

"State-Fetishism": some remarks concerning the Red Army Faction - by A. Grossman



A critical article about 1970s West German Marxist urban guerrilla group the Red Army Faction, sometimes known as the Baader-Meinhoff gang.

Notes

This short piece was published in English translation anonymously as a pamphlet in New York in the late 1970s/early 80s. We have prefaced it here with a short quote on the same subject by another French author;

"If we look at the ... Baader, it seems that they chose military struggle so as to give a sort of impulse to society, and also because they could not stand using traditional methods any more. This second reason is not a "mistake" : they just could not help it. They were fed up and disgusted by this world. I do not reproach them for this "irrational" element. But one must admit that such an attitude is close to madness. I have nothing against madness: what we call a "madman" is only an individual produced by our society who is unadapted to it. This society also gets rid of subversive elements by turning them mad.

But they also started armed struggle in order to set the proletariat in motion. They hoped to awaken it. This was pure illusion, typical of politics. The political mind always tries to act first upon the others, to organise or force them to do something, while it stays outside of the social movement. Our task is political only in so far as it deals with the destruction of political power. The main task of communists is not to gather others. They organise themselves together with others while undertaking tasks which come from their own needs -- personal and social, immediate and theoretical.

This is expressed in a very awkward way, unfortunately. What I would like to stress is that our main objective cannot be to act upon people's consciousness so as to change it. There is an illusion in propaganda, whether it is made by texts or by deeds. We do not "convince" anyone. We can only express what is going on. We cannot create a movement in society. We can only act within a movement to which we ourselves belong."

(Jean Barrot [Gilles Dauve] - Letter on the Use of Violence, May 1973; Appendix 3 to 'Eclipse & Re-Emergence Of The Communist Movement' - Black & Red, Detroit, 1974 .)

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The Baader-Meinhoff Gang

by A. Grossman

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The Red Army Faction was founded in 1970 because the people involved felt that a social movement was developing and becoming radicalized, in which revolutionaries could participate on a new level: they considered themselves an advanced detachment of the "proletariat", who they thought would shortly take up arms everywhere, before launching a general assault. "Urban guerrilla warfare" and "popular struggle" are meaningful expressions only in relation to this conviction. Although they regarded him as an important revolutionary theoretician, the RAF criticized Ernest Mandel (a Fourth International heavy) for conceiving of armed struggle primarily as a means of self-defense. The RAF sought to launch the offensive themselves.

In reality, the RAF is more the product of the end of an era than the sign of a new one. Its creation took place in the general context of the recession, if not decline, of a movement, after an often misunderstood surge of activity. What are the characteristics of the social unrest at the end of the sixties? First, a confused (therefore sterile) consciousness in which revolution (as heralded by Marxism and various parties of the left) is meaningless if it does not constitute a change radical enough to upset life-styles, the mode of production and human relations themselves. Second, a criticism of the so-called socialist states, as being just another kind of capitalist state, accompanied by a general critique of capitalism as the world of wage-labor and commodities. The refusal of all forms of capitalism, state-managed as well as "unmanaged", implies a split with the organizations (parties, unions, the left) that owe their existence to the management of reformist struggle, and divide power among themselves, the state and the bourgeoisie.

But when you come right down to it, the movement of the sixties never even got close to the roots of what it was rejecting. There were not even the beginnings of an attack made on commodity relations: the destruction of the state's forces and political machinery (as in Poland, for example) remained limited and exceptional. The movement's two characteristics were adapted upon to the point that they became factors of social evolution. In the absence of a revolution, the will to "change life" turned into a kind of reformist vision of daily life, which was propagated by modern, non-institutional leftism in the form of feminism, psychiatry, sexuality, ecology etc. The "new left" felt the need to dissociate itself from the classical leftist structures. This led to the creation of "buffer groups" to the left of the traditional parties and unions. In the East as well as in the West, this tremor of activity coincided with the appearance of new forms (or the reactivation of old ones) of organization and leadership.

The workers' struggle and the questioning of all aspects of life, when they remain essentially reformist, only give an impetus to the parliamentary and extraparliamentary leftist groups, both of whom take an interest in the ballot box. This is seen in the re-emergence of the left in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, the leftist unions in Great Britain and JUSO (a socialist youth organization close to the Communist Party) in West Germany. The developments in the class struggle are directly related to the means used to smother it. This is most obvious when you consider the ways that states have reinforced themselves during periods of unrest. So, one is left with conflicting impressions: many things seem to be happening, entire segments of ideology appear to be collapsing, yet it seems that no progress is being made.

The often heralded "recession" (visible since 1974), whose arrival we expected so much of, has, until now, only accelerated the rebirth of social democracy. In the face of this blocked situation, terrorism is an attempt to speed things up. The paradox is that terrorism sets itself the same goals as the legalist left. Both want to change people's ideas, modify their spirit, and introduce a different kind of consciousness, some by agitation, others by spectacular actions.

The anarchists at the end of the 19th century also preferred "propaganda by the deed" to the electoral politics of the socialists. But the point is, it was still propaganda. However, terrorism does reflect an important contradiction in the sense that social unrests have produced the temporary illusion of contemporary conformism, especially in situations where there is a "government of the left." Terror exists in all countries, especially in those which are not politically stable, where it is easy to believe that it's the dawn of a "revolutionary situation" (as in Italy). It exists in the more economically and socially stable countries, where the establishment seems invulnerable and all alternatives condemned to failure (USA, West Germany).

In Italy, the violence of leftist extremists must be seen in the context of the real or alleged plots of the extreme right and the factional rivalry within the state (secret services, military, etc.). In this particular situation, the violent actions of the extreme left are often a continuation of spontaneous proletarian reactions (factory burnings, sabotage, etc.) without necessarily serving them.

In West Germany as in the US at the time of the Black Panthers and the Weatherpeople, an isolated minority attacked a self-assured state, which didn't hesitate to shoot first and ask questions later. The RAF understood that the legalism and "realism" of the left reflect its nature and vocation: to set up a somewhat different type of management of society. They also understood that allusions made to "revolutionary violence" by these leftists are only more examples of radical sloganeering. When the French Communist Party extends its hand to God, or when Trotskyists plaster the walls with posters depicting a VC guerrilla brandishing a rifle, the same gimmick is used in different ways, for the purpose of stirring up emotions in order to recruit and to reassure.

In their own way the RAF brought up the question of the destruction of the state; the state which the Trots want to conquer via the traditional left, and that the Maoists would like to render "popular." But this honesty, this effort to get past the same old dead end, only brought about a new confusion. You can't say that the RAF "didn't have any political theory" (Le Monde, Oct. 18). But by haphazardly quoting Bakunin, Pannekoek and Mao, their theory became a crazy quilt in which they lost themselves. They posed the military question in such a way that it could not be resolved, because they reasoned in terms of an opposition between the "masses" and "revolutionaries." Left to their own devices these terrorist groups just couldn't rise above a Leninist level of consciousness. They generally tended to borrow their theories from third-worldist type Leninism, that is to say, they reproduced the plans and strategy of national liberation movements.

The RAF wanted to "build a party" that would be able to lead the masses. The modern urban area would replace the countryside, so as to permit a prolonged civil war, in which the enemy would be surrounded. There are two illusions at work in this strategy. On the one hand, they believed that West Germany was ripe for a large-scale uprising, comparable to the situation of China in the thirties. But more importantly, they analyzed the Chinese and Vietnamese not within their specific historical situations, but according to Mao or Giap's interpretations of these situations. The Chinese and Vietnamese popular wars did not coincide with a proletarian revolution. The proletarian uprising did not take place in 1949, but in 1927, and was crushed. Mao and Giap little by little established new states which then took the place of the old. Then they took on the task of activating national capital.

The RAF wanted to imitate Lenin, to introduce consciousness to the proletariat; in their view, students and youth in general would replace the intellectuals, who, according to Lenin and Kautsky, would bring "socialism" to the "workers' movement." Since then, the leftists have always criticized Baader. What they don't see is that, like them, his first priority was to create an organization.

The Military Question

Every group has its own blueprint for "building the party." To their credit, the RAF at least posed the

military question. According to them, past failures, especially after 1918 in Germany, were the result of a lack of violence or organization, militarily speaking, on the part of the proletariat. The problem is, they had it backwards. A sufficient level of armed struggle was not attained in 1918-21 because the foundations of capitalism hadn't been attacked. Therefore, there was no real call to arm oneself to carry out these attacks. The example of Max Holz, who, with some success, waged a kind of guerrilla warfare in 1921, demonstrates that military strength depends on the social strength achieved by the movement. Holz was strong militarily, but in social terms he "soared" above the real workers' movement, and was struck down.

The RAF would have liked to "organize" the violence of the proletariat and tap its energies. In order to start this process, a spark was needed: the "example." But this energy is not in itself the proof of a revolutionary practice. One can be at the same time violent and reformist, and often workers are just that. But for the RAF a "revolutionary organization of the proletariat had to be built through armed struggle." With violence in a premium ideological position, their strategy was to strike the first blow, which in turn was supposed to trigger numerous other blows from the masses. But if it's true that small groups can exercise a useful terror against the representatives of bourgeois society, their action is effective only if it takes place within a context of social warfare, and not if it is undertaken in order to create this context. The RAF fell into this trap. Their error lay not in engaging in isolated and violent actions, but in the fact that these actions did not correspond to any practice on the part of the proletariat. The RAF wanted to radicalize the proletariat, yet they placed themselves outside of it, thus succeeding only in progressively isolating themselves.

To Lenin's substitution of the party for the proletariat, they added the substitution of the armed nuclei for the party.

"For guerrillas, unity takes shape starting from nothing. Anybody can start, and there is no need to wait for anybody else. A half dozen fighters who really put their backs into it and don't talk interminably can fundamentally change the political scene, and provoke an avalanche." (This and all other quotes from the RAF found in "La Bande a Baader", editions Champ Libre, Paris 1972.)

The RAF wanted to prove that it is possible to "resist" the state. Their example proves once again that it isn't.

If you start out with a theoretical division between masses and revolutionaries, the most subtle dialectics will never succeed in preventing an attempt to "raise the masses." There are two possible outcomes of this. One, you can adopt the actual practice of proletarians in a non-revolutionary period, in that case succumbing to trade-unionism, electoralism, or becoming trapped on the lowest level of the class struggle. In this way, depending on your strength, you can begin to directly contribute to keeping the workers in their place. Two, you can situate yourself at a level not yet reached by the proletariat and, in that case, proceed with an isolated offensive. In the first case, you aren't "revolutionary"; in the second, regardless of what you are, you're dead. The failures of the second type of position are by far the most visible. This doesn't prevent the first position, by far the most common, from being counterrevolutionary.

Baader and his comrades did act on crucial problems. They attacked capital as a mercantile system (supermarket incident). They brought home the idea of revolution as anti-statist violence by their attacks on police and US military personnel. This last point is important. The RAF's references to the "just struggle of the Vietnamese people" matter very little here, even though elsewhere it was a factor of confusion. The simple fact that they dared to attack the US army in the heart of Europe was subversive in the same way that the anti-war movements were in the US. Some of the most positive things taking place these last few years have been the rebellions inside the US army at the end of the Vietnam war. However, in the case of the RAF, these attacks, on the army were not just one social gesture among many, that is, they were not accomplished by a group who, the rest of the time, participated in the real movement.

Instead these were the actions of specialists, taking place within the framework of a systematic plan of armed struggle. Even when striking a relevant target, the RAF always acted in the place of the proletariat, thereby hoping to trigger a whole process. This, of course, does not happen through the actions of any one group.

Among those who support the actions of the RAF, one of the most well-trenched mystifications is the idea that such acts disrupt the state and force it to appear in its true form; totally repressive. This politics of "worse is better" is no more consistent than the "lesser evil" policy advocated by the "united front." Thousands of heavily armed police and armored cars won't shock someone who is basically unaware of what the police really are. Someone who believes that the police are there to protect them is not going to suddenly become conscious of the "Police State."

The RAF's Error

Outraged by the left's disinterest in the military question, especially when this disinterest was hidden behind Marxist justifications, the RAF made this question the focus of all activity. Their mistake was in confusing capital and the state, and in confusing capitalist society's strength with its capacity for repression. The revolutionary question was reduced to the question of violence. Recognizing the omnipotence of the state, the RAF deduced that capitalist society was helpless without it. "To progressively eat away at the enemy's strength" meant, therefore, to kill police officers and scare the bourgeoisie. A good example of fetishism of the state! Capital's strength does not lie (primarily) in its cops or its army, but in the social dynamic which makes wage earners, especially in countries like West Germany, participate in the perpetuation of the system.

If you start off by attacking the official agencies of repression, you immediately place yourself on the military terrain, whereas, during a revolution, the center of gravity is elsewhere. In a non-revolutionary period such an error is fatal. By disrupting the "mode of activity" (Marx), a communist revolution would destroy the instruments and forces of repression by communizing society, one being the essential condition of the other. The RAF thought they were striking at the head of capital, whereas they were only eliminating interchangeable parts. They were preoccupied with secondary problems, while the essential was and still is untouched. Capital is only reinforced by these partial attacks and can surround itself with an apparently united front against the terrorists. Of course, any attack will be met by a united front of social reaction. There is nothing we can do about that, and it would be absurd to renounce all struggle for this reason. But in this case the struggle was seriously lacking in positive aspects and had the fatally negative aspect of coalescing the majority behind the state.

In this spiral of violence and counter-violence, the factor of armed struggle separates itself from the rest of the social movement. While Baader started out with a gesture that could have had some effect on the rest of society, a few years later we find a professional revolutionary, his entire activity devoted to bank heists, going from hideout to hideout... The means become the end, and killings are done just to survive.

Some deserted, like P. Homman, who gave himself up in 1971. He quite correctly denounced the "idea that the transgression of bourgeois laws is a revolutionary act in itself," adding that "isolated terrorist acts mean that one has lost all hope and confidence in the revolution. This is desperation."

Since the arrest of the principal members, the dead end reached by the RAF has become even more obvious. The terrorists acted to liberate others or to revenge them. It is likely that Baader understood that the survivors were going in circles. As refugees in "progressive" states, the survivors have become the political hostages of these regimes. How can they criticize these states and their national capitalism? Particularly since the RAF never broke off relations with the third world. But this political support made matters even more confusing for them. Those regimes like South Yemen, who had supported them in order to play the maverick with the other nations, now chose, diplomatic considerations having changed,

to persecute them and join the club of "moderate" countries. This world-wide anti-extremist alliance will, if nothing else, have shattered a few myths.

A group that is ready for anything, including the killing of hostages, will always meet its match in the state. The intervention of the German commandos in Mogadishu demonstrated the state's capacity for retaliation. When dealing in brutal strength, no one fucks with the state. The RAF was beaten because it fought on the state's own terms.