

The US-American left under the presidency of Donald Trump

Final report for the American Council on Germany

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Scope of my research

The scope of my researched shifted partly once Donald Trump had been elected as 45th president of the United States. Initially I was planning on answering the question weather or not there was a new left wing movement evolving in the US. And if so where: At the Universities? On the streets? And how much common ground there was between #blacklivesmatter, the discourse about cultural appropriation, the fight for LGBTQ-rights and feminist movements? If protagonists and ideas were overlapping? Or if it was only the opposition of these ideas and movements, that connect the movements?

But since the election of Trump it had become quite obvious that there definitely is a new left wing movement awakening in the United States. So I focused on researching on the different branches and ideas that stand behind these movements and in what ways they might differ – in terms of methods as well as ideologies.

Aside from this main focus of research I tried to find specific stories and protagonists that would illustrate specific problems within the United States, such as police brutality against black citizens as well as the struggle for or against abortion rights.

First Finding – To get hold of possible protagonists is quite difficult and there is a lot of mistrust against reporters especially within the far left

As a German journalist it is pretty hard to get hold of protagonists, whether they are

working for organizations, are independent activists or are journalists themselves. So I spent a lot of time trying to get in contact with spokespersons or representatives of organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) or Lambda Legal or the Arab American Association of New York (AAANY). All these attempts unfortunately were in vain. As well as my requests to meet someone from *The New York Times* or the White House Correspondents' Association. Either I did not get a reply at all or I couldn't get through to the person in charge on the phone or I was told that unfortunately there was no time to meet me for an interview due to the amount of requests they face on a daily basis. Also stopping by at an office in New York is a waste of time – as it is impossible to pass the lobby without a scheduled date. The personnel at the lobby is not allowed to make calls to the office to ask if it would be okay to come up – so I was told at the ACLU office in New York City.

What I learned instead was that almost every protagonist I met or spoke with only agreed to an interview followed by a personal recommendation of someone I knew or someone I had met previously and who made the initial contact. But even then some meetings I would have been very interested in did not work out in the end – I assume due to the extremely packed schedule and timetables and the sheer amount of obligations and work most people in the United States seem to have.

Once I managed to get hold of interesting protagonists and interview partners it was also very hard to spend some time with them. Shadowing protagonist, meeting them longer than for an hour in a café or visiting interesting places for the story with them was only possible in exceptions – which makes it quite difficult to write lively and descriptive stories afterwards.

I was also surprised by the amount of mistrust I encountered towards reporters in general. Even though I was in close contact with activist from the far left, the blacklivesmatter Movement and other organizations almost every person I met and spoke with initially was in doubt whether or not I might be police / FBI and somehow spying on them etc. or at least surprised that I did not reject their stories and opinions entirely and that I was happy to listen to what they had to say.

Second Finding – There is definitely a new left wing movement evolving in the United States and it is as lively as it hasn't been for years

Most of the time I spent on finding, meeting, interviewing and accompanying various protagonists who are somehow involved in different branches of a newly blooming protest movement since the election of Donald Trump. Almost everyone I met – whether or not they were protagonists in my research or „just“ the Uber driver – had an opinion towards Donald Trump. And one hundred percent of all people I talked to saw his election as a crucial point of the US history.

As most protagonists I met belong to a somewhat left wing spectrum (ranging from antifascists and anarchists to moderate liberals and voters of the Democratic Party) most of them described a state of shock the election of Donald Trump had put them in, some form of depression or a feeling of despair, some even talked about feelings of nausea and disgust – and as an outcome a few days later the strong wish to get involved in some form of opposition or protest. Some of them just had to resurrect their old contacts, as they had been involved in other forms of protest movements before (or all their life). Some had never been involved in any kind of protest before or had not considered themselves as very political but now felt the strong urge „to do something“.

According to this all organizations and movements I spoke to reported a tremendous growth in terms of new members as well as donation based funding. All of them were experiencing a flood of new volunteers who just showed up shortly after the election and who were eager to get in involved.

Some „old“ protest groups such as Act Up (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) who had been very active in the 1980s and 1990s HIV Movement reunited and formed new branches in order to fight recent policies and hardships due to the decisions of the Trump administration. Other groups like the New York City Anarchists / Antifascist group became much more organized and institutionalized after the election to be able to pursue their goals to fight the state even stronger. And some groups such as the wide

range of entities that formed all over the country under the label of „Indivisibles“ formed newly as a direct result of the election. Other existing groups which had not been political before – for example a group of female fiction writers in Austin / Texas – started to pay elected representatives visits, in order to influence their decisions on immigration rights and abortion rights.

Third finding – The opposition is quite scattered in terms of goals as well as in methods to reach these goals

The spectrum of protagonists I reached out to and spoke with was quite broad and they differed a lot in terms of their goals as well as their approaches and methods.

On the far left I was in contact with the anarchist groups of New York City as well as Washington D.C.. The New York City group had just formed the Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council (MACC) as a direct outcome of the election of Trump as president and professionalized their activism through various newly formed groups for example providing legal advice and support of their members in case they had been arrested during protests or needed legal advice and representation in court, and groups that came up with and organized various forms of direct action as well as providing direct action trainings for their new members.

I accompanied the preparations and MACCs protest on the demonstration on the 1st of may in New York City and witnessed the group’s struggle with the police during this demonstration, which lead to several arrest. In Washington D.C. I also witnessed a quite spontaneously organized protest of the local anarchists in front of the White House where they clashed with Richard Spencer, who is considered to be one of the leaders of the Alt Right movement. Spencer and his supporters were protesting against an US air strike in Syria. The D.C. Antifa group did not want to dispose anti war protests which they considered one of their genuine goals to activists from the far and so they organized a counter protest within just a few ours after learning about Spencer’s plans.

Interviews with Marisa Holmes, one of the main organizers of the Occupy Wall Street

Protest Camp 2011 and now one of the main organizers within MACC, as well as with various other members of MACC showed two interesting aspects very clearly: For one Anarchist groups within the US are not interested in any kind of political change based on election or the political system of the United States whatsoever as they do not believe in state power at all. What they long for is a horizontal form of self-governance that is organized in small entities throughout the country and as democratic and with as little form of representation as possible. With the election of Trump and his ongoing presidency they expect a boost and a broadening approval for these traditional anarchist concepts as they hope that a wider range of citizens might realize that political representation connected with a right wing or conservative backlash is what they consider “fascism” and leads to the financial and social suffering and disadvantage of the majority of the people. Even if the vast majority of white middle class Americans might not suffer strongly in a direct way from Trumps policies, they might – so the hope of antifascist groups – realize that minority groups such as People of Color, Immigrants, Muslims and the LGBTQ community are directly effected by Trumps hateful rhetoric and the political decisions of his administration. And that the US American mainstream might realize that it is time “to wake up” and to resist.

In the same time this strong rejection of state power as such isolates antifascist groups from more mainstream and / or liberal protest movements that are forming and growing after the election. For example they do not want to get involved in protest and rallies that are organized by Democratic leaning mainstream organizations such as Move on etc. And they prefer forms of direct action to protest forms such as demonstrations, rallies, call-ins to representatives and city hall meetings.

I also spoke about this with L.A. Kauffman, a journalist and left wing activist herself, who has observed and studied the US American protest movements since the 1960s and who had just recently published the book “Direct Action. Protest and the reinvention of American radicalism”. She confirmed my observation and clearly stated that she believes the far left might “miss the shot” by not joining forces in “what is one of the biggest protest movements in the US history”.

The far left does have strong ties though with the black lives matter movement in New York City. They join forces in a protest form that is called “Peoples Monday”, a rally that is held every Monday in a different part of the cities five boroughs to commemorate a Person of Color that has been shot dead by a member of the New York Police Department. They also overlap with an organization called “Cop Watch”, a self-defense organization that operates in poorer areas of New York City and who tries to keep track and to document police work on the street in order to be able to hold officers accountable in court when needed and other legal documents are not being provided (in time). They also support workers union organized struggles of immigrant workers who face the threat of deportation, such as the protest of the Workers of Tom Cat Bakery in Queens. I participated in various events and protest actions and was able to witness the various forms of protests for my story.

More pragmatic and subject-focused groups like the New York City direct action group Rise and Resist, a mainly queer group of activists, that holds strong personal ties to the Act Up Movement of the 1980s and 1990s, but also attract young and new first-time activists is much less ideological. They focus mainly on forms of direct action that work well with the media and in social networks such as their short occupation of the Trump Tower in the beginning of May to protest specific policies they reject such as the “Muslim Ban”, the threat of deportation of immigrant workers or the health care reform. During their first Trump Tower action the protesters dropped banners reading "No raids" and "No wall" from the Starbucks balcony in the entrance hall, tossing piles of leaflets to the ground and barricading the entrance to the famed elevators power brokers. They are quite open to other protest groups and movements and support all kinds of actions that focus on mutual subjects. Other groups have the possibility to pitch their ideas, projects and actions during their public meetings at a church in Greenwich Village and their members also participate in protest and rallies organized by liberal and more mainstream groups.

Groups that formed themselves under the label of “The Indivisibles” hold the strongest ties to the US American party system. Their goal is to influence elected members and representatives of the Democratic Party through meetings, call-ins and invitations to

debates at Town Hall Meetings and they aim for a political change, first in the Congress elections in 2018 and later in the presidential elections.

Direct action trainings are popular in all three categories.

Forth finding – Immigrant rights seems to be a subject were most left wing movements can actually join forces

Even though the different organizers might not agree in terms of their long term ideology or the way they try to effectuate the change they long for, they do overlap and agree in the short term goals they would like to achieve: they reject the so called Muslim Ban, they are in favor of Obama Care, they believe in climate change and they reject all sorts of racism, islamophobia, misogyny or violence against minorities such as immigrant workers and queer folks, or police brutality towards people of color. It seems that Trump and his administration have become such a strong enemy that it is clearer now than ever for the US American left what they would like to fight for. But instead of a unified movement they form plenty of small protest entities that provide all kinds of ways to participate so that each citizen who would like to take part finds the right movement for him or herself – and they support each other to some extent.

Especially protests that were able to gain support from the entire spectrum of the US American left and that made all sorts of protesters participate where the actions and demonstrations for the rights of immigrant workers. Maybe because they were mainly organized by the workers themselves and the other groups could just take part as supporters without dominating the protest and the actions the activists chose for themselves.

Generally speaking I learned that the vast majority of left wing action and protest groups are much more aware of racism and paternalism than in the past. One could say that the US American left has learned over the years that it a protest benefits from being organized by those who are directly affected or affected the most. So in case a specific group starts a protest it is the mainly white middle class activists who stand back and

offer support.

Fifth finding – especially the far left encounters stronger a response by the state forces to their protest since the Trump administration is in charge

Especially the protests throughout Inauguration day in Washington D.C. showed – so I was told by several interview partners, one of them being a lawyer and legal adviser – that the police forces are reacting much stronger and more forceful towards activists. I spoke to several activists who took part in the demonstrations organized by the far left, and they all described the police as acting randomly violent towards protesters, kettling them for hours, using stinger grenades towards them and arresting them in the end. Also the charges these activist face now – for some of them it was the first protest they ever took part in – are unusually crass. They are being charged with felony riot and not with property destruction or misdemeanor riot as it had been the case in the years before.