

Autonomy

Capitalism, Class and Politics

David Eden

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DAVID EDEN

*Griffith University, Australia
and The University of Queensland, Australia*



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AUTONOMY

To all my friends and comrades, with love and hope

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Introduction

My central task is to see how three related tendencies of what I call here the perspective of autonomy can aid in the development of emancipatory anti-capitalist politics. This effort rests on the claim that overcoming capitalism is both desirable and possible. As such its core premise is out of joint with the prevailing commonsense of the day. Today the accepted position in relation to the viability of capitalism is one of two variations. Firstly that capitalism, especially in its liberal democratic mode, is taken as the only and best of all possible worlds. Until the recent ‘Global Financial Crisis’ the very term capitalism had started to disappear from our vocabulary – as if simply stating its name would create the idea that there are other possible systems or forms of social organisation.¹ Even with the return of capitalism to public discourse, this discourse has been most often one of how to *save* capitalism as all other possibilities are considered worse. The second variation may express a critique of how things are, but excludes the possibility that there is anything we can really do about it. Both the possibility of other societies and the very existences of subjects and struggles that can create them are dismissed. Apparently such hopes disappeared somewhere between the Gulag and the Shopping Mall. We are told that any alternatives to capitalism have proven to be worse than what they tried to replace and the very social forces that were meant to bring them into being have dissipated: either by the successes and opulence of the commodity economy or the immiseration it creates. When the wretched of the earth do appear on the screens of the ‘spectacle’ (or as objects of study) they do not carry the banners of the *Internationale* but rather of the atavistic claims of communalisms, identity and religion.² Or else they appear only as victims to be

1 For example: “Marco Cicala, a Leftist Italian journalist, told me about his recent weird experience: when, in an article, he once used the word “capitalism,” the editor asked him if the use of this term is really necessary – could he not replace it by a synonymous one, like “economy”? What better proof of the total triumph of capitalism than the virtual disappearance of the very term in the last 2 or 3 decades?” Slavoj Žižek, “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses,” <http://www.lacan.com/zizecology1.htm>.

2 Readers might be interested to note that on a whole the authors examined here struggle to understand the existence and the popularity of reactionary ideologies. Perhaps Holloway comes close with his critique of identity – though he makes no distinction between the identities that function as part of the normality of liberal capitalism and those that emerge as part of a reactionary critique.

saved by humanitarian intervention so they can be transformed into orderly liberal citizens.³

Those who still hold criticisms and reservations about capitalism (and who have no desire to revive a mythic past/future of organic religious or ethnic wholeness) are then offered one of two choices. They can maintain the robustness of their critique but dispense with the methods to realise it; or they can engage in the realism of liberalism in the hope of ameliorating certain injustices.⁴ Of course the dominant ideological solution to the problems of liberal capitalist democracy is more liberal capitalist democracy. Whether the issue is ecological destruction, poverty, authoritarianism, whatever, we get the same solution: a solution to be taken up in orchestrated ‘colour’ revolutions or imposed through sanctions and soldiers (with or without blue helmets; with or without cluster bombs or food aid). The attempts at amelioration soon give way under the pressures of commonsense and the very weight of capitalist society. Thus the solution to the global AIDS crisis is not free medication for the poor, a largely un-radical demand, but rather to use credit cards promoted by Bono and Oprah. The benevolence of capitalists is the replacement for even mild and reformist critiques of capitalism.

Those who keep their critiques may keep their honour. Yet when it comes to a substantive challenge, an antagonistic politics that can confront the reality of capitalism there is a stunning silence – or wise warnings about the inherent totalitarianism of all meta-narratives, especially those built around notions of revolution.⁵ And thus with a step into social democracy, transformed by commonsense into a variant of liberalism, we are soon left with no real critique at all. Of course one may easily object to the vicious brutality and stupidity of neo-conservatives – something that is even easier now that they have passed on the reins of power – but this is far from actually critiquing capitalism let alone arguing for a militant and emancipatory politics.

Often when one is outraged by the latest horror or banality of capitalism part of our objection is to its seemingly overwhelming power to shape and compel our existence. The underside of this objection is our own subjective feeling of

3 For an excellent critique of the latter see Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2002).

4 Whilst I disagree with his conclusions about viable communist praxis, Žižek’s recent polemical review of Simon Critchely’s book *Infinitely Demanding* makes a similar if more robust diagnosis. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, “Resistance Is Surrender,” http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01_.html.

5 This is the common political position of much of what is called post-modernism and also amongst English language Cultural Studies. Žižek argues that “today’s critical theory, in the guise of ‘cultural studies’, is performing the ultimate service for the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible: in the predominant form of postmodern ‘cultural criticism’, the very mention of capitalism as a world system tends to give rise to accusations of ‘essentialism’, ‘fundamentalism’, and so on.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 218.

powerlessness. Take for example this insight into the role of capital in shaping our lives made by Wendy Brown:

Yet if capitalism has all but disappeared as a subject and object of political theory (notwithstanding routine drive-by references to ‘globalization’), capitalism is and remains our life form. Understood not just as a mode of production, distribution, or exchange but as an unparalleled maker of history, capital arguably remains the dominant force in the organization of collective human existence, conditioning every element of social, political, cultural, intellectual, emotional, and kin life. Indeed, what for Marx constituted the basis for a critique of capital deeper than its exploitation and denigration of labor, deeper than the disparities between wealth and poverty it organized, is that capital is a larger, more creative and more nearly total form of power than anything else in human history, yet it fundamentally escapes human control.⁶

Brown’s position, which potently describes the power of capital, also describes our impotence. Any theory that wants to abolish capitalism has to invert the image so perfectly described by Brown. It has to show not the power of capitalism but its weakness, not our hopelessness but our fecundity. It rests on arguing that the subjective experience of powerlessness does not constitute our objective reality: that there is something *more*.

The Possibilities or Absences of Class

Historically the revolutionary idea of class fulfilled this function. Not class as a simple socio-economic category for the marking of inequalities but class as the idea that within the conditions of exploitation exist the forces and agents for the overturning of the dominant order. There are many different ideas out there about what *class* is. Most are simply sociological: in that they identify the formal or submerged divisions of wealth, power, influence etc. In this sense class is a cake you can cut many ways. Those who are familiar with orthodox Marxism would be familiar with the idea that the class is determined by the relations to the means of production; thus the working class are those that have only their labour-power to sell. But if we follow Marx (and here I am interested less in Marx as the ‘Father’ of Marxism and more as Marx as the acidic enemy of capital) then class functions in a very different way.

In Marx’s work we find two different notions of class (famously rendered by his distinction between a class in itself and a class for itself). On one hand the proletariat is a material and social force whose existence is the living negation of capitalism. As Marx writes in *A Critiques of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*:

6 Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 68.

...a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no *particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*; a sphere of society which can no longer lay claim to a historical title, but merely to a *human* one... a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from – and thereby emancipating – all the other spheres of society, which is, in a word, the *total loss* of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through the *total redemption of humanity*. The dissolution of society as a particular class is the *proletariat*.⁷

Here the proletariat has been created by capitalism and is itself the very product of the accumulation of capitalism's dissolution of all previous social bonds. It is in this nothingness that drives the proletariat to emancipate itself by abolishing itself and the entire edifice of society with it and thus creating freedom for all. Here the proletariat is the only social force that can express the core revolutionary urge: '*I am nothing and I should be everything*.'⁸ Its condition in capitalism means that it cannot simply struggle for a better place in the social order but rather is compelled to struggle against the social order in total and to negate its own condition as being proletariat.

In *The German Ideology* and the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx and Engels simultaneously radicalised and ground this insight. It is the alienation inherent in labouring under capitalism which estranges individual and general human creativity in the commodity and thus creates the revolutionary nature of the proletariat. In the *German Ideology* the proletariat is seen not merely as the subject of exploitation, but as those who through their condition of exploitation are formed as a radical substance that can realise the emancipation of all through the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Their power arises despite and because of their apparent powerlessness:

Only the proletarians of the present day, who are completely shut off from all self-activity, are in a position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity, which consists in the appropriation of a totality of productive forces and in the thus postulated development of a totality of capacities.⁹

On the other hand Marx, particularly in his later writings sees the working-class as labour-power, as a *function* of capital. The 'proletariat' and thus 'communism' only makes a negligible appearance in *Capital*. The capitalist's purchase of labour-

7 Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1992), 256.

8 *Ibid.*, 254.

9 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology Part One*, 3rd ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 92–93.

power incorporates labour-power as *variable capital*. Labour-power that functions as variable capital is the source of surplus-value: profit. Here the working class is not a subject but rather an object. Marx explains this relationship between capital and labour as follows: 'The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but – a tanning'¹⁰ Thus we have the working class as proletariat: the rebel who must abolish all oppression to free herself (including its existence as the working class.) Alternative the working class is the physical bearer of labour-power: the source of value incorporated into capital's labour process.

In Marx's work there is a unity between these two aspects. This is expressed most clearly in the *Communist Manifesto* though it is less clear if Marx believed in this unity throughout his entire life.¹¹ In the *Manifesto* Marx argues that the development of capitalism expands the condition of proletarianisation and *automatically* leads to the radicalisation of labour. Marx and Engels argue that capitalist development leads to an increasing solidity, homogenisation and immiseration of labour. The development of capitalism steels the proletariat and robs it of all illusions, thus what capitalism produces above all 'are its own grave diggers.'¹²

It is debatable how much Marx's ideas on class were taken up by the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th century: especially those sections that cloaked themselves in his name. However we can be sure that the paradigm of class that constituted the old revolutionary project has come asunder. It has been broken from many sides: the structural changes to capitalism, the incorporation and management of social democracy and the radical claims and challenges of other social struggles. The professed centrality of the industrial worker created a privileged site and methodology of struggle that marginalised the marginalised. It often functioned as a reified image that was used against novel, inspiring and daring struggles and revolts against capitalism – especially those on the campuses, from the kitchens, out of the ghettos and in the peripheries. The official labour movement dragged the working class into the butchery of the First World War and then into class peace and compromise. Finally the restructuring of post-Fordism has seen the mass factory broken apart and new and strange organisations of labour created in complex arrangements across the globe.

Thus many who are trying to rethink and reconceive radical politics have moved away from the notion of class. Simon Critchley's work is a prime example of this. Critchley argues that Marx is wrong on two counts. Firstly

10 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 280.

11 Cf. Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

12 Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848 Political Writings* vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1993), 79.

that the homogenisation that is part of Marx's understanding of class – most noticeably in *The Communist Manifesto* – is wrong. 'Rather than a simplification of class positions, one might talk of a multiplication of class actors in society, of society being made up by an increasingly complex fabric of class identifications, rendered even more intricate by other sets of identifications, whether gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or whatever.'¹³ More than this Critchley argues against the idea that capital produces its own abolition: 'one might say that *capitalism capitalizes* – it simply produces more capitalism.'¹⁴ Thus Critchley attempts to apply Badiou to develop a form of 'neo-anarchism' but ultimately cannot come up with much more than a form of non-statist social democracy. It is a politics of specific fights in 'concrete situations' which Critchley admits is 'dirty, detailed, local, practical and largely unthrilling work.'¹⁵ Without imagining deep antagonisms against capitalism, it seems difficult to imagine the end of capitalism. Or one can only imagine the end of capitalism as a vortex of catastrophes. The potency of notions of class is that they imagine these antagonism to constitute everyday life, and thus pose the living possibility of an alternative to capitalism *inside capitalism itself*. But class must be a materialist category not a dream. If those like Critchely are correct – and I will argue that they are not – then there is no point just sticking our fingers in our ears and pretending the world looks like the factory floor of the 1930s.

Here I present different voices that radically rework the idea of class and attempt to revive its emancipatory potential – and do so in ways that make it refreshing and strange. Each voice – Antonio Negri and Paulo Virno, the Midnight Notes Collective and John Holloway – is, in the broadest sense, part a tendency of 'the perspective of autonomy' or 'Autonomist Marxism'. Obviously I use the word 'tendency' very loosely (can an individual be a tendency?): they do not constitute a tendency in an older, Leninist sense. Rather each voice journeys in a certain direction, makes certain arguments, and suggests certain ways forwards. They have been chosen as subjects because they all have something very interesting and novel to say. Also, with the exception of Antonio Negri, there exist, to my knowledge, no sustained studies undertaken in English on their work. They have also been chosen because each of them illuminates a broader position about the overturning of capitalism. Negri and Virno focus on the necessity of going *beyond* capitalism. The Midnight Notes Collective on building and defending an *outside*. Holloway's work largely focusses on negation, on being *against* capitalism.

13 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 97.

14 Ibid., 98.

15 Ibid., 132.

Communism?

In the following pages – perhaps to the surprise or dismay of some of our readers – we will speak not only of labour, exploitation and capitalism, but also of class conflict, proletarian struggles, and even communist futures. Do dinosaurs still walk the earth?!¹⁶

Throughout this book the term communism is used to signify both the movement against capitalism and the post-capitalist condition of emancipation. This may seem anachronistic, naive, obscene and/or callous. To the dominant understanding of our times communism is nothing more than either a tragic delusion or the pure expression of totalitarianism. Communism, we are told, equals Year Zero. Also does not the current ascendancy of anarchism as the hegemonic ideology in anti-capitalism in the North make it unnecessary to use a term so covered in blood and filth? Especially since communism is equated with state control, the overt anti-authoritarianism and anti-statism of anarchism seems to mean that it is not only ‘cleaner’, it also responds directly to the bitter failings of the 20th century. I use communism in this study simply because all three tendencies still describe their own positions as communist, and also because I believe communism as a concept, maintains an ethical, philosophical and political potency. Indeed communism is being used more often as term for struggle in the most unexpected places.¹⁷

Communism will probably remain for many only the name of a crime; but we must also acknowledge that it has existed and continues to exist as a name for collective emancipation. Words after all do not have a stable meaning. As the Invisible Committee write: ‘[c]ertain words are like battlegrounds: their meaning, revolutionary or reactionary, is a victory, to be torn from the jaws of struggle.’¹⁸ The sharpest critiques of Stalinism have been, and are, often made by those who maintain a fidelity to communism and who use materialist understandings to expose the links and discontinuities between ideologies and structures of a society. There exist many powerful communist critiques of the party-state, and the perspective of autonomy is one of them. The authors presented here are all attempting to revive communism as a tool to understand both our struggles and the potential future they create. But this cannot be done by simply wishing away the legacy of Stalinism – rather the authors, in their different ways, try to grapple with the failures of ‘really existing socialism’ and develop an understanding of the present, a politics of struggle, and a vision of the future that is founded on the possibilities of freedom.

16 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labour of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 2.

17 For example amongst the struggles on the campuses of California.

18 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 16.

But if communism is not the reign of the party-state then what is it? For if communism means anything, if there is anything to it, it is an opposition to the complex and bound-together forms of domination and control that constitute capitalism – the freeing of human potential through the self-activity and revolt. Of course there is a great variety of visions of what emancipation looks like amongst communists – part of the task of this thesis is to see how different authors take up the challenge of envisioning other worlds. Of course there is also the tendency of many communists to refuse to make blueprints of the future – rather they critique the present and try to aid the development of struggles. Such a position trusts the creativity of those in struggle to create the forms of its freedom. In words communism can only be described in the broadest of terms, but it is lived in the most vibrant of ways.

Marx envisioned communism as the profound transformation of social life through the activity and struggle of millions, ‘the alteration of men (sic) on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*.’¹⁹ A revolution not only to destroy the old order; but also as a series of processes that will change those who carry out the revolution – so they can free themselves from ‘all the muck of ages.’²⁰ A clear description of this position is made in *The German Ideology* by Marx and Engels:

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from premises now in existence.²¹

This means that communism cannot be thought of as just a nice alternative. Rather it already exists, at least as a potential, in the lived actual conditions of society. To practice communism then is to practice a material critique of the material conditions: to see, show and make the possibilities of the present radically different. The Invisible Committee again (who, astute readers would note, might squirm at being placed so close to Negri²²): ‘[c]ommunism then, as presupposition and experiment.’²³ Hardt and Negri write that ‘[t]here are two closely related elements of the communist theoretical practice proposed by this quote from Marx.’²⁴ These are the ‘analysis of the “present state of things”,’ and grasping what

19 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), 43.

20 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology Part One*, 94–95.

21 Ibid., 56–57.

22 For *Tiqqun*’s, who are the Invisible Committee’s predecessors, critique of Negri see *Tiqqun, Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 159–63.

23 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 16.

24 Hardt and Negri, *Labour of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, 5.

Marx calls “the real movement” that destroys’ that present state. In other words communist analysis tries to develop understandings of the present state of things that can then aid the creation of collective politics.

As for anarchism, there is a general ambivalence towards it amongst all three tendencies. Holloway is willing to acknowledge the similarities of his position to anarchism, whilst Negri emphasises the differences.²⁵ However in the English speaking global North outside of the university it is most often only amongst anarchist circles that you will find any ongoing discussion of the perspective of autonomy. The communism of the perspective of autonomy is, in content, deeply similar to the content of what many people call anarchy. Is there a substantial difference? At the level of theory probably not; there are of course strong and rigid historical divisions between actual political tendencies. There are a number of anarchist critiques of the authors presented here.²⁶ The core claim that Virno, Negri, the Midnight Notes Collective and Holloway make, that more desirable ways of living are possible through the radical self-activity and rebellion of those that are compelled to labour, should resonate with many emancipatory tendencies and militants, whatever their label.

There is a communist critique of anarchism which focusses on the question of materialism. Speaking crudely communists see communism arising from specific and concrete historical conditions – *some* elements of anarchism either ascribe it to some essential human nature or to the correctness of its ideology. Debord acerbically writes that anarchism is an ‘*ideology of pure freedom*.’²⁷ That is, it exists as a series of wonderful ideas to which people must be won and transformed – ideas that exist seemingly exterior to the historical conditions of our lives. Debord here is characteristically too savage and he downplays the pluralism and intellectual freedom that exists within anarchism. Yet the core of his critique is an accurate description of the failings of much of anarchism. Anarchism has and does delineate a space where many brilliant ideas and utopian dreams develop and take flight – but it is often ungrounded and absorbed in its own ideology. Against this, communist critique (at its best) rigorously tries to free itself from ideology, to be rather a series of tools to be taken up in the struggles, deeply concerned with contradiction, and engaged in the real, existing material conditions.

25 John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 12; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 336.

26 See for example the particularly strident critique of Negri from an insurrection anarchist position Chrissus and Odotheus, “Barbarians: Disordered Insurgence,” (London: Elephant Editions, 2004). This text is also an example of the long animosity between anarchist and *operaismo* and *post-operaismo* tendencies in Italy. The details of which, and those of the conflicts that continue within different Italian fragments and elements of *post-operaismo* itself, remain opaque to outsiders.

27 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press), 49.