



## Perspektiven auf globale Politik

### RUIN THROUGH FORMALIZATION? PROCESSES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT INSTITUTIONALIZATION: THE EXAMPLE OF THE INTERVENTIONIST LEFT

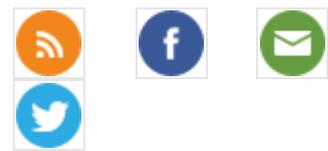
21. September 2016 · von Gast · in *Blog Series: Movements and Institutions* ·  
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*The article traces a formalization process within the Interventionist Left (IL). Against theoretical expectations that would assume a de-radicalization of aims and repertoires of protest, we find that due to the network's multi-track strategy, and the claim to radicalize existing social debates, the IL did not de-radicalize despite a formalization process and a partial integration into established systems.*

by Antonia Gross and Patrick Grosmann\*

*What brings us together is the rise of the movement against the capitalist globalization in which we participate according to our specific background and at the same time jointly as an undogmatic and interventionist left ([Interventionist Left 2004: 2](#)).*

This quote is taken from the invitation text to the first unofficial meeting of the Interventionist Left (IL). It took place in Frankfurt in November 2004 and marked a decisive moment in the foundation of the alliance. Since then, the IL has played a crucial role in the alter-globalization movement in Germany.



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This article is the result of a research project focussing on transformative processes within the alter-globalization movement. Our points of interest are specifically the processes of (de-)radicalization that occurred on the level of the movement's aims and the repertoires of protest chosen to pursue them. We assume that these changes occur due to institutionalization processes. Consequently, we pay special attention to organizational developments that lead to an enhanced formalization within the IL, in other words, the conversion from loose advisory meetings to a formally founded alliance. These processes define our understanding of institutionalization. They can be identified by a constantly growing proximity to the political party "Die Linke" and the institutionalized network "attac", alongside a stabilizing flow of resources, both material and immaterial, as well as an ongoing formalization of internal structures.

The overall question is therefore: In what way have aims and repertoires of protest of the IL changed, and why did these changes occur? The investigation period starts in November 2004, slightly before the "formal" foundation of the alliance in 2005, after local groups and networks were brought into contact through loose advisory meetings since 1999. The period of investigation ends with the Blockupy protests in 2012 and 2013, prolonging the period beyond the point of what is commonly called the peak of the alter-globalization movement – the protests against the G8-summit in Heiligendamm in 2007.

There has not been a comprehensive study on the IL as a group so far. We chose it as a research subject due to its unique internal, heterogeneous structure and its function to connect different actors. The decisive role the IL has played at most nationwide alter-globalization actions of the past years, depicts both the group's influence on and the outstanding position within the alter-globalization movement in Germany. This was especially visible at the protests against the G8-summit in Heiligendamm in 2007.

The IL is characterized by a strategic multi-track orientation, which means that ideological aims are realized through explicitly radical left-wing positions and actions. At the same time, these aims are made accessible for wider parts of society. Against the theoretical expectation, the Interventionist Left has not changed its level of radicalism concerning aims and repertoires of protest from its foundation until 2013, despite an ongoing process of institutionalization. The reason for this is the IL's strategic multi-track orientation.

### **From institutionalization to self-preservation?**

As **social movements** aim at transforming societal structures, they find themselves in a perpetuate area of tension between different groups of interest. They can also be described as an important node between ruling class and society. Societal change is not only a social movement's

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omnipresent aim, but also characteristic for the movement's own development. In that matter, internal and external factors can play a decisive role in influencing a group's development. Even if it is hard to separate these completely, we are interested in the internal factors that provoke processes of change, due to the multidimensional structure of the IL.

We focus on processes of institutionalization using a modified version of Hans-Peter Kriesi's definition. The concept of institutionalization is therefore the combination of a (growing) proximity to a political party, a stabilization of flows of resources and an ongoing formalization of internal structures. Representatives of the institutionalization-debate (See [Stickler 2005](#): 110) surmise a stair-step developing nature of movements that terminates either in the foundation of a formal organization or in its own resolution. The latter signifies that institutionalization leads to the group's self-preservation – meaning a shift from content-related to operative aims and a dependence from the political party “Die Linke” and established organizations like attac. The expected effect of the observed processes would be a de-radicalization of the group's aims and repertoires of protest. We test this traditionally assumed determinism for the example of the IL.

Based on three indicators of de-radicalization – a moderation of aims, a conventionalization of repertoires of protest and integration of the movement in established systems – we have conducted and evaluated guided interviews.

## Results

Our findings show that there were changes on the levels of organization, aims and repertoires of protest in the IL. However, these changes are not equal to de-radicalization processes. There is a partial shift from content-related aims to more operative ones. However, resulting from the strategic multi-track orientation, the IL has a hinge function between radical left-wing actors and moderate ones to keep up their aim of radicalizing societal conflicts. The fundamental and long-term aim of a radical transformation of society and its political system, therefore, has not changed.

Regarding the repertoires of protest, the increased use of moderate means like a colourful appearance at demonstrations instead of sticking to the “black block”, seem to indicate a de-radicalization process. However, these findings are just a small part of reality: Over the period of investigation, the IL has established forms of protest like civil disobedience to such a degree that even moderate actors have started to use them and accept them as conventional means of protest. Civil disobedience in terms of an announced mass blockade has been a part of the IL's actions at all important events. At the same time, the colourful appearance at demonstrations is part of the multi-track strategy during

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actions, which allows keeping up means of protest associated with the radical-left. Therefore, means of protest have not explicitly de-radicalized. The IL's motto, in one of the interviewed activist's words, stays: "Demonstration, blockade and paint bomb". The movement remains true to its claim to be radical in expression.

Solely the integration of the IL into established systems reveals a partial de-radicalization. Not only an increased proximity to actors like the political party "Die Linke", but even an enhanced level of integration into the established structures has evolved. An advanced professionalization of working methods and a tight interlocking of the IL and the party make these changes visible. Additionally, the creation of the contact **point** for social movements inside the parliamentary group of the party permits this integration into a formal frame. It shows mutual understanding of both actors that the IL is a complementary element to the work of the party "Die Linke".

In summary, a formalization process is ongoing within the IL as well as a partial integration into established systems. And yet, by keeping up the multi-track strategy, the claim to radicalize existing social debates and the capacity to critically self-reflect its own development, the IL did not de-radicalize regarding its aims and repertoires of protest.

The IL, so far, did not undertake a deterministic development that would have ended in its resolution during the period of investigation. As formalization processes only started to become a relevant matter in 2010, this finding should be rechecked by examining the movement's development from 2010 onwards.

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*This is the fifth post in the **blog series** „**Movements and Institutions**“. Check out the **introductory post** for more information on the series and click **here** for all contributions.*



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