

LESS RADICAL THAN YOU THINK



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Content Notice: discussion and description of rape in the section "Reading the Room"

AN UNSATISFYING CONCLUSION

I spent all this time writing this critique of a Palestinian solidarity action and some particular facets of radical queer organizing in Berlin instead of removing the threat of the worst of the worst. This is, in part, because like the soli events, doing so is “safe.” Of this, I am fully aware.

This text started by looking at an image that normalized certain behaviors and trends, ones that are broadly popular in the Berlin left. It meandered around the ideas of centralized decision making and authority to examining some of the ways our allegedly radical and alternative subcultures mirror much of mainstream society not just superficially but in essence. This text doesn’t have a super clear point, not entirely, and it’s convoluted entirely because we exist in a tangled system and culture where everything depends on everything else. There’s no easy answer, but as others have said, “To change anything, start everywhere.”²⁷

Images help build subcultures, identity, and even community. These themselves all help build resistance. Images cannot help but be part of the capitalist spectacle, and the hyper-quick transmission and transformation of memetic symbols make them particularly susceptible to even accidental recuperation. We can’t predict which memes spread, and we can unwittingly unleash images that normalize behavior or ideals outside of our anarchist moral code. A DIY mutual aid project can quickly slip into a profit-generating radically-aestheticked enterprise. Things move fast, and lines between identities and communities are ever-shifting and blurry.

If we want to keep anarchism as a subculture and ethic sharp so that it can be wielded as a weapon against all the evils of the world, we need to be conscientious of all that we do. How? Well, that’s complicated. Being perpetually critical of all that we do, both as we do it and after the fact might be key. Making our anarchist ethic the primary concern over coolness or tradition is another strong candidate. I can’t say for certain what magical combination of characteristics would make the Berlin radical scene more a threat, but to call into question the existent is at least a start.

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.

Every radical subculture has its host of problems, and Berlin is no different. This image found its way to me via group chat, and when I received it, I bristled.¹ Some parts of image stung acutely, and others were just jabs to places made tender by years of repeated impact. I shared it with comrades, and we stewed on whether to say something or not. What follows is not critique of the image alone, but rather an analysis of elements of the Berlin radical scene using the image as a focal point.

EVERYTHING CONTEXTUALIZED

Let’s first fill in some relevant background from which this image emerged.

Like many if not all other cities, Berlin’s radical scene is inseparable from its queer scene. “The left” is the illusory coalition of progressive underdogs, and as a marginalized group, queers naturally fall in to this. The queer influence is strong in the radical left here. There is little TERFism relative to other cities — just compare us with London for example. SWERFism too appears relatively infrequently. Queerness and feminism often align against cis hetero patriarchy and general machismo, but they can also be at odds with each other.

Somewhat less like other cities, these radical and queer scenes are heavily influenced by — and in the case of the queer scene, at times dominated by — Berlin’s club culture. House projects and autonomous spaces frequently host their own raves and (queer/feminist) dance parties. Because they are done in a DIY fashion, because they are hosted in autonomous spaces, because they attended by those who consider them part of the radical left, and because (sometimes) they are used to raise funds for political projects, a large degree of radicality and politicality is attributed to these events themselves.

Each city or region has its own split and fractures along ideological or cultural lines. Anarchists versus communists is a common one. Allegedly anti-authoritarian-yet-still-patriarchal rule versus anarchy-feminism is another. In Berlin, the hardest split is Palestine solidarity versus Zionism. This split in particular intersects with the queer scene because of the pinkwashing of Israel as the only safe place for LGBT people in the Near East. Stickers and graffiti with variation of “Queers for Palestinian” and “Queers for Israel” battle it out on our streets.

Despite repression, gentrification, and evictions, Berlin still has a large and pluralistic radical scene. Many autonomous spaces remain, and there are so many col-

¹To the person who posted it, if you recognize me by my words, please know I’m not picking on you, but I couldn’t leave these thoughts unsaid either.

²⁷ *To Change Everything* (2016). URL: <https://crimethinc.com/tce>.

lectives operating here that I don't think a single person here could keep track of all of them. One only needs to look at the StressFaktor calendar to see that even the fraction of events that are listed there makes for a busy busy city.

NORMATIVE IMAGES

The image in discussion isn't just a promotion for an event. It, like all images, carries with it the power of normalizing what it displays. Each facet of it, each individual component is a normative statement about the world the collective "we" of the diffuse radical scene find desirable and are trying to bring in to existence.

YES, MARSHAL

To start, at the foreground and the main subject of the image is someone in with an Ordner:in armband and Awareness Team vest with a patron of the event licking his shoe.

Ordner:in translates to steward or (demo) marshal. They're present at virtually all registered demonstrations these days and fill the role of peace police who follow commands from demo organizers who themselves often are relaying commands from the police. Marshals sometimes run interference against police who aim to disrupt demos or target individuals, but just as often they pacify the demo to ensure it reaches its endpoint or only engages in an approved subset of demo activities. The role of marshal has existed for decades, but it is a relatively new trend to make them so official and organized, one that's only appeared heavily and consistently in the last few years.

Similarly, Awareness Teams enforce the organization's Awareness Policy.² These policies aim to reduce (micro-)aggressions and bigotries against attendees and provide a means for expelling individuals with problematic behaviors. Awareness Teams are particularly common at parties and raves where the presence of alcohol and other drugs and the sexual themes of such events creates fertile ground for sexualized violence. Their roles are some combination of protecting those directly affected by abuse or bigotries, mediating conflicts, and offering comfort to those suffering psychological crises whatever the cause. Awareness Teams might be comprised of individuals from within the organizing body or pulled from external collectives that specialize in this role.

The role of marshal and Awareness may be combined, and in either case they are typically marked with either an armband or vest as seen in the image.

I have seen utility in some of the actions of demo marshals, but just as well, I have seen them interrupt de-arrests, block comrades from attacking riot cops, usher crowds away from those providing support to detained comrades, and act as security

²In German, "Awareness-Konzept", where Konzept could be translated as either concept or policy. An Awareness Policy is an analogue to a Code of Conduct in anglophone regions.

Now, they're everywhere.

There is no subculture that is immune to recuperation, no symbol that cannot be co-opted. There is a continuum between our DIY queer parties, the gayer of the major clubs, and the most atrociously boring mainstream clubs. Liberal antifascists affiliated with parliamentary parties wave antifa flags at counter-demos to the AfD while in principle agreeing that brown people are a threat to European culture, and at the other side are anarchists and other antifascists who are dead and in prison for fighting against domination. Yet these use many of the same symbols and slogans.

We aren't even immune from recuperating our own movement and symbols. The logo for the Fag Bar event is a détournement of the RAF logo. It's a red five-pointed star with the same typeface and the MP5 replaced with a double-sided dildo. To what end does this pastiche serve? Is it just that the RAF is edgy and actually "did stuff" while they were active? Is it honoring? Mocking? Or maybe it's just that it's something recognizably "lefty". It's all just copies of copies until the symbols mean nothing, more pink goo to feed to back to us.

Thanks to the internet, trends move faster. Corporations have budget to employ savvy youthful people to track trends and start astroturfed campaigns among social media influencers. Fast fashion shortens the turnaround times for these cycles, and at times it seems like Francis Fukuyama was right in as much we've reached the end of history. It's all just the '80s, '90s, and 2000s endlessly on repeat until we cook this planet into inhospitability. Capital driven fashion appropriates authentic styles, and the camp of platform shoes has been a queer mainstay,²⁶ but the current '90s retro fashion has brought them back. Though, so far as I observed, the repopularizing of chunky sneakers and platform shoes among the radical queers here didn't start within our ranks but came from the interplay of high fashion and social media influencers reflecting fashion choices back onto the trendy club kids before moving to more mainstream and queer fashions. Our own authentic subcultural markers can be extremely quickly cheapened and sold to the masses, and the current resurgence of this trend within our subculture is something we're copying from something that copied us. And, well, they're boldly present on the Fag Bar invitation.

I don't have an answer, not entirely, but it seems that our focus on the coolness of queer/punk/anarchist subcultures inhibits our ability to focus on spreading an anarchist ethic, or at the very least present more palpable hostility to consumerism. Anarchist symbology and even punk music can be — at least partially — recuperated, but then again even ideas like mutual aid and direct action have been defanged by fellow travelers and totally recuperated by NGOs.

²⁶Kish Lal (2023-06). *How Queer Communities and Club Kids Made the Platform Sneaker Their Own*. URL: <https://www.soleretriever.com/news/articles/platform-sneaker-queer-community-club-culture>.

shit yeeha! — when the alternative is so often just mirroring the wider society, often in amplified ways.

Thankfully, the parts of the Berlin radical scene I've encountered haven't been gate-kept by cis het dudes, but it does seem to be gate-kept a bit by being a punk, and often that comes with drinking (Sternis), smoking (hand-rolled cigarettes), and doing drugs. This is especially true if you're *not* one of the cis hets. Entrance into the queer punk circles seems most easily achieved through concerts, (sex) parties, or the offhand invitation to a bar after a demo or meetings, which is to say events where alcohol is significantly present. Social events that are explicitly queer, radical, and sober seem quite infrequent, and the cozy identity-politics-infused liberal queers and their events are fairly unappetizing. Induction into and the reproduction of the (queer) radical subculture in Berlin seems to be overly reliant on events where alcohol is present.

For a while, I was more actively involved in radical queer organizing here, and I had many friend who were afraid of getting queer bashed on the streets. During the early years of the pandemic when people still somewhat cared about masking, a comrade and I tried to organize a dozen or so people into weekly self-defense classes in a park. The only time we could do it was Saturday late afternoons or Sunday mornings as we had to account for people's partying the night before or social plans in the evenings. These classes were short lived in no small part because participants being too hungover or in some cases coming directly from clubs.

Alcoholism and addiction have elevated rates among queers, so not just those who completely voluntarily choose not to drink are excluded, but those who can't drink or can't even be around it are excluded. Those who can't stay out late are excluded, as are those who can't tolerate the smoke or the elevated risk of COVID infection either for their own health or out of concern for others. Partying's centrality to queerness allows only certain kinds of queerness to dominate.

The topic of alcohol has been surfaced within anarchism for over a century, as far as I've seen in my own reading. There's anarchists and those creating anti-authoritarian spaces who have pointed out that the use of alcohol and drugs can have a pacifying effect and leave us unable to take part in emancipatory actions. But the lines are drawn between the two broad camps of "ban it all" and "any attempt to regulate is authoritarian," and nothing seems to change. Let's not ban these things, but instead lets find a way to better self-regulate.

BEYOND SUBCULTURE

Recuperation is the process by which radical and subcultural ideas are diffused of revolutionary potential and pulled into the fold of mainstream society. House music and raves come from working-class and queer backgrounds, and underground raves carried a great deal of the DIY ethos. Raves were unlicensed and counter-cultural.

to force unwanted blocks from demos (e.g., Palestinian blocks), and that they are able to do this at all is directly attributable to their uniforms and officiality. Plenty has been written about the dampening roles marshals play at actions.³ That said, having people who are trained in the natures of bigotries we face and deescalation can meaningfully improve attendees' safety. But just as well, I've found that some of the strongest proponents of Awareness Policies use their role as mediators to diffuse conflict where conflict and hostility to bigotry or abuse is itself direct action. Mediation and so-called transformative justice eclipse, for example, insurrection against patriarchal violence.⁴ Power is delegated to those who fulfill the Awareness roles, and they act on behalf on the organizers who claim to be acting on behalf of the will of the attendees, though in some cases the organizers make it quite clear that they are merely enforcing their own set of values. Or, let us not forget how often the Awareness Team is high and/or drunk to a point where they would be unable to fulfill their duties.

Those living in Germany — and yes, even radicals, immigrants, and the intersection of both — have a problem with obedience to (perceived) authority. This has been exacerbated in demo contexts in the post-Gilets Jaunes era where the prevalence of uniforms at demonstrations has exploded. Marshals have one color, legal observers another. Medics, awareness, and interpreters/translators may each have their own colors too. This is also not taking into account how formal organizations have handed out vests to all members of their demonstrations to create uniformity (e.g., ver.di [a large cross-industry union] or Omas gegen Rechts ["Grannies Against the Right", a liberal antifascist group]).⁵

In the image, the uniform is a clear symbol of authority as is the radio on their belt. The person isn't wearing these things as a kink but rather in their official capacity as a marshal.⁶ Part of what makes a cop and uniform kink transgressive is either the feigned submission to authority or its inversion to reclaim one's agency over their oppressors.⁷ The individual tasked with preventing and responding to sexual abuse is engaging in (assumed consensual) sexual domination of an attendee. This is a clear conflict of interest and one we should be wary of depicting as desirable. The

³ACAB Includes Peace Police (2023-11). URL: <https://archive.org/details/acab-includes-peace-police-en-print-8/mode/2up>; *Peace Police are Police: How Protest Marshals Sabotage Liberation and Protect the State* (2024-03). URL: <https://trueleapress.wordpress.com/2024/03/05/peace-police-are-police/>.

⁴Wilian Gillis (2024-06). *What's In A Slogan? "KYLRL" and Militant Anarcha-feminism*. URL: <https://c4ss.org/content/59691>.

⁵And let us contrast uniformity of attire like the white painter's suits of Ende Gelände with the authority of A Uniform such as a vest, although EG are not free of hierarchy or spectacle either.

⁶It hasn't escaped my notice that the carabiner is on the marshal's right side suggesting they are a bottom. Is its position merely artistic license? Or is it implying that marshal is in a bottom/service position? The there's a whole history there. (Christina Cauterucci [2016-12]. *Lesbians and Key Rings: a Cultural Love Story*. URL: <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/12/the-lesbian-love-of-key-rings-and-carabiners-explained.html>)

⁷*Kink Shaming and Cop Uniforms, pt 1* (2023-11). URL: <https://gaybdsmfiction.blog/2023/11/27/kink-shaming-and-cop-uniforms-pt-1/>; *Kink Shaming and Cop Uniforms, Part 2* (2023-12). URL: <https://gaybdsmfiction.blog/2023/12/16/kink-shaming-and-cop-uniforms-part-2/>.

organization putting on the event, United Radical Service Tops, even uses language of others submitting to them at the parties in their communications about the event.⁸ Moreover, the marshal is assumed to be “aware” of the corona virus pandemic as they are wearing a procedure mask, but it’s pulled down below their mouth and nose suggesting that they know the “rules” or what’s right, and they are choosing to break them.

To this, one might say “don’t yuck my yum” or that I don’t understand kink. I won’t profess to be an expert, but also I knew I was a kinkster long before I knew I was queer. I even knew it before I knew I was “political” beyond vaguely anti-capitalist. When I first moved to a metropolis, at my first kink event, I saw an older white man in symbols of patriarchal authority: a suit and tie. He was the host of the event, and he pursued only very young femmes. Poorly developed as my politics were and inexperienced as I was in that scene, it was immediately clear to me that kink could and often would reify the power structures we see in mainstream society. I would later learn that he had a litany of abuse allegations against him.⁹ So am I saying you shouldn’t have a kink for uniforms? Of course not. I am, however, saying that just as we might be critical of media that makes light of Dom(me)s pushing or ignoring clearly stated boundaries, it behooves us to question the honoring of marshals and depictions of misuse of their (debatably willingly) granted authority.

SPORTY ANTIFA? NOT BDS APPROVED, ACTUALLY

Let’s now turn our sights to the shoe-licker. He exists at the intersection of several subcultures. Berlin antifa has long had a fitness chic bend to it with Adidas shoes, The North Face jackets, and the like. Fitness goth had a heyday among the Berlin club scene that has since been overtaken by quasi-kink leather straps and chains. (Cis) gay culture has long idealized hyper-masculine fit bodies. Let us recall athleisure’s popularity and the upswing in fitness culture within mainstream society. So far, the shoe-licker’s attire is remarkably normative.

The track pants worn by the bootlicker have four stripes instead of Adidas’ three, but this is immaterial as it doesn’t degrade the brand aesthetic,¹⁰ a brand aesthetic that is complemented by his Samba shoes. Adidas was previously targeted by BDS for sponsoring the Israeli Football Association.¹¹ They currently partner with Delta Galil (base in Tel Aviv) for their underwear collection.¹² Adidas dropped their campaign with Bella Hadid, a Palestinian model, after criticism and allegations of anti-

⁸This is normal for events put on by Dom(me)s, so I’m not critiquing that language and presentation on its own.

⁹If we’re going to really go over the CV that grants me “permission” to speak on these topics, then I should note that I’d started doing kink porn to make ends meet not long after.

¹⁰No one would think red soles on heels are doing anything other than aping Louboutin’s style.

¹¹Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (2018-07). *Team Justice Scores. Adidas No Longer Sponsoring Israel Football Association*. URL: <https://www.bdsmovement.net/news/team-justice-scores-adidas-no-longer-sponsoring-israel-football-association>.

¹²Delta Galil and adidas Announce License Agreement for Men’s and Women’s Underwear Collections (2021-06). URL: <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20210618005324/en/Delta-Galil>

of the beliefs and norms that make these alternatives at present so unviable. Maybe the belief that we should be “getting” something in exchange for our solidarity would be a start.

There’s limited hours per day and limited capital with which to work. Choosing to host parties necessarily excludes other activities, as do the hangovers after. The space is occupied for a night which means no organizational meetings, no Kūfas, no reading circles, no discussion groups. The planning and coordination that goes into them similarly takes up time and spaces. We shouldn’t stop hosting events, but we should be more critical of their purpose. Are they to reproduce subculture? To “grow” the movement? To increase solidarity? To sharpen our blades so that spectacular demos can become effective direct actions? These trade-offs might be worth it, but we are a long ways away from being an insurrectionary or revolutionary movement. We might manage our time in ways that better move us toward our goals.

ADDICTION AND EXCLUSION

When hosting events, we should ask ourselves: who included, who is excluded, and why? Not every event can be accessible to all because accessibility needs and preferences are contradictory. Further, subcultures and communities deserve to have their own spaces that don’t have to cater to the outside world. For example, trans people should be able to have trans events that don’t cater to cis sensibilities. Radical events shouldn’t be watered down to appeal to notions of decency or passive progressivism.

We might want to question the extent to which partying and alcohol exert outsized influence upon queer events and our subcultures. There’s many texts from anarchists that look at the intersections of alcohol/drugs, queerness, and radicalism. Some are contradictory, and I don’t agree many of the points raised, but I still encourage you to check the footnotes and read a few.²⁵

There is one that I found spoke to me a great deal, one that spoke about almost-sobriety in a way that felt closer to what I practice. *Bent Edge Revenge*, by an anon comrade from London I met by chance while traveling, had this line:

I drank with people I loved, people I was friends with, but also with people who I couldn’t stand [...] And lots of cishet dudes, since they are so often gate-keepers of “alternative” subcultures and as a baby punk I *felt* I needed to gain their acceptance in order to be seen as one. I did a lot of that and I was [conforming] so well while believing that I’m not [conforming] to rules because now I’m outside mainstream society’s

²⁵xriotfagx (nodate). *My Edge is Anything But Straight: Toward a Radical Queer Critique of Intoxication Culture*; Nick Riotfag (2010). *Towards a Less Fucked Up World: Sobriety and Anarchist Struggle*; CrimethInc. (2008). *Anarchy & Alcohol*; Boles (2023). *Confronting a Silent Assassin: Intoxication Culture in Resistance Movements*. Warzone Distro; Gabriel Kuhn (2010). *Sober Living for the Revolution: Hardcore Punk, Straight Edge, and Radical Politics*. PM Press. ISBN: 978-1-60486-051-1.

The first day of the spokescouncil was an opening presentation and Q&A closing. About 450 people crowded the room, a majority of which were not from Atlanta and had never been to the forest. Many had never been to a protest involving tear gas or less lethal munitions, and a significant percentage had never been to a protest at all.²³

It's not even that structurally how we organize lacks a radical shift, but also the incentives can be overly dominated by the imperatives to make money for rent and food that are forced upon us by a capitalist system. As an example, one of my comrades helps organize a Küfa in Bandito Rosso and asked if I could come help. We met at 1630h to shop, and after cooking, I took over the bar shift where I'd ask for "donations". I was told that the suggested donation as per Bandito was €7–10 so they could (justifiably) take a cut to help cover their operating costs and keep the space available. Some of those who came to eat were shocked at the price, and I just gave them free meal tokens out of sympathy. At the end of the evening, even after warning people in advance that we were closing at 23h, we still had to make repeated attempts to kick people out, people who not only didn't help with the final clean up but also left their mess for us to clean. My "shift" had started around 1630h, and by the time I'd left, it was the equivalent of a typical 7 hour shift like I'd done when working in restaurants. Without even getting into the gender bias of care work, and even though the Küfas at Bandito and other places are *very* clearly *very* important to the movement — I'm not being sarcastic here — some times they feel like working a shift at a capitalist restaurant, except we don't get paid. Mixing fundraising with solidarity can erode the radical nature of the latter.

Parties and concerts are often sources of fundraising, and sometimes projects become reliant on them to continue operating or to gather donations at all. One example of this is following a callout for repeated sexualized violence in one of our spaces, those who stood with the survivors faced pressure from the rest of the collectives to continue putting on concerts to fund the space. Beyond this, members of the Awareness Team — including some who had sided with the survivors — promoted events there as being safe for women and other marginalized genders despite the rapists and abusers still frequenting the space.²⁴ The imperative to make money does what it always does: it moves to a position of precedence over or moral and ethical values.

Fundraising via events is prominent everywhere I know anarchists exist because it *works*. At some point, though, we become less a radical collective and instead become a club promotion business, a festival business, or a restaurant. So, even if it works, we should call into question *why* it works far better than everything else, and we should more actively seek the creation of alternative along with the undermining

²³Anonymous (2023-11). *Don't Panic, Stay Tight: Frontline Reflections on Block Cop City*. URL: <https://itsgoingdown.org/dont-panic-stay-tight-frontline-reflections-on-block-cop-city/>.

²⁴I don't have permission from the survivors to name the space, and as much as I want to warn people off from it, I don't want to throw anyone under the bus by doing so either.

semitism.¹³ Or maybe it's just enough to boycott them because their founder Adolf Dassler was a card-carrying Nazi. Or that Adidas is *any* major corporation, let alone a German one.

There is no ethical consumption under capitalism, and no subculture is immune to the trends of the society in which it is embedded. This doesn't mean that it's not worthwhile to still boycott the most egregiously unethical of companies or the social norms our fashion choices reflect.

SOLIDARITY À LA CARTE

In the background, someone in a latex suit and gas mask hands out poppers from a tray that also has a large watermelon slice on it. Is the watermelon slice there to remind the attendee that the event has an explicitly political purpose beyond "getting fucked up and having queer sex?" Is it there as accoutrement to the festivities just like the poppers next to it? We, as the viewers, can imagine someone's hand flirting over tops of various bottles of alkyl nitrites looking for the one that will hit *just right* when their hand lands on the watermelon reminding them of the theme of the night before they immediately move on to inhaling the vapors and returning to dancing.

The watermelon as a symbol for Palestine has its roots in the 1967 Six Day War where Israel banned the flag in the occupied territories. In response, depictions of watermelons in the same Pan-Arab colors were displayed and the fruit was eaten as a sign of defiance. More recently, in January of 2023, the fascist Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir ordered police to confiscate Palestinian flags. This isn't so different than what the Berlin police had done in the early days following October 7th. However, such repression here has backed off, but the memetic replication remains. The important symbol has — as is the case with many other radical symbols — become a commodity.

The term pinkwashing was coined in 2010 as a critique of how Israeli media portrays Israel as a haven for queers and how it portray Palestine and other neighboring countries as being regressive and hostile toward queers. Since then, its grown to mean more generally corporations sloganeering and giving lip service to queers in lieu of meaningful material support. Consider a corporation that temporarily puts up a rainbow flag for pride month and donates some money to a local pride march while doing little to improve the lives of their queer employees or customers.

Huh. Have we queers pinkwashed our own resistance to genocide? We've done very little to hinder German delivery of arms to Israel which is arguably the only support that matters; everything else is just band-aids.

I will give credit where credit's due. According to their Telegram channel, the

-and-adidas-Announce-License-Agreement-for-Men%E2%80%99s-and-Women%E2%80%99s-Underwear-Collections.

¹³Lucia Suarez Sang (2024-07). *Adidas pulls Bella Hadid ad from campaign linked to 1972 Munich Olympics after Israeli criticism*. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/adidas-bella-hadid-ad-campaign-1972-munich-olympics-inspired-shoes-israeli-criticism/3>.

organization behind Fag Bar raised €2500 and €2800 for their July and November events respectively. That's not nothing.

"Existence is resistance" is a phrase we often hear in queer spaces, not just here but in other English speaking spaces both online and off. When I hear this, I think of the iconic image taken by Rachel Posner in 1933 in Kiel of a menorah on a windowsill with the regional Nazi Party headquarters across the street in the background. Berlin is a remarkably safe place for queers, and queers are abound in domestic and international media. It's not that we don't face legal issues, social stigma, or queerphobic violence, but just living our lives in public is barely resistance. I don't want to ignore the importance of informal socializing in creating bonds, the very bonds we use to launch attacks, but like how we might scoff at middle aged women doing shopping therapy as being resistance to the patriarchal rule of their husbands, we might want to scoff at ourselves for alleging that facilitating darkroom hookups is a defiant act of anti-Zionist resistance.

READING THE ROOM

The backdrop of genocide in which this image was created includes the sexual conquests of war. Israeli soldiers mockingly pose in women's lingerie in Palestine and Lebanon. These women who fled are by proxy violated and treated as spoils of war. They're intimacies captured and showed to the world. If their bodies can't be looted, symbols of it can. Palestinians of all genders speak of rape and sexual abuse by the IDF and agents of the Israeli State. The Sde Teiman detention camp made international news when footage of brutal gang rape surfaced, and when nine IDF soldiers were detained, far-right mobs rioted at the facility and ministers at the highest levels of government decried the soldiers' arrests.¹⁴ There's so many cases of this going back so many years, I can't even begin to try to reference them all.

"Scandalously sodomizing," reads the Fag Bar invitation. Maybe consensual sex like this is scandalous in some parts of society, but I don't engage in queerness to cause scandal nor for the joy scandal brings me. I do it not to be edgy but because I genuinely enjoy it. When the IDF is raping men and women, boys and girls, and people of every other age and gender — and specifically anally raping them using improvised objects like metal rods — I have to wonder if by using the phrase of "scandalously sodomizing" to be edgy that we've completely lost the plot.

Berlin has the largest Palestinian diaspora in Europe, and there's appreciable overlap between them and the "classic" radical left. I'm not Palestinian, but having been involved since well before October 7th, there's certain things I can no longer look at without seeing the traces of Israeli State violence. I can't see the words "scandalously sodomizing" next to a watermelon and kuffiyeh without thinking of the sexualized

¹⁴Simon Speakman Cordall (2024-08). 'Everything is legitimate': Israeli leaders defend soldiers accused of rape. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/9/everything-is-legitimate-israeli-leaders-defend-soldiers-accused-of-rape>.

as a reward for our activism, we might need to change how we organize and changes our frames of mind.

Parties aren't themselves the revolution, neither in threatening the system nor in reshaping how we relate to ourselves, each other, or labor. Parties as self-care might be experiences of pure joy, but placing self-care above solidarity it just nihilistic hedonism with communal vibes.

NO UTOPIA: A CAPITALIST MICROCOSM

In Berlin, there is strong holdover from the high water mark of the Autonomen, and we still have many spaces where we can self-organize. One of the movement's beliefs is in the creation of self-organized DIY spaces where one can experiment with alternative modes of living and relating and from these spaces launch attacks to reshape the world. In these self-organized spaces, we have bars and cafes, discussion groups and reading circles, plenaries and congresses, and all sorts of other events. Sometimes we create more temporary autonomous zones like the Fusion Festival, CCC Camp,²¹ or most notably the many forest occupations. However, because these spaces are encircled by a domineering capitalist society, and because we carry slivers of this society in ourselves, we can easily say that these spaces are not entirely removed from or different to our every day lives.

Many spaces have a singular organizing committee that uses a regimented process-based approach to all decision making, and this goes the same for the planning of most demonstrations. Such spaces are more autonomous in the sense of "self-governed" — they promote a more democratically decided set of rules — but they often are much less adept at promoting individual autonomy and agency. As one example, I was at Fischladen — the same spaces that hosts Fag Bar — for Küfa,²² and I asked if they would mind me handing out zines and stickers from time to time. They told me I'd have to submit a list for someone to bring to the plenary meeting for approval (I never did). As for demos, sometimes many collectives will form temporary alliances for larger mobilizations. I've been to plenty of plannings meetings for different events (demos, workshops, concerts, direct actions, large mobilizations), but I've never seen a meeting that ever felt open to the community and not just insular within out subculture. As a comparison, consider these lines from a report back from the Stop Cop City movement in the US, something truly unfathomable in Berlin:

²¹Questionably autonomous in the Autonomen sense, but some have told me they find it has autonomous characteristics.

²²Küche für Alle, "kitchen for all," AKA solidarity kitchens.

In the above-quoted text, the cousin of Sasha implores Emma to take a more stoic approach to political agitation, to which she says “No.” However, she can point out that her agitations including the dances certainly pulled people to her ranks. Dancing itself isn’t the revolution, nor does dancing imply revolution either. It can be a complement to other forms of organizing, or it can simply be recreation. But again, we must be honest with ourselves about what we’re doing.

We often say that in a world that demands productivity, self-care is revolutionary. My father used to say “Work hard, play hard,” and we were encouraged to separate out these two activities into distinct spheres where one was a reward for the other. This ethic isn’t limited to an upbringing in a Christian (or even post-Soviet) society. We reproduce these patterns ourselves.

In this society, we cultivate personality traits that maximize productivity. We learn to control our desires and limit our needs; we are praised for being self-sufficient and showing endurance. *Be a good worker; stay focused; keep your emotions in check; go the extra mile; no pain, no gain.* To balance the draining effects of this discipline, the marketplace offers us consumer self-indulgence. *Treat yourself; luxuriate; indulge your passions; get swept away.* Activist culture can also swing between these poles of self-control and self-indulgence, though we tend to embrace the capitalist work ethic while remaining suspicious of capitalist comforts. What we’re describing when we speak of self-care is often one of these poles. Exercise hard, or get a massage. Do a cleansing fast, or treat yourself to a day off. Work on your shit in therapy, or take a bubble bath. In all this striving to care for ourselves, we follow paths well-worn within capitalism, paths that loop back to where we started.²⁰

Our parties replicate capitalist constructs not just in the norms they reify or the particular kinds of excess they glorify, but the very pattern with when and how we engage with them is itself not so “alternative” as we think.

I often point to *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin as a good first anarchist text, and one of the reasons for me was the quote:

Most Defense work was so boring that it was not called work in Pravic, which used the same word for work and play, but *kleggich*, drudgery.

This itself was revolutionary to me, that work could be play. The things I’d had to do, I’d never enjoyed. The things I’d wanted to do, I was never required to. As I grew in my anarchism, I learned to find much joy in the work, the labors of love. Painting a banner, going wheatpasting, traveling to deliver supplies can all be joyful. Believe it or not, if collectives are kept small, informal, and fluid, then meetings can actually *give* us energy and themselves be quality social events. If we see our parties

²⁰CrimethInc. (2013). *Self as Other*.

violence of this current genocide. Even voicing the question as to whether an event like this would actually be welcoming feels like paternal tutelage of the most affected, but I still have to ask it.

We call this a soli-party, and it’s solidary in as much as money is being raised and sent to Palestinians, but let’s be real about what this is. This is collecting donations for a charitable cause, and maybe that’s fine. Maybe it doesn’t need to be more than that, but what this event is not doing is creating a network of mutual aid between the radical/queer leftish subculture of Berlin and the Palestinian, Lebanese, and other diasporas who are most impacted by the current military aggression and slaughter. Reproduction of our own (insular) subcultures isn’t bad or wrong, but we should be realistic about what we’re doing.

PARTYING: AN ETERNAL QUEER TRADITION

Queerness is seen as inherently radical, but one need not look further than the (white) cis gay men who first gained civil rights and see how they turned their backs on the rest of the community. Similarly, partying is seen as an unquestionable part of being queer. The camp, the extravagance, the ostentatiousness. Bars, cabarets, and clubs are places we historically could be more our full true selves, but hiding ourselves away in these sometimes cozy sometimes seedy corners isn’t the world we’re aiming for. We are anarchists. We want everything.

Partying as an element of our formative development or means of socializing is historically true, but this is more a result of past structures than anything else. Or, as Marx said:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.¹⁵

Just like we rewrote history about Marsha P. Johnson throwing the first brick at the Stonewall Riot — by her own admission, she didn’t — we’ve rewritten the histories of bars as the places we chose, not some of the few places available to us. The beauty of autonomous living is that we each as individuals and we collectively each get to decide what is important to us and what we want moving forward. Traditions don’t have to continue if they don’t serve us, but nor do they have to disappear entirely. Maybe they can step back from the forefront, and in this case, something else could usurp partying as the main form of queer socializing.

¹⁵Karl Marx (1852). “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. In: *Die Revolution*.

In Berlin, bars are clubs are tourist attractions, and multi-day hedonistic drug-fueled rampages are common among normies. Kink has long teetered on the edge of breaking into the mainstream, and I feel like the sign the dam had truly broken was the kink-inspired music video to Phantogram's 2016 "You Don't Get Me High Anymore."¹⁶ The queerness of clubs has been alleged to have been watered down. Queues for clubs are full of cis-hets and normies who have bought their way into coolness. For two of the classic examples, KitKat and Berghain certainly don't feel like they have the same kinky underground authenticity that they used to. The camp, the hedonism, the sexual excesses are not reserved for us as the "true" queers. A glaring case of this is the brand Heroine Kids whose underage-looking models appear strung out and with a trashy aesthetic, and these ads are mostly slapped where the club kids mill about, and these happen to be traditionally radical neighborhoods. This is to say, we're replicating much of mainstream society in our love of clubbing and partying.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't try to find our own spaces or make our own way, and it doesn't mean that authenticity can't still exist in a world that endlessly chases images and brands. It just again begs the question as to whether partying as we do is actually radical.

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION

In its various forms, the misquote "If I can't dance, I don't want your revolution" is attributed to Emma Goldman.¹⁷ This misquote is often invoked by radicals in defense of hedonistic abandon. The full context from which it's pulled is more nuanced.

I threw myself into the work with all the ardour of my being and I became absorbed in it to the exclusion of everything else. My task was to get the girls in the trade to join the strike. For that purpose meetings, concerts, socials, and dances were organized. At these affairs it was not difficult to press upon the girls the need of making common cause with their striking brothers. I had to speak often and I became less and less disturbed when on the platform. My faith in the justice of the strike helped me to dramatize my talks and to carry conviction. Within a few weeks my work brought scores of girls into the ranks of the strikers.

I became alive once more. At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me

¹⁶Though, one might argue the 2011 novel "Fifty Shades of Grey" and its 2015 film adaptation could have served as markers, or we could reach further back and point at other films and media that highlight mixes of goth and kink subculture, but these never quite seemed to signal kink as an aesthetic reaching the most basic of music-festival-obsessees.

¹⁷For example, this exact formulation of the quote appears in the epigraphs at the start of *The Bars Are Ours: Histories and Cultures of Gay Bars in America, 1960 and After* by Lucas Hilderbrand.

aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things." Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world — prisons, persecution, everything. Yes, even in spite of the condemnation of my own closest comrades I would live my beautiful ideal.

I had worked myself into a passion, my voice ringing out. I found myself surrounded by many people. There was applause, mingled with protests that I was wrong, that one must consider the Cause above everything. All the Russian revolutionists had done that, they had never been conscious of self. It was nothing but narrow egotism to want to enjoy anything that would take one away from the movement. In the hubbub Sasha's voice was the loudest.¹⁸

We often assert that our parties are means of inducting others into our ranks, as means of radicalizing people. I've never met someone who even infrequently or minimally engages with radicalism whose first contact was via one our parties.

One summer, as I was dating a union organizer, we went to a queer-feminist party at Rote Insel with some of her friends.¹⁹ We sat around and talked outside and tried to engage with others, but most groups who were there were content to turn inwards and keep to themselves. My partner's friends — who'd never been to a house project before — left after less than 2 hours because they felt too out of place in that subcultural space. My partner left soon after, and while I knew some people there, they were working the bar or the door, so I found some acquaintances, some Greek comrades in the corner. We talked amongst ourselves, but being dressed rather plainly, we didn't fit in with the party atmosphere either. As the night grew chilly the group slowly made its way home.

This is not the only story like this I have, and I'm not the only one with these stories.

¹⁸Emma Goldman (1931). *Living My Life*. Vol. 1. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

¹⁹All of us spoke both German and English, mind you.