

The New Repression

May Day 2012, Berlin

CrimethInc.

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Contents

The People Rebel	3
May Day 2012	3
Myfest Is Not Your Fest	4
Putting Down Roots, Escaping Plateaus	5

On May Day 2012, anarchists around the US succeeded in precipitating clashes on a larger scale than in previous years. But it's important to strategize ahead of our immediate problems, in order to be prepared for the subsequent challenges we will face when we succeed. This report from the May Day 2012 mobilization in Berlin offers a cautionary tale, showing how the commodification of rebellion, the influence of accommodating movement leaders, and the rhetoric of creating safe spaces have been used to neutralize a popular tradition of resistance. If revolt continues to gain momentum in the United States, we can expect to see some of these strategies employed here as well.

The People Rebel

According to *Fire and Flames*, a book recounting the history of the German Autonomen, the first May Day riots in the Kreuzberg area—on May 1, 1987—came as a surprise to everyone. A simple street party became a major conflict involving many sectors of the population, forcing police to abandon the district for hours. From that night of freedom sprang a tradition of mass confrontation, a yearly day of rioting in downtown Berlin.

May Day 2012

May Day 2012 occurred in a context of resurgent revolutionary movements seeking to project their strength. There were many signs that it would be exciting and combative: unexpectedly confrontational actions during the previous year, a call for insurrection days the weekend before, new attempts to squat housing, and efforts to expand the conflict zone to other areas of the city—not to mention, this was the 25th anniversary of the first Kreuzberg May Day riots.

Walpurgisnacht, the traditional anti-capitalist gathering the night before May Day, was moved to Wedding, a residential area seeing gentrification for the first time. This attempt to extend the conflict zone met a suffocating police presence that tightly controlled the actions of the 5000 participants and prevented almost any action outside the route previously registered with the police.

On May 1, for the first time, the traditional revolutionary May Day march attempted to march to the center of the city. Perhaps expectedly, the police surrounded the gathering of 20,000 after some small incidents, declared the march illegal, and steadily broke down the crowd.

Special semi-autonomous snatch squads charged violently into the gathering to extract individuals, making the majority of arrests during the march. Here's how these work: one cop selects the target and runs forward full speed with the rest of the squad in a compressed line behind. The group flows around the arrest site to form a circle, picking the target up and running, the entire operation usually accomplished in under 20 seconds. People were targeted for wearing masks and showing some sign of fight towards the police.

The suffocating numbers of police caused people to leave so as to avoid being trapped. Later that night, most people had returned to Kreuzberg but were unwilling or unable to precipitate further clashes.

The protests have been received within the radical scene as a bit of a letdown, while the state and establishment view this as a victory. Papers were splashed with headlines such as "May Day Passes Relatively Smoothly" and "May 1st Demonstrations Largely Free of Riots and Violence."

The reduction of confrontation on May Day is not a result of decreased social momentum. To understand what's happening, we have to look at the state's strategy for undermining successful mobilization.

A large movement with thousands of militants can't be ignored. Millions of euros are spent on the security operation to ensure that the events of May Day do not call the power of the state into question. Officials' careers can be advanced or ended by the perception of how May Day goes. Media coverage is extensive. The language around the necessity of using force, and against whom, mirrors the US government's description of "surgical" drone strikes and bombing campaigns against those with whom negotiation is impossible.

Myfest Is Not Your Fest

In 2003, Myfest was created by an alliance of do-gooder liberal types, small capitalists, and neighborhood-watch-style initiatives. The festival, now attended by tens of thousands, was designed specifically to occupy traditional gathering sites of overt political action in Heinrichplatz, Kottbusser Tor, and Mariannenplatz, remaking them as depoliticized zones of cultural activity, commerce, and partying. Through the joint public-private efforts of Myfest and the state, this scheme is intended to achieve complete spatial occupation and psychological control of the population of Kreuzberg.

The control extends from the big picture—about 10,000 police and private security—to minutia: the smallest aesthetic detail of your presentation can determine whether you are allowed to pass dozens of arbitrary entrance and exit controls.

Massive security operations in the US, such as those seen at political conventions and international summits, have carved out artificial spaces in cities for the elite to gather. This security model is designed to shut down all aspects of normal life in a particular zone by establishing an impermeable demarcation between the normal and the special. This is the use of *crisis*.

Berlin's May Day, on the other hand, is the mapping of total state control onto the everyday lives and experiences in a specific geographic area. In the festival zone, control is about the creation of fixed continuity and normality where nothing besides a festival can occur above all because everyone knows that nothing besides a festival can occur. The crisis model at least acknowledges a state of exception and increased violence.

To neutralize Berlin's history of active resistance, Myfest imposes its own convergence on the area. This starts with the branding of the event as a safe space for families, immigrant business people, and anyone wishing to participate in a political May Day event without conflict. "Protest leaders" play an essential role in legitimizing and enforcing the idea that this is not a space for confrontation.

Two dozen stages physically occupy gathering sites; music monopolizes the aural space. Artifacts of resistance are offered for consumption, wielded as weapons against any potential for resistance. You can watch bands under anti-Nazi banners railing against police and fascists. At night, there is a movie showing on the history of the protests.

Heading towards the festival zone, the police presence becomes visible a full mile away, increasingly steadily until you reach the actual checkpoints where bags are searched for bottles and weapons. The police officers who serve as bouncers courteously move aside to let in the right people, but sternly grip their weapons as they tell other individuals to fuck off. At one line,

you may not be allowed to leave due to a pierced ear or a political t-shirt, while at another you have no issues. It's the kind of arbitrary repression that says, "We do what the fuck we want."

The zone itself is closed to all vehicular traffic, ceded to pedestrian commerce in order to avoid the possibility of people trying to occupy the roads for anything else. Groups of 30–60 plainclothes police with earpieces monitor the crowds; additional groups of "Anti-Konflikt-Team" police work to "reduce tension."

As the night progresses, the proportion of radicals begins to rise and police visibility becomes more suffocating. Small autonomous groups of riot police snake through the crowd seemingly at random, looking at individuals or standing near smaller groups they wish to intimidate. Sometimes they deliberately shoulder people to emphasize that there is nothing anyone can do in response. It's a difficult tactical environment, a fact recognized by those who want to continue contesting space and by those who believe it's better to stay out of the way.

Putting Down Roots, Escaping Plateaus

All this is not to say there is no future for May Day confrontations in Berlin. Many avenues for experimentation suggest themselves: shifting to decentralized actions around the periphery, attacking the checkpoints themselves, precipitating conflicts at new flashpoints via squatting or occupations. This is not the venue for a complete evaluation of the options. Rather, we should focus on what May Day in Berlin can teach US anarchists.

Many US cities have been known as anarchist hotbeds over the last decade, and at least one seems in the running for a repeat championship. Yet successful outbursts of activity have often been followed by escalating police repression and movement fragmentation, locking anarchists in cycles of confrontation with the state (and each other) that have been difficult to disengage from.

What's astounding about Berlin's May Day is not just that the authorities have been successful at limiting people's ability to riot; it's also that each year thousands of people keep trying despite the odds. The ability to regularly manifest a collective desire to publicly attack our oppressors is missing throughout the United States. This failure speaks to the problems anarchists have had at rooting themselves anywhere from which they can consistently struggle—be it workplace, school, neighborhood, or margin. We've gotten better at gathering for occasional storms, but haven't yet broken through to creating permanent sites or traditions of confrontation—Oakland's admirable recent attempts notwithstanding.

Throughout the year, rioting and acts of sabotage occur regularly in Berlin, but they exist in the context of a movement that still holds significant space from which it can continually gather, regenerate, and attack. Social spaces and housing and the intimacy and support such spaces generate go hand in hand with the ability to weather repression. The constant flurry of activity at social spaces and their function as default social gathering points enable them to bring new people into the movement on an ongoing basis.

Yet movements rich in numbers and space and steeped in the history of specific tactics often have a hard time adapting and experimenting with new approaches. Owing to the sheer weight of resources being directed within them and against them, shifting strategy often requires a large movement buy-in that is difficult to achieve. If US anarchists are to consolidate recent gains, we'll

need to sink the deep roots our German comrades have, while retaining the unpredictability and dynamism necessary to push beyond plateaus and impasses.

It's also important to strategize ahead of our immediate problems, so we will be prepared for the subsequent challenges when we succeed. The cooption of Berlin's traditional May Day rioting via Myfest is an important cautionary tale, showing how the commodification of revolt, the influence of accommodating movement leaders, and the rhetoric of creating safe spaces can be used offensively to suppress outright resistance. On May Day 2012 in Seattle, a few dozen anarchists may have accomplished as much damage and unexpected disruption as occurred in all Berlin. If this kind of combative activity continues, we can expect to see some of the strategies exemplified by Myfest employed in the US alongside straightforward policing. Let's be ready to identify and counteract them immediately.

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