


**ESCAPE TO THE FRONT: THE STRANGE
RADICALISATION OF THE WEST
GERMAN STUDENT MOVEMENT**

Escapar para o front: a estranha radicalização do movimento estudantil da
Alemanha Ocidental

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the reasons for the rapid radicalization of the West German student movement of the 1960s. Instead of referring to established theories on the radicalization of social movements, it focuses on the implications of the activists' specific notion of "movement". It is argued that the pressure on the movement's protagonists to permanently unite theory and practice led to a tension that could only be maintained by a permanent orientation towards the next step. Keeping the "movement" in motion thus exerted a propulsive radicalizing pressure that was not directed toward a specific goal, but toward continuing to "keep going." "Movement" may thus be seen as the unifying element of theory, practice, organization, and habitus of the movement. From this perspective, it is also argued, the sudden transformation of the disintegrating movement into terrorist groups or ultra-authoritarian small parties becomes more understandable.

KEYWORDS

Movement. Radicalisation. Practice theory.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora as razões da rápida radicalização do movimento estudantil da Alemanha Ocidental na década de 1960. Ao invés de se referir às teorias estabelecidas sobre a radicalização dos movimentos sociais, o texto está focado nas implicações da noção específica de "se mover" dos ativistas. Argumenta-se que a pressão sobre os protagonistas do movimento para unir permanentemente teoria e prática levou a uma tensão que só pode ser mantida por uma orientação permanente em direção ao próximo passo. Manter o "movimento" ativo exercia, assim, uma pressão propulsora radicalizadora que não era direcionada para um objetivo específico, mas simplesmente para continuar adiante. Desta forma, o ato de se mover pode ser visto como o elemento unificador entre teoria, prática, organização e *habitus* do movimento em si. A partir desta perspectiva, também se torna mais compreensível a súbita desintegração do movimento estudantil em grupos terroristas ou pequenos partidos ultra-autoritários.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Movimento. Radicalização. Teoria e prática.



As a social movement in the narrower sense of the word, the West German student movement of the 1960s was kind of a strange one.¹ On the one hand, there is the obvious disproportion between public attention for the movement and its factual success: while the images of escalating demonstrations in West Berlin or Frankfurt, the imaginative happenings of the *Kommune 1*, or of heatedly discussing students have taken a prominent place in the public memory of the Federal Republic of Germany, at the same time there is relief that hardly any of the revolutionary goals of the youthful rebels were actually achieved. Former movement activists in particular emphasize that, despite their radical left-wing rhetoric, they had fought rather for a "fundamental democratization" (LUCKE, 2008, p. 78) or "liberalization" of the Federal Republic, against the "stick air" (LETHEN, 2012, p. 105) of the postwar period and the stuffiness of their parents — according to their account, the socialist revolution they had been fighting for in their youth had had more the character of a community-building slogan than an actual goal. Moreover, given the accumulation of unrest, demonstrations, and protest events throughout the Federal Republic, it is relatively difficult to specify what and who actually belonged to the student revolt and what was rather part of a much vaguer movement of the revolting youth or even part of various modernization processes. If we focus on the group of people who were especially in West Berlin at the center of public attention — the so-called "anti-authoritarian movement" with the best-known figure Rudi Dutschke at its center — the idea, what the student movement actually was, becomes somewhat clearer. However, the story itself becomes even more puzzling.

This is because, in many respects, the erratic development of this movement hardly seems appropriate to the real political situation. Many protagonists of the subsequent student movement had already been working on new approaches to socialist theory since the early 1960s; but from around 1963 onward they underwent a transformation in terms of their ideas, goals, practices and self-perception at a dizzying speed that can hardly be understood merely as the result of a process of intellectual development. While they initially still saw themselves as critical intellectuals who wanted to influence social debates with intelligent arguments and persuasion, only a few years later they understood the deliberate breaking of laws and the targeted provocation of the police as the best form of political practice. Although most of them were academics graduating in the humanities, they quickly distanced themselves angrily from the attribution as intellectuals, discussed tactics of the "urban guerrilla" (KRAHL 1984, p. 57) and engaged in fierce street battles with law enforcement. And even if the vast majority of the student rebels returned to civilian life toward the end of the 1960s or ultimately found themselves in the ranks of left-wing social democracy: it was not just a few of the movement's inner circle who flirted, at least for a time, with what were probably the movement's most spectacular decay products, the left-wing terrorist or militant groups on the one hand, Maoist cadre parties on the other. Even though these groups fought each other bitterly, they were very similar in their determination and martial rhetoric. This was probably because the aura of militancy and the rhetoric of determination had a per se meaning for former movement activists from about 1968 onward — a contemporary witness describes that belonging to a group at that time was essentially more important than which group one exactly belonged to:

So why did someone become a Trotskyist, Leninist, Stalinist, Maoist, DKPist, Castrist, anarchist, syndicalist or something else? And why did someone join a particular faction, tendency, group or party? Hardly only because of the

¹ For an English introduction to the history of the West German student movement see BROWN 2013.

abstract persuasiveness of the particular ideological doctrine to which one subscribed. Rather, all of these options were subject to the desire or downright law of community building, which also manifested itself as a fear of losing one's connection. Where one finally ended up was usually the result of a subtle play of coincidences and circumstances, of contacts and inclinations. But each group, once constituted, formed a specific milieu or biotope, shaped its own styles and traditions, and attracted people of a certain social and character type (KOENEN, 2001, p. 250).

As a result, within just a few years many young West German academics had transformed from critics of authoritarian university structures to bitter opponents of imperialism, capitalism and West German democracy. Although this development can undoubtedly be interpreted as a radicalization of both the content and the means of the movement, the reasons scholars of social movement research usually tend to offer for such radicalization processes hardly apply here: Neither was the majority of the activists part of a marginalized group that could not make itself heard, nor was there a lack of public attention, in some cases even public goodwill, for their demands; for the most part, they were also hardly excluded from political participation, and state repression was initially still within limits. Approaches that see the need to preserve collective identity as a key driving force behind the radicalization of social movements also fall flat here, since the movement was characterized by a great tolerance for differences in content and habit. So why did the activists radicalize so quickly and so thoroughly?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE IN A MOVEMENT?

This paper attempts to show that the reason for the impetuous radicalization of the West German student movement is to be found in a very specific constellation, namely in a problem about which left-wing thinkers have been pondering since the beginning of the socialist labor movement at the latest, but which confronted the actors of the student movement in a specific way: the persistent discrepancy between thought and action, between accurate analysis and effective action, or in contemporary terminology: the contradiction between theory and practice. Although, as mentioned above, this problem had already been intensively addressed since (and by) Marx (KILMISTER, 1982), in the early 1960s the question of how to translate one's own analyses into political practice was particularly controversial in the West German left. Certainly, this was mainly due to the widespread feeling that the intellectual left's political power was limited at that time: Large parts of the West German leftist political camp, which mainly consisted of splinter groups and single intellectuals, who were disappointed by contemporary social democracy and Soviet communism and were mostly oriented toward the British and U.S. "New Left" (SASSOON 2002, p. 385-387), saw little possibility for left practice at the present time. Consequently, their own *raison d'être* consisted primarily in the development of new leftist theoretical approaches.

As correct as the assessment of the lack of social power of left-wing intellectuals may have been at that time, the decided renunciation of practice undoubtedly led to a lingering bad conscience. The "unity of theory and practice that we are all yearning for" (MARCUSE 1966, p. 37) always remained at least a proclaimed goal — after all, the idea was not to find something else to do besides discussing Marx, but to find a way to make theory and practice mesh: Theory should make practice conceivable, and this practice should in turn improve theory. To work out theory that was not satisfied with or limited to its own conceivability thus appeared to many left-wing intellectuals as an increasingly pressing challenge, which was put forward with a certain moral verve by some actors.

In this respect, one of the roots of the student movement was already visible at the beginning of the sixties, when criticism of (alleged) theory orientation and lack of practice emerged in various left-wing groups² — criticism that was primarily intended to legitimize conceptions of new forms of practice. Even the cleverest and most accurate theoretical analysis of social relations, one could paraphrase this critique, would result in stabilizing the system if it did not point out possibilities to change the criticized conditions. Particularly the *Subversive Action*, one of the best-known nuclei of the later anti-authoritarian movement, emphasized the ability of the capitalist system to integrate criticism of the system into the system itself: "profound social analysis is only good for filling shelves at the Frankfurt Book Fair and in libraries" (SUBVERSIVE AKTION 1963, p. 10), the activists worried. This necessary paranoia of the imperceptible absorption of one's own critique by what was being criticized had to result in a kind of permanent flight movement towards practice, the activists of *Subversive Aktion* reasoned. The ability to lead to practice thus became the criterion of truth for theory.

This train of thought became a self-empowering and community-creating self-description above all because it almost necessarily had to devalue those comrades who still insisted on the primacy of theoretical analysis with moral attributes: "Theorists," who believed that theoretical analysis revealed the impossibility of practice, were accused of not being concerned with a genuine transformation of society, but merely with striking a critical pose, with one eye already on a job in academia. The criticism of the criticized was equally caustic: The "practitioners", according to the "theorists", presumably simply did not quite understand the criticized theory; haphazard actions for the sake of carrying out actions would at most lead to the "practitioners" making themselves court jesters of the criticized system and thereby still supporting it.

The subjective necessity of working out a mutually complementary connection between theory and practice was thus consensual, but in fact amounted to a situation of motivational asymmetry in which the "practitioners" were structurally in the more comfortable situation — mainly, because the side of the "theoreticians," who insisted that "theory" could be true even if it proved the impossibility of "practice," could hardly achieve anything like a theoretical breakthrough or any other form of success on its own terms. The "practitioners," on the other hand, for whom theory proved true only by enabling and succeeding in "practice," could chalk up almost any "practice" (or its failure) at least as work on theory. The "theoreticians" were thus relegated to their "theory," while the "practitioners" could always hope for successes in the future.

These disputes drew their intensity primarily from the fact that in the mid-1960s both "theory" and "practice" were unusually vague concepts. The dismissal of both Soviet-style Marxism and the established communist and social-democratic parties, and the resulting need for a new beginning on the left, opened up a wide field of possibilities for redrawing the defining boundary lines around and between theory and practice: The question of whether academic science was revolutionary theory or shirking, whether demonstrations were practical enlightenment or senseless actionism, whether theory could only be true theory without practice, had to lead to practice or whether theory could even be practice itself, could never be definitively resolved and was always the result of situational bargaining.

Without a doubt, these two factors — the moral and political imperative to develop theory leading to practice, and the ambiguity as to what exactly theory and practice were —

² My arguments refer mainly to two groups: on the one hand, the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* (SDS), which, after its separation from the Social Democratic Party of Germany, operated as an association of independent socialists at the universities; on the other hand, the *Subversive Aktion*, a cultural-revolutionary splinter group of artists and activists and was active primarily in Munich and Berlin.

had to lead to a particular dynamic. In my opinion, the key to understanding the radicalization of the anti-authoritarian movement can be found in this dynamic. Since the activists legitimized themselves mainly through a pose of equidistant distinction from those who supposedly limited themselves to pure "theory" (or "practice), the rebellious students were, so to speak, forced to fight permanently against their own relapse into theory-less practice or practice-less theory: "Complementary phrases such as 'reflect on that!' versus 'that's abstract!' or 'that's actionist' versus 'that's intellectual onanism' were our constant companions" (REICHE, 1988, p. 48) recalled Reimut Reiche, temporary chairman of the SDS: The constant fear of a slackening, slowing down, or stagnation of the previously achieved mediation of theory and practice thus forced the actors into an ongoing next step of further approaching the "unity of theory and practice". It is easy to imagine that this idea exerted enormous pressure on the activists. The "permanent tension weighing on each individual" (REICHE 1988, p. 48) to permanently unite theory and practice thus gave their very presence the character of a constant not-yet, in which the fusion of theory and practice was always only one step, the next step away. This continuous "going further" in both theoretical work and action seemed to suggest the permanence of a movement. For the anti-authoritarian movement, movement was thus far more than a simple self-designation that distinguished itself from the idea of being just another political party. The anti-authoritarian movement was a "movement" in the most literal sense — it existed only as long as it was in motion; and its theory, too, was theory only as long as it kept moving the movement.

STEP BY STEP TO RADICALIZATION

Consequently, the development of the anti-authoritarian movement up to its apex in 1968 can be told as the story of a radicalization mechanism inherent in the thought world of the actors, which revolved around the idea of a "movement" that would abolish the momentary non-identity of theory and practice in the future. "Movement" thus functioned as a key term for the activists' mode of practice and self-understanding, as both a means and an end: The way the movements' protagonists (and, uncritically, contemporary observers and later narratives) portrayed the West German Republic — as "encrusted" (NN, 1968, p. 44), "ossified" (RABEHL, 1968, p. 151) and "fossilized" (NAGEL, 1976, p. 333) or as a stale "fug" (KUNZELMANN, 1965) —, one could hardly help but think of the demand for "movement" mainly as an expression of a fundamental and all-encompassing rebellion against the status quo:

Gentlemen, we really need the beat to find our balance. When you see us swinging our butts, don't think it's exuberance. We're just trying to stabilize ourselves, because the balance you've given us won't keep us afloat. Hear me out: it's so damn hard to get rid of your starched shirts and your idiotic ties, you must have some speakers in your back. Yes, gentlemen, if we shake our bodies, we will be able to break your mudguards out of the most appropriate exuberance, then it will seem possible to empty the trash cans on your stairs (SCHNEIDER, 2008, p. 179).

The movements' writer Peter Schneider hurled at the immobile bourgeois in November 1966. The quotation illustrates the general and comprehensive character of the movement's sense of motion: Here, "movement" not only united music and politics to forebode a non-alienated life, it was also the mode of a different awareness of the body, it was the mode and goal of changing political structures, and it was also the mode and goal of theory — not without reason, one of the most popular Marx quotations of the time was

the one according to "these petrified relations must be forced to dance by singing their own tune to them" (MARX, 1844).

From this perspective, especially the role of theory for the movement becomes somewhat clearer: for the activists of the student movement "theory" was not a canonical literary genre. Rather, theory could be everything — a book, a concept, a text — that was capable of driving the "movement" forward in a given situation. The ephemerality and situationality of the theory of the student movement was thus its decisive characteristic — which serves also as an explanation for the remarkable phenomenon that from this period of time which left behind a flood of printed and typed theoretical papers, articles and essays, hardly any long-term received theoretical work has remained. Rather, the theoretical basis of the student's protest was highly fluid and changeable: new authors, works, and concepts were constantly received, new publications were published, read, and discarded in high numbers, and new books circulated through the ranks of the activists every week. Theory thus appeared not so much as an analysis of the present, but as a suggestion of the actual malleability of the future.

However, the importance of "movement" did not only extend to the theory of the student movement — the organizational forms of the movement and the habitus of its members were also characterized by "movement". For example, it was the deliberate dismantling of fixed organizational structures and the dissolution of all previous left-wing groupings into a collective body of fluid ad hoc groups that gave the student movement its breathlessness and permanent excitement (for an example for this kind of rhetoric see DUTSCHKE, 1967; LEFÈVRE, 1967). Also, the physical appearance of the actors was characterized by breathless hectic, by permanent willingness and by continuous exhaustion (for example FRONIUS, 2008, p. 32; MAASE, 1999).

The greatest effect of the idea of being a "movement", however, may have been the strange indeterminacy of the proclaimed goals of the activists, or more precisely, the rapid shift of these goals. This indeterminacy certainly stemmed already from the fact alone that numerous ideological orientations and set pieces came together within the movement, most of which were difficult to reconcile with each other. The reason why reformists and revolutionaries, militant communists and enlightened democrats, psychoanalysts and Marxists, but above all pathos and analytical coldness, fun and seriousness, political and private issues could coalesce for some time in a common movement with hardly any concrete goals, was mainly due to the collective suggestion that these differences would be resolved on a higher level in an indeterminate future and that fixed goals, positions and theorems would therefore tend to contradict the character of the movement. It seems obvious that this suggestion implied that the movement had to remain in motion, in a state of flux and flow, and that substantial concretizations had to be postponed as long as possible — and it also seems obvious that this inherent necessity of "carrying on" had a tendency to become self-perpetuating.

Without a doubt, the feeling of being part of a "movement" thus had also ecstatic elements for many of its participants: The collective coming together for protest marches, perhaps even without knowing exactly what it was against or for, the physical feeling of unity, solidarity and fighting spirit that emerged in the collective shouting of slogans and marching together undoubtedly had appeal on many students and young people — for student Hans Dieter Kittsteiner, "fleeting moments of happiness" flashed up in demonstrations, which still came closest to the "ominous 'liberation'" (KITTSTEINER, 2008, p. 42) they all were hoping for. When I talked to Rüdiger Minow, a filmmaker and former student protester, he told me that the "enormous dynamics that emerged at that time are unimaginable from today's perspective" — a statement that recurs in the accounts of other contemporary witnesses who told me their stories: Permanently sustaining the necessary tension between theory

and practice and thus keeping the movement going gave the present an enormous degree of subjective intensity. Many of the protesters felt the weight of the responsibility for the success of a mission of historic dimensions resting on their shoulders. With this in mind, the effortlessness with which just within a few years (from about 1963 to about 1968) the demand for free speech at universities turned into accusations of academic ideology production, the demand for balanced reporting on the Vietnam War into fundraising for the Viet Cong and stepping onto the forbidden lawn (for some) evolved into throwing Molotov cocktails, seems somewhat more comprehensible.

It is obviously clear that we have to presume the simultaneous interplay of several factors here. Social movement research has elaborated various explanatory patterns for the radicalization of such movements, which certainly also played a role in the case of the student movement. For instance, the often disproportionately harsh reaction of the police against demonstrators had such a shocking effect on many of the demonstrating students that they subsequently threw themselves even more vigorously into the confrontation with the state authorities. There is also no doubt that over time a collective identity developed among the members of the movement, which certainly became a goal in itself to maintain. Finally, it cannot be denied that the actors of the movement played a highly conscious game with the media, which also had a radicalizing effect.

All of these factors amplified the radicalization of the student movement, but they do not fully explain it — above all, they cannot explain the fact that in almost every situation, the actors of the movement would have had other options available to them for making their positions heard. In the later phases of the movement, the protesting students even actively blocked themselves from possible access to political decisions, to avoid taking the edge off their criticism and thus having to deradicalize themselves. The shift towards increasingly extreme positions by parts of the movement was thus only partly driven forward by ideological bandwagon pressures, mutual outbidding, or particularly pigheaded character traits on the part of those involved. Instead, the decisive factor seems to have been a kind of deep-seated distrust of the integration of one's own protest into the system by falling back into pure theory or practice — a distrust of one's own theory and one's own integrity, which manifested itself in a refusal to concretize one's own goals. The activists thus forced themselves into a kind of permanent flight forward, and thus the movement simply existed only when it moved — which could not last in the long run.

THE HARDENING OF A MOVEMENT

By 1968 at the latest, it became obvious that the continuously moving movement could hardly be made to last. Not only because the idea of permanent mobilization had reached its limits: the confrontational rhetoric between movement and the state had by now reached such a high pitch that it became clear to most of the activists that the much-invoked "next step" would have been the step into armed revolution. Indeed, it must be stated that the birth of the left-wing terrorist group Red Army Faction (RAF) ultimately corresponded precisely to the logic of "going beyond theory to practice" that had propelled the movement forward: "The Red Army Faction refers to the primacy of practice. Whether it is right to organize armed resistance now depends on whether it is possible; [whether it is possible is] only to be determined practically" (ROTE ARMEE FRAKTION, 1971, p. 7), the terrorists wrote in a statement from April 1971.

Without a doubt, only a tiny part of the radical left scene took up arms. After the end of the movement, the majority of those involved there engaged themselves in the emerging leftist milieu, in social democracy or in the left-wing cultural scene. A not-so-small number of the more important protagonists of the movement, however, sought their salvation in the founding of ultra-authoritarian Maoist parties, which in retrospect seem like political sects.

Although their bureaucracy, elaborate hierarchies, ascetic pressure to perform and ideological immobility made them seem like the complete opposite of the frenetic movement, they mushroomed in its ruins: In Berlin alone, at least five of these groups were founded in the first half of 1970, and they fought each other fiercely.³ In doing so, they abandoned most of the elements that were characteristic for the former movement: the ideological openness, the joyful fusion of private life and politics, and the intensity of night-long political discussions no longer had a place in the lives of the activists. Hard political work and personal asceticism and joylessness now characterized their daily lives. Even the physical representation of rebellious wildness gave way to colorless respectability: in order to be taken seriously by the proletariat, the newly minted party members cut their hair short, bought suits and left their polyamorous shared flats in favor of classic couple relationships.

The intensity and speed of this development makes the hypothesis seem likely that it was a reaction to the end of the movement — but I would argue that the founding of these parties was not an anti-movement gesture, but rather arose from the very idea of the unification of theory and practice, only under changed conditions. After all, the departure into the unknown that the movement represented, the search for a space in the future where theory and practice would intertwine, had been the very result of the uncertainty about what theory and practice actually were — the openness of the future had been more or less fundamental to the movement's propulsive energy. In the situation of crisis, however, which subjectively seemed very urgent to the activists from 1968 on, theory now had to suggest clear instructions for action: In order to take the next step, one had to have a concrete vision of the future. Most activists hoped to find this vision in an orthodox Marxism. Although the works of Marx, Lenin and Mao had been studied before, from 1969 they were no longer read as social theorists but as instructions for action.

This search for clarity and immediate applicability changed the entire character of the former movement: the former movement uniting all opposites became a multitude of dogmatic sects, which cultivated their antagonisms over minor differences in the interpretation of the Marxist literature and thus mutually swung up into ever more radical positions. The key to understanding the puzzle of how parts of the anti-authoritarian movement had raised such authoritarian structures in and around themselves within only a few years thus can be found in the subjective failure of the movement's logic and the resulting altered role of theory: As long as the "theory" intertwined with the dynamics of the movement was fluid, mobile, and coalescing from many sources, a failure of its promise to lead to concrete actions could still be blamed on faulty analyses, faulty theories, faulty planning, faulty individual theories. However, the sense that the movement somehow had gotten stuck and the subsequent turn to the "classics" also changed the implication of theory. Whereas texts or thoughts in the context of the movement, according to my hypothesis, had only become "theory" through their situational functionality — when they suggested continuing the movement in a concrete moment — the Marxist "classics" were read with a different set of expectations: Precisely because they no longer had to prove their status as theory so that one could derive practice from them, they had to be true in a more absolute sense than the theory of the movement. But this placed a new responsibility on the individual party members: Whereas the former movement had moved into the unknown with every step forward, the future now lay clearly and obviously before the activists. If it turned out not to be as plannable as one thought to read in the "classics," this had to be due to a lack of commitment on the part of the individual party members. If one accepted this logic, it was hardly possible to escape the dynamics of self-hardening and self-seclusion from the environment. Consequently, the immobile orthodoxy of the Maoist parties of the 1970s was

³ For an English introduction to the history of the West German Maoist parties see DAPPRICH, 2018.

due neither to character predispositions of the actors nor to the theory they read, but to the expectations they had of Marxist theory: If one could not allow an ounce of uncertainty in theory in order to be able to do practice at all, there was also no legitimate reason to do this practice differently than theory seemed to dictate.

CONCLUSIONS

Even if the West German student movement may not be a typical manifestation of a social movement, its case highlights some indicative elements of radicalization processes in general. One aspect is the enormous dynamic that a moral charge of “practice”, of “doing something”, can trigger in situations of subjective powerlessness. If an analysis of the situation emphasizes one's own powerlessness, but the actors counter this analysis with the attitude “after all, you have to do something,” this can lead to a development that makes radicalization likely. The general suspicion that criticism of capitalism must almost inevitably be absorbed into the capitalist system strengthened this tendency toward radicalization immensely. The activists thus placed themselves on a slippery slope of ever more fundamental criticism, which immediately exposed every declared goal to the suspicion of appeasement. Ultimately, this led to a situation in which the activists had to see the purest form of political activity merely in their own resistant existence — and this resistant existence had to be repeatedly authenticated through ever more radical actions and ever more determined opposition to the state. Ultimately, this led the movement's protagonists to find an alternative only in the very other of the capitalist system, and any form of reform, compromise, or concession to reality had to seem to them a failure, or worse, a betrayal.

Over the last decades, both contemporaries and later commentators repeatedly have compared the West German student movement with fascist movements (e.g. ALY 2008). Even if these comparisons usually aim at devaluing the movements demands and political style and can therefore easily be dismissed, there might be one tiny grain of truth to it: what indeed catches the eye both in the student movement and in fascist movements is the importance of the concept of a permanently increasing movement. Fascism, too, depended on the ongoing mobilization of their supporters in order to maintain its characteristic essence and had to escalate constantly its political goals in order to maintain itself. If we follow fascism researcher Robert Paxton, fascist regimes thus basically had only two options on the long run, which he calls “radicalization or entropy” (PAXTON, 2004): permanent escalation to the point of self-destruction — like Nazi Germany — or “normalization,” the sinking into a kind of authoritarian regime — like in Spain, for instance.

If one looks at the radicalization of the student movement from this perspective, its development can in fact be compared to the driving forces behind the development of fascist regimes in this regard, almost completely independently of its socialist content. The history of the RAF on the one side, which during the 1970s increasingly became more and more like a death cult, and the slow normalization of many former movement rebels into West German social democracy on the other hand can thus be seen as parallels to the history of the fascist movements: Radicalisation or entropy seem to be the only two options available to a self-proclaimed “movement”. The praxeological perspective presented in this paper, which focuses on the intertwining and interdependence of ideas, forms of practice, forms of organization, and habitus of social movements, can thus draw particular attention to the implications of ostensibly neutral terms such as “movement” that both activists and their investigators may be only half aware of.

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