



## [ book reviews ]

### ***The Red Army Faction—A Documentary History.***

#### ***Vol. I: Projectiles for the People***

Smith and André Moncourt (Eds),  
(Montreal: PM Press, 2009).

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This first installment of the documentary history of the Red Army Faction by J. Smith and A. Moncourt is a hefty tome of nearly 700 pages, which covers the vicissitudes of Germany's most famous terrorist outfit. The historical segment under review is the "classic" septennium: 1970-1977. This, indeed, was a time when the world at large seemed to have been invested by a wave of metropolitan counterinsurgency movements— from Latin America to Turkey and Japan by way of Europe, with Germany and Italy as its two most salient manifestations. The simultaneousness and similitude of such socio-political phenomena across geographical and cultural divides was, to put it mildly, uncanny. In this regard, the seventies were a unique period, and the detailed chronicles variously compiled of the strife that shook the constituted order in several nations at the time make up dazzling and forbiddingly complex material—material whose interpretative key social scientists and historians alike have been striving to discover ever since.

Complex material in that, much like the now-faded (and far from fully understood) tales of late-XIXth century "anarchism," the rebellious actions of these masked sappers of the urban underbrush —pre-modern or post-modern— could never be quite construed as simple, obvious strikes at the most conspicuous

(physical and/or institutional) symbols of the “system.” Through their deeds, these guerrillas might have thought they were propitiating full-scale revolution, but seen from a distance, their agitation seemed rather to have weighed as yet another variable in a larger equation. Not only were the vast majority of terrorist cells subject to standard life-cycles and reorganization processes—e.g., an old guard superseded by a more militant and violent “second wave” (and sometimes, a third and fourth wave)—, but their offensive patterns were also too heterogeneous, their strategies too mutable over time, and their targets too specific to have made terrorism’s enterprise, in the final analysis, a simple expression of (class) warfare seeking to reform “the capitalist system.” In other words, terrorism is not merely the extreme embodiment of economic grieving—and of its concomitant political disaffection—but is rather a matter of politics, of power. At the grassroots levels, most of these movements of urban warfare had emerged during the turbulent parenthesis of the Counterculture era (late sixties), yet they eventually survived, evolved and morphed into ever more elusive apparatuses—not few of them with unfathomable international ramifications— at a time when the popular ferment that birthed them had virtually disappeared (mid-seventies).

Originally tuned in the key of social justice, subsequently bolstered by choreographed violence, and finally deployed on the chessboard as a full-fledged political player, (Left-wing) terrorism confronts us defiantly with its mysteries. So we wonder, what is/was terrorism? And, to retrace the notable antecedents, what was the RAF, in essence?

Smith and Moncourt’s volume is a very valuable resource in this regard: it is compilation of the most significant tracts of the paper trail left behind by the organization during its first and defining seven years: manifestos, interviews, communiqués, letters and all manners of invectives penned by the RAF’s members, friends and foes. To have all such “originals” in one book, complemented by a meticulous chronology is special indeed: one may excavate, re-appraise the old revolutionary lingo, and even attempt to guess the sentimental contours of that distant, strange world by nosing into the (often inflamed) letters the guerrillas would write to one another in and from jail. The book is organized chronologically in fifteen chapters, from the

immediate postwar era to 1977—that is to the conclusive year of the RAF’s “historical” phase, which itself comprised two sub-periods: that of the so-called original nucleus of Baader-Meinhof (1970-1972), and the second wave of 1975-1977. Each chapter is prefaced by a deeply researched study of the editors, who frame the chronicle of the armed struggle in its socio-cultural context: cumulatively, such introductory labor takes approximately a third of the book—it is thus substantial and particularly informative.

As said, and as is the case for most flamboyant terrorist cells, the mere storyline of the RAF—its characters, the military “spectacles,” the incarcerations and mysterious deaths—is in itself particularly gripping: cinema-worthy indeed, as shown by the recent release of *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* (2008). In synthesis, this is the story of an original core of rebellious types who had risen to front the violent, illegal vanguard of the most recalcitrant wing of the students’ anti-imperialist movement. These types were animated by palingenetic *furore* and driven by a *keen death-wish*—for such seems to have always been the psycho-sociological template of the “average” urban guerrilla; Baader had sentenced: “We are a projectile.” The highlights of this “baptismal” phase (consummated between 1970 and 1972) were feats of arson; bombing attacks (the 1972 “May Offensive”) against two NATO bases in West Germany, which altogether claimed the lives of 4 US soldiers, and other domestic targets, including the emblematically conservative Springer press; and the armed rescue of the charismatic leader Andreas Baader (May 1970) by his confederates, a mere month after his forcible detention (on charges of arson). These beginnings drew to a close as all the historical figures of the RAF were, by July 1972, apprehended one by one, amidst a frazzling whirl of incidents. Chief among these incidents were putative State-provocations—i.e. “false-flag” operations, hoaxes, and the like, all of them designed to foment a state of collective dementia praecox and reinforce the Establishment thereby—as well as the hunting down and eventual killing by police forces of RAF fighters in broad daylight. And to crown it all, it so seemed that throughout this interlude that RAF had moreover availed itself of an intriguing connection to the Stasi, the odious secret police of the GDR—connection which seemed to account

for the organization's fluid use of the international *réseau* that would put it in operational contact with other European and Palestinian terrorist squads.

With the definitive demise of the "old guard" began the second and far more puzzling, as well as disquieting, act of the narrative. To begin, these founders of the RAF, under what appeared to be a studiously torturous and dehumanizing regime of imprisonment, were on the other hand *publicly* recast as waxen icons of the militant Left—icons which the authorities, with a developed sense of museological theatrics, proceeded to encase into the ultra-modern carcerary shrine of Stammheim. From there, in semi-effigy, they were to "radiate" their iconic strength to the outer rims of West Germany's Marxist-Leninist subversion and inspire its militants with renewed revolutionary ardor. While this set-up was being completed, the recruits of the "new" RAF, including the auxiliary phalanx of another terrorist clan—the Movement of the 2nd June (2JM)—were preparing the second grand offensive of 1975-1977. This sensational offensive would feature the abduction of Christian-Democrat politico and mayoral candidate for W. Berlin, Peter Lorentz (February 1975), and his subsequent release in exchange for a group of political detainees flown on the occasion from West Germany to Yemen; the takeover of the West German embassy in Stockholm (April 1975); the assassination of Attorney General Siegfried Buback (April 1977) and of banker Jürgen Ponto (July 1977); and, the high climax of this progression: the kidnap and ensuing assassination of the industrialist Hans-Martin Schleyer, in concomitance with the hijacking of a Lufthansa aircraft by a Palestinian commando—a spectacular move improvised to ante-up the RAF's request to swap Schleyer with the inmates of Stammheim (September-October 1977). Refusing to negotiate on behalf of Schleyer, the executive of Helmut Schmidt eventually managed to retrieve the hostages by dispatching a Special Force commando to storm the plane, which, in the course of a veritable and tragic odyssey, had been ultimately diverted to Mogadishu. The morning following the day of the rescue operation (October 17), the authorities announced that the bodies of Baader & co. had been found (gruesomely) "suicided" in their cells at Stammheim, and on October 19 the RAF led the police to a car in the city Mulhouse, near the Ger-

man border, in whose trunk lay the bullet-ridden corpse of Schleyer.

All of which is here recited to emphasize, by way of summary, that the RAF's is indeed an extraordinary, and extraordinarily mysterious, story. And all of it is recounted with captivating rhythm in this book. Clearly, in no fashion does this summary exhaust the many themes of the narration; one can dig in the book so much more: viz., the socio-economic portrayal of Germany during reconstruction; the very interesting description of West Germany's anti-parliamentarian, *spontaneous* scene; the retelling of the late post-modern drift of the West-German Left into feminism and environmentalism; the genealogy of notorious political figures of our time from the turbulent seeds of the seventies (e.g., Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer); the *fundamental* role of "the lawyer" in these games of terror/power, and the enigmatic trajectories that some of these lawyers did take (the fascinating case of Horst Mahler, from RAF counsel to Holocaust Negationist); and finally, not to be missed, that surreal anecdote of the terrorists' brains removed before burial and handed over to the clinicians of Tübingen with a view to discover, in the worst Lombrosian manner, a lesion that could "scientifically" account for the revolutionists' moral insanity (a vignette, by the way, that elicits a twisted reminiscence of Kaspar Hauser's autopsy...).

To return to the point previously made about terrorism being a game of power, what seems to be somewhat lacking from this otherwise notable collection is precisely the *political* commentary, i.e. the sub-text of "deep politics." In this respect, Smith and Moncourt confine themselves to the traditional explanations of radical economic theory, according to which modern society is divided into a capitalist elite and a majority of (subdued) subjects. The subjects, de facto, are depicted as (indentured) servants of this elite that coerces them daily via a strict diet of hard power (physical intimidation, if need be) and a multi-layered fare of soft-power stimulants, of which the circus and the bread-line remain the foundational archetypes. It follows that if such is the realm we are given to live into, social justice can only be achieved by means of resistance, or defiance, which, ultimately, signifies struggle. Violent struggle, that is. Adopting the leftist historiographical stance, Smith and

Moncourt maintain that the FRG was in actuality nothing but a repressive technocracy erected, under the American aegis, upon the foundations of the former Nazi Behemoth. In light of this, any kind of resistance—even, if not especially, armed resistance—was entirely justified in their view. Clearly, the authors feel admiration and—as they retell their gestes—root for the fighters of the RAF, making no mystery of their sympathies, which go out not just to the idealist *guerrilleros* of the Marxist left, but to all armed rebels of the “undogmatic Left.” In this sense, this book is also very much a paean sung for all those in-subordinate types that have categorically refused, often paying with their life, to adapt to a mode of life that so completely antagonized their moral sense and deepest psychic and sentimental affects.

Needless to say, the issue of justice in this world and the challenge of coping with the strictures of collective life, especially for those who happen to have been born on the wrong side of the fence (the vast majority of the world population), is not just the crux of political philosophy broadly defined, but is one of the questions that impinge on the very meaning of life itself. Vast problem. I do not wish to dispute the validity of radicalism’s basic premises—namely, that the world is for the most part organized upon the exploitation of the peaceable by the barbarous, and that the peaceable must “resist” somehow. It may very well be so. But the vexed question is what forms this resistance should take, and in the name of which principles. As said, Smith and Moncourt have no doubt. The impassioned, if not exceedingly “youthful,” tone of their narrative conveys the message without ambiguity: the struggle should be fierce for it is clear that right always lies on the side of the Left’s “steadfast combatants”—heroic guerrillas who, in the editors’ words, will always be countered by the “vulgar” and underhanded brutality of the “cops” and the “dirty play” of their capitalist paymasters in the government.

Now, I find this sort of approach problematic for two orders of reasons. First, advocacy of violence is always dangerous: one, simply because it is immoral, and, two, because many of those who care about the fate of social justice no less strongly than the authors, are instinctively repulsed by the language and praxis of violence, which, as we all know, are the defining ex-

pressions of the exploitative mindset we all wish to resist in the first place. It's an old story, of course: that of the young, tormented idealist that wants to change the world, finds out he cannot, and so reverts to conservatism; an old story that has covered vast expanses of discursive production, some of which keeps returning to various modules of Machiavellian resignation (think of Julien Freund and others). Leaving for the moment this daunting preoccupation aside, and without further digressing, it should nonetheless be stated that the primary objective of a movement for civil dissent is to keep its feet on the ground, not to hearken impulsively to the (now totally vanished and positively perplexing) heyday of Baader & Co, and never stop thinking of peaceable ways in which to implement social reforms.

Secondly, and more to the point, to treat the historiography of the RAF according to this "us vs. them" format does not add much, if anything, to the mainstream (i.e. conservative) version of these events—i.e. to the very mainstream version that Smith and Moncourt's have designed to challenge with their prefatory scholarship. It is as if we are re-viewing the same reel but with a different soundtrack, punctuated this time around by cheers rather than boos: yet the plotline remains as impenetrable as ever. Because Smith and Moncourt should know, in fact, that it is *unthinkable* that a fistful of death-prone, yes, but not particularly intelligent, resourceful or talented twenty-somethings (and the "first" RAF even had a sixteen-year-old recruit!) could, by the skin of their teeth, hold in check or merely defy, for almost a decade, something as formidable as the apparatus of a modern bureaucratized State such as the FRG. Obviously, they were (sacrificial) pawns in a bigger game. Everything indeed, points in this direction: their remarkable connection to the Stasi and Palestinian terrorism; the particular timing of the bombing campaigns and of the arrests; the whole circus macabre of Stammheim; the essential spin of the media, the function of the latter as sounding board of the terrorist antics, and the central role played in this regard by *Der Spiegel*; the surgical targeting of Buback, Ponto and Schleyer; and, last but certainly not least, that sensational coda of the Schleyer/Mogadishu *affaire*. How can all this boil down to a simple tale of urban revolt for fairer economics?

Holding on to their economistic mold, the authors do not provide a theory that explains consistently, and in keeping with the political evolution of the West German scene in the context of the Cold War, the true strategic motivations behind this sequence of terrorist maneuvers. This brings them, for instance, to dismiss the Stasi-connection and the financial/logistical support that came with it, as something utterly marginal and almost mischievously intended “to get at the Americans.” But, evidently, it was neither. Likewise, in their view, Ponto was obviously assassinated because he had financial ties to Third World tyrants (and the Apartheid); and Schleyer was obviously kidnapped (and then killed) because, having once fought in the SS, he was “the most powerful businessman in West Germany at the time,” and like, Ponto, “a frequent figure on television representing the ruling class point of view” (p. 477). But was Schleyer really West Germany’s most powerful businessman? How “powerful,” and in what sense, exactly? And, is it not rule n. 1 for *truly* powerful people never to appear, least of all on television?

And, in truth, what was there to gain, *for the revolution, concretely*, by bombing a supermarket or NATO headquarters, or by singling out and liquidating, say, a high-level businessman or banker, even assuming (erroneously) that he was so “powerful” as to be irreplaceable? Nothing —and there is the rub of the entire matter: that the illusion entertained by all guerrillas (at least officially) to fire up the masses with such inciting murders was just that. It was *never* a possibility in the early days when the fires of protest were still smoldering, and, as mentioned above, it had become a total delusion by the mid-seventies: from the outset, the “angry ones,” the potential rioters without any stake in conformity, had always been far too few to spark anything even remotely resembling the mass uprising they were all dreaming of.

In sum, the analysis suffers somewhat not only from a disregard of the wider political landscape of that era, but also from the candor of taking events at *face value*: politics is also theatricals, and terrorism/urban guerrilla warfare, by definition, is certainly not the weapon the weak wield against the powerful, but, rather, an instrument of (civil) conflict which the powerful, when sundered in factions, employ to fight one another by us-



ing (a particular typology of) the weak. Even after all the painstaking and precious work of historical reconstruction of the RAF's experience, such as has been carried out also in this volume, there still remains, in the end, to solve the whole mystery. The questions to be asked are thus: who/what was maneuvering these expendables in this complex game of murder and provocation, and to what end?



***Freedom Not Yet: Liberation and the Next  
World Order.***

Surin, Kenneth.

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2009,  
415 pp.).

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Despite spectacular failures (most recently the financial crisis of 2008 to present) neoliberalism continues to dominate the policy visions and commitments of global decision-making elites. Opposition to neoliberal politics and the possibilities of social transformation and the development of real alternative social relations are at the heart of heterodox Marxist Kenneth Surin's concerns in *Freedom Not Yet*. Surin (who has previously made some useful contributions to autonomist Marxist theory) suggests that within projects of Western neoliberalism most people are in need of liberation from their socioeconomic circumstances. Neoliberalism creates an increasingly polarized and impoverished society. Surin is particularly interested in the oppression of poorer countries and the poor globally. He asks: