous movements emerge from the New Left critique of totalitarianism of both the Left and the Right; they flow from a cultural and political rejection of society in the U.S., Western Europe and what used to be the Soviet Union. A facile

reading of the movement posits its negativity as a handicap. Many observers argue that since autonomous movements can never become a majoritarian movement or grasp power, they are a lunatic fringe and therefore of little interest and even less importance. The assumption contained in such a view is that power -- not its disintegration -- should constitute the goal of social movements.

In my view, the importance of social movements in the new epoch we have entered since the demise of Soviet Communism, far from being determined by an ability to wield national power, will be more a function of a capacity to limit the powers of nation-states and to create free spaces in which self-determined decisions can be made autonomously and implemented directly. At best, the existing system offers a facade of popular input into state agencies or allows space for cooperative groups to function within a larger context of obedience to the state and market profitability. While providing unprecedented consumer wealth for a majority of people in the advanced capitalist societies, the world system is founded upon unprecedented misery for tens of millions of people at its periphery -- as well as an increasingly marginalized strata in its core. Powerful nation-states and mammoth transnational corporations are essentially products of the modern world -- i.e. the epoch between the industrial revolution and World War 2. As the behemoth powers of governments and corporations expanded, popular control over significant decisions of life were eroded. Privacy continues to be invaded, family life destroyed, job security made non-existent, environmental conditions degraded, water made unfit to drink and air poisonous to our health. In short, the conditions of life are being destroyed at the same time as previously independent realms of everyday life are increasingly subsumed by the commodity form and criteria of profitability. This "colonization of the life-world" shifts the sites for the contestation of power by social movements from politics to everyday life.

In contrast to the centralized decisions and hierarchical authority structures of modern institutions, autonomous social movements involve people directly in decisions affecting their everyday lives. They seek to expand democracy and to help individuals break free of political structures and behavior patterns imposed from the outside. Rather than pursue careers and create patriarchal families, participants in autonomous movements live in groups to negate the isolation of individuals imposed by consumerism. They seek to decolonize everyday life. The base of the autonomous movement in dozens of squatted and formerly squatted houses reflects a break with the established norms of middle-class propriety in their everyday lives: communes instead of traditional families; movement restaurants and bars where the "scene" can have its own space as opposed to the commercialized world of mass culture; an international community defined by its radical actions in contrast to the patriotic spectacles so beloved in Europe.

In this context, the Autonomes represent a paradigm shift in politics that began with the New Left but has become increasingly well-defined. Unlike other movements of the twentieth century that have been preoccupied with seizing national power, they seek to dissolve it. Their subversion of politics means a complete reorientation of our understanding of the role of nation-states and individual obedience to their laws. In place of massive systems of representative democracy and majority rule, they live according to principles of direct democracy and self-government. They do not seek to create mammoth structures of power nor are they interested in participating in existing ones. Although their numbers are small, their actions often have a significance beyond what quantitative analysis would indicate. Autonomous movements have been called "post-political" because of their lack of regard for elections and political parties. I prefer to

think of these movements as subverting politics, as transforming public participation into something completely different than what is normally understood as political.

### **The Meaning of Autonomy**

Clearly autonomy has a variety of meanings. Western philosophy since Kant has used the term to refer to the independence of individual subjectivity, but as I use the term in this book, autonomy refers mainly to collective relationships, not individual ones. In my analysis of social movements, several meanings of autonomy emerge: first and most saliently, the independence of social movements from political parties and trade unions. Thus, movements for regional or national autonomy are not autonomous movements in the sense in which I use the term if they are aligned with established political parties. The Irish independence movement, for example, struggles for Ireland's autonomy from Great Britain, but I do not consider it to be an autonomous movement since it is controlled by hierarchically organized parties and traditional conceptions of politics. Separatist movements of all kinds abound today, but few if any are autonomous movements. National and regional autonomy have long been central issues for movements in peripheral areas of the world system. In the current period, the demand for autonomy is present within movements in Kurdistan, India, the Basque country and many parts of the former Soviet Union. Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico presented the major demands of the peasants as "food, health, education, autonomy and peace."<sup>6</sup> In Brazil, the United Black Movement, founded in 1978 when Blacks gathered to protest the police murder of a black man accused of stealing an apple, considers political autonomy for Blacks to be one of its main goals. Aspirations for greater regional autonomy for Native Americans in Chiapas or Afro-Brazilians in Bahia, while not precisely the same content of autonomy as is present in European movements, nonetheless demonstrates the formal similarity of these emergent movements. They all call for "Power to the People" and decentralization of decision-making concentrated in nation-states.

In Italy in the 1970s, thousands of factory workers participated in *Autonomia*, and the meaning of autonomy extracted from their experiences was sometimes defined exclusively in workerist terms. According to Johannes Agnoli, the concept of autonomy in northern Italy had two dimensions: Class struggle made itself autonomous of the circulation of capital; and the class struggle was not led by traditional organizations of the Left (Communists and their trade unions).<sup>7</sup> Although widely propagated, workerist definitions of autonomy are but one of its many forms, even in reference to the movement in Italy. As I portray in my case studies of Italian and German social movements, the autonomous women's movement in each country was vital to subsequent formations both because of feminists' innovative internal procedures as well as their capacity to act separately from men in accordance with their own autonomously defined needs and aspirations. These autonomous feminist movements set an example of a "politics of the first person" as opposed to traditional notions of revolutions leading the nation or the working class. Within these movements, moreover, individuals did not take orders from higher-ups but voluntarily acted according to their own will (thereby preserving the original Kantian kernel of autonomy within an enlarged meaning and collective context). Many feminist groups operated according to self-managed consensus, making decisions independently of central leaders and implementing them according to their own self-discipline. This organizational model remains vitally important to the definition of autonomous movements.

A final meaning of autonomy emerged in the course of prolonged popular struggles against nuclear power in Germany in the mid-1970s. Activist groups began referring to themselves as autonomous to establish distance from party-oriented Marxist-Leninist groups within the anti-nuclear movement who denied the value of spontaneous forms of militant resistance. As radical clusters also appeared within the peace movement, the counterculture and among squatters, they merged into a multifaceted formation that eventually became known as the Autonomen. By creatively synthesizing direct-democratic forms of decision-making and militant popular resistance, the Autonomen embody what I call "conscious spontaneity."

The Autonomen do not subscribe to the belief that there is one overriding truth or one true form of autonomy. There are, nonetheless, a number of principles that provide them coherence: They see their ideas as a revolutionary alternative to both authoritarian socialism (Soviet-style societies) and "pseudodemocratic capitalism." Unlike Communists, they do not believe in the need for one true revolutionary party or revolutionary sector of society. They believe in diversity and continuing differentiation. Nowhere written down, this principle emerges in the actions of thousands of people in their everyday lives. They believe in self-management and the need for individuals and groups to take responsibility for their own actions. While these notions may be contradicted in the actions of some, they materialize in the enduring patterns of movement activity. The Autonomen seek to change governments as well as everyday life, to overthrow capitalism and patriarchy.<sup>8</sup>

In Portugal and Spain in the mid-1970s, social movements critically impacted European countries when they suddenly seized power. I do not analyze them in this book in part because they were not oriented toward the transformation of everyday life. At the end of 1995, a wave of strikes lasting 24 days suddenly brought France to the brink of a repetition of the events of May 1968 (when ten million students and workers suddenly went on strike). Despite the volatile character of the strikes in 1995, they were contained within the government: The strikers were almost all public sector employees; their actions were in response to the Prime Minister's attempt to change national policies; and their union leaders sought negotiations with the government as one of their main demands. Like nearly everything related to social movements in France, these strikes occurred within the realm of established politics. Creating contested domains outside arenas normally regarded as political is practically inconceivable there.

If movement attempts to transform civil society were the sole criterion for inclusion in my analysis, I should also have written about Great Britain. In London, squatters have continued to take over buildings since the early 1970s, and an anti-fascist movement is also quite militant. The anarchist newspaper, *Class War*, grew out of the miners' strike and presents a unique synthesis of militant action and tabloid journalism. Historically Britain has been part of Europe while simultaneously cut off from it, and it would not be entirely inaccurate to characterize the relationship of Britain to Europe's autonomous movements in similar terms. My decision to focus on contiguous countries of Central Europe (Italy, Germany, Holland and Denmark) was predicated in part upon my organic connections with activists there.

Although my focus is on Central Europe, particularly Germany, autonomous politics are increasingly relevant internationally. Viewed from the perspective of how they constitute a determinate negation of the structural imperatives of the world system, the Autonomen should be understood as verification of my prognosis that the cultural-political character of the New Left

would continue to define the long-term *form* that anti-systemic movements will take. As autonomous movements find adherents in places like Prague, Athens, Lyon (France), Moscow, San Francisco, and New York, it becomes increasingly apparent that, while often invisible to the mainstream, they define the phenomenal form of contemporary radical activism.

### **The Autonomen: An Invisible Movement**

Relative to the voluminous literature on France and England in print in the U.S., few books exist about Germany, and those in print deal mainly with the Nazi past, the rise and fall of Communism, or the neo-Nazis of today. No wonder that prejudice against Germans is not uncommon among Americans. So long as Germans are characterized as orderly and obedient, Americans feel secure in our superior democratic values and cultural pluralism. After all, the Allies liberated the German people from their Nazi overlords, we Americans gave them their first democratic constitution, and we also financed the post-war reconstruction that made possible their current prosperity.

To the extent that Americans are aware of progressive Germans, it is generally the Greens. Taking advantage of the proportional representation rule governing German elections,<sup>9</sup> the Greens quickly established a presence within local and national governments and became the third largest party in Germany in the mid-1990s. In 1983, they got over two million votes in the federal election. When they took their seats in parliament, their long hair and casual attire signalled a larger change in German society and politics. On both sides of the Atlantic, mainstream analysts worried about the "threat" constituted by German pacifism to the Cold War. Due to the media's focus on them, it was commonly assumed the Greens created and led Germany's progressives.

One of the purposes of this book is to dispel that myth. Often considered by outsiders to be identical with Left radicalism in Germany, the Greens are but the most prominent organization to emerge from a broad-based and diverse social movement. Since there is so little information in the U.S. concerning the Autonomen, the assumption is often made that this invisible movement is irrelevant or even non-existent.\* As I discuss in Chapter 3, long before the Green Party was founded in 1979, an autonomous women's movement had waged a militant campaign for decriminalization of abortion and created dozens of women's centers. Other extraparliamentary direct-action movements arose and challenged the conservative spell that had gripped German national politics from Hitler to the *Berufsverbot* (government decrees in the 1970s which effectively stifled dissent by civil servants). Grassroots groups (*Bürgerinitiativen*) first thawed the frozen political terrain when they began a process of publicly challenging unpopular policies like the construction of nuclear power plants, expansion of the gigantic airport in Frankfurt, and the continuing housing shortage.<sup>10</sup> As local communities organized to protect their surroundings from encroachments by the industrial-political behemoth, their initiatives slowly gathered supporters seeking greater democratic input into significant social decisions, chief among them the country's heavy reliance on nuclear fission as a source of energy. Confrontations against nuclear power projects posed the need

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\*In 1989, after I made a detailed presentation at MIT to several hundred people on the Autonomen which included slides and copies of their magazines, one member of the audience confronted me with the charge that I had invented the whole movement, contending that the events I had described were simply part of the Greens.

for a parliamentary presence within the system that could articulate the aspirations of the emergent anti-nuclear movement whose popular support was clearly greater than anyone had anticipated. As the Greens began to run for office, radicals squatted hundreds of abandoned houses in the inner cities and used them as a base from which to radicalize the peace, ecology and feminist movements.

The Green Party was formed to fulfill needs dramatized by these extraparliamentary impulses -- to clean up Germany's environment, to make its governing structure more democratic and to break the hold of the patriarchal, small-town mentality that encroached upon women's freedom, denied gays the right to be themselves and crippled the capacity of young people to live according to their own ideas. In the crucible of years of struggles, direct-action movements galvanized the radical Autonomen. Employing militant confrontational tactics against the police in the 1980s, the Autonomen played a major role in defeating the government's plans for a nuclear reprocessing plant at Wackersdorf in Bavaria that would have provided Germany with bomb-grade plutonium. Their non-cooperation campaign caused the government to cancel a national census, and they helped undermine Berlin's bid to host the Olympics in 2000. These victories of autonomous movements are arguably more important than any gains won through the parliamentary system in the same period of time.

At first glance, the different levels of political action on which direct-action movements and the Greens operate appear to complement each other. Within the German movement, however, the contradiction between building domains autonomous from the government and parliamentary activity within it animates a complex political discourse all but unknown in the U.S. On the surface, since the Autonomen and the Greens both seek to achieve similar goals like the end of nuclear power, it appears that they differ only in their tactics. The divergence between these two wings of the German movement is actually much greater than that, encompassing organizational forms as well as differences of strategy (building self-governing centers of dual power versus transforming the society from within parliament). While militant actions and electoral activity often provide reciprocal benefits to each other, they can also generate bitter conflicts.

For many Autonomen, the Greens are not the movement in the government but the government in the movement. They are that part of the establishment which has penetrated the radical opposition, another mechanism used by the state to extend and legitimate its authority. As such, the Greens represent the latest example of coopted movement groups following in the historical footsteps of the Social Democratic Party (with whom the Greens have formed state and local coalition governments). For some readers, it may be disconcerting to read that the Greens are on the fringe of a radical egalitarian movement, but it would be less than honest for me to present them in any other manner.

To many Greens, the Autonomen are guilty of "blind actionism" (and worse); they substitute "the struggle for their goal instead of liberation." The Autonomen are "violent anarchists" who throw tomatoes and eggs at high government officials rather than engage them in rational debate. They are often linked to guerrilla groups like the RAF, a group that has kidnapped and killed some of the country's leading bankers, industrialists and political leaders.

I see these approaches (Green and autonomous, within and outside the system) as complementary. They require one another for their continual elaboration and historical impact. In Chapter 6, I discuss this issue in more detail. From my perspective, the Autonomen exist in a political terrain lying between the reformism of the Greens and the adventurism of the RAF. Most



Autonomen would vehemently disagree with my characterization of the Greens as even part of the movement. They perceive the Greens as more of a threat to the movement's vitality than any other established political force since the Greens are able to access so many movement activities, blunt their radical potential, and even aid the police in isolating the movement. During preparations for a planned demonstration against the Brokdorf nuclear power plant in 1987, for example, many of the more than 50,000 people going to protest refused to submit to mandatory police inspections of their automobile caravans before they went on the *Autobahns* (freeways). Green organizers, however, agreed to allow their vehicles to be searched for helmets and other materials which might be used to confront the massed police defenders at Brokdorf. Naturally, the police then simply waved the Greens through their checkpoints, while they bloodily dispersed the remaining protesters before they could even assemble (as occurred in Berlin). Near Hamburg, hundreds of people were brutally attacked while stopped in their cars. Many of those injured in the police attack blamed the Greens' cooperation with the police for effectively identifying those who refused to submit to the searches.

A less severe example of the Greens' distance from the Autonomen came in September 1988 when the Autonomen prepared demonstrations against the international conventions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Berlin. Thousands of militant demonstrators tried to stop the top finance ministers of 150 countries and over 10,000 world bankers from planning their future exploits (since the protestors blamed them for poverty and starvation at the periphery of the world economy). For their part, the Green Party and their affiliates attempted to defuse the planned confrontation of the World Bank by calling for a convention of their own to discuss the possibility of an "alternative world banking system." Unlike the Greens, the radical Autonomen would have little to do with banks -- alternative or not -- or any kind of system. The type of world they seek to create and to live in is as far removed as possible from money, centralization, government and ownership in all their forms.

The autonomous framework of action constitutes a promising realm of politics not generally considered by analysts of social movements and activists outside Europe. Contained within my history of autonomous movements are many of their most salient points of departure from other types of politics. There are several main threads in the discourse of this book:

1. the tension between working within the system versus working entirely in opposition to it, and the relative advantages and liabilities of each approach.
2. the importance of establishing alternative humane life-styles right now, not only challenging power at the collective political level.
3. the formulation of a universal species-interest and the transcendence of exclusive identities that delimit the aspirations and vision of groups.
4. the psychological disposition and Nazi heritage of the German people and the potential for these to affect radical social movements.

The first three are certainly enduring questions, and the fourth can also be understood in a more general form: How can we prevent decentralized popular movements from attracting and incorporating hateful elements, particularly those drawn from ethnic chauvinism?

### **Media and Marginality**

Unlike the Greens, autonomists do not seek publicity -- indeed, they are known for their hostility to and attacks upon photographers who show up at their events. Activists have several

reasons for preventing the mainstream media from broadcasting news of their movement. Most obviously, the police use photos and video footage from the media to identify and arrest people. More subtly, activists consciously wish to prevent the media from artificially creating leaders (which they view as one of the shortcomings of the New Left). In order to maintain the integrity of their own groups, they shut out the media as intrusive forces which undermine the autonomous identity they have created. They seek to control directly media productions about them, something which the U.S. media, unlike their European counterparts, do not permit. In 1981, for example, a CBS film crew showed up at one of the many squatted houses in West Berlin to shoot a story on the movement. Although the squatters were aware that they were dealing with a potential audience in the tens of millions, they opted not to speak to CBS because they could not be guaranteed the right to approve the final segment.

Additionally, once outsiders have knowledge of their existence through the media, many activists fear they are doomed to be invaded by tourists.<sup>11</sup> Typical American media coverage is oriented precisely to voyeurism. After German reunification and the Bundestag's decision to move the capital to Berlin, the editorial pages of the **New York Times** paternalistically described the movement there as part of the city's touristic allure: "Hair tints tend to be polychrome, women dress to be dramatic rather than chic, and youngsters in Kreuzberg wear their anarchist politics on tattered sleeves."<sup>12</sup> A year earlier, the **Times** had referred to the Autonomen as "anarchic thugs" and the **Washington Post** described them in less than glowing terms: "They are a bedraggled bunch, dressed mostly in black, their hair painted in bright streaks of color, their noses and ears pierced by multiple rings."<sup>13</sup> There could be no better impression of the scene, at least from the point of view of those who believe the inner meaning of the movement is best left incomprehensible to outsiders.

Another motivation for the movement's marginality is to defy the modern propensity for uniformity and preoccupation with neat and orderly systemization. That is one reason why there are so few written histories of the Autonomen by its members. Of what use is overarching analysis to those who seek to mitigate the entrapment of individuals and communities in the global web of commodity relationships and standardized versions of truth? Autonomous movements seek to break the stranglehold of uniformity and integration into consumer society. Even if the movement were to comprise a majority of the population, it would be a myriad assortment of groups with different life-styles, dress codes, political conceptions and self-constructed norms -- a majority of marginalized people from the perspective of the control center and its satisfied supporters. Their presence on the margins of German society -- replete with scorn and other signs of low status -- guarantees that they serve as a reminder that freedom is freedom to live differently. Particularly in Germany where conformity of small town life is rigidly inculcated and enforced, the continuing existence of a marginalized movement of urban non-conformists is vitally important to individual liberty.

Pursuing the issue of marginality further, we could question whether "marginal" people are on the edge of society or are central to social change. Social movements of the "second society" (unemployed and marginally employed people, youth, minorities and women), those left out of what the Germans call the "two-thirds society" (*zwei-drittel Gesellschaft*) produce astonishingly important social changes: They usher in new values (feminism, sexual liberation, equality for foreigners) and new forms of social organization (group living, self-directed programs of work and study, cooperative working relationships) that transform the larger society over time. While their

dress codes and appearances may seem superficially outlandish, many of their essential qualities are quite reasonable. From this perspective, perhaps "marginals" are actually central to social change. The sudden proliferation of movement names, tactics and ideas, what I consider the "eros effect,"<sup>14</sup> occurs so quickly in contemporary societies in part because of the media. The capacity of human beings to grasp instinctually the gestalt of a movement and to adapt it to their own context connects our species at essential levels of life. While small groups of autonomists may currently be isolated, they can quickly reproduce in the right situation.

Despite the difficulties in conceptualizing anti-systemic movements, I situate the emergence of autonomous movements in the material conditions of late capitalism, specifically in the extension of power and production from the government and factory to arenas of everyday life. The thorough penetration of civil society by capitalist social relations and hierarchical structures of authority has been accompanied by the partial incorporation into the established structures of old social movements -- the traditional forces of opposition like unions and political parties based in the working class. Under these new conditions, different types of social movements (feminist, youth, and ecology) have arisen that reveal the changed character of society and simultaneously challenge the new constellation of power. In Chapters 2 to 4, I trace the new wave of movements from Italy to northern Europe. In the course of my historical analysis, I weave in threads of discussion about the relationship of parliamentary and direct-action forms of resistance, the importance of neighborhood base areas and the changing character of autonomous movements. As I discuss in Chapter 5, following the break-up of the Soviet Union and its allies, the Autonomi developed along the trajectory of anti-fascism in response to the neo-Nazi upsurge. By also paying attention to some of the movement's German attributes that are internal obstacles to their own professed goals, I seek to filter out specifically national characteristics in order to understand their more universal qualities. Chapter 6 is devoted to a discussion of the changed notion of politics introduced by autonomous movements. Drawing from documents of the Autonomi as well as my history of them, I contrast them with traditional tendencies on the Left (Social Democracy and Leninism) and also portray their differences from the Greens. In a critical examination of the work of Antonio Negri, I show how his workerism is an inadequate interpretation of the meaning of autonomous movements. Given Negri's prominence in the Italian movement, my critique might help explain why *Autonomia* failed to regenerate itself. In contrast to Negri, I call for a "rationality of the heart" and a fresh understanding of the roles of passion and militance in social transformation. The invisibility of autonomous movements is shaped in part by the inability of major social theorists to understand them. In Chapter 7, I analyze some of the reasons for this lacuna and pose the decolonization of everyday life as an urgent need. While much of my book is narrative history, in the last chapter, I provide the reader with an analysis of postmodern capitalism and ground my presentation of autonomous movements in a larger context. I also discuss identity politics and new social movement theory to clarify my own interpretation of them and their relevance to autonomous movements. Yet another detailed textual criticism -- this time of the feminist theory of Seyla Benhabib -- shows the inadequacy of traditional categories of western philosophy for comprehending the expanded forms of autonomy possible today. With the critiques of Germany in Chapter 5, Negri's workerism in Chapter 6 and Benhabib's feminism in the last chapter, I demonstrate how even the best ethnic, class or gender politics fall short of a universal critique of society as articulated by autonomous movements at their best. The questions posed by

contemporary industrial societies and subversive movements within them are at the level of the human species as a whole, and no partial identity is capable of reaching the species level of discourse. By the end of the book, I hope the reader glimpses the outlines of the potential for enlarged democracy and freedom prefigured in the practice of autonomous movements.

My presentation begins with Italy in the 1970s, the most meaningful post-war movement in advanced capitalist countries outside the events of May 1968 in France and May 1970 in the U.S. Once the turmoil of the late 1960s subsided, most countries returned to less stormy times as grassroots movements either disappeared or became integrated into the system. In Italy and Germany, however, social movements in the 1970s continued to build from the student and worker struggles of the late 1960s. The Italian movement's broad appeal to a popular base deeply impressed German activists, some of whom moved there and later returned to Germany where they helped prepare the ground for the subsequent emergence of the Autonomen. Just as the civil rights movement in the southern U.S. served as a crucible for many white and black activists who went on to facilitate and lead struggles outside the South, Italy provided many Germans with their initial involvement in popular struggles.

## NOTES CHAPTER 1

I would like to thank members of the Boston editorial collective of **Capitalism Nature Socialism** for their comments on an earlier draft of part of this chapter.

- 1..See my book, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (South End Press, 1987).
- 2..The term "postmodern" is loaded with so many meanings that it is difficult to use it without raising questions that properly belong to the category of whether a glass is half full or half empty. In Chapter 7, I discuss postmodern capitalism and its implications for social movements. Two noteworthy discussions of postmodernism are David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, 1990) and Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).
- 3..**Newsweek**, Dec 22, 1986, p. 49.
- 4..quoted in Rob Burns and Wilfried van der Will, *Protest and Democracy in West Germany: Extra-Parliamentary Opposition and the Democratic Agenda* (St. Martin's Press, 1988) p. 100.
- 5..Tine Stein und Bernd Ulrich, "Die Kohorte frisst ihr Kind: Die 68er und der Niedergang der Grünen," in Ralf Fücks (Herausgeber), *Sind die Grünen noch zu retten?* (Rowohlt, 1991) p. 76.
- 6..**Processo**, January 10, 1994.
- 7..See Dieter Hoffman-Axthelm, Otto Kallscheuer, Eberhard Knödler-Bunte and Brigitte Wartmann, *Zwei Kulturen? Tunix, Mescalero und die Folgen* (Verlag Ästhetik und Kommunikation, 1978) p. 86. Michael Ryan outlines a similar conception in his introduction to Antonio Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (Autonomea, 1991) p. xxx. To Agnoli's two meanings, Ryan adds a third, "the multilateral productive potential" of the "subject in the communist society."
- 8..While there have been few attempts made from within the Autonomien to define autonomy, one exception was made in preparation for the autonomist convention held in Berlin in April 1995. See *Eat It! Reader: Autonomie-Kongress-Reader Teil II* (Berlin, 1995) pp. 6-7.
- 9..This system assigns a proportional number of seats in parliament (the *Bundestag*) to any party which receives more than 5% of the vote.
- 10..*Handbuch: Bürgerinitiativen in Frankfurt* edited by Ingrid Damian-Hesser and Michael Damian (Verlag im Leseladen, 1978).
- 11..This perspective is best articulated in Holland. See *Cracking the Movement: Squatting Beyond the Media* by ADILKO (Autonomea, 1994).
- 12..Karl E. Meyer, "Germany's Once and Future Capital: A Second Chance for Renascent Berlin," **New York Times** (June 25, 1991).
- 13..See Serge Schmemmann, "Germans' Day of Exultation and Marlene Dietrich Too," **New York Times** (October 4, 1990) p. 16.
- 14..The eros effect refers to the sudden, intuitive awakening of solidarity and massive opposition to the established system, as occurred in May 1968 in France. See my *Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* for its initial formulation. Also see my paper, "The Eros Effect," presented at the American Sociological Association meetings in August 1989. For a debate about it, see my exchange with Staughton Lynd in the **Journal of American History**, June 1990. Much research

remains to be done on the spontaneous solidarity and actions generated by popular upsurges. Sidney Tarrow understands a similar global diffusion of movements in *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).