1.2. DIY culture and youth struggles for autonomy in Switzerland: distortion of the punk scene

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Abstract

If the 'do-it-yourself' ethic (DIY) is a major legacy of the punk movement, the case of Switzerland provides an interesting development. The most specific facet of the Swiss punk scene lay in its encounter with broad youth movements. Both shared the will to fight to obtain spaces for young people inside the urban landscape so they could express their own culture and more. It first began with a riot occurring after a protest against the new budget allocated to the Opera of Zürich in May 1980, which lead to a year of protest called *Züri Brännt* ("Zürich is burning"). This kind of movement has not disappeared. In the present day, they may be found in the collective *Tanz dich frei* ("Dance yourself free"). Through these two examples, this paper aims to question the ability of DIY cultural practices to dissent from Swiss strong consensual conservatism through autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, dissent, anti-hegemony, youth, scene

Today, DIY seems to embody the most important legacy of the punk movement, its strongest persistence. This can be seen in the fact that cultural movements are often described as "punks" even if they do not have much to do with pogo, leather jackets, or rudely played rock music. To give only one example, the collective SPF 420 was often described as "Internet punks" (Martin, 2014). SPF 420 gathers a crew of youth who organize live-stream clubbing with underground DJs. The link between them and punk is the will to produce and consume their own specific culture. This persistence was already stressed by George McKay (2009), who identified DIY as one of the dimensions of the "punk" inside the "cyberpunk." Johan Kugelberg (2012, p. 46) was even more affirmative. For him, the heritage from punk is quite simple: it is the DIY revolution inside youth cultures, letting the popular culture become immediate. Even if this kind of approach to the punk movement is far too simplistic, dodging many elements of the punk movement to resume it to its aesthetical dimension, the DIY process nevertheless embodies one of the main values of punk. It is punk's aspect that remains strongly alive today. In this paper, we would like to question the meaning of DIY and its actuality. We will analyse it through one national case: Switzerland.

From an international perspective, this choice might appear a bit odd, but its interest lies in the fact that this national case possesses one main specific facet: Swiss punk has encountered the new social movements (Schulz, 2011) and became integrated within what is often referred to by the expression *Züri Brännt* ("Zürich is burning") (Raboud, 2014). The Swiss DIY cultural actors met the political struggles for autonomy in the early eighties. Both shared the will to fight to obtain spaces for young people inside the urban landscape so they could

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express their own culture and values. This kind of movement, bringing altogether politics, music, and parties, still exists in Switzerland with the late example of *Tanz dich frei*, which means "Dance yourself free", and gathers thousands of people each year to protest against the cultural policy of the city of Bern. The case of Switzerland also constitutes a representative example because its national structure is marked by a strong and consensual conservatism, related to the strong hegemony that has ruled global societies since the eighties. We will discuss these topics later.

Through these two examples, we aim in this paper to question the ability of DIY cultural practices to express and perform dissent. These examples will allow us to question the different dimensions of DIY practises as to the claim of autonomy. We will define the emancipatory processes bound to that autonomy. We will examine what autonomy really mean, the scale at which it spreads itself, and how we can relate it to the notion of cultural scene. We will also look for the limits of DIY regarding the potentially individualist dimension of the "yourself" in "do-it-yourself". Through the concrete example of Switzerland, we hope to draw some analytical perspectives both about the DIY process and its ability to develop anti-hegemonic practices in contemporary struggles.

Swiss cultural scenes

Before focussing on the topics of DIY and its meaning within urban life, we must first present briefly these two scenes from Swiss culture. *Züri Brännt* began on 30 May 1980 when the city government of Zürich decided to allot a budget of 60 million francs to renovate the Zürich Opera House. Many young people, who were attempting to obtain one concert venue for youth cultures, decided to protest against this decision and gathered in front of the Opera House. The police repressed this meeting harshly, leading to struggles between police and the young people the whole night. What was then called the "Opera Riot" lasted more than one year, through many demonstrations gathering thousands of people (Braendle, 2010).

This scene had a strong cultural effect. Its name referred to the punk credo "London is burning". *Züri Brännt* was initially a song by the punk band 'TNT' from Zürich. Many punk bands, such as Kleenex, participated to the demonstrations. The strength of its cultural dimension can be seen in the fact that one of its leading associations was named *Rock als Revolte* (Rock as Revolt) (N/A, 2001).

Tanz dich frei is a one-day event supported the whole year only through social networks and a website (the website is now shut down and the social media sites are inactive). It has existed since 2011 and consists of a walk through the city of Bern, acting as something between a demonstration and a street party. In 2012, 10,000 people participated (Gerny, 2013), which made it the largest demonstration in Switzerland in years. The whole organization is anonymous and calls on participants to bring sound systems and drinks. This event has been initiated to protest against the repressive policy of the city in terms of cultural offerings and nightlife (http: www.tanzdichfrei.net).

We will approach the two examples cited above, *Züri Brännt* and *Tanz dich frei*, by applying the notion of "cultural scenes". Straw (2005) defined cultural scenes as

> particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them. Scenes may be distinguished according to their location (…), the genre of cultural production which give them coherence (…) or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape. (p. 412).

In both of our cases, we face scenes whose unity can be found through broad elements. Firstly, they are located in one particular city and structure themselves at this scale. *Züri Brännt* has stressed this point through its name, which means "Zürich is burning". *Tanz dich frei* was initially an event taking place in Bern. Secondly, they gather mainly young people. In Zürich, 24% of the participants were less than 18 years old, 21% between 18 and 19, 32% between 20 and 25, and only 23% older than 25 (Kriesi, 1981, p. 213). We do not have such statistics for *Tanz dich frei* but in all pictures from the press or within the movement's documentation, most of the people who have participated are young (see for example Habegger, 2013). Thirdly, their cultural tastes are not specifically bound to one exclusive style. They gather productions from broad youth cultures, such as punk, rock, and reggae in the eighties and all kinds of electronic music today. Fourthly, they both add a political agenda with anti-capitalist watchwords to the cultural dimension of the scene, as we will see.

DIY and autonomy

One of the main shared values of these two scenes is DIY. *Züri Brännt* was born next to punk and remains strongly bound to its spirit. *Tanz dich frei* has taken over its legacy. Hein (2012) defined DIY as an ideology that affirms that people should create their own culture without following the mainstream or the dominant discourse. Everyone should escape the passive attitude of consumption to take initiative and choose for themselves.

The DIY process has two main meanings. Firstly, it refuses any hierarchy in terms of legitimacy to create. One does not have to learn to play guitar for years to start a rock band. One does not need to care about what the establishment will think about one's works. Secondly, it also means that cultural production should search for autonomy. It must escape the cultural industry by creating its own labels, magazines, venues, and more.

This radical statement of DIY may explain why cultural practises and political struggles have joined together in Switzerland. The young generation fought to obtain free spaces where they could express their own culture. It stands to reason that if a group tries to obtain autonomous spaces, it will use those spaces to produce and access its own culture.

During *Züri Brännt*, every demonstration or squat constitutes opportunities for punk, reggae, or experimental bands to perform (Grand, 2006, p. 228). The close ties between punk and DIY may explain why this musical genre has played the leading role and why so many punk musicians became spokesmen for the whole movement. Punk bands needed the broad movement to conquer spaces. At the same time, the broad movement wished to express a culture strongly identified with youth and the refusal of the dominant values. Astrid Spirig, the singer of Kleenex, asserts: "Die Punks brachten durch ihr Outfit klar zum Ausdruck, wie sie die Gesellschaft sahen: als heuchlerisch und verlogen." (N/A, 2001, p. 49) ("The punks brought the outfit to show clearly how they see the society: hypocritical and lying.")

This situation allows us to understand why the punk panoply has spread beyond individual punk bands or audiences in *Züri Brännt*. This can be seen in the fact that the main punk fanzine in Zürich, *Eisbrecher*, changed its name to *Brächise* shortly after the Opera riot, its articles talking more and more about political struggles in the city, and less and less about gigs and records (Sozial Archiv).

In the *Tanz dich frei*'s demonstrations, the music played is less easily associated with one specific musical genre. The music blaring through crude sound systems is mainly electronic music in a street parade style: techno, drum 'n' bass, and so on, not the kinds of electronica

one would hear in mainstream clubs or on the radio. The most important issue is again that everyone brings their own music and sound systems in a DIY process.

The translation of DIY in a more literally political meaning may be the notion of autonomy. This notion does not only designate the wish to enjoy the kind of entertainment one prefers. As Tari (2011) emphasized when speaking about *Autonomia Operaia*, an Italian autonomist movement active in the 1970s, autonomy means the explosion of the subversive potentiality of the individual and social behaviours. Struggle for autonomy means fighting to obtain spaces freed from the capital and the state. This notion enlightens the radical side of DIY, and "autonomy" was the precise term used in most of the discourse produced inside *Züri Brännt* and *Tanz dich frei*.

Young protesters in Zürich did not ask for a "youth centre"; they demanded an "autonomous centre". Their fanzines not only discussed bands, records, or gigs, as was the case in most punk fanzines at that time. They developed the need for autonomy, to self-organize the space they had conquered in all of its dimensions: culture, food, entrance, places to sleep, and more. This protest went beyond the space for the autonomous centre. The different fanzines and tracts consulted in the archives expressed broad protests to change urban life in terms of housing, public space, labour, and the like. For example, one tract stated, "*Wir wollen die ganze Stadt. Eine autonomes Haus, das PAJZ, genügt uns nicht*" (Sozial Archiv) ("We want the whole city. An autonomy is not enough for us"). Here, the autonomy was not understood solely as an individual space to obtain and to protect. It represented a first trench in the way to change the whole urban way of life.

We cannot find such an evident discourse inside *Tanz dich frei*. The main reason for this absence may lay in the fact that here we do not face leading associations that provide watchwords and edit fanzines. The event's Facebook has some links to files with criticisms against the policies of Bern, in terms of nightlife but also of housing and public spaces. One is called "*Wem gehört die Stadt*" ("To whom belongs the city"). That link contains the same kinds of watchwords as in *Züri Brännt*, but it remains hard to certify if this page was representative for the whole movement or if a minority with a more politically defined discourse ruled it.

We faced the same interpretative problems with the movement's website (http://www.tanzdichfrei.net). It also had affirmations that the goals of this demonstration were not only about having more clubs or about being able to go to venues where the music would be in sync with youth cultural tastes:

> This movement entails more than turning up the volume and making music. It is about raising our words, not just the sound. (…) It is not just about dancing freely once a year. It is about speaking freely, thinking freely, exchanging freely. (http://www.tanzdichfrei.net/about)

Here, the discourse emphasized the claim for freedom already encountered through the notion of autonomy. But again, this may be only relevant to the small more-politicized groups who take part in the movement, such as young communists or the collective based in the Reitschule, a famous squat in Bern.

Breaking the ice

After having observed how the DIY process has brought together cultural practices (playing punk music, editing fanzines, bringing one's own sound system) and struggles for autonomy

in scenes where protest and culture are bound together, we must now address why we can find such specificities in Switzerland. *Züri Brännt* occurred at a time when protests were becoming scarce in Europe (Judt, 2012). The Swiss punk scene joined a political movement, whereas in West Germany (Teipel, 2010) or France (Rude Boy, 2007), punks and political movements rejected each other in most cases at that time. For its part, *Tanz dich frei* has gathered thousands of people, which may be related to the "Occupy" or "*Indignados*" movements but with the difference that in Switzerland the cultural issues occupy the front row.

One possible reason could be found through the dissonance between these two cases and the usual application of the notion of "scene". Straw (2005) linked this notion to an expression of energy formed within urban life. But both *Züri Brännt* and *Tanz dich frei* have faced what we can call an absence of urban life. The specificity of the Swiss context lay in its strong cultural conservatism.

On the eve of the Second World War, the Swiss government had set up a policy called "*Schweizerische Landesverteidigund*" ("Swiss national cultural defence"), whose goals were to avoid any influence from other countries by assuring control of the society through censure and repression. This control was so severe that some historians have even discussed, in a provocative way, a "Swiss totalitarianism" (Jost, 1998). During the Cold War, this cultural policy survived by reinforcing its anti-communist dimension (Caillat, 2009).

When Züri Brännt erupted, even if the Swiss national cultural defence was not as close to the government as in the 1950s and 1960s, its values of order and calm remained strong. The Swiss elite had not yet experienced a shift comparable to those in other European countries. The elected politicians were still marked by the importance of their national and military status (Mach, 2011). Pro Helvetia, the main Swiss cultural foundation, which was founded within the Swiss national cultural defence's process, despite its emancipation from it, remained very conservative and considered only bourgeois culture as legitimate (Milani, 2010).

The young people of Zürich were living in a city without any cultural life apart from the traditional and elitist. There were simply no places to organize concerts for bands they liked, no places to hear the music they liked. The only youth centres were ruled and controlled by the government. The co-founder of the associtaion *Rock als Revolte*, Markus Kenner explains it: "Es gibt so wenig Orte für uns Junge. Wir müssen raus auf die Gasse. Deshalb dieser Name Rock als Revolte, RAR. Es ging um Musik, aber es ging auch um den Kampf für Freiraüme" (N/A, 2001, 21) ("There are so few spaces for youth. We are thrown into the street. This is the reason for the name Rock as Revolt, RAR. It's about music, but it is also about fighting for free spaces").

One of the main recurring elements of the discourse inside the *Züri Brännt* movement was criticism of this cultural conservatism. To denounce it, they used the metaphor of "pack ice". Michael Lütscher, an important member of the punk scene, described the situation in this way: "*Zurich – et toute la Suisse – était recouverte d'une banquise*" (Lütscher, 2012, p. 228) ("Zürich – and all of Switzerland – was covered by pack ice"). The manifesto-movie *Zürich Brännt* (1980), a documentary directed during the events, began with long shots showing a cold city without any movement. In a fanzine called *Werkbund Material*, Peter Erni (1981) criticized the "pack ice city" where order ruled. This element was part of some of the slogans used in the demonstrations, like "*Freiheit Grönland – Nieder mit dem Packeis*" ("Freedom for Greenland – Down with the pack ice") (Erni, 1981, 8). This metaphor showed again that *Züri Brännt* not only asked for more musical venues. They were fighting against a whole situation

in which order and consent were dominating and killing every opportunity to bring energy to urban life.

The beginning of *Tanz dich frei* revealed a similar situation. After a more open era in the 1980s and 1990s, with many venues opening thanks to the youth struggles of the early 1980s (N/A, 2010), the late 1990s and 2000s had been years of backlash: the government shut down squats and instituted a more restrictive policy towards nightlife. Bern, the fifth-largest city of Switzerland, had only few clubs left, and most of the places—clubs and pubs—closed early. Again, the demonstrators wanted to challenge this organization of the urban life in which "order" and "silence" were the key words. The video "Tanz dich frei. Wem Gehört die Stadt (Offiziell)" (available on the facebook page) shows the city of Bern without any human or social life, just police cars.

Both *Züri Brännt* and *Tanz dich frei* have showed how DIY cultural practises could mean empowerment for groups trying to conquer autonomous spaces within urban life. Whether in 1980 or todays, Swiss young people have fought against a conservative cultural framework to find ways to express their own culture. We have already stressed the political dimensions of such a protest. We see it as anti-hegemonic.

More precisely, these DIY practices and struggles for autonomy represented emergent processes. As Williams pointed out, they were "significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the dominant" (Williams, 1977, p.122). They expressed the need for autonomy and disclosed the continuing strength of conservatism at the same time.

We can understand the primacy of this cultural issue in recent Swiss movements because of the economic stability of this country and its lack of tradition in terms of unionist struggle. If the Switzerland has also been affected by economic recessions, their impacts have remained low, especially compared to other European countries. In 1982, its GDP had fallen only by 1.1% (Rein, 1987, 22). In 1984, the unemployment rate did not exceed 1.2%, whereas it stood up at 9.7% in France and at 13% in Great Britain (*Idem*, 51). Switzerland has also succeeded in remaining safely apart from the 2008 crisis and its consequences (Buss, 2013).

Here, DIY seems to embody a political process able to conquer the public space. Even better, it suits perfectly the Swiss context: in a very consensual society, DIY would represent a battlefield where emancipation becomes possible. Against a strong hegemony, it allows anti-hegemonic practices to be heard.

But we must not forget that this cultural dimension can also turn to a disadvantage. DIY may impact only on marginal or individual spaces of society. We can ask if autonomy, despite its radicalism, lock these practices up in the margin. To win an autonomous centre and be happy with it do not change the structure of the society.

This limit of DIY can be seen also in the fact that the government always tries to respond to these kinds of protests by reducing them to their cultural dimensions. The City of Zürich allowed a youth centre to be built (the *Rote Fabrik*) in 1980. The city's mayor, Sigmund Widmer, reportedly shouted once at rioters, saying, "Make some music instead" (as cited in Lütscher, 2012, p. 230). The City of Bern has responded to *Tanz dich frei* by setting up a new nightlife policy with more liberal closing times and new places to organize special events. In both cases, the responses of the government have succeeded in normalizing the protests by splitting them.

This kind of recuperation or normalization represents a real danger for any cultural protest. To aim to change the whole urban landscape, a DIY movement needs to add broad political

discourse and agendas to its cultural practices. We must recognize that both *Tanz dich frei* and especially *Züri Brännt* did this. They have affirmed loudly that the autonomous centre was not enough. They did not want to be locked up in a "cultural ghetto", as a tract from *Züri Brännt* expressed it clearly (Sozial Archiv). They wanted the whole city.

One last and brief observation can be made through the comparison of the two analysed cases, showing how social movements have changed and how the ways to express dissent have shifted. In 1980, despite the punk outfits, the *Züri Brännt* scene was organized in a very countercultural as it possessed a lot of elements listed by Hebdige (2008, p. 53) in his definition of counterculture: it was represented through associations. It published information and had a clear political discourse. Its mobilisations lasted months. By contrast, *Tanz dich frei* does not have any real representative institution. It has no clear discourses and its temporality is limited to a one-day event. Actual movements of protest seem more heterogeneous. If they still express the will to change urban life, they do not have the same ability to build long-term militant actions and a defined political discourse (Cannone, 2012), at least for now.

Both cases, bringing together political struggle and DIY cultural practices, have turned the notion of cultural scene upside down. Here some may think that this notion should not be used to describe *Züri Brännt* and *Tanz dich frei*. But we have showed how the cultural agenda drove the political movement to act like a scene: editing fanzines, gathering through particular venues, and the like. The political dimensions tore the borders of the scenes apart.

The differences between the situations lead to two opposite cases. *Züri Brännt* constituted perhaps more than a scene: its values (DIY) and practises (fanzines, gigs, and music) spread beyond the dimension of the scene to become appropriated by a broad youth movement. *Tanz dich frei* is instead less than a scene: a ghost of a scene, becoming alive only once a year and crying for life the rest of the time.

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