

# **Talk about our demonstrations**

**A reflection on demonstrations as practice**

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# Contents

Demonstrations and their functions . . . . .	3
Against the demo reflexes . . . . .	4
Spontaneity and lethargy of the masses . . . . .	4
Overcoming the tension between reform and revolution . . . . .	5
Multiple strategies for lasting change . . . . .	5
Autonomy or integration . . . . .	6

*This article was published in the third issue of the Bella Ciao magazine. This volume also contains photos and reports from various left-wing emancipatory protest events in Germany in recent months.*

*Regrettably the inflation has also impact on the editorship of the Bella Ciao. With the 6€ store price the running costs are not covered, even if nobody earns oney from it. So consider subscribing and supporting this magazine!*

*I have written a guest article, which I like to reproduce here somewhat delayed. My concern with it was to reflect on our practices, which are always in danger of becoming ends in themselves. demonstrations are obvious and useful means to gather people, to articulate views, to influence discussions and to form a space for action. Nevertheless, it has to be weighed up from time to time whether a rally is always the right form of action - and if so, what distinct goals we want to pursue with it and how we want to shape it...*

## **Demonstrations and their functions**

In my environment and in the left scene in a broader sense, I have been observing the tendency for quite some time that attending demos and getting involved in self-organized groups seem to diverge more and more. Neoliberal individualization, the increasingly difficult to escape compulsion to wage labor, as well as an apocalyptic spirit of the time does not make it attractive to commit oneself to long-term, binding and continuous grassroots work. In general, there is nothing against organizing and participating in demonstrations. On the contrary, gathering, articulating and being active in public space is extremely important for social movements.

Unfortunately, many people tend to see their participation in demonstrations as a political activity par excellence - in the worst case even as a kind of indulgence for not being able to find the capacity to fight for a different form of society and tangible changes. With this statement I do not apply for standards to be achieved, as they are preached to us in capitalism anyway. But I criticize those who think and also tell that they are committed, while they are actually only occasional demo visitors and otherwise read up on twitter, facebook and co. Powerful demos are good, functioning grassroots work is better. The former should be an expression of the latter. Much more important than the spectacular events are the often silent processes.

The assumption circulates that a demo in itself would "create pressure on politics" or brings any changes. But this is unfortunately a myth. Nevertheless, I'm not saying that demos don't do anything, on the contrary. However, we need to be aware of what they can and should serve. Many people are also concerned about this. The following reflections are only intended as a further suggestion.

In essence, demonstrations have five functions, in my view: First, they serve to gather similarly minded and sympathetic people, thus cultivating our communities and possibly expanding social contacts. Second, people empower and reinforce themselves when they come together under a particular label and with similar ideas. They want to feel understood and connected - which are completely legitimate needs. If they are met, those involved are more likely to take action in everyday life as well. Thirdly, demos have the function of creating awareness and self-understanding. This happens in speeches, in conversations on the sidelines, through slogans, inscriptions on banners and other stylistic devices. This is not just a rational process. Fourthly, they should be used to communicate with the outside world and to convince people. Other people should understand what the demonstrators stand for, what truth their perspective has and how it

is justified. The fifth point is direct action. This can include many things and does not necessarily have to result in breaking windows. But it is crucial to abandon the form of the legitimized walk and to take the street in a self-determined way.

## **Against the demo reflexes**

Of course, demos can vary greatly depending on the organizing groups, the political and legal framework, the social situation, the occasion and the local context. For this reason alone, there can be no such thing as a successful demo - but there are certainly some that fail to achieve their goals. Because we often tend to name the aspects that do not suit us, annoy us or disturb us, rather than those that we find good, we should also appreciate what we manage. Another question, however, is whether it always has to be a demonstration at all when it comes to expressing a desire for action.

In German-speaking countries in particular, creativity often seems to me to be rather limited in terms of the repertoire of forms of action. An event upsets us, we feel powerless, and the response is very quickly to organize a demo. The same applies to anniversaries or counter-protests. Understandable as it is, we should seriously reconsider whether demonstrations are always the adequate means to realize our concerns. And if we come to the conclusion that a demo makes sense for us in relation to a certain event, this leads back to the above-mentioned intentions that can be pursued with them.

For only then do we ask ourselves HOW our demo should actually look like in order to create communities, empower people, build awareness, communicate, persuade and enable direct action. And in this context, we need to overcome the damn consumer mentality: No, this is not the task of the organizational group alone. It is the task of everyone who participates and has any capacity to prepare for it. Because then we shape these events ourselves, make them our own events.

Which demos have you experienced that you found really good and for what reasons? How do you imagine a demo that you find meaningful and powerful, that you would like to participate in and be a part of? From which demos were you annoyed and frustrated? What was the reason for that and how can it be changed? This is worth thinking about further.

## **Spontaneity and lethargy of the masses**

There is too much walking around in G€rmany. That is not bad, but it should give us reasons to think about. Those who draw the reverse conclusion from this that there should simply be more rioting are often also stuck with a rather limited idea of demonstrating. That is why it is necessary to become militant. This means to develop a combative and lively attitude in the best sense of the word, to get actively and dynamically involved in the events.

The specific actions that result from this thought remain open. Groups can stage short street theaters, distribute flyers to passers-by, expand the selection of demo slogans, work with color, scout for Nazis, make a statement completely off the route, or whatever. It is clear that this can only succeed through organized affinity-groups, in which, if possible, a few individuals who do not know each other get together immediately before the start of the demo. Rather, people should conspire through shared convictions and forms of action, communicate with each other and with

the outside world, and can support or seek support for each other in all incidents. A demo is only as strong as our cooperative relationships with each other.

Participation in demos is occasionally prepared, but far too rarely does its evaluation happen - whether in our own circle or a larger semi-public setting. Apart from the fact that the threat of repression is to be avoided and that people have limited capacities, however, important learning processes are squandered in this way - whether in tactical terms or in relationship-work. That demonstration is also a pedagogical action.

Because a functioning affinity-group practice is far too little developed in my perception, it comes then nevertheless again and again to the well-known boring tramp-demos. Here, too, the following applies: The demo organization sets some framework conditions, but is neither obliged to serve the consumer mentality of the participants, nor does it have the right to completely determine what may or may not take place at the demo. Nevertheless, possibilities for communication before, during and after the demo should be used, if one does not want to achieve something against each other, but together. Instead of the lulling passive lethargy of the masses, we realize their self-determined spontaneity.

## **Overcoming the tension between reform and revolution**

In radical left circles, an opposition between reform and revolution is often constructed. This creates a field of tension between the demand for very concrete improvements within the existing political, legal and economic system on the one hand, and the overcoming of the framework set by the existing order of rule on the other. Historically, this was extensively discussed in the so-called revisionism controversy. Eduard Bernstein completely abandoned the revolutionary perspective, while Karl Kautsky wanted to disguise the fact that social democracy had already completely adapted by using revolutionary phrases to mobilize its members. Rosa Luxemburg took a different path, seeing the party as the expression of the organized working class and striving for a "revolutionary realpolitik" with it. In contrast, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin designed a "party of a new type," which as a tight vanguard organization was strictly oriented toward political revolution and was to take over state power.

Unfortunately, much less known than these social-democratic and party-communist strategies are the anarchist ones. These emerged precisely in criticism of both political reforms, which did not focus on changing the whole society and maintained the framework set by the ruling class, and political revolution, which started from the false assumption that state power could be used as a neutral instrument and that socialist society could be established by means of a dictatorship. Alternatively, Élisée Reclus, in a contribution of 1891, very nicely thematizes that "revolution" and "evolution" are not opposites, but rather two different moments of the same process.

## **Multiple strategies for lasting change**

Four ways were thus developed to achieve fundamental social transformation. First - as a departure from reform - mutualist self-organization, with which it was hoped that social conditions could be radically changed in the long term through grassroots work. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

and Gustav Landauer, for example, stood for this approach. Secondly, in disenchantment with political revolution, there was a focus on insurrection without a specific goal, for example by Luigi Galleani. Closer to making politics, on the other hand, are, thirdly, organized mass movements that practice civil disobedience. They are by no means only anarchist, but anarchists like Errico Malatesta or Emma Goldman actively participated in them in a libertarian-socialist current. Finally, all of these strategies, fourthly, also relate to the concept of social revolution, which in a sense binds them together and directs them towards the transformation of society as a whole. As Peter Kropotkin, in particular, elaborates, this is also associated with a real utopia as a positive vision for a libertarian-socialist form of society. In anarch@-syndicalist approaches, e.g. in Émile Pouget, this reference point to the whole is in turn linked to concrete social struggles in everyday life.

So there are a lot of strategies to think comprehensive, radical and lasting social change and to align social struggles with them. And we should become aware of and decide which strategies we actually pursue - in the long term and in relation to specific situations. Because this will also have an impact on the design of our demos, shaping their character and effects. It is absolutely clear that there cannot be one right way or only one sensible strategy in this. In fact, they mix, which is also perfectly okay and enriching. However, irritation and disputes arise when the strategies, goals and practices of the different participants are very different - and when this is neither made consciously nor communicated and discussed transparently and honestly. And this logically also affects the design, the expression of demonstrations and the options for action in them.

## **Autonomy or integration**

To set reform and revolution against each other is constructed contradiction, which we can also practically overcome in the design of our demos. It is much more worthwhile to think in terms of an opposition between autonomy and integration. Because this tension basically runs through all social movements and their different wings. Do we aim with a demonstration primarily to find a hearing for our particular demands, to set an issue in the mainstream media, or even to bring about a particular change in the law? Or do we want to make it clear that we are organizing ourselves, that we are already practically setting up the desirable social conditions and are pursuing a self-determined agenda with which we are distancing ourselves as clearly as possible from the set framework of the politically and economically ruling classes and their administrative and coercive apparatus? Here, as with the transformation strategies, it is not primarily a question of how much power the activists in emancipatory social movements currently have. Instead, what is decisive is how and towards what they orient their messages, forms of expression, action and organization.

Even if it seems a bit strange at first - of course we can orient our actions in a social-revolutionary, insurrectionary, civil-disobedient or mutualistic-self-organizing way even in a small affinity-group. The question is HOW we do something and WHERE we want to go. And whether our actions are consistent with our strategies, ideas and statements. The claims that we live in non-revolutionary times, that we first have to fight back fascism, or that only symbolic politics or marginal reforms are currently possible, are sham arguments that always serve to integrate us into the framework of the existing political rule - even if they are presented with

phrases and justifications that sound as radical left as they may be. Against this, it is time that we rediscover a different approach and strive for autonomy.

However, we have to keep in mind who is in which position. For migrants, for example, it is crucial that they receive a residence status so that they can stay in the FRG - even if this means that they should „integrate“. Likewise, it is desirable for activists who pursue wage work as teachers, lawyers, journalists, paramedics or cultural workers to use their positions to strengthen social movements - even if this regularly leads to contradictions. Nevertheless, in their activities they can fight for a libertarian-socialist form of society instead despairing at the rigid framework of the withering, shattered ruling order. Such an approach will also affect the character of demonstrations and all other practices.

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