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Periodical Forms of Theory. New Left Journals, 1950s to 1980s. PhD Project

What is the function of a periodical? In editorial practice, one would expect that such a crucial question is addressed when a journal, a review or a little magazine is founded, or when changes in policy or style occur during its life span. Yet, in the case of the West German Marxist journal *alternative. Zeitschrift für Literatur und Diskussion*, the most thorough discussion of its use and purpose was documented in its last issue in autumn 1982. At that point, the political energies of the student New Left had long since been dispersed and absorbed by the so-called new social movements. Consequently, the function(s) of a journal such as *alternative*, and more generally of publications identified with the ›1968‹ generation, had become less self-evident. In the wake of political landslides and experiences of defeat, the theoretical approach of *alternative*, in the interpretation of its makers, had lost its link to any kind of movement or practice. As chief editor Hildegard Brenner metaphorically testified in the pages of this last issue, their output had become “placeless”. Although some loyal readers remained, Brenner found that her journal lacked relevance to those who were active in the new social movements: “We have readers, but we do not have an audience anymore”. Without the audience, the journal would also lose its function.¹

Functions of *Zeitschriften* – journals, reviews and (little) magazines – and historical debates about these functions are at the core of my research project. The comparison of the West-German *alternative* (1958–1982) to other, rather academic New Left publications such as the British *New Left Review* (1960–today) or the US-American *Studies on the Left* (1958–1967) shows the entanglement of scientific, literary, journalistic and documentary forms and specific modes of how theoretical work is contextualized, mediated and stored. On the one hand, in a rather classical way, I understand these periodicals as networks or sites of transfer, dissemination and intellectual gathering. But in contrast to their simplistic representation as “cargo trucks” for intellectual freight, journals have played a significant role not only with regard to the propagation, but also to the epistemological formation of theory.² Thus, on the other hand, I am interested in material forms and textual practices that are specific to ›theory journals‹ and thus allow to speak of a genre of its own. I suggest to call some these forms and practices “documentary” and “archival”, since these journals can be characterized by the fact that they not only printed documents for discussion, but also actively documented leftist theory and practice itself, and thus turned their own labour, its

¹ Redaktion *Alternative*: Zu Diesem Heft. In: *alternative* 25 (1982), 145/146, p. 133 and Karl Heinz Roth: ‘Alternative’: Das Ende einer kulturellen Klasse. Aus einem Gespräch. In: *alternative* 25 (1982), 145/146, pp. 134–42, here: p. 195.

² Jeffrey Williams: The Rise of the Theory Journal. In: *New Literary History* 40 (2009), 4, pp. 683–702, here: p. 687.

context and conditions, into a subject of discussion, and the journal itself into “little archives” of intellectual and political experience.³

alternative, based in the environs of Berlin’s Free University, is one specimen of this genre of ›theory journals‹. It was linked with other New Left groups, journals and publishing houses, and yet a theoretical microcosm of its own. Since 1963 it was led by Hildegard Brenner, a literary scholar and journalist who was 36 years old when she took over, being one of the few leading female journal makers of the time. She turned the former literary little magazine into a literary theory review. In its heyday in the early 1970s, *alternative* had a peak circulation of 10.000 copies, its contents being first and foremost relevant to students and scholars in the humanities and social sciences, but also to activist journalists, teachers or playwrights. The journal was deeply committed to a tradition of materialist aesthetics within so-called Western Marxism and participated in the ongoing rediscovery of thinkers such as Karl Korsch, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Carl Einstein, Georg Lukács, Lu Märten and others. It helped pave the way for West German adoptions of French structuralism, critically discussed Russian formalism and, in a later phase, introduced its readers to feminist psychoanalysis, Cultural Studies and Operaism. Addressing the theoretical avantgarde within the humanities, *alternative* was still highly tradition-conscious in its regard to the history of labour movement intellectuals. This was already indicated by the journal’s red and black visual appearance, not far from that of *Die Weltbühne* or *Die Linkskurve*, which was the publication of the *Union of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller)* in the Weimar Republic. This “ancestral claiming”⁴ of the socialist tradition allowed journal makers to inscribe themselves into a continuum, historic and imaginary at the same time, that provided orientation for their own intellectual endeavour. Fittingly, Helga Gallas, the second important woman in the editorial board, wrote her dissertation on *Die Linkskurve* while she was part of *alternative*. Other cases of ancestry in the New Left are not hard to find, if one thinks of the role model of *Left Review* in Great Britain, *Partisan Review* in the US or of the orientation that Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes* provided to New Left editors in general.

Following media theorist and former revolutionary Régis Debray, the „ecosystem of socialism” as a print culture falls into the last stage of the so-called graphosphere, the era of the printed word, and designates the continued attempt to establish “a counter-medium of dissemination within a hostile milieu”.⁵ Accordingly, the importance of the craft formation of print, of newspapers, journals or pamphlets, has been highlighted by many historians of socialist and communist movements. Literary historian Patrick Eiden-Offe recently demonstrated how in the German Vormärz period between 1830 and 1848, concepts and self-perceptions of „class” came to life and were filled with content through literature and theory, most often published in journals which served as loci of a political “Wir-Konstitution”.⁶ Even if the New Left’s promotion of self-consciousness took place under very different circumstances, analogies can be drawn in regards to the formatory function of media. New

³ For the concept of „little archives” cf. Gustav Frank, Madleen Podewski, Stefan Scherer: Kultur – Zeit – Schrift. Literatur- und Kulturzeitschriften als ›kleine Archive‹. In: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 34 (2010), 2, pp. 1–45.

⁴ For this concept cf. Elisabeth K. Chaves: Reviewing Political Criticism. Journals, Intellectuals, and the State, Ashgate, Farnham, 2015, p. 53.

⁵ Régis Debray: Socialism. A Life Cycle. In: *New Left Review* 46 (2007), pp. 5–28, here: p. 24.

⁶ Patrick Eiden-Offe: *Die Poesie der Klasse. Romantischer Antikapitalismus und die Erfindung des Proletariats*, Berlin, Matthes & Seitz, 2017.

journals, Ernst Osterkamp writes, are often meant to give form to new a “consciousness of historical transition”.⁷ This holds true again, I argue, for the late 1950s and early 1960s, when a new wave of young academics became journal makers. Stuart Hall, himself co-founder and editor of *Universities and Left Review* and *New Left Review*, wrote in 1961 that “there is nothing that I know of to match the flood of university journals which have been irrigating the newsstands in recent months”.⁸ Against the shared background of a critique of capitalist consumer society on the hand, of communist bureaucratic rule on the other, the New Left publishing activities were not only concerned with theory and strategy, but also with self-assurance and self-education.

Even if the breaking down of the barriers between intellectual and manual work was proclaimed by many New Left academics as a (distant) goal, the publications studied here are decidedly highbrow. In the example of *alternative*, even the less theoretical issues and documentations of practice, with reportage on or analysis of school tuition or prison theatre, were not so much written for pupils or prisoners but rather for their educators, while the journal makers, educating themselves, could perceive themselves as the educators of the those working in educational institutions (as many of them did). Looking back, former editors often describe their editorial contributions as a formative episode of their intellectual biographies, testifying that they learned more in making a journal than in studying at university.

From the mid-1970s on, the tone in *alternative* changed from self-evident educational practice to critical self-evaluation: Now, it both reflected and reflected upon a permanent discourse of crisis within the Left itself. The journal kept on publishing new theoretical inputs, introduced readers to Althusser’s structuralist Marxism or French feminist psychoanalysis. But the focal point shifted to an ongoing documentation of the recurring crisis of Marxism and the fragmentation of the student movement. Among the topics of the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were: the struggle with the anti-intellectual orthodoxy of the Maoist and Leninist K-Groups; state repression against of leftists in universities and schools; deaths and tragedies of left-wing icons and theorists such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Nicos Poulantzas, Rudi Dutschke or Louis Althusser; a growing hostility against theory among students and activists. In this later phase, the editors became increasingly doubtful about their own work and legacy. In an editorial from 1978, *alternative* collectively wrote: “It is becoming terrifyingly clear, how a strict commitment to conceptual rigour (including our own) [...] has neglected the transformations at the social base”.⁹

Thanks to this reflexive and documentary style that *alternative* kept throughout its publication span from 1958 to 1982, this specific journal’s 146 numbers reflect large parts of the rise and decline of the German New Left, as well as the history of the student movement and its collapse. Journals like *Studies on the Left* and its successor *Radical America*, or the early *New Left Review* and its forerunners, have had similar yet distinct “functions” which I compare in my research project. I aim to show that the journals’ roles in the making of the New Left as an intellectual and political movement, as well as their different reactions to

⁷ Ernst Osterkamp: Neue Zeiten – neue Zeitschriften. Publizistische Projekte um 1800. In: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 1 (2007), 2, pp. 62–78, here: p. 71.

⁸ Stuart Hall: Student Journals. In: *New Left Review* 1 (1961), 7, pp. 50–51, here: p. 50.

⁹ Redaktionskollektiv Alternative: Zu diesem Heft. In: *Alternative* 21 (1978), 119, p. 65.

crises and their forms of critical self-evaluation are fruitful sources for a history of ideas which considers the material forms of ideas. Moreover, investigating functions of periodicals – and perceptions of these functions, including hopes, expectations and deceptions – might be useful not only within the scope of an intellectual history, but also for a contemporary debate on the possibilities and limitations of leftist intellectual publishing between academic and public spheres.

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