

Rezensionen *Reviews*

Hagen Schölzel: *Guerillakommunikation. Genealogie einer politischen Konfliktform.* Bielefeld: transcript 2013.

What do Dada's sound poetry happenings, the infamous paint bomb throwing at Joshka Fisher, and Wikileaks' revelations have in common? Hagen Schölzel argues that these actions challenge their era's dominant social order as 'irritations' allowing for the subversion of established tropes and entrenched legitimacies, yet without supporting clear-cut alternative political agendas. To political scientist Schölzel, 'irritation', a notion borrowed from system theorist Niklas Luhmann, is a key feature of guerrilla communication. Based on Schölzel's PhD thesis submitted at the University of Leipzig in 2011, this pioneering book fleshes out a convincing historical and political narrative for a term that, while recurrent in Western public discourse in the last few decades, too often remains nebulous.

Schölzel only draws on system theory in his above mentioned definition of guerrilla communication. He recurs to Foucault's genealogical method in his investigation of the concept's evolution over time. Genealogy aims to highlight the historical constitution of contemporary discursive orders while rejecting a vision of history as coherent and linear, rather stressing the importance of contingency and change within discourses. [1] Preferring this method to a more structural analysis identifying continuities is justified by the nature of the object of study: singularity and surprise are constitutive of guerrilla communication. Given that the latter is not the vehicle of a clear political project, one could argue that a danger of arbitrariness lies in the attempt of giving historical contours, even if only sketched, to protean manifestations of subversion. Yet Schölzel is aware that the boundaries of his research topic remain somewhat blurry, and is cautious not to claim analytical exhaustiveness. In addition, a Foucauldian genealogical approach has the merits to

[1] See especially Foucault, M. (1981) *The Order of Discourse*. Inaugural lecture at the college de France. In: Young, R. (ed.) *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan. 'Discourse' for Foucault goes beyond language and includes broader systems of signs.

reveal not only the chronological transformation of guerrilla communication (geographical diversity is not addressed) but also the evolution of dominant norms, or dominant ‘cultural grammar’ as prominent German communication guerilleros autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe label it.

The analysis begins with a discussion of the original, military notion of guerrilla, drawing on theorists and practitioners such as Clausewitz, Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. All stress the defensive character of the guerrilla, which would not exist were it not to oppose a regular army superior in numbers and representing a dominant political order considered illegitimate. Military guerrilla fights this dominant order and its armed forces with chameleon-like tactics as well as media strategies, including the sabotage of the regular army’s information channels, aiming to rally local populations to the guerilleros’ cause. All guerrilla actions serve the ultimate political objective to defeat or at least fundamentally transform the dominant political order, and here Schölzel reminds us that guerrilla tactics have been used by both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries. Success fundamentally transforms the guerilleros and their tactics, from the conduct of punctual guerrilla operations to that of a people’s war relying on the support of the masses and eventually to the professionalization of armed forces should regime change be achieved: military guerrillas are, in essence, transitory.

Adapting this military typology to the field of communication, equivalences are made between military guerrilla and communication guerrilla, people’s war and grassroots campaigns, and regular armed forces and professional communication campaigns. It is argued that guerrilla communication is tactically similar to military guerrilla operations in terms of their denunciation of the legitimacy of a dominant order, their inferior position of power, their versatility, their organisational egalitarianism, and their attempt to gain the support of the masses. However, the ultimate political objectives of groups using guerrilla communication practices, as well as their ‘lifespan’ in their original form, are far less clear than they are in the case of military guerrillas. This is most evident in the chapters presenting three central movements of the European avant-garde of the 20th century, Dada, the surrealists and the Situationist International, as the precursors of groups explicitly practicing guerrilla communication.

In Zurich, a city of refuge from the atrocities of the ‘Great War’ for many, the protagonists of the original Dada aimed to challenge the religion and nationalism-inspired social order they considered responsible for the war with a profusion of innovative provocations channelling absurdity

and irrationality. The latter included their meaningless moniker as much as the use of originally productive technology for purely artistic purposes. From the origins to the end of Dada a tension existed between those considering that artistic irritation was the essence of the movement and others, such as Tristan Tzara and the subsequent Berlin group, promoting political change.

This tension was also patent among the surrealists, who in the 1920s and 1930s added psycho-analytical reflections to Dada's nihilist energy, and resisted what they perceived as an increasingly materialist dominant social order. The surrealists believed in the ability of the unconscious to free the mind from its rational, order-abiding straitjacket, an ability that was to be fostered by the study of dreams and the practice of automatic writing. Yet whereas writer Andre Breton considered, until his disillusion with Stalinism, that a transformation of the mind should go hand in hand with a social revolution as promoted by communism, famed painter Salvador Dali took distance from such political objectives.

At the time, the significance of the unconscious was also central to the work of the founder of 'public relations', Edward Bernay. Contrary to the surrealists, Bernay saw in the unconscious a source of irrationality which needed to be controlled through the methods of advertisement, such as emotional dramaturgy and repetition of a key message. In reaction to the increasing legitimacy of such views within the dominant order, the situationists of the 1950s and 1960s considered that surrealists were naive to believe in the liberation of the unconscious through art. Debord, Vaneigem and others opposed an increasingly dynamic, information-based yet conditioning capitalist order, labelled as the 'society of spectacle', through the practice of *détournement* and *dérive* in daily life. While *détournement* aimed to reveal and question the cultural grammar of the dominant order by subverting established mass media tropes such as the photo-roman and widely circulating newspapers, *dérive* explored the emotional landscape of our built environment. As with Dada and surrealism, there was no consensus regarding the political finality of such interpretive possibilities. Even though the Situationist International undoubtedly played a catalytic role for the May 1968 upheaval in France, the movement experienced several waves of expulsions before disbanding in the early 1970s.

By then, 'guerrilla communication' was slowly establishing itself as a concept, a landmark being Umberto Eco's 1967 lecture and subsequent essay on 'semiological guerrilla warfare'. The chapters focusing on groups putting the term in practice especially since the 1990s are not as eloquent

about tensions among protagonists over the political dimension of guerrilla communication as the chapters discussed above. Rather, Schölzel investigates subverting tactics respectively used in the context of guerrilla marketing and communication guerrilla. Guerrilla marketing, as promoted by prolific US author Jay Levinson, does not challenge the capitalist logic of the current dominant order, which remains based on information exchange and mass consent. Yet it does replace resources-heavy professional communication with ingenuity and versatility, and aims to activate potential consumers into becoming multipliers spreading the marketers' message through viral marketing especially. Whereas no concrete examples of guerrilla marketing are presented, Schölzel engagingly discusses the Yes Men's actions in the chapter on communication guerrilla. Through 'identity correction', the US-based Yes Men pretend to represent established institutions of the capitalist dominant order (the World Trade Organization, big companies, then presidential candidate George W. Bush) and emphasise the less glamorous side of these institutions' activities in copycat speeches and websites. [2] What the Yes Men do has been further theorised by the earlier mentioned German activists of the autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe as 'overidentification' with dominant norms with the purpose of subverting them. Another guerrilla communication tactic, 'distanciation', creates disturbances within established socio-political narratives, for instance by interfering with the staging of national myths and symbols.

Beyond the discussion of practices subverting the dominant order, I would have appreciated further investigation of tensions among communication guerilleros regarding the expression of an alternative political agenda going beyond 'irritation'. To be fair, the penultimate chapter summarises the transformative dimension of irritation and rightfully discusses the potential significance of 'swarms' and activist networks. Perhaps Schölzel's future work could further investigate this thematic. This seems a worthwhile pursuit if one considers the current situation of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. Wikileaks has considerably affected the global perception of secrecy in public affairs by arguably 'overidentifying' with the dominant order of information exchange, releasing documents considered improper to public sighting. Assange, now a fugitive, is controversially working towards the establishment of a grassroots-supported 'Wikileaks party' promoting 'the free flow of information' and campaigning for a Senate seat in his native country of Australia, hence putting tensions over the political nature of his organisation in plain sight. [3]

[2] See www.theyesmen.org.

[3] See interview of Julian Assange by University of Sydney political scientist John Keane published on the website 'The Conversation': <https://theconversation.edu.au/lunch-and-dinner-with-julian-assange-in-prison-12234>. (18/02/2013)

Even though ‘the volume only touches upon current political tensions of this kind among the protagonists of guerrilla communication, ‘Guerillakommunikation’ offers a clear-eyed and enlightening contextualisation of what is often perceived as decidedly contemporary practices. I particularly recommend it to readers interested in a critical history of political subversion and to those seriously wondering about the transformative potential of adbusting, hacking and pie-throwing.

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