Jens Benicke describes in his book the development of the German far left in the years around 1968 from positions strongly influenced and informed by the Critical Theory of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse to the neo-leninist cadre organisations, which became in the 1970's the strongest formation on the far left. In this article I'm using the book as a starting point to elaborate on some topics I touched upon in last issue's text Hedonism and Revolution (datacide eleven, p.6).

The situation of the German Left after the War until 1967

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School provided an intellectual pole of critical Marxism amidst the general post-war West German anti-communist consensus. After the war, the holocaust, the eventual defeat of fascism and the ensuing occupation which produced two German states, the Institute for Social Research, originally founded in 1923 and exiled in 1933, finally returned to Frankfurt at the beginning of the 50's, and took a unique place in the development of the left.

In terms of left wing organisations and parties which had reformed/returned from exile after 1945, there were two key dates eventually leading to the student movement of the 60's. In 1956, the Communist Party (KPD) was made illegal in West Germany. In 1959, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) declared its transition from a workers party to a „people's party“ in its Godesberg Program. The more radical student organisation associated with the SPD, the SDS, didn't go along with this move towards the political center. The SPD banned dual membership with the SDS and thus effectively expelled its members.

Far from being delivered to political oblivion, the SDS became the driving organisational force for the „extra-parliamentary opposition“ (APO) in the 60's. It absorbed a diverse range of far left positions at that time, from traditional communist ones to situationist inspirations via the Subversive Aktion to critical theory, which heavily influenced key SDS spokespeople such as Hans-Jurgen Kralh, who was a pupil of Adorno. A great deal of effort was made to re-construct the historical Marxist perspective that the Nazis had tried to eradicate. In the years leading up to the peak of the „student revolt“ of ’68 it was this latter „anti-authoritarian“ faction which was leading the organization.

The government's introduction of new State of Emergency legislation, and protests against the visit of the Shah in June 1967, when one demonstrator was shot to death by police, acted as catalysts of a radicalisation of the movement.

Another crucial moment in the development of the far left at the time was the Six Days War in 1967. Before it, the German left had been the most Israel-friendly and pro-Zionist. Afterwards, it became one of the most rabid anti-Zionist leftist movements in the west, at least until the early 90's. This has to be seen in context. The early student movement regarded it a key issue that many Nazi murderers held high positions in post war West Germany, and that the Shoah was barely talked about. They tried to counter the myth that only a small number of arch-Nazis knew about the horrors perpetrated in the extermination camps. And they saw the state of Israel as a necessary refuge for Jews from murderous Anti-Semitism.

The turn towards activism and the question of organisation – leading to the call for a re-foundation of the Communist Party.
It appears that a younger generation was politicised not so much by the continuity of the Nazi elites or the campaigns against rearmament, but rather through the Vietnam war and an increasing anti-imperialist outlook. This was not limited to younger militants, but can also be seen in the development of Ulrike Meinhof, for example. Meinhof wrote editorials in the radical paper ‘Konkret’ for ten years before she became one of the founders of the urban guerrilla group Red Army Faction.

As the student movement sought to consolidate itself as a revolutionary force, debates about future organisation ensued. In 1968, the KPD was de facto allowed to re-constitute itself (despite still being de jure illegal) under the name DKP (German Communist Party). At the end of the same year, the KPD/ML (MI standing for Marxist-Leninist) was formed with a „anti-revisionist“, pro-Chinese/Maoist intention. Technically the KPD remains illegal in Germany to this day, but even self-declared successor-organizations are tolerated, presumably because it is easier to monitor their activities.

While these two parties were not products of the student movement itself, they helped spawn a plethora of party-nuclei which came out of a SDS increasingly fraught with tensions (and eventually disbanded in 1970). A „turn towards the proletariat“ caused many in the student movement to abandon the „anti-authoritarian“ roots, and to accuse the critical theorists of being professors in an ivory tower far removed from the practice of the class struggle.

**A frenzy of party founding**

Many former activists engaged in a mania of founding various „communist parties“ or „leagues“, which are usually referred to as K-groups because they often used the letter K (German for communist) in their names. Besides the DKP and KPD/ML, there was the KPD/AO (for Aufbauorganisation), the KABD (Communist Workers League), the PL/PI (Proletarian Left/Party Initiative), the KBW (Communist League of West Germany), the KB (Communist League) and many more (see the book review of Michael Steffen's „Geschichte vom Truffelschwein“ in Datacide Nine).

The DKP was orientated towards Moscow, and initially organize the members of the illegal historical KPD, but it was only marginally connected to the revolts of the late 60's. The DKP was generously funded by the Eastern Bloc (apparently to the tune of 6 Million Deutschmarks a month), and was thus able to have an overblown infrastructure and press that had no relation to the actual strength of the party in the wider left. Although the DKP also swallowed up some ex-SDS people, it was the K-group that became the real product of the decomposition of the stu-dent revolts.

**The historical anchors of German Maoism**

After the decline of the anti-authoritarian movement after 1968 the question remains why it was possible that these K-groups managed to establish themselves as heirs to the student movement. This is particularly mysterious considering that they had mainly two historical references of orientation. One was the „anti-revisionist“ course of the Communist Party of China under Mao, the other was the course of the „bolshevized“ Communist Party of Germany (KPD) of the late 20's and early 30's.

**a. The Chinese Communist Party under Mao, and Albani ruled by Enver Hoxha**

The Chinese party – after Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin's crimes in 1956 – claimed that the Soviet Union had abandoned Marxism-Leninism and become „revisionist“. Mao Zedong, the j Chinese leader, was hailed as the „greatest Marxist-Leninist alive“ and no doubt saw himself at the helm of the world communist movement after Stalin's death. However, it can be reasonably said that while Mao perhaps made valid contributions to military writing, he added nothing to Marxist theory. When reading his writings, a person easily forms the uncanny question „is this banal drivel, or genius dialectics?“ I would argue it is usually the former, but the German middle class students after a proletarian turn obviously read something else into it. Considering the importance that Mao lent to „praxis“, something that was used by his acolytes in the K-groups as an argument against Critical Theory, one also has to look at the „praxis“ of the Communist Party under his leadership.
While the real extent of bloodshed and famine in China in the 50's and 60's were not known in the West until later, it was quite unlikely that a hardened Stalinist warlord would put his land reforms into place with subtle persuasion. The public executions of hundreds of thousands of landowners was just the beginning. In the „Great Leap Forward“ during the second five year plan, tens of millions of ordinary Chinese starved to death due to the failed policies of the leadership. At the same time, China was exporting wheat for free to „brother countries“ like Albania and North Korea to trick the world into believing the „Great Leap Forward“ was a huge success.

The fascination with Mao shared by many in the Western Left grew to new heights during the „Cultural Revolution“ (1966-69) – being essentially a massive power struggle within the Communist Party establishment, where Mao used the young „Red Guards“ to ransack the country and terrorize his opponents. Mao was indeed a revolutionary – rather than introducing a society that in any way could be called communist, he in fact laid the groundwork for the current ultra-capitalist development under the dictatorship of a bureaucratic stratum led by the „Communist“ Party, just like Stalin, his idol, did in Russia.

After Mao's death, some K-groups abandoned the Chinese way, which was seen as becoming too „social imperialist“. Some K-groups followed the Albanian Stalinists under Enver Hoxha, and Albania was duly revered as the „one true socialist nation“.

b. The historical „bolshevized“ KPD from 1928 onward

The other historical reference point of the K-groups was the KPD, in its phase from about 1928 onwards. This period was characterized by a number of fatal misjudgments of political situations, most notably about the nature of National Socialism, but also about the KPD's own strength, as well as the fighting spirit of the working class.

The KPD had been purged of all its important intellectuals in a gradual process of Stalinisation by about 1928-1930. Everyone who hadn't left in the splits of the early to mid-20's (most importantly the „ultra left“ forming their own Communist Workers Party (KAPD) in 1920 and subsequently other organizations) had been expelled, from Paul Levi to Karl Korsch, to August Thalheimer and many others. Although these factions were diverse and often fought each other, after the expulsions hardly any original Marxist thinkers were left in the Party.

The Communist International and its sections (the KPD in Germany) had become tools of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. They adopted the directive that the Social Democrats, not the Nazis, were the main enemy – the so called „Social Fascism“ thesis -, and the bizarre illusion that Germany was on the brink of proletarian revolution.

The SPD was seen as the great competition between workers parties, but was in fact also a traitor to the revolution of 1918/19. When the Berlin police president Zorgiebel prohibited the communist May 1st demonstrations in 1929, riots and fighting left many workers massacred by the police. The KPD leadership saw this as the beginning of a new revolutionary mass militancy after the years of relative calm since 1923.

In 1930 the KPD issued a „Program of national and social liberation of the German People“, which exemplified their misguided opinion that the masses following the NSDAP were merely manipulated by the elites of monopoly capitalism, and that they could be convinced to change sides by adopting some nationalist rhetoric. The KPD also figured that with the rule by decree that overturned traditional bourgeois parliamentary procedures under chancellor Brüning from 1930 onwards a kind of fascism had already arrived. In this period of economic and political crisis, the KPD's mass following consisting mostly of the unemployed, and not so much of the workers still in employment.

Even after the Nazis took power, the KPD was convinced that it would be a short lived episode which the organized proletariat would put an end to through its mass actions. When the central committee finally tried to call a general strike against the Hitler government in 1933, it was not heeded at all. Within weeks, the party was smashed as a public political force and driven underground. This showed that the KPD did not have the structure to effectivly strike back at the combined onslaught of the State and the Nazi goons. It was not prepared for the counter- revolutionary escalation at all. The KPD was a „paper tiger“.

It was this tragic period that allowed the Nazis to take power and smash the organizations of the working class. Despite the fact that the KPD made numerous misjudgments, and eventually became a blown up bureaucratic shell that was swiftly crushed by the Nazis, the K-Groups saw it as their historical reference point and idol.
In some cases this went even further, exemplified by the KPD(/AO) adopting a German nationalist stance, seeing the USSR as the main enemy on a world scale (a „social imperialism“ thesis shared by some other K-Groups as well).

**Decomposition of the revolutionary movement**

This is all the more significant in so far that the K-groups could have known better, in fact, I would suggest in many cases they did. There were a large number of relevant works of Marxist theory re-published and available in the late 60's and early 70's, including the writings of Otto Rühle, Anton Pannekoek, Paul Mattick, Karl Korsch, and early Lukács, as well as from Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse.

It seems that activists believed in the manichean world view of a struggle between good and evil – or between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. You were either on one side or the other. And the one good side was represented by the Communist Party, no matter what shifts, u-turns and distortions it performed. During Stalin's purges, even long standing cadres had agreed, often under torture, to accuse themselves of being counter-revolutionary activists, all in the interest of the party and the revolution.

But how could activists decades later still follow the same path? It appears that they still gravitated towards power, rather than critical thinking – in that process they abandoned the essentials of critique, and failed to see the new ruling stratum, whether in Russia or China, or for that matter in Cuba or Vietnam, as eminently counter-revolutionary forces.

Looking at it like this, it also makes more sense that many former members of K-groups eventually became government executives via the Green Party, which many of them joined around 1980. After Mao's death, their delusions became even more apparent, not just to the proletariat, but even to themselves. Employing the Green Party as their exit strategy, „Comunism“ was all but forgotten. Some even played an „important“ role in the „red-green“ coalition of the Schröder/Fischer regime, as well as in the mainstream media.

Jens Benicke's book is an useful history of the rise and decline of the New Left, from the resurgence of a anti-Stalinist, anti-authoritarian movement to its dissolution in the authoritarian retro-Leninist party-nuclei and sects. He also offers an interpretation of the Red Army Faction as an „armed K-Group“.

**The RAF – an armed K-Group?**

The RAF was the foremost armed group of the far left in the early 70's. In the public discourse in the media they were often, completely wrongly, characterized as „anarchist“. In fact, their theoretical texts demonstrated they were just as Maoist and anti-Imperialist as the K-Groups. The K-groups also agreed that the revolution would be a violent affair, but insisted that the time was not right yet to take up arms, while the RAF claimed it was creating another front in the world wide anti-Imperialist struggle. „If it is correct to organize the armed resistance now, depends on the question if it is possible. If it is possible can only be found practically“ („Das Konzept Stadtguerilla“). This text is riddled with Mao quotes, and while a certain revolutionary voluntarism can be seen as a heritage of the „anti-authoritarian“ phase – a clear tactical difference to the K-Groups – the theoretical agreements are blatant if you follow the arguments in their texts.

**Lessons to be learned?**

Some reviewers have criticized Benicke's book by noting that while it was valid to investigate the decomposition of the revolutionary movement, there was nothing to learn from it because the K-Groups were a phenomenon too bizarre and too stupid to waste too much time on. This is only partially true. On one hand, the struggle between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian wings in the revolutionary movement goes back many decades. It is also not over. Maoism has certainly gone out of fashion in Germany, and so have other forms of „Marxism-Leninism“. However, on the other hand, this is unfortunately not necessarily the case in many other regions of the world. Even Alain Badiou, an unrepentant Maoist, still has some currency in the Western Left.

In any case, it would have been interesting to put the development of the K-Groups, at least briefly, in a more international context. After all, this was not only a German phenomenon
– I’m only mentioning here the Gauche Prolétarienne in France or the Progressive Labor Party in the US.

What made Maoism apparently so attractive to activists at the time? It was certainly not „Marxist“ theory, since there was very little to deserve that name. Maybe the aesthetics of the propaganda also played a role? The feeling of being an active part of a historical process? The prospects of a career in an invariably victorious bureaucracy that would replace the bourgeoisie as the ruling elite?

This issue leads me to another terrain, which remains largely unexplored. Although about 150’000 people in West Germany alone went through these organizations, a lot of other aspects played a role in the more diffuse context of what the radical left was at the time. It would be interesting to see more research about the far left publishing houses and journals, which usually stayed away from straight party politics. The more relevant publishers included Wagenbach, März, Roter Stern, Trikont, Rotbuch, EVA, Luchterhand and others. There were also more mainstream publishers like Suhrkamp, Rowohlt, Fischer, and even Ullstein (owned by Springer by that time), which printed a large number of radical books. The effect of this is much harder to quantify than that of the organized groups. But possibly their effect on a general political and cultural climate was more deep than the propaganda of relatively small Maoist sects. Journals such as Kursbuch, Prokla, Argument, Sozialistische Politik (up to issue II before this publication was taken over by the SEW/DKP), Erziehung und Klassenkampf, etc., probably had more readers than the theoretical journals of the K-Groups, such as Kommunismus und Klassenkampf (of the KBW). It would also be interesting to look into the history and influence of more marginal publications such as Schwarze Protokolle, Politikon, Der Lange Marsch, wir wollen alles und Revoltel, which in one way or another carried on the current of an anti-authoritarian outlook.

Nevertheless, the neo-Leninist groups managed to proclaim a certain hegemonic state in the context of the radical left at the time. The anti-authoritarian current, whether it was informed by Critical Theory, Council Communism, Western Marxism, or a mixture of these and other currents, was side-lined and marginalized. In this context, it makes sense to pose the question: was it the (seeming) quantifiability of „progress“ of the organisations, and therefore the revolutionary process, that attracted activists? Quantifiability could be measured in terms of paper sales, membership numbers, and votes in elections. Although these indicators always remained tiny, it was always seen as „a beginning“ • a starting point to measure the influence on „the masses“.

New social movements became the predominant trend in the wider Left in the second half of the 70’s. These included the struggles against nuclear power plants and for women’s and gay rights, as well and many „single issue“ campaigns. These movements, as well as the disappearance of Maoist reference points particularly after Mao himself died in 1976, led to a steep decline of the K-Groups. Organised Maoism in Germany more or less disappeared by the beginning of the 80’s. The KPD dissolve* in 1980, soon followed by the KBW in 1985 (after a couple of years of inactivity). The Hoxhaist KPD/ML merged with the Trotskyist GIM (!) in 1987. Besides a some small splinter groups, only the MLPD (Marxist Leninist Party of Germany, which had come out of the KABD in 1982) is still an explicit Stalinist party with 2’300 members.

Only the KB, being the least dogmatic of these groups, was able to tap into the new social movement and stayed a relevant force throughout the 80’s. However, both the print run of its paper Arbeiterkampf and its membership also decreased. The KB even totally disbanded over internal disagreements about how to deal with German re-unification. One faction still publishes the former Arbeiterkampf under the title Analyse & Kritik, and the other faction prints the quarterly journal Bahamas.

A large number of former K-Groups cadres were absorbed into the Green Party in the early 80’s. Some went into the PDS (later Left Party) in the 90’s, and others made it into parliament or other leading functions of the system. Needless to say, they have abandoned any pretense for communism a long time ago.

However, the ideological mechanisms of the K-Groups remain active in other currents of „Marxism-Leninism“, and in other parts of the world. In Britain this can be observed in Trotskyism (which was always much stronger than Maoism there). They have a similar obsession with party-building, paper sales, and electionism. They are the same bureaucracy of wanna-be representatives of the proletariat, building up organisations that act as processing
plants of revolutionary energy, usually ending in the disillusionment of the individual members, used and abused as cogs in the machine.

Considering this sad legacy of the so called '68 movement, it makes all the more sense to employ an uncompromising critique of its authoritarian undercurrents. Benicke is making one contribution to this.