

This text is trying to sum up some of the aspects of the student movement of 2009 / 2010 in Vienna and to draw some conclusions of what worked well and what went wrong from a libertarian revolutionary perspective.

Demand nothing, occupy everything!

Reflections on the student movement in Vienna 2009/2010

The student movement starting in Vienna and other Austrian university cities in the fall of 2009 was the biggest social movement in Austria since the resistance against the conservative - extreme right government beginning in the year 2000, and one of the biggest student movements in decades. It was set off by the occupation of the University of Fine Arts on October 20th, it got big and gained public attention when people occupied the largest lecture hall of Vienna's main university, the so called Audimax, three days later. For several weeks, the topic was heavily present in the media and a subject many people even far away from university talked about.

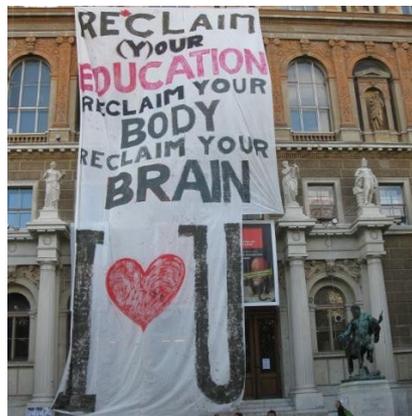
At least in the beginning, the demands of the movement, though partly far-reaching and quite radical, were supported by large segments of society. Though student movements before had used the tactic of occupation, this time the occupied Audimax became the center of attention, and occupation suddenly seemed to become a legitimate means to fight social injustice.

Before the movement started, for years there were protests by students of different subjects, such as International Development and Political Science, but they stayed isolated and hardly surpassed one-day mobilizations. They were directed against certain problems in each subject and were mostly aiming at putting pressure on the rector's office or the ministry in ongoing negotiations. They were largely unsuccessful but certainly had their part in laying the ground for the massive eruption of discontent in the fall of 2009.

The issues that the movement addressed were many. Frustration for politically aware students was already high since the new university law of 2002, which technically abolished or made powerless the democratic structures of co-governance for students and staff introduced in 1975. Basically, this law turned Austrian universities into authoritarian institutions. In the summer of 2009, this tendency in the law was intensified, whereas many people had demanded taking back the anti-democratic aspects of the law. Throughout the period leading up to 2009, the old diploma system was abolished and replaced by the EU-wide Bachelor-Master-system. This put an end to a comparably liberal course and credit scheme that was giving students many choices throughout their studies.

Another issue were tuition fees, which were introduced in 2001. The social democratic party, which entered government in 2006, had promised to abolish them, in 2008 finally this step was made partly, but only for students from EU countries that managed to finish their studies in minimum time. Everyone else still had to pay. On top of that, people were fed up by overfilled class rooms, having to sit on the ground or not even getting in. A very frustrating point was also the introduction of an online registration system for courses that turned getting a place in a seminar into a game of luck.

And these are just some the aspects affecting large portions of the student body, at the same time there were many issues concerning different subjects separately, including the planned abolition of some popular subjects.



The first days

So when the winter semester 2009 started, anger at the university administration and the government's political course was high. The occupation of the Academy of Fine Arts, though itself a school of some 1,000 students only, was inspiring for many, especially because it addressed issues relevant to all students and university staff far beyond that specific institution. They called for an occupation and an unlimited strike, demanding free education, access for all and democratic structures. A huge banner attached to the facade of the building read

"Reclaim (y)our education! Reclaim your body! Reclaim your brain!" In the first days, many students also from other universities in Vienna gathered there and discussed how this energy could be carried on and spread. It was decided to call for a demonstration on the 22nd of October. Some voices called for occupying a part of the University of Vienna, but many were skeptical whether this could be successful. The student body of this university is quite heterogeneous and people were fearing there wouldn't be enough support for such a radical action.

When the people gathered for the demonstration in a park close to the main building of the University of Vienna, it was raining and the

number of people was smaller than some had hoped for. Then a group of a few hundred students of International Development arrived who had started the day with a gathering on a campus half a kilometer away. The police was there but in rather small numbers, and made the decision not to allow the crowd to move on to the streets. In this situation, the option of occupying something seems to have convinced



enough people, so they walked into the university and directly to the biggest lecture hall. Within minutes, the message spread, and within two hours more than a thousand students were inside or around the Audimax. From the very beginning, the atmosphere was buzzing and people were excited that this might actually be the beginning of something bigger.

Certainly this first day was chaotic, but the message coming out from the Audimax was clear: People gathered to set off a movement that was aiming at changing university education as a whole, and with it, the society that gave birth to the university system of today. The time for fighting off single repressive measures was felt to be over. Another message that was communicated rather internally was: We don't want any representatives, and our mode of organization will be open debate and grass roots democracy.

A people's kitchen and an info-point were set up within a few hours. In the evening, there was an attempt to evict the occupation. Police tried to close down the building, but didn't succeed. More and more people managed to get in. Riot police that were trying to close the hallway in front of the Audimax were enclosed from both sides and people were chanting "Get lost! Get lost!". About two hours after they started the operation, the police was called off. A feeling of a first victory spread, more and more people came, and political discussions mixed with a party atmosphere.

An attempted coup

The second day, a Friday, after cleaning up, there was a short plenary session where people agreed to split up in working groups and have a general assembly in the evening. About forty working groups were started that day, in the following days the number surpassed a hundred. At the assembly in the evening the Audimax was packed with about a thousand people. Suddenly a group of six people had occupied the podium. They called themselves "organizing team" and claimed to have been elected by a plenary in the afternoon, a time when almost everybody was meeting in working groups. The six people on the podium set the agenda for the assembly without asking for points to be added by the rest of the crowd. They didn't moderate an open discussion, but took all the speaking time for themselves. Their main proposals were to reduce the long list of demands to three points, to make a press conference a few hours later, and then to end the occupation and call for a demonstration the following Tuesday. They were arguing that to be taken serious by the politicians, we would have to show that we are willing to give up the occupation in exchange for negotiations. But not only were they demanding to end the occupation even before any politician had shown a sign of being willing to start any negotiations, but also they neglected the fact that without the occupation there would be nothing to put any pressure on them. A big part of the crowd, reduced to being a mere audience rather than an egalitarian assembly, was going wild on their seats. A small group of reformists, more precisely Trotskists and representatives of social democratic and green student unions, had taken over control of the microphones and started to steer the emerging movement into a dead end road.

After about half an hour of listening to their useless speeches, people that had got too angry to stay on their seats had lined up at the podium to complain about the authoritarian show going on

there. Finally one woman grabbed the microphone and interrupted this nightmare. Speaking calmly, she started to explain what this movement means to her and why she's there. A verbal battle broke out because the "organizing team" saw their project of taking over the movement threatened. The whole scene turned into a tumult, and in the end most of the ready-prepared proposals that were to be voted on were dropped. The idea to end the occupation that day seemed so irrational to many that it was deemed to fail, fortunately.

Later that evening, about eighty anti-authoritarian people gathered to talk about how to avoid such a takeover of a general assembly in the future. In the following weeks, the struggle about how to organize became a dominant topic in the movement, and again and again the student unions, socialists, Trotskists and the like tried to impose some kind of centralized structure with representatives at the top. Because the anti-authoritarian current was quite strong, these attempts were never successful.

The approach that the anti-authoritarians fought for rather successfully throughout the whole time of the occupation was to keep the working groups independent and to use the general assembly as a venue for open debate, and not mainly to vote for or against proposals that were supposed to represent the whole of this heterogeneous movement. But the continuous attempts to install a passive voting democracy for the masses and a leading circle to set the agenda and to negotiate with politicians dominated most of the general assemblies. So the open exchange of views was made much harder and sometimes impossible. Much of the fascinating energy of the first days and weeks was sucked up by this struggle, and many of the most active radical people were occupied with fighting off an authoritarian takeover.

Some conclusions

In the first days, it seemed like everything was possible. Quite easily, new rooms were occupied and held. The public attention produced by the occupation of the Audimax gave a certain protection, and the university administration had obviously decided not to evict until the movement would lose its initial force. Looking at the conflict about how to organize, which was dominating many of the debates, it seems obvious that it would have been better for people of the anti-authoritarian tendency to start parallel structures and to organize their own discussions and actions. The architecture of the Audimax lecture hall with its elevated podium was perfect for the leaders of student unions and political sects to give their speeches and try to let the crowd vote on their proposals. It would have made much more sense to occupy many small rooms and organize in a horizontal fashion, only occupying big lecture halls for information exchange and debate every once in a while, when needed. The Audimax as well as the second biggest lecture hall that was occupied soon thereafter were never suitable for egalitarian exchange and discussion, even less for human needs such as resting or sleeping. In the beginning of the movement, a big portion was ready to bring the normal flow of people and commodities in the university to a halt to replace it with an alternative that was yet to be invented. Many of these people got tired because they were fighting with the reformist and authoritarian self-appointed "leaders". This was quite comfortable for the administration, whereas libertarian people organizing independently could have achieved much more.