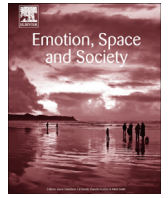


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

Spaces for feeling differently: Emotional experiments in the alternative left in West Germany during the 1970s

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 February 2016

Received in revised form

11 November 2016

Accepted 14 November 2016

Available online xxx

ABSTRACT

The article explores emotional practices amongst West German alternative leftists during the 1970s. It argues that leftists engaged in various forms of emotional practices that would allow them to produce feelings they missed in capitalist society. The article interprets these feelings as emotional experiments to feel differently that sometimes succeeded in the sense that they produced the desired feelings, but could also fail. These attempts to produce different feelings were based on a specific emotional knowledge about capitalism, that is an understanding of how capitalism, and specifically capitalist spatial arrangements, produced, regulated and restricted feelings. The emotional knowledge facilitated a variety of experiments that would yield the feelings that leftists missed so dearly under capitalism. The article focuses, first, on a variety of consciousness-raising and therapy groups where people tried to build new intimate relationships, and, second, on demonstrations and festivities that constituted temporal zones of exuberance. In both cases, changing spatial settings was a crucial element for producing different feelings.

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1. Introduction

How does it feel to live in capitalism? Are there 'normal' or 'typical' feelings in a capitalist, urban society? In the 1970s, West German leftists would have answered such questions by arguing that capitalism necessarily produces fear, that living in modern cities makes people feel isolated and lonely, and that boredom and frustration characterize capitalist society. Numerous leftist texts analysed this 'emotional normalcy' under capitalism that damaged both individual personalities and personal relations. Facing this emotional plight, left-wing activists tried to develop practices that would allow them to 'feel differently': to overcome fear and loneliness and to foster meaningful interpersonal relations. Alternative leftists thus created various spaces for trying out new and different feelings. Producing these feelings would not only cure, the argument went, individual 'damaged personalities', but would also be politically subversive as it could challenge the domination of rationality characteristic of capitalism.

In this article, we explore how the trying out of feelings in West

Germany's alternative left worked. Attempts to produce different feelings were based on what we call a specific emotional knowledge about capitalism, that is an understanding of how capitalism, and specifically capitalist spatial arrangements, produced, regulated and restricted feelings. The emotional knowledge facilitated, we argue, a variety of experiments that would yield the feelings that leftists missed so dearly under capitalism. We are thus neither interested in what feelings a peculiar (built) environment produces, nor are we interested in the ambivalent emotions that social movements create and arguably need to work on (from a geographical perspective, see [Brown and Pickerill, 2009](#); [Wilkinson, 2009](#); [Askins, 2009](#); from a historical perspective, see the discussion in [Häberlen and Russell, 2014](#)). Rather, we explore how historical actors thought about the emotions capitalist society and the built environment in cities produce, and how this knowledge informed practices that could yield very real emotions. To make this case, we will first analyse the emotional knowledge leftists produced, and then look at two distinct spaces for trying out emotions, namely, first, a variety of consciousness-raising and therapy groups where people tried to build new intimate relationships, and, second, demonstrations and festivities that constituted temporal zones of exuberance.

Methodologically, our article builds on Monique Scheer's

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suggestion to understand emotions as practices. Rather than separating practices and emotions, Scheer draws our attention to the 'doing' of emotions in a performative sense. With Scheer, we will ask what people did, not least with their bodies, 'in order to have emotions' (Scheer, 2012: 194). We will read these practices as attempts to produce feelings, as emotional experiments that could—with regard to the actors' intention—succeed or fail. Importantly, this implies that we seek to make claims about 'real' emotions and not just the representation of feelings (Eitler and Scheer, 2009). Highlighting the experimental nature of leftist emotional practices will also shed a different light on debates regarding if and how the alternative left with its focus on transforming the emotional self ultimately contributed to the rise of a neo-liberal subjectivity that, by equally invoking self-fulfilment and personal liberty, requires people to constantly work on improving themselves.

Empirically, our article will address what scholars have called the alternative milieu in West Germany (Reichardt, 2014; Reichardt and Siegfried, 2010). This alternative milieu encompassed a broad variety of non-dogmatic left-wing groups, most of them organized in a rather informal way. There are no exact numbers about the size of this left-wing milieu, but social surveys suggest that it was not a marginal milieu, in particular amongst the educated youth and in university cities. Surveys conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s estimated that between 10 and 15% of West German teenagers and young adults were part of the alternative milieu, which amounted to a total number somewhere between 700,000 and 1.3 million. A survey from early 1980 that was not limited to teenagers and young adults but included people between the age of 14 and 54 even estimated that 2.7 million people belonged to the alternative milieu, while a further 3.4 million were at least open to alternative ideas (Reichardt, 2014). Small, local left-wing magazines and newspapers reached a combined print-run of 1.6 million (Reichardt and Siegfried, 2010). Our research builds on these magazines as well as other left-wing publications. While we will thus present a limited number of examples, they represent a much larger milieu.

2. Fear and isolation: The construction of capitalist emotional normalcy in 1970s leftist discourse

In the wake of the student revolts of the late 1960s in West Germany and elsewhere in the Western World, leftist political thinking changed. Many students distanced themselves from the traditions of classical Marxism and emphasized the role of the 'subjective factor' [*subjektiver Faktor*] for the struggle against bourgeois, capitalist society (see only Gilcher-Holtey, 2005). As Rudi Dutschke, arguably the most famous leader of the West-German student movement, argued: It is 'not an abstract theory of history that binds us together', but an 'existential nausea' and a 'sentimental-emotional refusal' of a society that 'subtly and brutally oppresses the immediate interests and needs of the individuals' (Dutschke, 1968: 91). Society was oppressive, radical students argued, because it restricted not only the fulfilment of individual needs, but also the free expression of subjective experiences and feelings. Given these restrictions, the very act of expressing such feelings could be a means of resistance. Along those lines, Herbert Marcuse, a central theoretical thinker for the New Left, hoped that a 'new sensibility' he saw amongst students would become the foundation of a renewed political resistance (Marcuse, 1969). The turn to emotions amongst radical students and New Leftist thinkers was, in other words, a central element of the politics of the anti-authoritarian movement (Häberlen and Smith, 2014; Davis, 2003).

Classical Marxist theory with its focus on economic questions failed to provide the analytical tools adequate for understanding this 'subjective factor'. The West-Berlin *Kommune 2*, a political

commune formed in 1967 by leading members of the anti-authoritarian movement,¹ argued that Marxist theory is too abstract to account for the 'subjective experiences and feelings (suffering, fear, aggression, loneliness)' [*subjektive Erfahrungen und Gefühle (Leid, Angst, Aggression, Einsamkeit)*] that people have under capitalism (Kommune 2, 1971: 33).² The group thus called for a 'revolutionary social psychology' that would explain how capitalism generates specific mentalities and feelings in individuals: a psychological theory that would provide what we call the emotional knowledge that was needed to identify specific 'capitalist feelings'. Analysing capitalism in such emotional terms, activists created a knowledge about the feelings in urban, capitalist society. They developed an understanding, that is, how it would normally feel to live in capitalism, how such feelings were created, and what role the urban environment played thereby. Based on this knowledge, it would be possible to develop emotional practices that could yield different feelings as a means to overcome the emotional damages inflicted by capitalist society.

To develop this emotional knowledge, radical students during the late 1960s turned to Freudo-Marxist theories (Eitler, 2007; Herzog, 2005; Schulz, 2003). Particularly influential were the writings of dissident psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who in the early 1930s had argued that sexual repression in the nuclear family produced the submissive, anxious, and aggressive authoritarian character that matched the requirements of capitalism and fascism (Reich, 1970, 1974). In the early 1970s, however, leftist thinkers expanded beyond this focus on sexuality to understand how capitalist society yielded specific emotions. Most prominently, leftist authors argued that capitalism produced fear. In 1972, leftist sociologist and social psychologist at the Sigmund-Freud-Institute in Frankfurt Klaus Horn, for example, explained in Marxist terms that capitalist rationalisation—reducing everything and everyone to its economic exchange value—was increasingly internalized by the individuals, who therefore became not just alienated, but 'inauthentic'. As a substitute for authentic personality, people in capitalist consumer societies purchased a 'commodity identity' [*Warenidentität*]. Capitalist principles also governed interpersonal relations, turning them into a matter of (emotional) investment, profit and consumption. Thus, it became impossible to have non-instrumental, genuinely communicative and 'libidinous', that is profoundly trusting or loving relationships. Instead, Horn claimed, as human personality was reduced to its exchange value under capitalism, 'emotional life' was 'essentially reduced to fear, to social fear': fear was the basic emotional reaction to the helplessness and disorientation people experienced under the heteronomous constraints of capitalism, this fear drove people into consumption, and fear ruled the social relations rid of mutual trust and communication (Horn, 1972: 67, 70).

In the same year, left-wing psychologist Dieter Duhm published his book *Fear in Capitalism* (Duhm, 1972), which became a bestseller in the leftist milieu that was printed in the 14th edition in 1977. Drawing on Marxist theory and psychoanalysis just like Horn, but using a less abstract and complicated terminology, Duhm argued that fear was, far from being an individual emotional reaction to threatening situations, the ubiquitous emotional state under capitalism. Explaining capitalism in Marxist terms, Duhm identified five core principles of capitalism that all caused people to be permanently afraid: first, the fear of authorities such as parents and

¹ On collective living in the alternative left, see Reichardt (2014: chapter 5).

² The book cited is the commune's experience report, first published one year after its early break-up in the summer of 1968 and soon becoming a bestseller in the leftist milieu. Its title translates as "Attempt to Revolutionize the Bourgeois Individual. Connecting Collective Living with Political Work!".

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