

Fire and Ice: Space Wars in Zurich

Interview with a member of the Zurich anti-work movement

Midnight Notes

May 1981

The following interview was made in April 1981. The interviewee is a man from Zurich who has been involved in the Swiss anti-work movement for some time before it became “a focus of international attention.” He might not be typical since this movement has been known for its suspicion of language –its demonstrations are usually banner-less– while he is quite articulate . But he’s been there. This interview is largely self-contained and discusses the Zurich events from the Spring of 1980 to April 1981. However, for a little background we quote an excerpt from an article on the Zurich movement in a French journal Gueute Hebdomadaire (address: 27 rue J.P. Timbaud, 75011 Paris, France) printed in November 1980:

“Swiss social life rests on a very strict labor code where all the possibilities of conflict are absorbed before they can develop. Strikes are very rare and in many sectors they are judged unconstitutional. Absenteeism is severely attacked. Switzerland is the country in Europe which has the longest work week. Only one category of workers (the typesetters) have gained the 40 hour work week, and that after a struggle lasting three or four years. Also professional restrictions are extremely severe. In the last few years leftist lawyers and teachers have been attacked, whose crime was that they had participated in seminars organized by the extreme left or even the C.P. Such a system requires a very strict social control. Switzerland, though a neutral country, is an active member of the European police community. Half the public telephone booths in Geneva, for example, are tapped.”

MIDNIGHT NOTES: Did you have a feeling in the spring of 1980 as to what was about to come down or was it a big surprise to you?

HERR MULLER: It was not a surprise, there were already a lot of struggles going on around housing and against traffic.

The traffic demos, what were they about?

There is a highway crossing a neighborhood where old leftists and new autonomous people live; it is a commuter highway and it has an underpass; there was a lot of pollution coming from it. The street was barricaded and a whole “game” was invented by the future, to-be movement and

by the police. There was the old slogan: "For Life Against Concrete, Pollution, Cars." People were saying, "We have a right to live in this area and we are going to do whatever it takes to get it."

So it was a demand for space.

Yes, space is one of the most expensive commodities in Switzerland.

Give some examples of rents.

In the place where I used to live, an old type place, we paid \$200 for a four room apartment. Now for a two and a half room apartment we pay \$600. Half the space and twice the rent.

Is this very common?

Yes. There has been an explosion of rents in Zurich this last year.

Why did you leave your old place?

The owner changed and we got thrown out. They're now rebuilding these houses. They chop up the large apartments, make smaller ones and charge double.

Sounds like Boston. What relation does this have with the struggle around the community center?

It's not a community center. It's called "Autonomous Youth Center". The relationship? I'd say it's an organizational one: the same people who pulled the struggle around traffic and housing were among the organizers of the first struggle around the center, the cultural struggle. Because the whole thing was about culture, having a space for our culture, which was mainly rock, punk rock. People wanted a place where they could play that kind of music and just hang out together.

You see, they have closed down all the bars and other places where we used to hang out, one after the other. First you don't have a place to live and then you have the same problem with public space. It's getting expensive as well, concert tickets are now \$10 and more.

So everybody was saying we need a place where we can do things and do them cheaply.

Yes, and we can do it ourselves. We can play our own music and listen to our music without having to pay.

Was the Autonomous Youth Center already there?

No, the whole thing began in the spring of 1980 after this prologue had been played in traffic. There had been a referendum in the city about credit to rebuild the opera house. They got \$40,000,000. Then there was a little demonstration to protest this in front of the opera house one Friday evening. 200 people, those who were into other kinds of music, showed up.

At this point, the authorities made a mistake, they sent the police in riot gear; the demonstrators felt provoked and started throwing rocks. The police responded. There were a lot of people around in the neighborhood, like Greenwich Village, so when something started developing a crowd gathered and it just escalated.

Suddenly you had two thousand people that same night and the "game" started: if you could not attack the police, you fled and while fleeing you smashed shop windows. You acted your response against the windows. The next people who came by saw that the windows were smashed and they could take things out and so the looting followed.

The next day it made the news, "RIOT AND LOOTING IN ZURICH". That had not happened in Zurich for five hundred years; clearly something new was going on in the city. People kept gathering in the same place and there were more and more people on Saturday and Sunday nights.

Who are these people?

What do you want to know? Their sociological description, how they get their money?

Everything.

It is a proletariat in the broad sense that they work for a wage; you don't have to worry about that. Old time Leninists should be satisfied. But what kind of proletariat is this? It's a mixed, socially diffused proletariat; they are not tied down to any job but they move from job to job. Sometimes they get into unemployment (which is hard to do in Switzerland), but most of these people have gone through this experience.

These are the kind of people who know all the possible ways of getting money, including money from the state. They are community people. It is easier to define them by how they reproduced themselves than by how they get their money. Some of them have their own business. Others work in printing shops and newspapers, but they are not stable jobs. A lot are apprentices, young workers who will never become foremen (small "bosses" over immigrant workers) as Swiss usually do. Then you have the second generation of Italian and Spanish workers. You have ages ranging from 14 to 45; you find everybody including a lot of people from the ideological industries. like TV, radio people, social workers, teachers... nurses.

We heard the movement had a good Red Cross team during the demos.

Yes, that made the right wingers freak out, they could not deal with doctors running around in T-shirts like "hippies". It's an over-qualified, unstable, diffused proletariat. At the same time you have people who in the 70's refused qualification, like the "punkies". They are all into drugs so you have the self-destructive crowd and the self-valuating crowd. Some of them have made themselves cheap, sabotaged their own career. And then you have all kinds of "minorities" like gays and lesbians.

Are there many women in the movement?

As many as men. But you had a new feeling towards women, much more like "buddies". You can do heavy construction work with women like building barricades. This "buddy" aspect was evident during the demonstrations, in the confrontations with the police. The excitement was not sexual in an erotic sense. Nobody spoke of love. That is out, love is definitely not a theme of the movement. Of course, this "buddy" relation does not resolve the "personal" problems between men and women.

What about the nude demos?

They were "sterile", not like a "love in". Nakedness did not have an erotic sense. Even the press does not see them as a kind of "fuck in", for they had nothing to do with sex. Rather they expressed the refusal of "militant", "violent" work. The first large nude demo came after a large day-time demo broke up and people went into a park for music and food until about ten or eleven at night. Then out of frustration they did it, they stripped naked. The police were completely surprised, for this subverted all the former models of militant behavior. It was a kind of damage against yourself, for nakedness in this kind of situation means, "We are not going to fight for what we want."

How about the gays?

They showed up once *qua* gay. There was one gay demo, Gay Pride Day, commemorating the Stonewall riot.

Tell us something about how the demos go.

Basically you have a rally (announced or not), march through the street and at a certain point you start...somebody (I never did) starts making a barricade, throwing things onto the street. You can always rely on somebody doing it and they could always rely on somebody joining them. The police has a theory about this. They say there are 300 guys who do it, 300 who cover them and

300 behind those who just stand around and watch what's going on. The police want to get all these three categories of people in jail. These are the three essential elements of their so-called "by-stander theory". In fact, those who make the barricades could do nothing if they were not covered by the movement. Everybody is a by-stander, but that's why the by-standers are there... to allow the barricades to be built. They're not real by-standers.

Is this going on everywhere in the city?

There are certain areas, especially the main street, Limmatquai, along the river, Limmat. It's a very popular neighborhood, because it's always full of people from the outskirts. As if you had a river going through the Village, you would have a lot of things going on around that river. You stop traffic, which was what the prologue was about. You take whatever you find because it's not a barricade you defend. It's not like the Commune, nothing serious, it's just to prevent the cars from moving.

Occasionally, the barricade was burnt to keep the fire between you and the police. Then the police intervenes. When they come, they disperse you, but then the whole routine of window smashing and looting starts again.

The geography of the city must have helped out, with the alleys and small streets.

Yes, at first it was very important, but later the police changed tactics. At first they came with 200 or 300 cops and made just one mass. They made something like a counter demonstration, they had one front line while you were much more into guerrilla movement. You could split up whereas they stuck together. But later on they split up too into little groups of 5-10 together and they were chasing you.

They were not afraid that they would get knocked back?

No, they were never seriously attacked. Occasionally there were some rocks thrown at them. Once they threw one into the river. But there was not direct physical assault on the cops. The ones that were attacked were the shops.

On that level it was a very disciplined and controlled crowd. It sounds like Poland where it seems they made a mass decision not to directly confront the police as in 1970.

You see in Switzerland you could always be more or less sure that the police would not kill you. That's not the case in Poland where they got massacred in 1970. So you cannot compare the two situations. You can play games with the Swiss cops. It was like a ballet and it would not have been possible without the police. They had to play their part.

But if they catch you they'd beat you up?

Yes, they are rough and they've become more and more rough. It's not that funny. A couple of people lost their eyes: rubber bullets. It's the only police in Europe that uses them. In West Germany they're still discussing it and for sure the German police is not renowned for its kindness. I think it has something to do with the lack of personnel in the Swiss police. They don't really have a riot police to do the dirty work. They have to stand at a distance and be mechanized. They would not have enough policemen for beating up demonstrators in a mass.

The demos at the street level are a weekly or bi-weekly affair. Then you have a more "actionist" level, like those little groups, who independently of a demo taking place, move around doing something on their own. Sometimes you'd read about it in the paper: "Several dozen windows smashed in the downtown area". This of course without any immediate connection with a demonstration. Maybe it's a reaction to the frustration after they closed down the youth center.

You also have attacks on construction firms that are connected with the housing problem. There have been fire-bombings of depots where machines and materials are kept. Fire is always being used. That's why the slogan of a film that just came out is "Zurich is Burning". This, the most secret level of the movement, causes millions of dollars of damage. They have no mandate, they do it on their own, you don't know who's doing it. But they leave leaflets on the place saying, "This is because you raised the rents."

So is there a connection between these types of struggles and the movement?

There is with the hardcore, hardliner type. Lots of people in the movement reject it, others like it. But it has not officially been disavowed by the movement. There has never been a decision that this is wrong. On the other side you have the Social Democrats who pose as our friends. But they move on the institutional level and just use the movement as their strength in the party power game. They tell the other parties, "We want our share because we represent the movement." That's like the Walesa game: trying to represent a dangerous force within the institutions. The Social Democrats have not been given a mandate by the movement, but unlike the hardliners, they have been disavowed.

Is this movement all about the Youth Center?

No. People didn't even know that there was such a building in the first place. There are two buildings in question actually. One is a former ITT factory, the "Red Factory", that has been recycled. It was empty and movement people wanted to struggle for that building but it was a little outside of town. The city was not ready to give it. Meanwhile, they found out by accident that there was a building very close to the main railroad station which is in the center of the city. They said we want that and the other one. Then the whole struggle concentrated on the building in the city center. It had been a Maintenance Department depot where they kept snow plows and the like. The city did not even expect that anybody would like it. If you look at it it's really nothing. A 19th century building, useless. They found out they wanted that building and there was a lot of struggle around it. The city gave them the building and they actually started using it very well.

When did they get it?

This was in June 1980. Right after the first riots. It was really quick because the city council thought that the whole thing would be over with this, that there would be just some alcoholics and drug addicts hanging out in that place suffocating any kind of activity. It almost happened but not quite. Their problem was that the center really started functioning, centralizing all kinds of other struggles around housing. It became a meeting point and that was very important. People got a taste of it. It's not just the problem of space, but empty space you can use in your way, unoccupied territory.

Was the center used to organize squatting?

Yes. Near the center there was one house squatted by alcoholics and drug addicts, as well as three or four others in other parts of the city. But new squattings were planned for the Fall. A lot of organization was going on around getting cheap housing. One of the major initiatives had to do with an old city housing project (called Rebhugel) built in 1919. It was two blocks long. One-fourth was still inhabited but the rest were empty apartments just waiting to be renovated.

You were involved in this squatting... how did it work?

We did not have any theory about whether we would get it or not, we just decided to move in. One morning; at 10 o'clock exactly, we were about 100 people and we moved in after using

crowbars to open the doors. We had some furniture and other living stuffs. Just the basics, a bed and mattress. We moved in and it was really nice.

How about lights and water?

We had people who knew about it, within two or three hours everything was done. Usually it would take days to do it legally. Within four hours we felt at home and sae felt that nobody could ever throw us out. But after five hours, lots of police arrived, equipped with tear gas and everything.

When did they find out you moved in?

They knew from the start. There was a whole legal process of accusation and warrant that was done. It took five hours to mobilize the police. We fled, we did not defend it. We even had to leave the furniture. The problem was that we did not have any tactics no plan about what we would do if the police came. We were just telling the police that we were ready to move in, that we were going to do it, but we were not going to fight with them. The fight was the next day, on the territory we could choose in the city.

There was a demonstration on housing in the center of the city and it was one of the most violent. The point is not to accept the terrain where you cannot do it. It's like: we want those houses but we didn't have to defend those houses because we couldn't. But we could defend those houses in a place where the authorities were much more vulnerable.

How did you get along with the people who already lived in the project?

At first the people were really hostile, but in two hours they liked us. A guy who was in the same house where we were was furious, he started throwing our furniture out of the window. "Get out! Get out!" But by the afternoon we were already discussing how we could fix this and that. His wife had already found a lot of girl friends among the women. They had been very lonely but they only found out because we were there. They found out what they had missed, within three hours that problem was solved.

After the demo the next day, were you able to go back?

No, we could not. They put a stinking substance into all the apartments, you could not use them. They sabotaged the use of them.

What about the people that were living there?

They were pissed off. It stinks like fish. It was chemical warfare. You could not use those apartments, there was no point. It would have been just symbolical. Now, just recently, some of the squatters did get some other apartments. The city is starting to give some housing, some apartments which they refused in the beginning.

How does the movement get together, how does it make decisions? Are there parties, unions, any other type of organization?

Some are in parties and unions, but the whole organizational mechanics lies in the general assemblies. They meet on Wednesday or Thursday at the "People's House", an old social democratic conventional hall. There are between 500 and 2000 people, usually there is no schedule, just a lot of people talking, microphones, everybody saying what they're feeling, a lot of people attacking each other. Women attacking men, hardliners attacking "softies", some saying, "We've had enough of this window smashing, it doesn't pay" and the hard-liners saying, "You would not be here you softies if we hadn't started this way, for the soft line had been around for decades."

Decisions are always made by vote like "Next Saturday we're going to make that demonstration, to accept this kind of proposal." There are two or three rules which are always respected: there is never a delegation, never a committee in charge of the whole thing, there is never any

kind of negotiation on the demands. The demands are: the unconditional re-opening of the Youth Center and the unconditional release and amnesty for all who are accused; then there is the release of certain kinds of prisoners, especially one prisoner named Walter Stum, who's very popular.

Who is he?

He was a kind of burglar, he declared himself an organizer for prison struggles... during the riots there was a prison strike. He's a symbolic figure for all kinds of common prisoners, not just political. His release is one of the demands. There is no negotiation on them. No compromise possible.

Is this because of the nature of the demands or because there is nobody to negotiate with?

No, there have been a lot of people negotiating in the name of the movement but they have always been fucked up later by the movement. They would negotiate something but later nobody would respect it. Some of the most clever said, "Yes, let them do it, and if they get the center back we just will not respect the conditions under which they got it back." We take whatever we can get. It's the same as how they treat the social democrats. If they are able to give us something we accept, we are not sectarians.

So there are no traditional parties in the movement?

No, there are individuals...you see in the first two or three general assemblies the Trotskyites and other political groups showed up explaining to the movement that they should unite with the factory workers and fight capital...there was only one big whistle and they never showed up again.

Because first of all there were factory workers in the movement and the last thing they would identify with would be guys like this. Political groups did not get any hold on the movement. They were doing a lot of things for the movement but the movement was never grateful. The movement just used them.

Political groups were used as hostages between the movement and the state, but that was because the movement had its own strength at different levels: the street level, the fire-bomb level and the cultural level. In between the individual and the movement however, there are informal crowds, the "areas", the "tribes" and what are sometimes called the "pies". They are designated by the street or neighborhood in which they live. A demo would start with these "pies", so there would be a "community" base to the movement.

What about the music, sex and drugs of the movement?

The whole thing can be done under the chapter, "How does this diffused (sometimes qualified, sometimes refusing qualification) proletariat reproduce itself? How do they live? How do they get a positive balance every evening?" This is culture. This is music how you get into time by rhythm. The whole cultural problem starts with the breakdown of the family. It's a feeling of loneliness; if you are really alone you have to invent your own life, your own reproduction, what you're doing. There is nobody to take care of you and if they take care of you, you can not use them. This was due to the "breakdown of the family".

In the 1960's lots of German and Swiss families split up and in the 70's even the families of the immigrants have begun to break up. And then you have whole spaces where you cannot get your reproduction because they are "occupied". You need new spaces to reproduce yourself, invent your own life. This was mainly music: punk rock and new wave; and clothing. People started refusing "regular" clothing, they got into "punk" clothes and not just punk but also "new

elegance”, the californized dandies. So you have two ways in which you deal with your reproduction, oscillating between creativity and self-destruction.

What kinds of self-destruction?

Punk is outspokenly into self-destruction and so are the junkies. Heroin was very important. There were a lot of deaths in Zurich, double or triple the old rate. It’s horrible, suicidal. Heroin is not mobilizing in itself. But all these deaths scared a lot of people and it became a spur to action. Suicide was always at the limits of the situation. It was played out by a woman who burned herself up in the street. She was a junkie but when she came into the movement she got off junk. But during a demonstration she was beaten and jailed by the cops. When she got out she was really fucked up... and then a while later this self-immolation. It was not directly related to the movement but everyone took it “personally”. As far as drugs are concerned, the movement itself is into hash and marijuana and the punkies, of course, are into alcohol.

You mentioned some people scarring themselves.

That’s the whole punk culture. A culture of pain, a new culture of pain. Self-destructive but also aggressive. Like the smashing of windows becomes part of your reproduction. It was not a political action in the sense that you do it to get something. You live by doing this. It’s a lifestyle. That’s why it could last a year. If it had been a means people would have done it three or four times and if there was no result, or you got the center, that’s it. Instead it did not stop with the winning of the center, there were still riots. That was one of the arguments of the city, “You see, it doesn’t pay to be weak. They only understand force.”

MN: How did the punks relate to the rest of the movement?

HM: You have different cultures coming together. Punk culture, the new elegance culture (the “chiceria” as they call it). But then there’s the old ’68 intellectual ugly guys who are still around. They’re neglected but not because they want to be in pain but because they are body-unconscious. Then you have the hippie-country-side-“new peasant” type, long hair and soft clothes, woollen pullovers, earth shoes.

It’s like a marriage between Bambi and De Sade.

Yes, you have a culture that goes from the Marquis De Sade to Bambi. You have some recycled types from the anti-nuclear movement and others too tricky to classify. An important element in the movement was the presence of many mentally or physically handicapped people. In fact, the whole movement started with a “Festival for the Handicapped”. As everybody felt handicapped, everybody went there. The handicapped were just marginalized in that festival and they said, “For once we got something of our own and we are on the side!” It was a huge success because everybody felt they were handicapped.

In the demos the presence of many handicapped was crucial. People began to lose their fear and not just the fear of the police. Seeing cripples coming to the demos on wheelchairs made them realise that life keeps going on even if you lose an arm or an eye. That it was not true that you were finished if you were hurt and that gave us much more courage.

The theme is alienation pure and simple.

Yes, it’s a movement that comes from alienation directly. Abstract, coming from heaven somehow. Everybody felt handicapped, and that’s true, everybody is handicapped. The Left had never done that, saying, “You are all cripples, we are all cripples, you are the crazies.” The idea of the noble proletariat had been destroyed. People felt that for the first time you could show what you were lacking, how ugly you were. It is a movement of ugliness. A movement of the ugly people...of vulnerability and suicide.

So this is a movement that makes cheese and does heroin...it's amazing that people coming from such different places can stick together.

All these people who during the 70's had been separated and kept quarrelling with each other have been unified by the police. They were attacked together and both in the same way. So they found out that there is another front, completely different. "The Concrete" as they say or "The Iceberg"— that's the city, money, capital. It's just another name for capital, "The Ice": solidified, coagulated work, dead work. It's a quite adequate Marxist terminology. They found out that both the death culture and the life culture are opposed to the "Ice Age" of capital. They found out that all the conflicts they had among themselves were much less important than what they opposed. Capital had never been forced to show itself, to show that it existed. Never had it become visible. The only way it could become visible was through the police. You could feel it.

So the police are the "Polar Bears"?

Yes. You could not be in Zurich finally and not feel that there was oppression, the state, capital. You were lost before; every-body was lonely and depressed, everybody felt handicapped. Then suddenly you felt that they were really there, that they existed, you could feel the attack, the ice, the coldness. That was the point of no return. Certainly the police would not kill you. But they would not let you live either. They would not give you the space where you could live. Yet they would not kill you, they would keep you alive, but frozen.

Not everyone in Switzerland is in the movement obviously, how do the "non-movement" types, the "ordinary people" relate to it?

Not so few people have been involved. On the whole there have been on the streets about 150,000 this year in different demos. There has been a lot of overlapping, so I would say there have been about 50,000 people involved out of a population of about 1,000,000 in the Zurich metropolitan area. So you always have a neighbor who has been there. In the average high school class there would be at least one student who was there. Everywhere, in all businesses, you would find somebody who was there. Nobody has been left untouched.

For example, during a demo on the Bahnhofstrasse (like Fifth Ave. in NY City) you would see the police coming, flee to the side streets and find a guy in a grey suit and tie with an attaché case. He would open the attaché case, take out a rock, throw it, close it and go on. You would find such people. Another time you would be hiding in the hallway of a house and could not see whether the police were coming, a black guy would pass (there are black businessmen in Zurich) and without looking at you would say, "They're behind the next corner." So there are many accomplices.

Now, you have little unemployment and high wages, granted there's not enough housing to go around but basically Switzerland is a social democratic paradise in the capitalist world. Why is everybody so unhappy?

The wage, how much you get doesn't change the situation. Marx was right when he said that the point is that you're alienated. Work remains a problem even if you are well paid. This is no relative problem...the problem of being alienated and having enough pay is as serious as dying from hunger in India. You have people who die, kill themselves, from this kind of situation, the heroin deaths. You cannot say these problems are not serious. If you have death, that's the most serious thing you can imagine anywhere.

So winning the right to a full plate is not enough?

Most people say, "It's a nice concentration camp." There's no unemployment in a concentration camp. That's how Switzerland is like. It's a problem to get on unemployment because they im-

mediately find you a job. They force you to take a job. That's the other side. I had lots of friends who wanted to go on unemployment for a change, but they could not. They would get them a job.

Are you saying that in a case like Switzerland the real demand is not for more wages, but space, resources, time...

This space demand is, of course, an indirect wage demand; if you take the wage as what you get for your work. That could as well be in the form of space. If you want to, from a purely Marxist point of view, you can subsume these kinds of struggles under the wage struggle. This is true as we know, there's no such thing as a struggle outside of the wage struggle. The problem is that if you put it in that abstract way you don't understand anything that is going on. That doesn't tell you anything because it's always true. You can say the wage struggle goes from South Africa to Alaska...what does it mean? It means that all the rules of the game are still valid.

For example, there have been wage struggles in the sense that many parts of the more traditional working class like the rail road workers and the printing workers took advantage of the situation and demanded higher wages and they got them more or less.

How has the movement affected these other sectors?

For the first time in a while there is a frontline going through the whole society, and you can relate to that front. More and more, all social movements relate to this front, like the railroad workers making jokes about "Icebergs". Everywhere you find that this new language is taking over. The language is a threat, because people in any sector can say: "We use the language but we mean the facts. You can still deal with us in the old ways if you want, but if you don't, we now have found out there's a front we can go to."

Capital's problem is that it's not only Zurich, it's going on throughout Northern Europe. Like the German metalworkers being on strike, it's different. It becomes a threat. They say, "There has been a proof, a general proof that everything can get out of hand." That you can say of Poland also. Even in a communist country things can get out of hand.

Even in Switzerland.

Yes. If there was one country in which you thought nothing could get out of hand it was Switzerland. In Poland you might expect it because they had a long history of this kind of struggle, but Switzerland was completely unexpected. That's why it's worth talking about. It was a complete surprise.

Now it has expanded to Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia...

It has not expanded from Zurich, but Zurich gave a lot of courage to all those guys: "If they can do it in Zurich we can do much more here!" That's really the mood. "They are not going to teach us a lesson!" It is the same struggle in Berlin around housing and in Amsterdam where you had the police moving with tanks against the demonstrators. It was much rougher in Amsterdam. It is a wage struggle but it isn't immediately about money. It's based on the commodities. But what has been used is the language, it's European now: "Iceberg", "Anti-concrete", "For Life Against Concrete", there is no talking all the old political language. By refusing it you can bypass all kinds of anti-communist propaganda.

The bourgeois newspapers were deluded, they would say, "This is not political; it's a cultural movement so it's not dangerous." Only lately have they begun to say that this whole thing is being organized by an international network of terrorists, but they don't really believe it. It's only crazy guys like Strauss in Germany or some right-wing city councillors in Zurich who think that, because obviously it's not true. It's impossible.

Why is the situation so different in Southern Europe?

That's because the whole situation of reproduction is completely different. In Southern Europe you still have a family background. You have old, archaic back-up systems. If capital fucks up you can go back to "feudalism", not feudalism in the classical sense, but you have the family, the Mafia, the cousins in the countryside. You can be poor but you can survive. You can go back to a non-money economy. That's not possible in Northern Europe any more. Either you invent your own reproduction or you're completely lost.

There's no back-up system. You're alone. The feeling of loneliness is very important. Here you have the ice and there is you, the Eskimo and the Ice with Icebears threatening you. That's why all this "Ice" stuff. You can't use that language in Italy, it's just too warm and not only in a geographical sense but in a human, family sense. Capital has not been very efficient in Southern Europe; the quality of life there is too high, even in poor countries. They have certain standards. In Northern Europe there is complete discipline, they can do whatever they want with you. Like Woody Allen, he can take and take and shit as much. He's completely elastic. He is the ideal of one whose needs can always be redefined. He's never at an end, he can always take more shit. Whereas an Italian or a Greek will take a certain quantity and then he cannot any more. He will explode.

The women have helped bring on the "destruction of the family" themselves?

Yes, there is female employment. Women wanted to get out of the house. My mother worked; I grew up with a key around my neck. These kids are now on the streets, more or less, for the women work more and more. That's what the right-wingers say all the time, of course; it really starts with the family. This housing struggle is also an attack on the family because it is not family housing that young people want but community housing. We want to invent new types of communal life-styles. It was done in the 60's but now there is a new wave going back to it.

Are there many mothers and children in the movement, is that a big issue?

Yes. There are many mothers and there are always children around. They are accepted as being part of the whole thing. Just buddies. Nine-year old punkies.

This is not a union movement nor a political movement as classically defined, how would you describe it?

It's a union founded on culture. You do not identify yourself by your job, you do not even organize yourself on your job. But you organize yourself around your reproduction because the job is just the place where the "fuel" comes from. Anyway, the job is also changing all the time so I am not a "worker", I'm a punk or a reggae guy or a "chicaria" guy or a junkie. There are lots of new identities you can find.

On that level you organize very efficiently because you recognize the members of the same organization by their clothing which you cannot do in a union. A metalworker is hard to identify off the job. At the same time, this kind of organization also allows complete anonymity. You can be anonymous and have an identity at the same time.

Can you talk about what you call "Mullering", the "dysinformation struggle", this conscious attempt to fuck up capital's lines of communication.

That's ideological sabotage by not accepting the language or the expected way of behaviour. The Muller business was very important. A man and a woman from the movement had been invited to be on TV to defend the point of view of the movement in a roundtable discussion. Instead of doing that they defended the point of view of the "silent majority", the right-winger, presumably the average Swiss.

(It is a fiction, though there are some like those old working class guys who went through the crisis of the 30's. Those are the only hardcore, right-wing Swiss state supporters. They are not "right wing" in an official sense, they can also be social democrats. It's not right wing as a particular ideology but just as totally for law-and-order and the state. They are the ones who defend law-and-order against the movement.)

There was a film done of one of these guys watching the Mullers and as they were saying that the state should put the movement in concentration camps, shoot them, put them to work, guys like him were saying "Yes! Yes!" When it turned out that they were movement people the indignation was very big. That happened several times on TV. TV got fucked up. On that show a hardcore social democratic woman usually for law-and-order had to defend the point of view of the movement against the Mullering. This Mullering is a constant element of the whole movement.

Also on the language level. For example, you have demonstrations of 10,000 people shouting "WORK! WORK! WORK!" to the bystanders. But then you have this Czechoslovakian reporter of Rude Pravo (the Party paper) who wrote an article on the Zurich riots saying that there was a demonstration of 10,000 unemployed people demanding work! It was disinformation beyond the Iron Curtain. They could not tell their people that there were actually 10,000 people shouting against work in the West, because the Czechoslovakians want to get to the West. They want to be able to "really" work and get some money. The whole myth of the West would have been destroyed in their eyes.

Another form of disinformation is making sprayed messages on the wall; for example, the Marlboro slogan "Freedom and Adventure" was sprayed all over the city, "Marlboro: Freedom and Adventure". Everybody understood what it meant: we want freedom and adventure against the police, against the state, against the work. Whenever you saw a real Marlboro advertisement you'd remember...so you could use official advertising by copying it. It's an old joke, like Andy Warhol's soup cans. You use official slogans to get your message around.

So people took to re-doing street signs, renaming streets, putting small stickers all over the city—stamp size—now the streets are full of signs. Of course, you have this circled A which stands for "autonomy" or "anarchy". It used to be "anarchy" but now most people understand it as standing for "Autonomous Youth Center".

What about the critique that you people are anarchistic, not really organized to deal with the state, not ready to control production, etc.

Actually we have always been very efficient in terms of organization, but the best thing organization can produce is surprise. That's why you organize, to be in a place before the others are there. Surprise was one of our strengths all the time. So you cannot say that there was no organization: the sense of surprise and getting people at the right moment to surprise the others.

The Leninist conception of the movement is that it is a river that can be turned here and there by the smart organizers and eventually be dammed up to run a power plant and generate work...

Yes...but here the movement is a lifestyle. It is already what is after the movement. Whatever it can invent is the horizon.

What you're saying is that a major motive force behind this movement is that right now unless you do something like this in Switzerland you would go nuts...unless you have people going out opening up some space you'd have a few million people berserk. But can it go on...can the state and capital tolerate it?

I'm quite sure it will go on because there are a lot of untapped resources, there are a lot of people who are ready to get involved but have not yet found their way. There's a lot of sympathy around this movement. People are attracted by this kind of culture: language and literature, theater and music grew this whole year. There's a lot of temptation around this movement. The only thing that capital can do to deal with this is to try to institutionalize it...open all this space, like have a Fool's Day every week or a Carnival every two months.

There already have been things like that. Carnival always existed in Zurich—there was a period of three or four days in the year where you could do whatever you wanted, you had the streets. You could mask yourself, you could act, you were anonymous, you were not responsible for what you were doing. Capital could think about institutionalizing it, saying, "Let's give them something like in Poland." This is the line in Berlin, the German government feels very much this way. "Let's give them 200 or 300 houses. It's only one-tenth of the population that is into this life style, we can probably live with it."

In Zurich they would say we cannot live with 10% of that, because our proletariat, much more than in West Berlin, is fragile. When the Swiss start freaking out they become useless. Where manufacturing is still central you can always use crazy workers doing shit work, it doesn't matter how crazy you are when you dig a hole. But you cannot really use crazy accountants and crazy computer programmers because they are going to fuck up millions of dollars in one "break-down". So Swiss capital cannot say that craziness can be institutionalized and you can live with it. It would always be a temptation for this kind of person, that's way capital needs some ideological stability, some major way of functioning. That is why all this dysinformation tactics is so important. It is like a thought poison...the whole movement is disintegrating coherent behavior. Irrationalism is used as a weapon against capital.

So "dysinformation" is a way of spreading the movement?

That's one of the most important, most contagious things...the language. Because the work of most people in Zurich is language, mostly figures. If you fuck up language you fuck up all work processes. If it continued like this within a few years capital would collapse. "Dysinformation" is very disintegrating, very dangerous. They could only shut down the whole place. Capital would have to withdraw from Zurich.

In "No Future Notes", Midnight Notes #2, we found that alternativism can be easily integrated into the system.

Yes, I'm familiar with your argument but it only works if you can make a selection within the "alternativist area". Capital in Switzerland was not able to divide between pure alternativists and the "destructive" people. They could not make the distinction between alternativists and pure anti-capitalists. This whole scheme did not work, though they tried to separate between the "cheese people" and the "window smashing people".

There was a long article in a Swiss newspaper about young people in the Alps who made cheese. All the "moral majority" types were saying: "Those guys in the streets should take the example of the good, young people who are making cheese and upholding the Swiss traditions in the Alps. For one-fifth of the Swiss Alps are run by alternativists. It is one of the most traditional parts of Swiss culture.

And the "cheese people" wrote back a letter saying, "You old asshole, there's complete solidarity between us and those who smash windows in Zurich. We would do the same thing in the city. What else can you do but destroy it and what else can you do on the Alps but make cheese?"

The “Moral Majority” was completely destroyed. Actually I met a friend of mine who came down from the Alps for a holiday to go to a demo. There was an even more dramatic incident. Some people who were arrested by the police had to be freed because they had to take care of their cows. They said, “You cannot keep up us because the cows cannot wait for the trial. You cannot keep us in jail, we have to go make Swiss cheese!”

The mixture of alternativism and this kind of “destructive” approach is still explosive. It becomes harmless only if you can put the alternativists exclusively to work and make a clear cut distinction between them and the rest: A lot of people in Zurich now say the situation is like that before the bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie already had the means of production in their hands but not the state, the nobility was still in charge. So, the alternativists are saying that they are getting their economic basis together at a low level. They say: “We can depend on ourselves, we can live without capital.” That’s one of their strengths. The alternativists which during the 70’s looked like they were integrated turn out to be one of the strengths of the movement because they don’t have to be afraid of “capital withdrawing” and being thrown back to a no-man’s-land. If capital withdraws, everyone rejoices. A lot of people now say that’s exactly what they want.

But alternativism seems to be a return to labor intensive work...

That’s not true. This new type of agriculture is not going back, it is very refined. Reproduction is always in the foreground. It’s probably more efficient to use a lower technological level but stay in better mental health. It’s more expensive to mend people than to mend machines.

But do we have to choose between going crazy and scratching the dirt?

No. The highest quality of life is not dependent anymore upon the level of goods produced by capital. If you have friends around that have studied this and that, having these people is more valuable than getting one more TV. Capitalism has nothing to offer. Labor power is now so expensive, we are so expensive somehow that using ourselves is a higher luxury than using a machine. That’s why it is a struggle around space and time.

But time is not as central now because it has been won a little bit with the spreading of part-time work which began to take root some years before this thing started. The cultural movement started a year or two before with music, “Stilto” and other underground journals. Then you needed the space.

But there is a high technological level in the movement. The police band was continually tapped on the radio. You’d go to a demonstration in the afternoon and then you’d go home and have a good dinner. Whenever the police would say, “OK, now we’re going in”, we’d join the demonstration. You’d use all forms of media.

Like there would be groups that would jam the sound of the TV announcer and put in a different sound track; you had the regular picture but there was another voice. There are five or six groups in Zurich doing this, as well as “pirate” radio stations: Radio Banana, Radio Wildcat, Radio Iceberg, but they can only broadcast for 15 minutes at a time because the police would find their location, so they go from one transmitter to another.

What about your slogans?

At first they were metaphorical like “Free Greenland” but now it is more and more jokes like “Legalize strawberry ice cream.” It’s propaganda, it’s disinformation.

It’s not clear why this thing should end.

True, people are really relaxed. There are lots of people saying, “Let’s end it,” but those are the same who show up in the next demonstration. It has become like a drug.

Is there a possibility that the movement can be fragmented?

Fragmentation will not necessarily weaken the movement. In fact, it started fragmented. For example, when the women decided to have meetings of their own it was never a sign of weakness. The movement became stronger out of it.

What happened?

One day the women said, “We cannot stand this kind of male, macho talk.” There’s a certain part of the movement that are Red Army Faction supporters, ideologically not really. It’s the old Leninist behavior, the small strategists, they are never very efficient, but they create a macho-type of atmosphere. Nobody takes them seriously, but at a certain moment the women said they could not stand them any more. They met once or twice alone. But the women’s movement was always there. They put out their own newspaper, it was called WOMEN’S FASHIONS, (as if it was a NY TIMES fashion magazine) but it was completely punkie.

Could the Swiss government follow what seems to be the “new soft line” in Germany?

Well, it’s mostly in West Berlin where they are trying to be more flexible and accept that there is a “new type” around. They have become “pluralists”. After all there are Bavarians, Blacks, Chinese, so there will be alternativists. They will be sorted out somehow. They figure that this is not against the system, just a new product of the system, a new way of life with advantages and disadvantages. The only city in which they can do it is West Berlin because it is an isolated, “special case”. West Berlin is the welfare city anyway. They would say, “They’re just crazy people.” But the movement is still growing like a cancer and they try to circle it—not to cut it out but to stabilize it. They say, “We are going to live with cancer but make it stable, we may have lung cancer but we don’t want heart cancer and brain cancer as well.”

I talk about “cancer” because if there is a physiological model for the growth of this movement this is what it looks like. The Leninist metaphor of political methodology is the heart attack, a sudden collapse — the whole attention is on the heart and you can neglect the other organs. But nowadays that model does not work any more because capital has many hearts and many brains.

In the 60’s U.S. capital had hegemony, that’s not true any more. Today capital is core decentralized. Europe can get fucked up and the U.S. can go on. (Poland poses the same problem for the communist countries.) So you must have another type of disease like cancer: there is not one organ but a cancer for each organ.

So they don’t seem to know what to do.

Yes, that’s why they’re always saying, “You can get whatever you want, but just talk to us with responsible delegations, And be like us. The you will have it.” That’s the point of the whole thing, for that’s what the work process is all about, being responsible. It’s not our demands that are impossible but the way we’ve made them.

What about the crisis?

In the last few years Northern Europe has overcome the “crisis” while the Southern part has not. Northern Europe got rid of inflation and had a new boom. In 1979–80 the pressure on lots of people was released.

Unemployment eased up a little bit, or you had learnt to cope with it. It’s like they put the patient under a heavy dose of chemotherapy and they thought they cured the problem, but the minute they stopped it came back. Not only that but many people are immune now. “What,” they say, “you’re threatening us with a crisis? But we’ve gone through the crisis and we know what that is.” It’s true, young people were badly hit in 1975, many were ruined. It was a shock. But

things have eased up and now it would be difficult for the government to play the same game again.

Note: As of May 1981 the movement won back the Autonomous Youth Center and Walter Stum escaped from prison.

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