



*SOME REMARKS
ON THE
NEED FOR OPEN ASSEMBLIES
IN BERLIN*



The following text was published anonymously on Indymedia in December of 2013. Although its authors clearly intended it as an intervention into the local anarchist / autonomous scene, it seems to us sufficiently portable to be of potential interest to others elsewhere. - Ill Will Editions, July 2014

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INTRODUCTION

On the 9th of December, 2013, people, as individuals and as delegates of affinity groups, answered the call-out for an “open meeting for self-organization”¹ and gathered in Mehringhof (Berlin-Kreuzberg) for an open assembly. We hope that the comrades who called for this meeting will publish the protocol from it in the coming days, which could provide a better impression of that initial meeting than we can offer here.

Energized by this initial meeting, we as a group wanted to take the chance to reflect on a few aspects of autonomist/anarchist organizing in Berlin, and particularly on the form of the assembly. We wish to suggest a possible role that we see open general assemblies playing within our struggles.

We agree that we need a scale of organization that is larger than affinity groups, yet looser and less defined than single issue campaigns or formal organizations. There needs to be a middle ground between these two, and this is lacking at the moment.

We know that lots of discussions are presently stuck within smaller groups and social circles. We need to find a way for the different questions and topics each group is mulling over to be discussed collectively. We want to know what problems and questions others are wrestling with, and we want to know what you think of ours.

Yet, at the same time, for us it is important to avoid setting up another once-a-month routine that becomes simply *one more plenum*. Another ritual that quickly starts to feel bureaucratic, lifeless, and dominated by the same voices that already dominate conversation within the “left scene” in Berlin.

We think that the original call out for an assembly, and the assembly itself, was a good step in this direction, but we want to further stress some of the particular ideas that it addressed, and to discuss some of the problems that we see ourselves facing in Berlin. In the last assembly it seemed unclear to many of the people present what exactly those of us assembled there should talk about: was it the basis from which we struggle and our highest aspirations, or was it the details of particular struggles in Berlin and how we see ourselves engaging with them? To some extent we find this to be a false opposition: obviously, there needs to be space for both. Additionally, it seems to us, that often times the big picture is spoken about best through the details, and that the details need to be framed within our larger analysis and orientation to avoid becoming “activist”, lifeless, and stale. It seems like this confusion and debate is born out of an instinct to turn an open general assembly into a kind of informal organization, something along the lines of the previous *Autonome Vollversammlung (AVV)*. For us this is exactly what needs to be avoided. Instead, we would like to suggest that what we need to develop is not one “general assembly” that starts to look more and more like an umbrella organization, but rather a culture of general assemblies in Berlin: the open assembly not as a once a month meeting, but as one of our basic forms of self-organization. By contrast, it seems like all too often in Berlin the instinct of the autonomist/anarchist milieu is to rely on relatively closed processes and closed meetings for planning actions, developing ideas, and engaging with existing struggles.

EVALUATING THE RECENT PAST

There have been many positive new directions in anarchist/autonomist struggles in Berlin in recent years. We see the recent calls for open assemblies as a constructive effort to act on the widespread discontentment and frustration with the demo and (anti-)political culture in this city.

We have also noticed and are excited about the escalation of tactics in the past year or so, and an apparent increase in the strength and richness of affinity-group based actions. We think that this might be further strengthened by

being combined with a denser fabric of organization at its base, so that these smaller groups may draw courage from a real rather than an imagined sense of belonging to a wider movement.

In particular the anti-gentrification movement in Berlin has seen militants and neighborhood groups using a variety of direct action tactics in order to forcefully stop evictions as well as act offensively against a gentrifying urban landscape (e.g. the *Berliner Liste*).

Although we would like to see always more in the direction of international solidarity, there has been a pretty decent show of international and intercity solidarity in Berlin which has sought to develop active connections to the current cycle of struggles taking place around the world.

We've also been excited about the return of practices of squatting to Berlin, and the repeated breaking of the Berlin hard line on squatting. Stillestr, Ohlauerstr, Oranienplatz, Cuvrybrache, the Eisfabrik...these spaces offer inspiration and encouragement to others for the open occupation of empty buildings, public squares and empty land. While neoliberal urban development continues its deterritorializing crawl across Berlin, spaces of refusal continue to rise up and contest this moribund vision of the city, assembling other possible worlds.

Alongside all these positive developments, certain perennial critiques of the anarchist milieus in Berlin remain true. We find the reliance on subcultural identities still remains too prevalent. This is not to say that we should abandon the signifiers of our autonomous and radical culture, nor exit the subculture in order to "join the masses". It can be useful to feel ourselves to be part of a visible and recognizable milieu of dissidents and agitators. However, reliance on political identities can become problematic for a number of reasons. For one, they can come to limit the spread of the struggles beyond a certain group when outsiders feel excluded on the basis of age, style etc. There is also the risk of adopting a "lefty-identity" in a superficial manner, as a clique, lifestyle and look, consuming demos and soli-parties while emptying this identity of any antagonistic content. Wherever it allows itself to become detached from the struggle against and destabilization of the metropolitan tissue surrounding us, autonomous culture devolves into a hollow alternativism, masking the Same with the veneer of aestheticized difference.²

Although the history of the Autonome movement of the past continues to provide inspiration and a rare sense of a continuity to the development of auton-

omous structures in Berlin, we have the feeling that this history can also be a weight on radical movements in this city today. While the glory days of the autonome movement have passed for now, people continue to operate more or less in the cognitive space of its identity, invoking its symbols, myths, songs, slogans and chants. Once again, although perhaps comforting, this identity can work at times to block more heterogenous, dynamic and open-ended forms of social identification which might be better able to make themselves illegible to the state, and by tending towards difference rather than homogeneity, be harder for the state to order, organize, capture and repress. Keeping things alive that once worked isn't the worst thing, but we also feel like its often the superficial aspects of this tradition are being preserved. We think, for example, that the powerful culture of open assemblies that it once possessed has been regrettably lost.

At the same time we have the feeling that Berlin's radical scene has the unique status in northern Europe of being big enough to actually constitute a social force all on its own, and we expect that it will continue to expand as more active anarchists and autonomists continue to arrive from elsewhere.

Over the past decade "the scene" has become far more geographically dispersed, as the people involved spread out across the wider areas of Neukölln, Treptow, Wedding, etc. This fragmentation is not a problem in itself, since it can mean that actions begin to occur in more places, with radical infrastructure and influence spread throughout the city. Yet there is a risk of isolation and fragmentation when organization and communication no longer have a basis in frequent informal meetings, based on geographic proximity and the kind of consistency that certain locations, such the "Dorfplatz", once provided for the scene. This dispersion needs to be combatted with increased coordination within and between people located in various neighborhoods, and we see open assemblies as a step in this direction.

Perhaps most importantly, we see a large portion of the "left scene" in Berlin maintaining a 'consumer' relation to demos and other actions: showing up, but then expecting others to "make things happen". The enabling condition of this attitude is the practical separation between a small cadre of active people who organize and plan, and the vast majority who passively attend without experiencing these events as a result of their own self-organization.

We've also noticed that the Berlin police have been increasingly effective at managing and containing us, all the while avoiding escalation. We need a space

beyond our immediate circles to share our observations regarding the changing menu of police repression tactics and how to break their spell. For example, it seems like the biggest mobilizations and most militant street fights lately tend to happen on the defensive rather than the offensive. There is definitely a more determined spirit circulating - one need only think of the eviction of Liebig 14, the eviction of the Gülbol family in Kreuzberg, the unrest during the police congress, the people on the streets around O-Platz or the recent explosion of activity in Hamburg. Yet all these events happened as a reaction to a threat or attack, and as such they have as their backdrop an already-precarious and endangered existence, i.e. the familiar and constant attack on our life and freedom by state, capital, and institutional racism. The recent change up of police tactics, where, instead of maintaining their usual perpetual presence, they have begun following demonstrations along side streets and intervening only at select moments, is just one instance of how governance changes its approach and strategy. Where it is successful, resistance holds the possibility of demasking the existent, revealing it in all its cruelty. But for this to happen, it is necessary to avoid allowing the time and space of our struggles be dictated by our enemies. Though this is neither a new nor a simple question, it remains as important today as ever. Some people appear to have sought to answer it through an escalation of tactics. Spectacular acts of sabotage and vandalism have happened in the last few years in Berlin, including effective interruptions such as the sabotage of train lines, which are able to be pulled off with only a handful of friends. Though there have been several direct actions that seemed to build on one another, they appear to have remained isolated, not being picked up by a mass of subversives, and were even misunderstood by people whom one would otherwise expect to be sympathetic. We think that broader discussions - for example at open assemblies - can increase the acceptability of such escalated actions and help to spread them further, by discussing them in a space that goes beyond the own circle of friends or affinity group. We are sympathetic with efficient sabotage on a large scale, and for more uncompromising self-satisfaction of our desires, but we think that this will not constitute a threat so long as these ideas and practices fail to circulate. We don't think that it is a coincidence or a symptom of arbitrary authoritarianism that the repression hit so hard after the attacks on cops at Kottbusser Tor that took place in solidarity with the fighting in Turkey, or the coordinated attacks on job centers and the SPD headquarter during the extended 1st of May 2013. We think it is because it was obvious that for these actions to have happened people had to have got together, discussed their situation, and created relations of subversion between each other which moved beyond reaction and towards an

offensive attack. This is the threat that our enemies are afraid of, and precisely what we wish to push forward. We think an open assembly is one of the tools for doing this.

THE NEED FOR OPEN ASSEMBLIES AS SPACES OF SELF-ORGANIZATION

We would like to see the recent callout and meeting for self-organization as first steps towards developing a more general culture of open assemblies, rather than as first steps towards developing another institution, or worse, organization. Our hope for the long term is to create a habit of assemblies at various different levels (e.g. in neighborhoods, citywide, etc.). There need to be more open spaces for discussion on all levels: from sharing our theoretical ideas and analysis of the current situation in Berlin, to discussing the concrete ways in which we see ourselves engaged in current struggles, to coordinating concrete actions such as spreading counter information, demonstrations, etc. Sometimes we need to talk about deeper and more difficult questions; other times it's really concrete things we need to discuss. As for the more theoretical discussions, we think that these can be most helpful when they take a certain form, in which we test out our theoretical convictions by analyzing specific struggles and demos, campaigns and their limits, etc. For example, we think it's cool that you're an insurrecto-queer nihilist, but how does this perspective inform your analysis of the way things at O-Platz have gone over the past 6 months? How have you engaged with it, or why have you avoided engaging it? Theory should test itself in strategy, and strategy is only as strong as the principles it serves to actualize.

But the ability to have time and space for all these discussions means that the assembly needs to become more than a monthly meeting. Rather, we need to generalize, using the form as it fits particular circumstances. We don't need a single general citywide open assembly that takes place on a regular schedule. Rather, as affinity groups (or looser constellations), we need to get into the habit of taking the initiative for calling open assemblies when we feel like we need to exchange ideas with others in an open space, rather than in the confines of our normal social and political circles.

For us, developing this practice is particularly important at the current moment for several reasons. Perhaps the most important is the fact that, in our perception at least, struggles in Berlin are heating up. Crisis politics are starting to affect us here more and more. This makes it even more important for those of us who are opposed to Capital, the State and domination in all of its forms to increase our ability to act together, to build spaces in which we can organize amongst ourselves and talk with others who are unsatisfied with the reformist solutions that are presented as answers to our problems. This means cultivating assemblies that can both be meeting points for those of us who are already within the autonomist/anarchist milieus as well as ones that serve as meeting points for those who are struggling and looking for paths outside those presented by the institutional left.

From our point of view this becomes even more important when we consider the particular dynamic of Berlin as a city where more and more radicals from outside of Germany are arriving every month, driven by economic crisis as well as political and social repression. These people bring diverse experiences of struggles, new ideas, and organizational forms with them, and it is important to build structures that allow for those who have not been in Berlin for a long time to have a place to start from, without having to first learn the complicated maze of autonomist institutions and all the social quirks of the scene. Open assemblies can, in part, provide this infrastructure.

As crisis politics increasingly make themselves felt in Berlin, the attendant ideas of revolt and resistance already quietly flourish not only among those already won over to anarchist notions, but also amongst long-time residents. Unrest in gentrifying neighborhoods, strikes of refugees, and talks in bars with drunken fed-up people, all of this indicates to us that there are more comrades outside of the anarchist/autonomous milieus. Once again, open assemblies can provide a basic point of infrastructure for these newly active comrades where they can quickly make connections with a variety of struggles, and break the isolation that is often imposed by the limitations of struggles happening only in particular neighborhoods or sectors of the population. They also provide a space where newer voices can be heard outside the normal confines of single issue campaigns. We have often wondered whether a strong assembly culture can only develop within the context of a generalized revolt, such as we see in Greece and Spain. How can it function outside of such a context? We can't answer this question in any precise way, nor can we foresee the success to which an open assembly culture could develop in the relative "social peace" of Berlin.

But from our experiences outside of Berlin as well as what we have heard from comrades from other places, those assemblies that were the most successful during heightened periods of revolt were ones which had already been taking place for some time *prior* to these revolts kicking-off.

Such meetings can also help to give us access to other perspectives on the recent demo culture. What aspirations or feelings have we had while attending them? What sorts of things might we have wanted to do or see done during them, but we didn't feel capable of? If we were to find out that others feel the same way, or would like things to be headed in the same direction, we might feel more confident in breaking out into new sorts of practices, knowing others wouldn't oppose it, and that they perhaps might even join us.

Finally, these assemblies constitute an important strategic component of our practice that is currently lacking. For example, had the response to the raid of Rigaerstrasse94 on August 14th, 2013 been to call an assembly that same night rather than the unregistered demo, it might have given people time to organize something much more interesting than what took place. Comrades at Rigaer already made a similar point, when they wrote,

"We, as R94, support the initiative, in cases of raids and repression, to come together on the same day at a certain time for a Berlin-wide plenary to exchange information and plan a concerted action. Our feeling coming out of these raids is that it is most important to rapidly create a common information pool in which all the facts can be gathered. We think it makes a lot of sense for there to be a common meeting to open up lines of communication, and to do so independently of digital media, or existing individual or group structures of communication. [...] It is a total pain in the ass to get raided and organize a spontaneous demonstration on the same day. By having a common meeting, we can better share out such tasks and plan things in a more clear-sighted way".³

We need to create a situation in which planning becomes an active process in which other and more groups get involved. This already would in itself constitute a huge step toward breaking down the consumerist dynamic. Smaller groups who don't presently feel like they want to shoulder the burden of calling actions all on their own would perhaps feel more comfortable doing so if they were able to see beforehand that other groups were interested. And as a result, these assemblies could potentially lead to more people organizing

things than currently happens. This practical process would also benefit from a wider circulation of theoretical and analytical materials from elsewhere. Much insightful and challenging writing from Greece, Spain, the U.S. the U.K., France, Italy and elsewhere has been circulating lately regarding the shape and limits of the recent global revolts. This upsurge in radical thought can help us sharpen our interventions and develop a more self-critical practice. However, for this material to be able to have its desired effect, it must no longer be confined to a small number of hands. While distro's and infoshops are indispensable resources, there is no substitute for face-to-face discussions and critical exchanges, which provide the only true measure of the portability of these analyses. A more inclusive organizational practice should therefore also simultaneously serve as laboratory of theoretical exchange.

A FEW IDEAS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Instead of deciding to have a once a month assembly taking the same format regardless of the content being discussed, we want to see affinity groups or other groupings taking the initiative to call assemblies when they see them as needed, and picking a specific form that fits the context. Some of the many appropriate moments to call an assembly for us, could be: after an attack/raid on a house, to discuss how we want to respond to it; prior to an up-coming demonstration, eviction or action; in order to have a more general discussion on a specific theme, and to develop critiques together; to discuss strategies for moving forward and analyzing our current situation in a more general sense; to plan solidarity with struggles happening outside of Berlin; to evaluate the successes and failures of a recent large events, and through such a collective evaluation to also test out our principles and visions of struggle. This is all too much for a single assembly, or a single kind of assembly to take on, but we see the need for all of these conversations to be given space in an open rather than a closed room. In general, we would like to suggest that open assemblies could and should act as replacements for what seems to us like a rather tired routine of Berlin leftist info-events. Rather than sitting and passively listening to a presentation followed by a lackluster "Q and A", we would like to see more open talks that are organized from the outset around participation and the mutual exchange and development of ideas. Call-outs to participate in the assemblies should consequently be spread as widely as possible.

We think these assemblies could help to counteract the fragmentation in the scene, by sewing deeper relations between groups living close-by one another. For example, we think it might be an interesting idea, during the assembly (or else afterwards) for there to be a breakout session where groups and individuals from each neighborhood can meet each other. This is especially important for groups coming from areas further away from traditional hubs of activity in Kreuzberg or Friedrichshain. Certainly, we anticipate questions about security culture arising from this suggestion. We get it, but we don't see this as sufficient grounds to abandon the idea (we could also imagine assemblies where participants have disguised their identities).⁴ Even if it means sticking our necks out a bit at first, establishing more communication between informal local groups is essential.

We also know that there is a risk that leftists and reformists may take advantage of such an 'open' format to hijack the conversation, diverting it into the neutralizing urgency of their frenetic 'activity', and preventing us from forming the bonds we want to form through this effort. Our experience is that such hijacking and its attendant aimless circular discussions can often be averted by keeping in mind the aims of the discussion as well as the basis on which we came together. Overly-general open assemblies often hover at a superficial level, are rarely satisfying and tend to only stumble into interesting questions haphazardly, as if by accident. Perhaps it might work better if groups put out invitations for open assemblies on a certain topic or content, which could then serve as a basis for the discussion. This will need to avoid any excessive reliance on identity-based, pre-digested ideologies, if we are serious about open assemblies helping us to break out of the self-constructed cage of the left scene and as a source of inspiration toward widening revolt. Some guiding questions that come to mind for writing such a call-out might be: 'Why do we see the need to come together? Where do we come from with this need? What do we aim for with such an assembly?'

-Some Anarchists

NOTES

- 1 See the call out at: <https://linksunten.indymedia.org/en/node/99855>
- 2 See Tiqqun´s *This is Not a Program* (2001) for a discussion of the importance of a coincidence between living and struggling: “What we are getting at here is the constitution of ‘war machines’. By war machines should be understood a certain coincidence between living and struggling, a coincidence that is never given without simultaneously requiring its construction. Because each time one of these terms ends up separated, however it happens, from the other, the war machine degenerates, derails. If the moment of living is unilateralized, it becomes a ‘ghetto’. Proofs of this are the grim quagmires of the ‘alternative’, whose specific task is to market the Same in the guise of difference. Most occupied social centers in Germany, Italy, or Spain clearly show how simulated exteriority from Empire provides a precious tool in capitalist valorization” (Citation drawn from the Semiotexte translation, p.69-70).
Accessible at <http://zinelibrary.info/files/Tiqqun%20-%20This%20Is%20Not%20a%20Program.pdf>
- 3 “R94 – Chronology of the repression”, accessible at <https://linksunten.indymedia.org/de/node/99427>
- 4 As for the question of how open assemblies either increase or decrease our ability to be surveyed and policed, we know this is a complicated and import-

ant issue, which we will not attempt to deal with at any length here. For a more detailed discussion, read for example the PRISMA (<https://linksunten.indymedia.org/de/node/23028>) for the methods and technical possibilities of cops the Polizeibericht 2010 (<https://linksunten.indymedia.org/en/node/30859>). Gathering in larger sized groups may seem like a win for police, increasing our visibility and making identification easier. Yet sometimes gathering in larger groups can make things harder for them too, making it more difficult to single out certain organizers, for example. In addition, the usual precautions should be taken: it makes sense to leave mobile phones at home or take out SIM cards and batteries before you go to an assembly, not only because police are able hack into the phone and use the microphone to listen to what is discussed, but also because they can track the numbers and thereby gain an insight on our social networks. Obviously a lot more remains to be said beyond this.

