

Ausländer:innen



A Collection of “Foreign” Anarchists'
Experiences in Berlin

Preface	1
Reflections on Failures to Keep Building an Anarchist Berlin	2
At the Institute of Seclusion	9
The German Way	17
“That's just your american individualism!”	23
Postscript	29

Preface

The first zine we published, and the reason this distro exists, was *Berlin, You've Hurt Me / Another Berlin is Possible*. It was an anthology meant to give a bit catharsis for the negative experiences some have had with the so-called radical left here, not just as an opportunity to vent or commiserate, but to create an artifact that could be handed to others as a bit of a plea. The point was to implore others to reflect and change their behavior in order to make this place a little more welcoming, a little less harsh, and that by doing so, we all might be better prepared to change the world.

Berlin, You've Hurt Me is our most popular zine, and certainly the one that people talk about with us the most often. Four of the five people who submitted were immigrants, and the ones who seem most happy to have read it tend to be immigrants too.

Following October 7th, Israel's vengeance, and the reactions worldwide and especially here, it seems that some of the divides that split "foreigner" from "of this place" only deepened.¹ It often feels that there's a parallel community of us foreigners, us Ausländer:innen, that brushes up against, sometimes mingles with, but is still distinct from the left here. We keep saying "the left" rather than focusing on the anarchist community because of often our collectives and projects are made of a hodgepodge of different ideologies, and maybe there's a lesson here. From these conversations and grown schism, it seemed appropriate to try to return to this sense of *foreignness* so many anarchists continue to feel even after being here for such a long time, even when being quite involved in the movement and the projects that constitute it.

So again, we let our comrades speak and tell you how they feel.

¹And maybe this is for the better. No more pretending. We know where everyone stands.

Reflections on Failures to Keep Building an Anarchist Berlin

Aletheia

I have always felt absolutely proud of the collectives I am part of in Berlin. Fortunately enough, I am part of international and diverse collectives with people from many backgrounds so right after 7th of October quite soon was very clear to us that we were aligned in the basic support of the Palestinian resistance. We were all aligned in terms of not judging the means of resistance the oppressed choose when living under siege for decades, except of one collective member from Israel who knew some of the people killed in the NOVA festival during the counterattack from resistance and therefore did not see this attack as a consequence of an oppression, but more as an isolated need of revenge from Hamas. The tension was felt in the sharp and unequivocal way the words were being exchanged during a plenum one of those first months, and the friction came to surface and culminated online in the chat of the collective with many members of the collective writing things to him resulting in his resignation from the group collective after several years of good and close relations with him, his wife and his recently born child.

I wanted to bring this story of mistakes that my collective made with other type of *Other*, falling into the same logics of whiteness, replicating division, Manicheism, binarism and lack of dialogue on a daily basis in the anarchist scene in Berlin.

This person is in no way a Zionist. Since we were close for years, we shared the same beliefs of liberation and fought for making sense of this world, using our privileges to bring support and relief to the homeless in Berlin. However, the 7th of October pushed the debate a bit harder, and soon it was obvious that he didn't agree with some of our statements as anarchists and anti Zionists. I found that normal, that we didn't agree with all, but unfortunately the environment started to get tense within the collective, and still today, I feel bad about how everything was handled back then.

We were comrades, and the space for a much more mature conversation

should have taken place instead of easy messages through a chat by many members of the collective, not giving a personal space for a dialogue with a person which we could have learned a lot from. As internationalists as we always have been, we should have identified better our own ways of *othering*. We were, at that moment, a reflection of our oppressors and performed what they have done to us during centuries, with the use of an apparent moral superiority, the constant stare of the elderly and the language that Germans profess to us every day in their treatment of others in this city, the suppression of our language as migrants who suffer here on a daily basis and struggle to work hard to maintain the welfare of others plus giving our free time to the struggle against homelessness and their abandonment by the entirety society. The impossibility of speaking, or of making mistakes, of saying things that are not politically correct, of saying what one thinks without being judged by a white-made subculture, is a colonial practice that must be eradicated from plenum culture because we are under construction in an extremely mean world that has shaped individualism as a core characteristic.

Instead, we should have listened to his perspectives as the sharing of something personal by someone who's been directly related to this colonial project and from there building a common understanding of the ways and implications of being a white traitor, with him as part of the struggle as he always was.

As part of some anarchists collectives in Berlin, I have witnessed moments when things didn't feel correct, and since the topic of this anthology is the *Other Side*, I wanted to share a different perspective of our own ways of failing as we grow as a collectivity. In spite of achieving amazing bonds of understanding and solidarity among us and other collectivities during the last years, we failed.

Assuming that because a person has another perspective doesn't make it an entitlement to be assigned a label given by the rest of the collective as the dominant group with a dominant position. That's completely hierarchical, simplistic and stigmatizing of someone who clearly is part of the collective because he does not share the values of the settler colonial state where he comes from.

I perceive the emergence of this entitlement of dominant group in the

anarchist collectives in various ways. There is the *good other* in the collectives who are the ones who have stayed there for years, they have belonged long enough in certain groups that feel now superior in terms of old ways of doing things, old structures of mind set paranoia that close their minds to new young anarchists that bring new ideas for connections and good use of communication channels and cyber security, for instance. This sort of membership role form a *sense of unity* of collective rationale that needs to be protected from the outsider and that builds a superior language in the way of threatening the new others in the collective, or theirs diverse ways, different manners, positions or perspectives.

Fortunately or unfortunately, this mismanagement of language is more clearly seen during the long plenums where we have the opportunity of discuss issues that unite us, but instead of this, I have perceived over my years here that the anarchist collectives are radical in the sense that they do not open safe spaces for sincere, humble and honest dialogues. The jealousy and ego are present always and have to be handled secretly so they do not break the collectives.

As a migrant, I have throughout the years entered diverse collectives where the constant is that the collective might have been started by Germans some or plenty of years ago and therefore, these people due to their length of membership or belonging to the collective, have more power in the decisions made, the solidarity causes to support, and similar. This masks a hierarchy given by the duration of belonging.

One could argue that this type of hierarchical structure are overall human and can happen anywhere, but here in Germany I feel it more sharp and unequivocal. The cancel culture is a good example of a taken-for-granted truth that have lead us to a comfortable inability to discuss and give the opportunity to understand, apologize in public and individually, forgive the mistakes, and see the change in the person who said or did something selfish and this representation of truth applies like a script in the collectives in Berlin. If one person say something out of understanding, the person leaves the collective, staying is not an option, and the replacement is fast. So, in spite of thinking that otherism can happen in all collectivities, I perceived it here in Berlin more radical and expedite. The cancel culture in anarchist collectives is a way of

otherism that annuls the possibility of conversation, discussion, argumentation and real consensus when dark times arrive, such as October 7th.

Where I come from in Bogotá, Colombia, we cancel a person only in very serious cases such as rape culture, infiltration, violence. But never for ways of thinking, or any form of identity politics, whereas here in Berlin I have seen rejection of persons and points of view for issues such as being straight edge, veganism, not being FLINTA, and other forms of framed subcultures derived from concepts in turn derived from the theorization of everything. I have struggled here to let people see that things are never black and white, and it's there I see the difference from my home country. I also perceive sometimes the class difference in certain moments. In Colombia, the majority of people I know that are collectivized belong to the working class so this is not an issue, whereas here in Berlin this varies a lot, and that has influence in the language of superiority and silences during plenums, the time dedication to the cause and other less important aspects like the end destination of the collected money.

On the other hand and in contrast, even in somewhat diverse and migrant collectivities in Berlin, due to the lack of belonging to a land that nurture us and makes us feel "*at home*," we replace that lacking with a sense of belonging somewhere that has meaning only when assigned a label to it to be then recognizable and from thereon start knowing other scenes, places, people, projects.

Sometimes collectives in Berlin are being used selfishly as a fulfilling gap or a platform to fulfill that belonging or loneliness some people have as a consequence of living in this hedonistic city. I'm not trying to generalize throughout the solidarity movement in Berlin, as I know quite new people who recently joined into the collectivities and have very good ideas, new ways and challenging perspectives that I really appreciate and value. However, I often see migrants treating collectives as a social platform to the anarchist scene rather than a place where to build connections of trust, friendship, or comradeship. This gives a false sense of unity as people bring selfish attitudes and superficial behavior in the political solidarity movement.

Moving away from these bad habits and following our values during that challenge we had as a collective after October 7th, we should have had a more

in-depth and personal conversation as a community, meaning as a politically diverse family that have gotten together due to the socio-political concerns that unite us in this city, a community that now after October 7th needs to deal with something real such as an ongoing genocide that brings to the surface ideological conflicts that this person has in his mind as a Jew raised in Israel and the connection all this has to the German society due to this country's ongoing guilt for the Holocaust.

Instead of that, most of us immigrants unfortunately constructed the otherness very fast from our own representation of how a person should think about October 7th without opening the dialogue to listen to the nuances that a conflict like this can have specially for someone who has been raised inside the perpetrators' mind and yet is a declared antizionist.

We have definitely a lot to learn since forever. We have failed plenty of times, we have had special challenges that we have overcome at some point, and there is a reason why we have been in action for so many years. In this opportunity, we missed the chance to improve the dialogue and the communication between each other, and by doing so we missed a comrade who was always quite proactive going to the collective actions even with his newly born baby and wife. Unfortunately, he lost contact with most of the members of the collective, and I know that not long ago he moved out of the Germany. I'm sure he would have liked to be part of all the solidarity gatherings we have organized for Gaza during the last years.

This is a call of attention to all of us giving our energy, time, love to a cause we believe is an honest way to be in this society. We need to break the circles of hatred and understand that we are all privileged one way or another in this world depending on the place, context where we are. Privileges varies and adapts if I am an immigrant, if I am a national, if I am cis gendered, if I am white, If I am part of the majority.

This constant realization place us in a world where most of the times is better for us to be silent and listen before saying a word. It's definitely easier to point fingers at others at any moment instead of judging our own actions and trying to understand the other ones, but we are part of anarchist collectives because we want the complete opposite, we want to organize autonomously based on self-governance, consensus, but most importantly on a culture of care

which is what the state constantly denies us. Privileges should be something that each one of us are aware of, and that realization takes us to act with respect, empathy, solidarity, towards others.

Constant and intuitive self-awareness of own privileges should take us to the fact that assuming privileges in others is a mistake. I have immigrant friends from global south who have more income than my European ones. At the same time, I have European comrades who are white traitors and white abolitionists who we organize demos or solidarity events with. While I know also many of my friends from Colombia not being to one single demo since I've lived in Berlin. I know some people from Israel that make constant efforts to deconstruct the ingrained hatred and fight for the liberation of Palestinians which includes to cut ties with their families and friends. The world will never be black and white, and therefore neither should be our judgments. The analysis we make in certain moments needs distance from the fast pace of the world where responses must be reactive in order to carry weight.

It's was very disappointed to see comrades feeling entitled to judge someone by their origins and for not being that radical, and I judge myself for remaining silent, instead of making an effort to listen at his perspectives to then, all together as a collectivity, find a way of understand and cut with this unbearable vicious circle of hate that separate us constantly. This could have been attempted by setting a date for a special meeting that was not in a plenary setting, but rather an informal and friendly listening gathering, where a person shares what they feel or what they felt at a certain moment that hurt them. I personally called this emoplenu (when they happen, which is almost never). They help to build in us this simple but hard habit of listening to the other perspectives and getting rid of the ego and its judgments. Another idea is to cultivate the habit of getting together, not only for plenary sessions but also to share moments that strengthen community and, therefore, build new alliances and projects. We do not have to replicate the same collectivization structures that already exist here if they do not work to build real bonds. Sometimes plenary sessions have become schematic and expeditious, which is precisely why everyone is reluctant to attend them, so this cannot be the only way of seeing and sharing with each other as a collectivity.

We will never agree on everything all the time. That's not the reality of

the world and our society. Outside our own ego, there's an entire color palette of backgrounds and feelings that we cannot control or disappear, and having lost a comrade to this it's something I will always regret, and therefore I will make an effort not to repeat such an experience.

At the Institute of Seclusion

H.

Intro Note

As a disclaimer: the present critique of the “German” way of doing things should be taken with a grain of humour and love. I am sympathetic to attempts of native comrades to integrate migrants into common projects. Besides, the text draws a distinction between anarchist and leftist circles: they largely overlap, but most of the problems migrants face daily are not encountered among anarchists as regularly or as sharply as among the left.

Germany proudly carries the label of a social state. However, once you are here, you quickly understand that Germany — specifically its capital — is a world of individualists, both free and lonely simultaneously. Albeit (almost) all of us come from capitalist societies, German culture doesn’t fail to repeatedly surprise with its focus on self-interest.

Blowing your nose as wildly loud as possible even in quiet rooms? Eating in front of a presenter? Who came up with solitary Abendbrot instead of collective Abendessen? I won’t talk here about these and other nuisances of solipsism even if, after many years here, they still stun me at times. Of more concern is why loneliness is so normalised.

Walking Back

Bin ich wirklich allein? In deinen Armen, an deinem
Herzen wieder, Natur, ach! und es war nur ein Traum...

F. Schiller, “Der Spaziergang.” (1795)

Even for Northerners like me, the German social fabric doesn’t feel warm enough. Here, everyone seems to want to operate independently and at the same time feels left alone by society. Is loneliness embedded in German lifestyle? It is not that people do not care about each other “because you can’t save everyone,” as it is unfortunately in my home place. In Germany,

people sometimes seem unaware that others even exist. Perhaps, the idea of alienation can help explaining reclusive German soul?

While not exclusively of German interest, alienation became a focal point specifically in German philosophy and acquired so many names — like *Entfremdung*, *Entäußerung*, *Entzauberung*, etc. — as if they were some different kinds of snow in Eskaleut languages. Ever since the German Idealists, alienation was seen not as pathological but rather as something positive for personal development.

Before that, the Reformation must have played a role as well: it shifted responsibility for salvation onto individuals themselves. Now everyone could talk to God directly in their own head and was accountable only to themselves.

Does German language syntax also take its toll? One often has to listen until the end of the sentence to grasp its meaning. Speech thus leaves less room for back-and-forth and emotional interaction.

Looking further back: life on a compact plain in times of wars, racketeering, plagues, and fragmentation into hundreds of competing states certainly did not foster a welcoming culture. Close cooperation with administrative authorities, which provided customs and trade security, may have been fundamental in establishing the German rule-based order.

The result was an entrenched belief in institutions, further solidified with the adoption of the militaristic and discipline-oriented Prussian state model when the unified Germany we know today formed in the 19th century.

Loneliness and alienating communication style are part of life here, damaging not only migrants but also Germans themselves. And if alienation is embedded in mentality, culture, and language, then we surely should not expect amendments in German persons soon. What could be changed though is politics. I believe alienation is a piece of the political project called “Germany,” too.

Asocial Democracy

In Berlin, more than half of households are single-person: partly because larger apartments are few (less profitable to build) and couples can’t move in together. Statistics tell that Berliner kids are more likely not to have siblings —

meaning to grow up without learning an acute need to share space, attention, toys, etc. Correspondingly, one third of children live with only one parent, compared to 18% in Germany overall – already among the highest rates in Europe.

Alienation is a basic trait of modern social-democratic capitalism, a system enjoying such long-lasting and broad public support that it is arguably not threatened by any influential political force in Germany.²

As a Keynesian-Neoclassical capitalist system, its economy is based on stimulating consumption. Intrinsically, it aims at leaving its participants never satisfied. The social aspect is only that the state makes it easier for everyone to jump on the consumption needle.

By reconciling class struggle, it promises vertical social mobility but can never fully deliver it, since the system depends as much on elites and big business as on the public. That promise creates a dream of achieving a higher standard of consumption, status, and glory. The unattainability of this dream leads to dissatisfaction, social anxiety about being judged on income scale, and further withdrawal from communities into a loop of self-ostracism and self-improvement to sell yourself out on the market.

In this respect, the sell-off of social housing to financial investors by Berlin's red-left government, and labour market liberalisation by Social Democrats and Greens in the 2000s, turn out less like a betrayal of the working class and more like features of post-industrial social democracy.

The invention of the “middle-class social democrat” provided citizens with a lifelong goal – forever unreachable, squeezed by taxation focused on middle incomes and dwarfed by lifestyle of the super-rich. The idea seems to be to essentially implant dissatisfaction and let people quench it by chasing dopamine on the free market of entertainment.

This is not even to mention people stigmatised by Hartz IV/Bürgergeld, which feels insufficient to leave the house sometimes. Cherished by the leftists, the slogan of SPD mayor Wowerweit of Berlin being “poor but sexy” is meanwhile already rather “expensive and kinky.”

The German state claims to be your friend but pulls you out of communities.

²AfD coming to power is of course a disaster for all of us migrants, but they won't be able to remove the safety net without costing them their parliamentary seats.

Claiming to be the provider, it leaves you forever hungry for more. Substituting for God, it leaves you only to believe in yourself. Not that other states are that different but at least they don't pretend that much.

The omnipresent lifestyle of the “social-democratic Berliner”, in all their varieties – from democratic socialist to left-conservative – affects the lifestyle of anarchists, withal.

On a personal level, looping in Berlin's fun-hunting scene is certainly a coping strategy to forget unfolding catastrophes and long-term consequences of capitalism on the planet. On the broader level, self-expression becomes much more important in anarchist organising than community-building. Many anarchists move to Berlin not to strengthen activist networks but to do some soul-searching, dive into the sea of role models and discover their (unique) identity.

In the meantime, there is much to do in the revolutionary movement. Getting organised is relatively easy – help is needed everywhere. But why is it so difficult to settle into German activist groups as a foreigner? Why is it difficult to feel as accepted and engaged as German comrades? Why is there frequently someone who says, “Oh, it is not easy organising with people from such a variety of backgrounds”?

Welcome Package

Outside anarchist circles, the context for migrants can be staggering. Certainly, racism here is less violent than in many other places, including where I come from. In the safe haven of Berlin centre, you might not even encounter passive-aggressive behaviours if you stay away from crowded places and only ride bike.

However, what we migrants do recognise daily even in leftists is that orientalist look. People from other cultures are seen either as some curious anthropological object to be added to the collection or conversely as “the Miscellaneous” – a clumsy allocation of all kinds of migrants into the box of random stuff that is too difficult to navigate through.

So, instead of connecting with their interlocutor, the approach is either to study their kind or to dismiss differences in cultures and experiences overseas

as too complex and irrelevant for convo with a progressive global citizen, modern German, hip Berliner also known as simply a “Friedrichshainer” 😎, etc.

The anthropologists usually specialise in one particular culture, so if you are not from it, they gradually lose interest. The progressives don’t pay much attention by default. Overall, the aim of interactions rarely seems to be finding something in common, but rather extracting some form of profit – whether having you as listener, language tandem, date or showpiece of how worldly Berlin life can be.

It would not be an exaggeration to call this a typical first-meeting treatment, and one must be lucky not to be left out in the cold after a brief exchange. That said, people who have lived abroad extensively or attended culturally mixed public schools tend to demonstrate less of such objectification.

Identity Politics

Political conversations display this condescension prominently. Arguments undermining German business-as-usual – Germany as the centre of the European neocolonial empire, or critiques of democracy, hedonism, or speciesism – usually fall on deaf ears. Attention switches, points are confronted unwillingly, and eventually there is disengagement. Why is that?

This may not stem from pride in being “the Host” or “German,” but it does remind of entitlement rooted in identity. In a society built on economic specialisation, a migrant is rarely seen as an expert in anything beyond their country of origin. And if that country is more backward in GDP or other metrics of the colonial world, it is considered wiser to rather trust a German expert on this area instead.

Exemplifying is the depth of misunderstanding whenever debate touches Germany’s national interests – such as wholesale support for the Israeli state or self-appointed “saviour” roles in conflicts where “Germoney” has helped shape or profited from. It took significant effort by migrants, with anarchists at the forefront, to mobilise people at the start of the IDF’s genocidal revenge to the October 7th. While protests were ravaging across Europe, the German left remained reluctant with all alarms silenced by the small but deafening

Anti-D.

Identity politics has also been taken on by anarchists. On one side, most anti-militarists and pacifists see defeatism as the only possible uniting European stance and avoid debates about it. Apparently, they hope their advocacy will sneak behind the Russian Iron Curtain and the war will vanish by itself. (The problem is that behind the curtain, the theatre is shutdown. Actors are scarce; there is no revolutionary class.)

On the other side, for pro-Ukraine anarchists “national” is an antidote to “imperialist” and the best way to reach peace in the region is to attempt a NATO-led invasion into a nuclear state. If trying to propose more anarchy or expediency, Russian-read people are shamed as traitors or cancelled. Anyone bar the donors better get lost anyway. Rumours tell about a similar treatment of some anti-militarist Israeli activists in Berlin whom it was hinted to stay away from holding events for now “not to silence Palestinian voices.”

Identity is at its best when it stays unknown — but this one is a different approach, unheard of in anarchism.

“Hoch die internationale Solidarität!”

Insensibly, identity is a building block of international solidarity where most contact of German leftists and migrant activists occurs. In this context, “mixed” is typically falsely interpreted as “international,” and “intercultural” as “multicultural.” The difference may sound subtle but is crucial for integration between groups and its members.

The former implies identity plays a secondary role; the latter makes identity central. Neighbourhoods and communities become “mixed” by interconnecting, whilst in “multicultural” ones, as name suggests, cultures rather only try to co-exist. If the word “international” compels dividing anarchists into nations first, then internationalism is not too far off such social democratic inventions like Multikulturalismus or Solidaritätszuschlag.

In this view, internationalism emerges by drawing borders and risks repeating stereotyped tropes. And anarchists sometimes fall into a trap of defending their nations, too. In case of Germans as self-proclaimed champions in liberal democracy, anarchists start measuring freedom by the strength of “democratic

values.”

Democracy provides a number of leeways for individuals to ignore each other and everyone in Germany received education in it.

First and foremost, everyone is universally allowed to peacefully exist in their own distinct political bubble. In general, a German political dialogue feels more like two people broadcasting rather than developing a dialectic. And when you (as a migrant) take a more direct approach entering their opinion bubble with spiky critiques, even anarchists are quick to get annoyed with your uncivil boldness.

Secondly, in the majority-based decision-making world, some part of people are by default considered irrelevant as long as they can't make much noise. When debate with a migrant hits an emotional note, standard German way of resolving disagreements is to freeze and withdraw – only to regroup among compatriots afterwards. Foreigners cannot even vote, so why bother changing their opinions?

Thirdly, the main fear of the liberals – to be labelled racist – applies to arguments of the left vs. migrants (or indigenous) likewise. It is deemed that one has to drop own privileges, pay back for years of oppression by providing platform and shut up. It might be good-willed until it's instrumentalised by authoritarians.

Recently, a half refugee centre / half housing project in Potsdam has been gifted by the local leftists to a couple who serve as house administrators there. The couple is however rumoured to run an exploitative enrichment scheme at the expense of refugees and covers up cases of violence. They apparently bought an expensive car and a personal house outside of Potsdam. How could it possibly happen?

The responsible house AG³ had repeatedly ignored complaints from dwellers and eventually dissolved. The reason is that the house administrators are actually BIPOC and any AG's decision could result in racism outcry. Having slowly been pushed out, neither the AG, nor the complainers lived there since the last year.

³AG is Arbeitsgruppe or “working group.”

Concluding Advice

In anarchist context, that alienating individualism strikes hard, since treating other anarchists — forever migrants with no nation — as foreigners, Exots, tourists is something so rare outside of Germany.

To me, a possible way out for my migrant anarchist comrades is actually to take initiative in discourse — whether one-on-one or in plenaries. German disengagement often stems from bewilderment or shyness rather than arrogance. After years of quietness, I had to become one of the most extroverted people in the room. Still, listen carefully: German emotions may be less visible but are as influential as in any culture.

The basic communication problem anywhere is that bonding requires an amplitude of shared emotional moments from hardship to joy, especially if building trust for actions. “Growing up” together dispels prejudice. Unfortunately, the only proven way to get included into friendship groups here is to form them yourself.

An advice to my German anarchist comrades is to move beyond the notion of internationalism. Anarchists have no nations; struggles are so similar everywhere. Try not only to “learn from international comrades” but work with them together on theory and practice and take them along on your adventures.

Mixed spaces may appear rougher but they are arguably safer than German ones, exactly because they are more real. Please, do not start “engaging” by relinquishing privilege; instead, how about using your structural advantages to enable equal participation?

Leftist hedonist singularity is a game of pretence considering that it is made possible by the state rooted in histories of exploitation and colonialism. Togetherness emerges in mutual necessity. In a “Germony” without extreme poverty or ubiquitous violence and repression, urgency for solidarity may appear weaker.

In turn, relatively safe conditions give an opportunity to work on libertarian alternatives to social-democratic consensus together: to experiment with small-scale models of shared life where we do not merely coexist as internationals, but build communities.

The German Way

Anonymous

When I first moved to Berlin in 2015 there was some kind of altercation on the U-Bahn between an old white German woman and a woman of colour. My German was basically nonexistent then, but I remember the old German woman muttering something passive aggressive and the other women yelling back and then saying “Mann, die *Deutsche!*” The complete frustration and despair in her voice stuck with me.

When people ask what I like about Berlin, I used to list a bunch of reasons, one of them being that, compared to South Australia and then Victoria where I grew up, everyone here is political. Although, to be fair, while I went to demos there, I didn't really organise, put off by the white Marxist men at uni who acted as unfriendly gatekeepers to any lefty spaces on uni events and seemed to just want to quote the most difficult texts at each other. I went to a lot of feminist events and demos when I was there, but not much else. Despite them slowly following the other patterns of fascism around the world, people in Germany don't tend to know much about Australian politics, even with One Nation (populist right-wing party) slowly gaining traction. I'm only really in contact with my family there now, other friends moved away as well. When I talk to my family they say I talk about politics too much; that I should go back to Australia where it's safe.

I'm interested in the '80s and the last moments of the Cold War, partly for the intrigue, partly because I inherited an intrinsic hatred of Thatcher from my northern English parents. A book was recommended to me — *Memoirs of a Spymaster* by Markus Wolf — about Wolf's life and his time as the head of the foreign intelligence for the Stasi. I'm only part-way through it, but strangely, a lot of what the author is saying makes me think of the issues I've had organising in Berlin. This could be because Wolf's family fled Germany for Russia after Hitler came into power and he only returned in his twenties, so he was somewhat of a foreigner in Germany, too.

About the GDR, Wolf said:

The fact that changes were not possible at that time lay in the

nature of both the system itself and the tensions of the international situation. They made any acceptance of reform seem like an admission of failure, which was automatically counted as a victory for the West. Such were the circles of the devil in which we revolved, year in, year out.

This quote makes me think of organising here, or trying too, in a few ways.

Demos

Wolf talks about being in East Berlin and having one of the first marches with music. He says:

Like many communists who had been brought up to view this blend of militarism and music as having prepared the ground for Nazism, I found this disturbing. When the marches were played I turned to the Russian Jewish writer Illya Ehrenburg ... and asked him what he thought of the spectacle. He gave a classic Russian shrug of resignation and replied, "The Germans were always fond of marching."

I've included this for the humour of it, rather than the referral to Nazis or the idea of demos being shows of the military. But man, I get the shrug of resignation. Germans are *very* fond of demos. I remember looking one weekend to find there were thirty demos on one rainy day in late summer in Berlin. Demos are organised either in knee-jerk ways, or they're set far in the future when the issue might be different or overshadowed by some new horror. Failures and successes seem to just be about being able to stick to the planned route without getting kettled, making it to the end, and showing solidarity. It sometimes seems that it's prioritised as *the* way to show solidarity, which limits the imagination about what else could be done to show it.

To question this means that you're branded as an outsider, that you don't understand how it works in Germany. There's no credit given to the fact that outsiders might actually bring fresh opinions or be able to comment on successes or failures. The demo becomes something that can't be questioned.

Even before I got sick, I was fed up with them. Fed up with the fact that the demos have to be registered with the police. Fed up with the Ordner:innen (demo marshals). They're required at protests in Germany, but even us lefties seem pretty happy to volunteer to do this, and to really do our best to keep everything to the police's liking. Which doesn't matter in the end, anyway, because police have criminalised these demonstrations anyway and act with more and more impunity. In my bleakest moments, I think these demos are for the police to see what they can get away with doing to us, and we're letting them.

This obsession with demos isn't just a German thing, though. Or, if it is, it's contagious. I'm thinking about a time when a mad and disabled pride march was happening through the city in 2025. In 2024 they'd asked people to leave who were wearing keffiyehs. There was a callout to meet at Casino, an social centre in Neukölln. It's remarkable in Berlin for being very friendly (unsurprisingly, it's mostly run by foreigners). We went there to read a speech that was prepared, which felt a little like preaching to the choir. Talk about going to the demo came up. Only about five people out of twenty say that they going. A comrade, who also has ME/CFS, says sadly, "I used all of my energy getting here." She talked a bit more about how it's hard for her to go shopping, how it's hard to get there. I get it. In the end, we made a Signal group where events are sometimes shared. A lot of people post about needing help with chores or appointments. It's unclear if the help is received, but the texts are rarely answered. Demos take a lot of time and energy to organise and to go to, perhaps at the expense of direct action to take care of them, or mutual aid. Demonstrations show a united front, but I know that so many disabled people are missing out on the care that they need, and nearly everyone complains that Berlin can be a really lonely and isolating city.

"It's the German way"

It's Berlin winter now, and the pavements are like ice rinks. The trains are often late, and buses don't come because of the conditions, as though authorities and government departments are surprised it happens. It sometimes feels the same with us, reacting to crises but never trying to imagine or predict

the next one coming, thinking that German crises will stay the same, and therefore our reaction should stay the same. (Presumably because of all the success we've had? Unsure.) The German left do look to other countries — at every anarchist book fair there's a stand calling for the release of Mumia Abu-Jamal. There seems to be a lack of curiosity when it comes to looking to other countries to see what forms their resistance takes. At an event at Offline to talk about the murders and oppression by ICE and resistance towards them in Minneapolis, there was one German, three others, and the rest were from the US. The meeting took place after a report that "Bavaria's AfD suggests a police unit similar to US immigration agency ICE for tracking asylum seekers and deportations, amid criticism of ICE's harsh tactics and recent deadly incidents."⁴

And this quote was said after the high-profile killings of Renee Nichole Good and Alex Jeffrey Pretti, and the under-reported murder of Keith Porter Jr. in 2025, as well as so many other immigrants that rarely make the news.⁵

On preparedness, the organisers talked about mutual aid and talking to our neighbours here and there were a lot of laughs in the audience from those of us who've been here longer. I was one of the few who had any contact with my neighbours, and this is mostly because they're a lot older and have needed things, and I've helped. I'm also, thanks to my Australian upbringing and being socialised as a girl, pretty friendly. I also like chatting with neighbours. I'd never lived in apartments before I moved here — most students and workers live in shitty share houses over there, neighbours are separated by fences and backyards —but the idea that I can hear my neighbours fart and not greet them on the stairs is absolutely bonkers to me. I can only recommend getting a dog, and also, getting a mobility aid as a (comparatively) younger person. I joked at the meeting that I have to be aggressively friendly, but it's true.

Maybe it's because I'm in my chronically ill bubble, where I'm just trying to ration energy to be able to work, look for work, negotiate with the Jobcenter,

⁴Sonja Issel (2026-01). *Bavarian AfD proposes ICE-style police unit for deportations*. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/2026/01/26/bavarian-afd-proposes-ice-style-police-unit-for-deportations>.

⁵Maanvi Singh, Coral Murphy Marcos, and Charlotte Simmonds (2026-01). *2025 was ICE's deadliest year in two decades. Here are the 32 people who died in custody*. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2026/jan/04/ice-2025-deaths-timeline>.

see friends and start new romantic relationships, but I haven't really seen any methods that people are taking to prepare ourselves or help each other except in really insular, friendship-based circles.

Plenaries/Meetings

A lot of people in Berlin, like maybe every other big city, are burned out and flaky. Possibly due to the fact that everyone seems to be in at least two groups, and usually more, most of which seem to do nothing other than have meetings. And meetings that start and end late, where people cancel shortly before the meeting takes place, where people don't have each other's numbers because of vague security reasons that are never made clear.

I found this quite difficult to begin with, that meetings will start an hour after they were meant to and can run two hours over. Is it any wonder that people burn out and drop out and skip meetings when something that's meant to last two hours can eat up the whole fucking day without anything being accomplished? Since getting ME/CFS, it's becomes impossible for me. I have to plan my days carefully, and I usually only have about two hours of social capability. The things I've organised myself — an anarchist writer's group and prisoner letter writing — tend to have no orga team, because I literally don't have the energy to wait for people. I get laughed at when I voice these frustrations, get told (usually by people with seemingly endless reserves of energy) "That's just anarchist organising." I don't know how we're going to start a revolution when it's impossible to get five people to turn up somewhere at the same time and place and make a decision, but fine.

People proudly say that they go to multiple meetings a week but don't talk about the action they've taken. Of course, maybe it'd be bad security to be blabbing about their actions, but not much seems to change here. It's all demos and discussions, infighting, Germans doing things their way which had famously gone so well and is going so well, given how the AFD are still rising.



When people ask me what I like about Berlin now, it's still the politics of people, but these people usually aren't Germans, and if they are, they're the

kind of Germans who go to events or are in groups where a lot of foreigners are involved, where their views and suggestions are taken on board. I like going to places that are friendly, places open to critique and collaboration. What I really like about Berlin are the foreigners.

"That's just your american individualism!"

Echo

I'm from the US. I left at the start of 2014 and arrived to a temporary flat on an icy Sonnenallee to start a new life, and I've lived in Berlin ever since.

I was rejected from the first collective I tried to join by someone I'd never met because he didn't want me bringing "american identity politics" into their way of organizing. Ironic, given that I never found use in the stereotypical version of that ideological lens.

Since then, I've been loosely and deeply part of different collectives and transient constellations, and one of the most recurring points of conflict I've experienced is one that's framed as individualism versus collectivism. Though, the latter is rarely phrased as such. It's simply that other anarchists here often enough call action taken outside of a consensus process selfish, egocentric, narcissistic, arrogant, vanguardist, ineffective, or disruptive.

The first collective — more vaguely leftist than anarchist, though I wasn't the only anarchist — I was able to finagle my way into with my mediocre handle on the german language was all germans besides me and one other long-time resident I'd originally mistook for being german as well. After working with them for a while, I thought that with a fresh set of eyes, I might be able to call into question some of the seemingly counterproductive organizing strategies that, to me, had the appearance of being tradition and rote rather than carefully selected actions. I pushed us to try being more flexible, to allow for more autonomous action instead of waiting for the bureaucratic approval of a consensus process. I was told "That's just your american individualism!" as if the only reason I could have wanted collective members to be able to make their own decisions was so that we could be free of the enslaving shackles of interdependency. No matter how much I compromised for the sake of the collective, I was always seen as the disruptor for wanting us to experiment or even just my desire to have an influence on what we did or how we did it. I was treated as if I was arrogant for thinking that as an outsider I could in any way know how germans living in Germany should handle their uniquely german issues.

When a taboo was breached and some members' rabid zionism was made known, I said that if we took specific action or made denunciations based on the perceived antisemitism of some (assumed to be) Arab comrades, then I could no longer be associated with the collective. This statement of a personal boundary was called blackmail. I left and never looked back.

There was a period immediately following the Unite the Right rally in 2017 that, while living here, I was working online with US-based antifascists to help them infiltrate and doxx their local nazi groups, in particular active clubs. We had good success with some groups ceasing to exist and others faltering, many nazis getting fired, and a few of them facing criminal and civil lawsuits.⁶ I saw antifascists in Germany post about some of our work, and when I talked to local antifas to see if they were interested in exchanging knowledge and tactics, the response — every time — was that “German nazis don't organize like that” or “Due to privacy laws, it would be illegal to doxx them.” I was told I didn't understand german nazis, no mind that german nazis copy much from US nazis only with a few years lag. Well, active clubs are now a problem here, and like I tried to draw attention to, they in part organize online using Telegram and similar chat apps that we'd had success infiltrating. But still, I'm just the foreigner who doesn't know how things really are.

It's not just german nazis that mimic US nazis. German antifascists have a fascination with US antifascists and other political organizing in those territories. A disproportionate amount of what we read is from the US, as are many of our terms. I've met plenty of germans who know more about US radical history than their own, having more to say about the Black Panthers than the APO or Autonomen.

In part following in the tradition of internationalist solidarity, and in part spillover from so-called german Indianthusiasm,⁷ there is considerable interest in the struggles of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, especially around land and water protection. This merges with a generalized orientalism that looks at people outside Europe of being some sort of noble savages who have retained a sense of community that was stripped away from the rest of us by

⁶Not that I believe in the courts for “justice,” but I guess any consequences are better than none.

⁷German: deutsche Indianertümelei.

western capitalism. Consensus is imagined to be everyone sitting around in a circle, coming (calmly, rationally, peacefully) to agreement, and acting in unity, just like some imagined tribesmen must have done.

One collective I’ve worked with had a long discussion about why, despite being quite involved in Palestinian solidarity, we were still so white and especially why the PoC and non-European members rarely came to meetings. We’d received feedback that our formality and processes were a turnoff to people who weren’t white, western, and middle class. Specific reasons were that those outside the border of the collective wanted more autonomy, fewer rules, and a more organic way of decentralized organizing. These critiques were well received which on one hand pleased me that change might come, but on the other, it was so incredibly frustrating that the exact things I’d been saying that had been labeled as “american individualism” (again!) were accepted when said by our Arab comrades. Accepted verbally, but never implemented, mind you.

In a collective I’ve worked with, I’d multiple times warned people that someone we had occasional and minimal contact with was a snitch. A year and a half after the first time I brought it up, after some had still retained loose contact to said snitch, there was An Incident that had rippling effects across Germany, and I again told the full story during a meeting. Afterwards, as she smoked a cigarette outside, one german collective member told me that she had thought I was being a typical hyperbolic american and the entire time hadn’t meant that the person was *really* an *actual* snitch.

In all my time living here, I’ve only ever actually organized with one other person from the US, one who is loosely involved in a collective I work with, them only joining it a year ago. I know half a dozen local radicals from the US who basically stopped organizing because of the bureaucracy within radical collectives in Berlin. Or, the strictly regimented and formulaic demos replete with marshals to ensure everyone acts within the bounds set by the organizers. There’s so little room to actively participate, to *shape* outcomes.

For all the claims german antifascists make about being the True Knowers of Fascism having grown up in its wake, they frequently get it wrong in claiming that fascism is an individualistic ideology, and therefore — never quite saying it explicitly — individualism has its roots in fascism. This idea

seems to stick around as German anarchism has not cleaved itself off the predominantly Marxist “leftism” and has taken with it the apocryphal Lenin quote “Fascism is capitalism in decay.”

As to whether fascism is individualist, Zeev Stenhall said of one particular manifestation of it:⁸

The nation is a living organism, and nationalism is therefore an ethic, comprising all the criteria of behaviour which the common interest calls for, and on which the will of the individual has no bearing.

Or, we could listen to Mussolini himself:⁹

Anti-individualistic, the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal, will of man as a historic entity.

It is unsettling that I cannot reject subservience to something as poorly defined as “the collective” or “the community” without being accused of promoting an American “libertarian” ideology. Other people make claims to my time and my actions. Why is it so wrong when I make such claims for myself?

In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wendgrow propose the existence of three primordial freedoms (“the freedom to move; the freedom to disobey orders; the freedom to reorganize social relations”), and they use the anthropological and archaeological records to show that individuals in past societies around the globe simply assumed such freedoms to exist. For all the interest so many anarchists have in indigenous struggles and peoples, they completely miss the latter two freedoms as basic components of such societies.

How then do we increase agency given that there is interdependence between us all? How do we construct more free ways of living and relating?

⁸Zeev Sternhell (1976). “The crisis of *fin-de-siècle* thought”. In: *International Fascism: Theories Causes and the New Consensus*. Chap. 14, pp. 169–174.

⁹Benito Mussolini (1932). *The Doctrine of Fascism*. URL: <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Germany/mussolini.htm>.

A lover once noted that I can never answer the question "How do you feel?" without first situating myself in the complex web of social and political interactions that comprise my life. And here, writing stream of consciousness, I have done it again. But also, that is how I experience the world. It's never so simple as "I'm hurt," but rather that my hurt has a convoluted lineage with many distinct aspects, and I need others to know *why*.

So, to answer the question directly...

I come from a place that is often discussed — idealized, demonized — within german radicalism, whose texts and terms are part of the basis for our analyses, yet when I try to pull some of the core parts of the experience of being "an american" into activism and life here, it's often acted as if I'm undermining the movement by breaking from what's seen as "unity." I do not feel like Berlin is *home* because I largely do not feel totally accepted or welcome. I'm just *the american* with *those* ideas, you know the ones (or do you?). Over time, I have become worn down, and I find myself feeling less free than I did in the past despite dedicating ever increasingly more of my life into the struggle for freedom for all.

It's also strange to exist as someone born in the US living in a Leitkultur and radical subculture that are somewhat obsessed with american-ness, american things, and american ideas but to then be negatively judged for that background, one I didn't choose and in fact actively left. And if I try to say that it feels like a kind of anti-american chauvinism, I get reminded where I fall on the hierarchy on statistical privileges or told that anti-american racism doesn't exist or that our comrades of color have it worse (they do; I know).¹⁰

Don't get me wrong, I probably have an overall higher quality of living

¹⁰But there really *is* something odd there, the right word for which escapes me. I've bizarrely many times had this conversation with german anarchists (and only german ones, no one else) after talking to them for only a few minutes.

"Are you dutch?", they ask, unprompted, the topic of origin, nationality, or immigration never having been broached. Maybe they're guessing based off my appearance or assumed accent.

Trying to be friendly, I share a bit about myself. "No, I'm from the US, but we have an old family tree that goes back quite far showing that some of my ancestors came from there. And my last name is pretty unique older dutch."

"So you're not really dutch. You're american. Why do americans always claim european nationalities like this?"

Fuck. Right. Off.

under the german government's (limited, insufficient) "social" "democracy" than whatever the fuck hellscape is going on in the US. But the wearing-down I've experienced within the movement leaves me feeling like a wholly distinct person than the one who moved here, and like so many second generation immigrants, this new person looks back at the land their parents left and wonders if they would have had a better life there.

I can never know, but I ask myself if I would have been more free in some of the ways that matter most if I'd stayed.

Postscript

Independently, three of the four texts focused on the ideas of individualism and collectivism. This wasn't mentioned in the callout, and yet the authors all felt for different reasons that this was somehow central to the struggle of creating a movement of diverse and blended backgrounds. But then again, the authors didn't agree on what individualism was, nor whether we need more or less of it. In conversation with comrades, a question that recurred is "what is the role of the individual within anarchism?", something that seems to be the core of some of the issues of belonging so many seem to experience here.

What does it mean to belong? To fit in? What is community? A collective? And should we pursue either over focusing on what improves the lives of each and every individual?

It does often seem the cure to social ills here is to found a collective then define an accountability process, and then through some magic, bingo bango we have liberation and community.

But if these communities exist and endure either through movement norms, an named collective, or a physical space like an infoshop or a housing project, how then do we make them accessible to those who are "new"? New because of age, because of an internal change that pulls one toward radical politics, because of moving from another German city or village, because of immigrating from somewhere far away.

Or maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe the question is why so many Ausländer:innen here feel they can't break German hegemony within the movement and have to form their own spaces? And if we can't answer that and affect change within our movement, what hope do we have of halting the AfD's ascendancy or getting society at large to reject borders and Fortress Europe?



Scrappy Capy Distro

scrappycapydistro.info / scrappy-capy-distro@riseup.net

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