

# From *operaismo* to ‘autonomist Marxism’

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## Review article:

***Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* by Steve Wright** (London: Pluto Press, 2002)

***Reading ‘Capital’ Politically* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.) by Harry Cleaver** (Leeds: AK/Anti-thesis, 2000)

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The Italian ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969 was one of the high points of late 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary struggle, and is associated with *operaismo* (‘workerism’), a Marxian approach that focused on rank-and-file struggles in contrast to what was seen as the politics and opportunism of the dominant (Stalinist) left. The wave of social struggles of that year was echoed, although with important differences, in the tumultuous ‘Movement of 1977’. Under the banner of *autonomia*, the workerists’ analysis of class struggle was extended through the actions of groups outside the workplace. Intense street-fighting, self-reduction or outright refusal of bills and fares, the explicit raising of radical demands such as the abolition of wage-labour: all this hinted at a movement for which what counts as ‘political’ had been seriously questioned by struggles around wider desires and needs. Readers will be aware of workerism and *autonomia* today through the works of its most well-known theorists, such as Negri, through the US journal *Midnight Notes*, and perhaps through the aut-op-sy website and discussion list.<sup>1</sup> For many of those dissatisfied with the versions of Marxism and anarchism available to them in the UK, the notions of ‘autonomy’ and ‘autonomist’ have positive associations. For example, the recent ‘anti-capitalist’ mobilizations of J18 and Seattle both drew on themes and language associated with *autonomia*, such as autonomous struggles and diversity.<sup>2</sup> However, the history and theory surrounding workerism and *autonomia* are not always well known. The recent publication of two books on *operaismo* and *autonomia* and their theoretical heritage testify to the continued interest in this current. Harry Cleaver’s *Reading ‘Capital’ Politically* was originally published in 1979, and has now been republished, with a new preface. Cleaver’s Introduction, in particular, has been a point of reference to many in grasping the significance of post-war developments, including struggles that don’t necessarily express themselves in traditional forms. Steve Wright’s *Storming Heaven* presents a critical history of the Italian movement’s political and theoretical development in relation to the struggles of the 1950s, 60s and 70s – a history which, we argue, now supersedes the Cleaver presentation.

The publication of these two books gives us the opportunity for a critical reappraisal of the contributions of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, and Cleaver’s attempt to keep them alive. In particular, we will examine five issues. First, there is

the question of whether the concept of ‘autonomy’ is adequate as a basis for a class analysis. Second, we argue that the workerists and hence those who have followed them suffered from a lack of an adequate critique of leftism and nationalism. Third, there is the issue of the ambiguity of those influenced by workerism in their account of the status of the ‘law of value’. Fourth, the failure of workerism and of *autonomia* to theorize retreat in the class struggle can be linked to an implicit (or even explicit) satisfaction among some theorists in this tradition with the current limits of the class struggle. Finally, there is the question of whether the political reading of Marx’s *Capital* offered by Cleaver actually works. We conclude that the defeat of the movements that sustained the development of workerism has led both to the abandonment of the project of world revolution and the ideologization of theory among theorists in this tradition.

## 1 Promise and limits of an ‘autonomist’ class analysis

To understand the workerist and the subsequent ‘autonomist Marxist’ take on class we need to go back to the emergence of the current’s key theoretical concepts.

### 1.1 Classical Workerism

The origins of *operaismo* lie in research carried out on workers’ behaviour in the 1950s. The concern of the research was with workers’ own needs and perceptions: their definitions of their problems on the shopfloor, and the nature of their struggles. Wright (p. 63) cites the following as the core features of the workerist perspective emerging from this research: the identification of the working class with the labour subsumed to the immediate process of production; an emphasis on the wage struggle as a key terrain of political conflict; and the insistence that the working class was the driving force within capitalist society.<sup>3</sup> All these features were

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<sup>3</sup> In political discourse in the UK, ‘workerism’ is usually a derogatory term for approaches we disagree with for fetishizing the significance of workplace struggles (and dismissing those outside the workplace). Italian *operaismo*, on the other hand, refers to the inversion of perspective from that of the operation of capital to that of the working class: ‘We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital’s own reproduction must be tuned.’ (M. Tronti, 1964, ‘Lenin in England’, in *Working Class*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons/aut\\_html/](http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons/aut_html/)

<sup>2</sup> The J18 mobilization sought to link up the autonomous struggles of ‘environmentalists, workers, the unemployed, indigenous peoples, trade unionists, peasant groups, women’s networks, the landless, students, peace activists and many more’. See <http://bak.spc.org/j18/site/english.html>

a reaction against, and the basis for a developed alternative to, the productivist reformism and (bourgeois) politics of the traditional (Stalinist) left, i.e. the PCI (the Italian Communist Party, by far the largest Communist Party in Western Europe). For the PCI, 'politics' was conducted primarily through parliament (and the union bureaucracy). By contrast, in stressing the significance of workers' own struggles within industries, the workerists rejected the classical Leninist distinction between 'political' and 'economic' struggles.

Through relating workerist theory to the context of the struggles through which it emerged, *Storming Heaven* examines workerism's most well-known category – that of *class composition*, which Wright (p. 49) defines as the various behaviours which arise when particular forms of labour-power are inserted in specific processes of production. *Operaismo* also introduced the concept of the *mass worker*, which describes the subject identified through the research on the FIAT and Olivetti factories. What characterizes the mass worker is its relatively simple labour; its place at heart of immediate process of production; and its lack of the bonds which had tied skilled workers to production (Wright, p. 107).

## 1.2. Workerism beyond workers

As Cleaver points out, the traditional Marxian analysis, and political practice, understands production and work itself as neutral. The aim is to take over the means of production, and run them 'in the interests of the workers', to the ends of a fairer distribution. However, the research on FIAT and Olivetti had shown that the division of labour, and the definition of skills, operated as a process of domination rather than being a technical matter. The workerists therefore proposed concepts intended to grasp this non-neutrality of factory organization and machinery. Particularly important here is the work of Panzieri, who had argued that, unlike the reformist Stalinists, the working class recognized the unity of the 'technical' and 'despotic' moments of the organization of production.<sup>4</sup> Such concepts pointed to the limitations of workers' self-management which could be seen to be merely the self-management of one's own domination.

Tronti developed this line of analysis with the notion of the *social factory*. The idea of the factory as locus of power was extended to the wider society as a whole which was seen to be organized around the same principles of domination and value (re)production.<sup>5</sup> The implication of this was that, since

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*Autonomy and the Crisis* (London: Red Notes/Conference of Socialist Economists, 1979). While the Italian usage is clearly positive rather than negative, as we shall see, one of the eventual limits of (versions of) Italian workerism was precisely the fetishizing of struggles on the factory floor.

<sup>4</sup> 'The new "technical bases" progressively attained in production provide capitalism with new possibilities for the consolidation of its power... But for this very reason, working-class overthrow of the system is a negation of the entire organization in which capitalist development is expressed – and first and foremost of technology as it is linked to productivity.' (R. Panzieri, 'The capitalist use of machinery: Marx versus the objectivists' in P. Slater (ed.), *Outlines of a Critique of Technology* (pp. 49-60), London: Inks Links.

<sup>5</sup> 'At the highest level of *capitalist development*, the social relation becomes a *moment* of the relation of production, the whole of society becomes an *articulation* of production; in other words, the whole of

social organization in society is not neutral, then resistance outside the factory could be a valid moment of the class struggle.

Yet the emphasis on those (factory) workers in the immediate process of production meant that *operaismo* was caught in a tension if not a contradiction. Tronti and others were unable to reconcile their notion of the social factory with the emphasis they wanted to place on what happened in large factories: even as they pointed beyond the mass worker, workerists continued to privilege the role of the factory proletariat.

*Autonomia* (the 'area of autonomy'), a loose network of groupings including and influenced by radical workerists, emerged in the 1970s, following the collapse of some of the workerist groups. This new movement also saw the influx of a lot of younger people; they were often university educated or working in small manufacturing or the service sector. They characteristically emphasized the localized and personal over class-wide struggle, need over duty, and difference over homogeneity (Wright, p. 197). They thus sought to stretch the concept of class composition beyond the immediate labour-process in the factories. They were also less committed to totalizing concepts of class and to their workplace identities; and they had less time for the PCI and the unions. Some of these tendencies found theoretical expression in Bologna's seminal 'The tribe of moles'.<sup>6</sup>

The most controversial theoretical development in this period was Toni Negri's argument that the mass worker had been replaced by what he called the *socialized worker* (*operaio sociale*). Negri's thesis was that capital, while maintaining the firm as the heart of its valorization process, drives toward a greater socialization of labour, going beyond the simple extension of the immediate process of production towards a complete redefinition of the category of productive labour. The extent of this category, according to Negri, was now 'relative to the level of the advancement of the process of subsumption of labour to capital... [W]e can now say that the concept of wage labourer and the concept of productive labourer tend towards homogeneity', with the resulting constitution of 'the new social figure of a unified proletariat'.<sup>7</sup> In short, all moments of the circulation process, and even reproduction, were seen to be productive of value; the distinction between productive and non-productive labour was obliterated. While *Capital* Volume 1 assumes the reproduction of labour-power in the form of the family and education, Negri's theoretical innovation was to focus on this as a locus of struggle. Negri suggested that, historically, there had been a shift in emphasis after the end of the 1960s whereby capital adopted a strategy to avoid exclusive dependence on the traditional working class and to rely more heavily on the labour-power of social groups who were, at that time, marginal

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society exists as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over the whole of society. It is on this basis that the machine of the political state tends ever-increasingly to become one with the figure of the *collective capitalist*.' (M. Tronti 1971 *Operai e capitale*, Turin: Einaudi).

<sup>6</sup> S. Bologna (1977). 'The tribe of moles', In *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis* (op. cit.).

<sup>7</sup> A. Negri (1973). 'Partito operaio contro il lavoro', in S. Bologna et al., (eds.) *Crisi e Organizzazione Operaia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974)

and less organized.<sup>8</sup> Thus he and his followers looked to the organized unemployed, the women's movement, the practice of self-reduction and the increasing instances of organized looting that characterised the Movement of 1977 as valid moments of anti-capitalist practice; the revolutionary process was understood as a pluralism of organs of proletarian self-rule (Wright, p. 173). As Wright discusses, Negri's account was criticized as ultimately too abstract because it identified power as the dimension linking all the social groups and practices referred to as constituting the socialized worker; this emphasis had the effect of flattening out differences between the different groups and practices. The redefinition of the category of productive labour is problematic for the same reason. Moreover, it led Negri to draw over-optimistic conclusions as to the class composition resulting from the real subsumption of labour to capital. The 'socialized worker' also seemed to change over time. At first, the socialized worker characteristically referred to precarious workers; later, as Negri's perspective wavered with his disconnection from the movement, it was embodied in the 'immaterial worker', as exemplified by the computer programmer.<sup>9</sup>

The area of autonomy reached its zenith with the Movement of 1977. However, it wasn't just the well-documented massive state repression, in the form of violence and imprisonment, that led to the breaking of *autonomia* and the collapse of workerism. The development of *autonomia* and the emphasis on extra-workplace struggles went hand in hand with the isolation of the radical workerists from the wider working class. It was this isolation and hence pessimism in the possibility of a wider movement that led many ultimately to end up back in the PCI - or to join the armed groups.

### 1.3 Cleaver's account of the working class

One problem often raised against the communist project is that of the supposed disappearance of its agent – the working class. Marx's conception of revolution is said to be linked with a class structure that was disappearing. This was a particularly pressing issue at the time Cleaver originally wrote *Reading 'Capital' Politically*, with Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class* and similar sociological analyses becoming fashionable. Cleaver offers a response to this by suggesting that the working class is just changing shape and is in fact everywhere.<sup>10</sup> For many of us, the most influential aspect of Harry Cleaver's *Reading 'Capital' Politically* is less his 'political' account of the relation between value and struggles (which we discuss below) than his Introduction, in which a history of movements and ideas is used to develop an 'autonomist' conceptualization of the working class in opposition to that of traditional Marxism as well as to those

who wanted to argue that the working class was disappearing. (In fact, while Cleaver's book was photocopied and passed around by loads of people, most people we know only read the Introduction!)

Cleaver's class analysis can be seen to follow on from Tronti's concept of the social factory and Bologna's 'The tribe of moles'. Thus, in his account of developments in Italy, he suggests that the struggles of non-factory workers - predominantly women in this case - both embodied and clarified the new class composition (p. 71). 'Community' struggles around the self-reduction of rents and food and utility prices, he suggests, enabled these women participants to become more conscious of their own role in value-production. Hence their own autonomous activity could be grasped as an essential part of the class struggle, rather than being limited to the auxiliary role of supporting the wage-based struggles of their menfolk. Cleaver takes the Wages for Housework campaign as the highest expression of this development.

In the new preface to *Reading 'Capital' Politically*, Cleaver (pp. 16-17) elaborates on this account of the nature of class. Descriptively, an essential point here is the extension of the category of the working class to cover not only the waged but also the unwaged. Cleaver claims that this expanded definition is justified by historical research (e.g. Linebaugh's *The London Hanged*<sup>11</sup>) which, it is suggested, shows in the political culture of artisans and others that the working class predates the predominance of the wage. Conceptually, the crux of Cleaver's argument is in terms of a social group's exploitation by, and hence struggles against, capital. Moreover, the struggles of the social group as such, rather than their subsumption within a general working class struggle, are taken to be significant for their self-transformative potential. For Cleaver, the ability of such social groups to re-create themselves in struggle points to a problem with traditional (narrow) definitions of the working class, which said nothing about this self-re-creation.<sup>12</sup> In line with the tradition of *autonomia*, Cleaver's account recognizes resistance to capital as an inherent feature of the majority of humanity, rather than - as in sociological and some Marxist accounts of Western class structure - limited to the industrial proletariat.

<sup>11</sup> P. Linebaugh (1991). *The London Hanged*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<sup>12</sup> Negri introduced the term 'self-valorization' for this process of autonomous self-development (see *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, New York/London: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991). The attraction of the concept lies in its implication that the working class is an active subject, not just a function of capital's valorization needs, and whose strategy is to take what it needs. However, in Marx, the concept of 'valorization' refers to capital's own operation - specifically, its use of our activity to expand value, that is, our alienated labour. It therefore seems extremely odd to employ it to refer to our activity against capital - unless that activity too is itself alienated in some way. In the preface to the second edition of *Reading 'Capital' Politically*, Cleaver acknowledges that the concept is problematic (as he does in his interview with Massimo de Angelis in *Vis-a-Vis*, 1993). However, he still uses it to explain that, in being against capital, autonomous struggles are also for 'a diverse variety of new ways of being'. See also his 'The inversion of class perspective in Marxian theory: From valorization to self-valorization' in W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn & K. Psychopedis (eds.) *Open Marxism: Volume II: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto).

<sup>8</sup> See Negri's (1982) 'Archaeology and project: The mass worker and the social worker', in *Revolution Retrieved: Selected Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis & New Social Subjects 1967-83*. (London: Red Notes, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> See 'Decadence: The theory of decline or the decline of theory? Part two', footnote 83, *Aufheben* 3, Summer 1994.

<sup>10</sup> An opposite Marxian response to the 'problem' of the class basis of revolution, as provided by Moishe Postone in *Time Labor and Social Domination* and the Krisis group, is to retain Marx's work as a critique of commodity society and value but disconnect this from class.

Cleaver's account of an 'autonomist' tradition of struggles and theories was important for us, as for many people seeking an adequate account of class struggle in the 1980s and 90s. But, re-reading Cleaver's definition of the working class now, and in particular the social groups he seeks to include (*as* social groups) within this definition, leads us to argue that his account is not sufficient as a class analysis. The question is whether exploitation is a feature of the social group he refers to *as such*, and therefore whether resistance is inherent for the group as such. Our argument is that there are differences and distinctions that matter within and between the social categories that Cleaver identifies as part of the working class. Wright argues that *operaismo* and *autonomia* employ concepts which serve to flatten out and lose important differences and distinctions in class analysis. Our point is that Cleaver is heir to this tendency.

To flesh this argument out, let us consider each of the social categories that Cleaver wants to (re-)define as part of the working class.

Before doing so, however, we need to stress here the inadequacy of playing the game of treating classes as categories into which we place people. For us, class is not a form of stratification but a *social relation*; rather than attempting to classify people we need to understand how class is formed, as a process, within a relationship of antagonism.<sup>13</sup> It is true that individuals are situated differently with regards the fundamental social relation of how labour is pumped out of the direct producers (and that identities and perceptions of interests linked with these identities can form around these situations). But our argument with Cleaver's (re)classifications is inadequate in its own right, and needs to be read within a broader argument about class as a relation not (just) a stratum.

Cleaver states (p. 73):

The identification of the leading role of the unwaged in the struggles of the 1960s in Italy, and the extension of the concept [of working class political recomposition] to the peasantry, provided a theoretical framework within which the struggles of American and European students and housewives, the unemployed, ethnic and racial minorities, and Third World [sic] peasants could all be grasped as moments of an international cycle of working class struggle.

<sup>13</sup> The point is well put in 'Marianne Duchamp talks to Tursan Polat about class': 'First, there are differences, and not mere differences but oppositions of the first order, between the sociologic conception of *socio-economic categories* on the one hand and the hegelo-communist conception of *social-class* on the other. In the sociological conception, socio-economic categories, including 'class' and an inexhaustible number of constituent sub-strata, are defined: (a) beginning with the particular i.e. the individual, i.e. analytically/inductively; (b) as transtemporal aggregates of individuals who share commonalities of occupation, income, and even culture; (c) as static and normal presence within any society, i.e. biologically. In the hegelo-communist conception, social classes are defined: (a) beginning from the whole i.e. the social form i.e. synthetically/deductively; (b) as active bearers of the mutually opposed historical interests inherent within the social form; (c) with a view toward the abolition of state and economy; i.e. necrologically.' <http://www.angelfire.com/pop2/pkv/class.htm>

### *The unemployed*

Organized unemployed struggles played a significant role in the Italian experience of the 70s – the Neapolitan movement for example was able to mobilize thousands of unemployed workers, becoming the region's central reference point for militant activity (Wright, p. 165). In these pages and in other publications, we have given much attention to such struggles, which for us are often over benefits, for the very simple reason that benefits are the other side of the coin of the working wage<sup>14</sup> (and because we ourselves have relied on benefits so much!). The unemployed are the lowest stratum of the proletariat – the most dispossessed – and are likely to have a background in the working class as such. In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx demonstrates that the unemployed are necessary to value-production. Since they are defined as a category by their relationship to the wage, the unemployed are obviously part of the working class. But Marx also makes clear how the unemployed function to instil discipline in those in work and hence put 'a curb on their pretensions'.<sup>15</sup> For traditional Marxism, the unemployed as such cannot play the same role as the industrial working class; they lack both the leverage and the potential for revolutionary class consciousness of those in work. In this perspective, unemployed struggles must necessarily be reduced to the role of tail-ending workers' strikes; any unemployed 'autonomy' could too easily take the form of scabbing.<sup>16</sup>

However, the functions of a social stratum for capital do not necessarily define the limits of the subjectivity associated with it. Historically, it has often been the least self-organized, or the least autonomous, among the unemployed who have scabbed. The unemployed are, among those Cleaver cites, the social group which can least controversially be defined as part of the working class.

### 'Race'

In the case of 'race' and ethnicity, what is being referred to here by Cleaver is the construction by capital of divisions within the working class in order to create and justify competition amongst workers. To the extent that 'racial' and ethnic identities are constructed, working class organization itself is 'racialized' or 'ethnicized'. In other words, it is because racialization and ethnicity is part of way that class division is constructed and the working class decomposed that people might use 'racial' and ethnic identities as a basis for organizing against capital. Blacks and those other ethnic

<sup>14</sup> See *Dole Autonomy versus the Re-imposition of Work: Analysis of the Current Tendency to Workfare in the UK* (only available now on our website), 'Unemployed recalcitrance and welfare restructuring in the UK today' (in *Stop the Clock! Critiques of the New Social Workhouse*) and 'Re-imposition of work in Britain and the "Social Europe"' (in *Aufheben* #8, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> p. 792, Penguin edition.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in the 1930s, the Communist Party, which nominally controlled the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), saw the NUWM's role as limited to tail-ending existing industrial strikes. The NUWM leaders, despite their membership of the CPGB, asserted the role of the unemployed movement to act in its own right. See Wal Hannington (1936), *Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936: My Life and Struggles Amongst the Unemployed* (Wakefield: EP Publishing).

minorities who organize and resist autonomously do so because they, as a social stratum, experience class more harshly, and are more often located at the proletarian pole of the class relation; and this is because of the way 'blackness' and 'whiteness' have been socially constructed (in the USA). Those ethnic minorities which do not engage in such autonomous action tend to be those that are more socially mobile; i.e. in US terms they become 'white'.

Particularly in the USA,<sup>17</sup> blacks are atypical of ethnic and 'racial' groups: always at the bottom of the pile, even in relation to other ethnic minorities. Blacks are the prototype of the working class; and the black middle class is the exception that proves the rule.

### *Women*

The emergence of women as collective subjects of social change contributed to a reassessment of *operaismo's* class analysis (Wright, p. 133). In particular, women's demands for a universal social wage were seen to point to a solution to the limits of the over-emphasis on the working wage (Wright, pp. 123, 135). Some in *autonomia*, such as the Rosso group, began to talk of the emergence of a 'new female proletariat'; for them, along with the unemployed, feminists were seen as integral components of the new social subject – the 'socialized worker'.

Likewise, for Cleaver, women are a key example of a social category that, through their struggles, should be grasped as part of the working class - in particular 'housewives' demanding wages for their work of reproducing labour-power.<sup>18</sup> From our perspective, it is clear that it is working class women - defined here in terms of the class position of their family - who are more likely to be involved in such struggles. Better-off women are less likely to need and want the 'transitional demand' of a wage, and can achieve 'autonomy' individually (through pursuing a career) rather than needing to organize collectively. Moreover, the form through which women have challenged exploitative gender relations has varied historically. The identification and questioning of women's roles that emerged in the 1960s was part of a theorization and challenge to the reproduction of capitalist society more broadly, and hence tended to be expressed as a movement of social change. But, particularly since the retreat of the wider class struggle, feminism has instead tended to be an ideology justifying either a reduction of the political to the personal (with no link to social transformation) or a vehicle for middle class women's careerism. Without being grounded in - rather than trying to form the basis of - a class analysis, the emphasis of the struggles of women as women inevitably risks this dead-end.

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<sup>17</sup> American black struggles inspired the Italian workerists: 'American Blacks do not simply represent, but rather *are*, the proletariat of the Third World within the very heart of the capitalist system... *Black Power means therefore the autonomous revolutionary organisation of Blacks*' (Potere Operaio veneto-emiliano, 1967, cited in Wright, p. 132).

<sup>18</sup> An examination (and critique) of the issues around the Dalla Costa & Selma James pamphlet *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, the 'Wages for Housework' demand and more recent discussions (e.g. Fortunadi's *The Arcane of Reproduction*) would be useful, but is beyond the scope of the present article.

### *Peasants*

Cleaver's inclusion of peasant struggles as part of the working class differentiates him from statements in classical workerism. Although the early workerists recognised that peasant struggles could contribute to working class internationalism, they also suggested that the two should not be confused, and that the 'salvation' of peasants ultimately lay with their counterparts in the more developed parts of the world (Wright, p. 66).

To state that peasant struggles are in effect working class struggles at least serves to convey something about the social location of the peasant in a capitalist world and the consequences of their actions for the broader class struggle. Despite not depending exclusively upon a wage, peasants' work is often commodified; the way they produce goods is subject to the demands of the world market. Hence some peasants' attempts in some sense to act like 'the working class' - i.e., collectively to resist capital's requirements.

But Cleaver's redefinition of 'peasants' as part of the wider working class glosses significant differences within this heterogeneous social category. The term 'peasant' covers a multitude of economic positions: there are varying degrees of communal relations, varying degrees of production for the market (versus for subsistence), varying extents to which some are moving towards the capitalist class, and varying degrees to which peasants engage in wage labour. It is for this reason that 'peasants' as such do not act like and therefore cannot simply be lumped in with a broad working class.

Even if we take it that Cleaver simply means the majority of peasants who have no chance of becoming capitalist farmers, there is nevertheless a logic to their struggles which characteristically prevents them from constituting themselves as the negation of capital. The peasant is defined by a relationship to the land, and land is characteristically the issue over which peasants struggle. Given this, the successes of peasant struggles are also their limits. In the case of the wage, a quantitative success (more money) preserves the qualitative relationship of alienation but can point to its supersession: victory is still unsatisfactory but any setback for the capitalist class may suggest the vulnerability of the capital relation itself. But a victory in a struggle over land is an end in itself which thereby impels no higher level of struggle. There is no essential imperative in land struggles to abolish land ownership itself. As we argued in a previous issue of *Aufheben*, while we might acknowledge the revolutionary subjectivity of peasant-based struggles such as that of the Chiapas Indians, the peasant condition entails a conservative stability in social relations. Peasant resistance tends to reflect external threat rather than internal class antagonism. Consequently, the form of that resistance may often entail alliances between small private farmers and those who depend on communal landholdings – or even between a peasant mass and a leftist-nationalist and urban-based leadership.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we do not see the resolution of 'the

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<sup>19</sup> See 'A commune in Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista rebellion', *Aufheben* #9, 2000, especially pp. 20-22. While we took Holloway as the academic Marxist overestimating the working class and revolutionary significance of the Zapatista rebellion, Cleaver represents this tendency even more clearly. His refusal to consider criticisms of the Zapatistas and Marcos come across as just as ideological as previous Marxist defences of 'actually existing

agrarian (i.e., peasant) problem' simply in 'autonomous' peasant struggles, nor, obviously, in the proletarianization of the peasantry; rather, with Marx<sup>20</sup> (and Camatte),<sup>21</sup> we might look to a revolution in which peasant communal possibilities are aided by a wider proletarian uprising at the heart of capitalist power.

### Students

For workerist groups such as *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power), student struggles had to be subordinated to those of factory workers. But student movements were a part of both the Hot Autumn of 1969 and the Movement of 1977, and were important for workerism's attempt to theorize the proletarianization of intellectual labour.<sup>22</sup> One of the interesting developments of the Hot Autumn was the appropriation of a faculty building at the Turin Medical College for the purpose of a permanent general assembly.<sup>23</sup> The 1977 Movement involved practical attempts to link workers and students both organizationally and in terms of demands such as the generalized wage, which was seen as a way of enabling more working class young people access to university.

Cleaver's categorization of students as part of the working class might be seen as somewhat prescient since the gulf between university students and others in the labour market has narrowed in recent years. As more students gain degrees, so the value of the degree decreases and the jobs that graduates go into may often be no more privileged or well-paid than those of their more basically-educated counterparts. Graduate unemployment is higher now than ever.

However, these are only tendencies. Students are overwhelmingly middle class in terms of their family background (income, values and expectations) and their destinations. In line with the notion of the social factory, Cleaver deals with such considerations by defining students' education as work to reproduce the commodity of labour-power.<sup>24</sup> But their work as students is more than, and different from, the simple reproduction of just any labour-

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socialism'. For example: 'a woman said of the '96 encuentros: "the women [were] doing all the cooking and cleaning, including of toilets, invariably without any footwear (the men had the boots), even after the heavy rainfall... Harry Cleaver said 'Well, maybe they like it'..." (cited in *You Make Plans - We Make History*, 2001; [http://www.webcom.com/maxang/combust/you\\_make\\_Plans\\_We\\_Make\\_History.htm](http://www.webcom.com/maxang/combust/you_make_Plans_We_Make_History.htm)).

<sup>20</sup> See T. Shanin (ed., 1983) *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (London: Routledge); and T. Shanin (1972) *The Awkward Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>21</sup> J. Camatte (1972) *Community and Communism in Russia*.

<sup>22</sup> 'The student was already a proletarian by virtue of a subordinate location within the university division of labour. To the extent that existing stipends became a fully-fledged wage, she would be transformed from an "impure social figure on the margins of the valorisation process" into a fully-fledged "wage worker producing surplus value"' (Cazzaniga et al., 1968, cited in Wright, p. 95).

<sup>23</sup> See 'The worker-student assemblies in Turin, 1969' in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis* (op. cit.).

<sup>24</sup> An irony of such an approach is that it implies that the right thing for them to do is be bad students, yet Cleaver himself has been a good student and gathers other such good students around him.

power. In the first place, the end product of the work of the university student isn't necessarily skills at all but rather a qualification, the point of which is just to provide access to more privileged occupations. What is being reproduced, therefore, is hierarchy within the workforce – a division of labour to enhance competition. This process is also ideological to the extent that its beneficiaries internalize and identify with the resultant hierarchical division – believing that they deserve their privilege, and that only a talented and hard-working minority can achieve their kind of status. Second, the 'skills' that *are* reproduced through university education are not only those of supervision and management, but also (for those graduating in the humanities and social sciences) those of classifying, bullshitting and playing a role – all of which don't make sense outside of alienated social relations.

In focusing on autonomy and its possible consequences for capital, Cleaver's redefinition of student struggles as working class therefore loses some important features of this social category.<sup>25</sup> It is an overly cynical point of view, perhaps, to state that 'student radicals' mostly end up pursuing the same well-paid establishment careers as their parents; but the moment of truth in such a claim lies in the fact that there is no equivalent expectation for young working class radicals mostly to end up becoming managers! Unlike students, the young working class (in working class jobs) don't usually have the same choice.

### *Whatever happened to the middle class ?*

The 'middle class' is a label largely absent from *Reading 'Capital' Politically*, which is because for Cleaver it largely doesn't exist, except perhaps sociologically. The 'autonomist Marxist' argument seems to be that, in conditions of the 'social factory', the middle classes are just a sector of the working class.

On the one hand, Cleaver's analysis again reflects real tendencies. In a number of domains, middle class work has been de-skilled and proletarianized. Casualization, once limited only to working class jobs, has now come to many in the middle classes. Moreover, many salaries, particularly in the public sector, have increasingly lost value over the past 20 years or so. At the same time, the salaries of those at the top end of the middle classes, and particularly in the private sector (e.g., accountants, lawyers and the various types of 'consultant'), have continued to rise. Hence, as a shared identity assumed by people whose conditions vary widely - from white-collar workers in insecure jobs with salaries lower than their blue-collar counterparts, to executives and senior managers - the 'middle class' as a whole is to say the least a problematic category if not a mystification. In the USA, Cleaver's home country, the term is even more problematic due to the (self)description of large sections of the (white) working class as 'middle class'.

On the other hand, to take these disjunctions, anomalies and tendencies to mean that the category 'middle

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<sup>25</sup> In fact, a focus on the side of struggle today might lead Cleaver to re-re-define students as middle class after all. With the wider retreat of collective proletarian resistance, and even as more people have entered university from working class backgrounds, so the incidence of overt struggles in the universities has declined.

class' can be dispensed with is one-sided. The analytic subsumption of most of the middle classes within the working class is one-sided because it loses the explanatory power of the middle class as a category.

Here again, we would argue, Cleaver's analysis reflects the limits of the approach he is heir to. As Wright argues, for all its vital contributions to our understanding of struggle, one of the problems with *autonomia* and *operaismo* more broadly is the way it misrepresents one tendency as standing for the totality. In the same way, Cleaver misrepresents a particular tendency as a characteristic of the class situation as a whole.

While tendencies to proletarianization might push many of the middle classes toward throwing in their lot with the working class, there are other features of the middle class condition as such which operate in the other direction. What is absent from Cleaver's class analysis is an acknowledgement of the ties that bind the middle class individual to his role or class position and hence to the alienated world that gives rise to that role and class position.

One feature which distinguishes the middle class from the working class, and which has consequences for the possibility of revolutionary practice and subjectivity, is the presence or absence of a career structure. While wages in working class occupations typically rise to a relatively early peak and then plateau off, middle class salaries more typically develop in continual increments within which the middle class individual can foresee a future of continually rising income and enhanced status. In effect, the longer she carries on and sticks to the job, the relatively less interest the middle class individual has in escaping since the greater comfort the job provides him or her. Because the working class job typically provides no such prospect, the imperative to escape remains a lifespan constant.

Second, while pride in one's role can arise in many types of occupation, middle class jobs often engender an identification of a type which is characteristically absent in the case of working class jobs. Such middle class identification has consequences for the form taken by resistance – and for whether resistance takes place at all. The academic, social worker, lawyer etc. may wish to attack capital but they characteristically do so by premising their resistance on the continued existence of their own role in a way unthinkable to the working class individual. Thus there are radical psychologists, radical philosophers, radical lawyers and so on,<sup>26</sup> but not radical bricklayers or radical roadsweepers! The latter are simply radical *people* who wish to escape their condition. By contrast, the former wish to engage in the struggle while at the same time retaining their middle class identities, including their specialized skills and roles. As such, their participation presupposes rather than fundamentally challenges the institutions and social relations that provide the basis of these identities.<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence, it seems to us,

that the leading figures of a post-*autonomia* scene which rejects (or at least neglects) the situationists' critique of roles and academia, and which redefines all areas of life - including academia - as working class, are themselves academics.<sup>28</sup>

Some groups, such as the professionals – doctors, lawyers, academics – who retain control of entry into their profession, should obviously be defined as middle class. But there are other groups for which the situation is less clear-cut. For the most part dealing with the thorny issue of class, and in particular the status of the middle classes, is inevitable messy. This is because class is a *process* not a box into which we can simply categorize people, as in sociology.<sup>29</sup> In Argentina, for example, we are seeing a process where middle class identity breaks down; but to understand this it is necessary to recognise that such an identity exists and has a material basis. As we see it, the problem with the way Cleaver flattens out everything into the working class is precisely the absence of class composition and decomposition as a process. Class (composition) involves a constant dynamic of proletarianization and 'embourgeoisment'. But if these poles are not recognized – and if the middle classes are understood as already working class - class composition appears only as a static given.

### 1.4 Autonomy as basis or function of working class composition?

As we have seen, Cleaver's fundamental point is that the unwaged, and hence the other social categories he refers to, are part of the working class only insofar as capital has sought to exploit and alienate their unwaged labour or particular condition, *and* since these unwaged and other categories are now fighting back against capital. It is their *struggle* not their social category membership as such that makes them part of

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consumer. These "radical" specialists (radical lawyers, radical architects, radical philosophers, radical psychologists, radical social workers – everything but radical *people*) attempt to use their expertise to de-mystify expertise. The contradiction was best illustrated by a Case Con "revolutionary" social worker, who cynically declared to a public meeting, "The difference between us and a straight social worker is that we *know* we're oppressing our clients". Case Con is the spirit of a spiritless situation, the sigh of the oppressed oppressor, it's the 'socialist' conscience of the guilt ridden social worker, ensuring that vaguely conscious social workers remain in their job while *feeling* they are rejecting their role... The academic counter-specialists attempt to attack (purely bourgeois) ideology at the point of production: the university. Unwilling to attack the institution, the academic milieu, the very concept of education as a separate activity from which ideas of separate power arise, they remain trapped in the fragmented categories they attempt to criticise... In saying social workers are just like any other worker, he [the Case Con social worker] conveniently ignores the authority role that social workers intrinsically have, plus the fact that when they participate in the class struggle they don't do so by "radicalizing" their specific place in the division of labour (e.g. radical dockers, radical mechanics) but be revolting against it." (pp. 10-11, 23).

<sup>28</sup> See 'A commune in Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista rebellion', footnote 33, *Aufheben* #9, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> 'we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period.' (E.P. Thompson, 1963, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin).

<sup>26</sup> In fact, for many Marxist academics, the prefix 'radical' has now been replaced by 'critical', reflecting the general retreat of the class struggle which for the intelligensia takes the form of a (still further) retreat into the realm of ideas and arguments.

<sup>27</sup> This point was ably made in *Refuse* (BM Combustion 1978): 'The "opposition" by counter-specialists to the authoritarian expertise of the authoritarian experts offers yet another false choice to the political

the working class. Thus the key for Cleaver is autonomous action against capital.

As such, Cleaver is again consistent with the tradition that has come out of workerism, which sought to distinguish itself and go beyond the poverty of traditional Marxism through focusing on precisely the independent or autonomous activity of workers in struggle; their collective activity and organization of resistance was shown to occur without the mediation of the party or union – or even in opposition to them. Antagonism itself, in the form of autonomy, was thus the basis of class analysis.

In the sixties, the workerists subsumed the specificity of different working class locations and experiences to those of the mass worker. In the seventies, Negri's work threatened to dissolve even this partially concrete understanding of class into a generic proletariat, the 'socialized worker'. Bologna in 'The tribe of moles' identified new subjective determinations of class: 'Classes have tended to lose their "objective" characteristics and become defined in terms of political subjectivity'.<sup>30</sup> For Bologna, questions of social and cultural identity, of acceptance or refusal to accept the norms of social behaviour required by the state, now played a role in the reproduction of classes. These new determinants were said to be evidenced in 'the continuous reproduction and invention of systems of counter-culture and struggle in the sphere of everyday living, which has become ever more illegal'.

In fact, Negri and others abandoned the central investigative approach of the workerists – that of examining the relationship between 'material conditions of exploitation' and 'political behaviours'. As Wright discusses, the radical workerists overemphasized the subjective, the 'will of destruction' (*Potere Operaio*, 1972, cited in Wright, p. 138), as judged, post festum, from an analysis of the struggle rather than location in the labour process. The abandonment of the material determinants of class composition leaves unresolved the question of how the different subjects, or strata of the class, recognize themselves and each other as proletariat, the universal revolutionary class.

For us, the reason why different groups organize autonomously against capital is because they are already proletarian (or, at least, being proletarianized). Antagonism arises because of class. It is implicit in our arguments above in relation to the different social categories referred to by Cleaver that the possibility of 'autonomy' may be necessary but it is not sufficient for a class analysis. 'Autonomy' requires, and therefore cannot be the basis of, a proper class analysis: the subjective requires the objective.

## 2 Beyond leftism?<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> 'Leftism' is a concept we find useful but is perhaps tricky to define. It can be thought of in terms of those practices which echo some of the language of communism but which in fact represent the movement of the left-wing of capital. However, for us an important point is to get away from the picture in which there is a pure class struggle only interfered with and prevented from generating communism by the interference of an exterior force (from the bourgeoisie) of leftism. A question arises of why the class struggle allows itself to be so diverted. It is important to recognize that, though some leftists are clearly part of the bourgeoisie or at least of

It was a vital insight of workerism to see workers' refusal to participate in union-sponsored token strikes not as the absence of class conflict but as evidence of their autonomy. In debates today about the state of the class struggle, the danger is to take such 'passivity' as just a refusal of representation when it might in fact be doubled-edged: at the same time as being an expression of hostility to capital it might also entail a paralysing fatalism. However, a weakness of workerism was not an exaggerated sense of the significance of workers' autonomous antagonism not only to capital but to the institutional left; rather it was an unwillingness or inability to reconcile their insights with their conceptions of organization. Time and again, the same theorists who provided us with the theoretical tools for a new approach caution us to be modest in our understandings of workers' struggles. For example, Panzieri stressed that sabotage merely expressed workers' political defeat (Wright, p. 61); and *Classe Operaia* ('Working Class') suggested that spontaneous struggles were not enough (Wright, p. 69). While we agree that different particular struggles need to be linked up if they are to go beyond themselves, there is a crucial question of the nature of this organization and how it may arise. For the most part, the workerists tended to fetishize formal organizational structure in a way which reflected their Leninist origins.

In the first place, there was for a long time an unwillingness to cut the ties to the PCI. Thus, Tronti continued to argue for the necessity of working within the PCI in order to 'save' it from reformism. Tronti was not typical and ultimately abandoned workerism; but *Potere Operaio* too maintained links with the PCI until the events of France 1968, and even then still saw itself as Leninist. And Negri, despite having written about the contradiction within *autonomia* between those who privileged 'the movement' and the champions of a 'Leninist' conception of organization, affirmed his commitment to the necessity of the Leninist Party even during the events of 1977 (Wright, p. 214).

In part, *autonomia* emerged as a grouping of militants who felt the need to criticize Leninist forms of organization and practice (including the formal party structure), placing emphasis instead on class needs: 'To articulate such needs, organization was to be rooted directly in factories and neighbourhoods, in bodies capable both of promoting struggles managed directly by the class itself, and of restoring to the latter that "awareness of proletarian power which the traditional organisations have destroyed"' (*Comitati Autonomi Operai*, 1976, cited in Wright p. 153). Ultimately, however, as Bologna argued, *autonomia* failed in this regard, reverting to a vanguardism which forgot that 'organisation is obliged to measure itself day by day against the new composition of the class; and must find its political programme only in the behaviour of the class and not in some set of statutes.'<sup>32</sup>

Despite their attempt to escape the 'political', the workerists themselves were in fact caught up in a politicism, in that they both constantly tried to express the social movement's needs in terms of unifying *political* demands and

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the state, the power of leftism/trade unionism etc. comes from the fact that the working class generates leftism from within itself as an expression of its own current limits.

<sup>32</sup> 'The tribe of moles', op cit. p. 89.



were forever trying to reinvent the party. Although they innovated in some ways, with ideas like the armed party, their conception of organization remained Leninist in its fetishism of formal organizational structure, and showed little sense of Marx's quite different conception of the (historical) party.<sup>33</sup> As such, a proper critique of the left and of leftism was still not developed. This problem is reproduced in current versions of the workerist approach.

Our argument is that, if the concept of autonomy is insufficient for a class analysis, it is also inadequate - in the sense of being too open or ambiguous - for a critique of leftism. Whose 'autonomous struggle' is it? The emphasis on autonomy itself, and the consequent absence of an adequate critique of the left, has meant that some of the inheritors of the tradition are uncritical of nationalism.<sup>34</sup>

Cleaver (p. 25) states 'The [Vietnam] antiwar movement joined many of these diverse struggles, and its linkage with the peasants of Southeast Asia became complete with the slogan of "Victory to the NLF [National Liberation Front]" and with the flying of Vietcong flags from occupied campus buildings.' In relation to this, the idea of 'circulation of struggles', which refers to how struggle in one area inspires that in another, certainly described something of the social movements of the 60s and 70s (though we'd also have to acknowledge the reverse process whereby defeat of one section after another discouraged the rest). But such a concept is inadequate in itself if it means, for example, that the struggles of the Vietnamese peasants are considered without referring to the nationalist and Stalinist frame in which they took place, and if it means treating uncritically the way that an anti-imperialist ideology dominated the minds of the students (i.e. they tended to see the western proletariat as irretrievably 'bought off' and themselves as a front for the 'Third World').<sup>35</sup> Harry Cleaver's 'autonomist Marxist' treatment of leftists and nationalists is reflected currently in his uncritical attitude to the Zapatistas.<sup>36</sup> In Cleaver's texts there isn't a proper critique of the role of leftism and nationalism in struggles because such expressions are considered - equally with the struggles of 'housewives', students, the unemployed and the industrial proletariat - moments of autonomy to the extent that they appear to challenge the capitalist strategy of imposing work within particular national and international

frameworks. Any criticism of nationalism in struggles, as in the case of Zapatistas, is dismissed by him as ideological or dogmatic.

Given their necessary antipathy to the project of the negation of capital, the 'autonomy' of leftist and nationalist tendencies must mean their subsumption and indeed crushing of proletarian autonomy! This analytic gap, through which the forces inherently opposed to working class self-organization can emerge as *equivalents* to that working class self-organization, appears to be a function of the failure of the *autonomia* tendency to make quite the radical break from Leninism which is sometimes claimed for it, and which Cleaver has inherited (despite the fact that, unlike Negri, he has never endorsed any party). At its worst, far from being an alternative to a leftism in which political representation and nationalism are supported as vehicles of 'revolution', 'autonomist Marxism' can end up being just another variety of such uncritical leftism. While they may reject the idea of the formal party, the 'autonomists' still seek to formulate political demands for autonomous struggles in a similar way to the leftists.

### 3. Negotiating the 'law of value'

A further workerist tension reproduced in Cleaver's book is that surrounding the status of the 'law of value'. On the one hand, the very emphasis on workers at the sharp end of the immediate process of production appears to speak of a commitment to the centrality of value-production in the explanation of the dynamic of class struggle. On the other hand, the seeds of a revisionist approach were sewn as early as 1970, when *Potere Operaio* argued that class struggle had broken free of the bounds of accumulation; the mass worker was said to have disrupted the functioning of the law of value, forcing capital to rely more and more on the state (p. 137). *Potere Operaio* cited the Hot Autumn as the turning point, but their analysis was prompted by a revolt in the second half of 1970 among the population of Reggio Calabria against proposed changes to the city's regional status which seemed to speak of a widespread violent rejection of the institutions. This line of reasoning was developed by Negri, who was led by his understanding of the crisis as a product of class antagonism to argue that the law of value was being superseded by relations of direct political confrontation between classes,<sup>37</sup> and that money now needed to be understood in terms of its function as 'command'.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent to this, a distinctive feature of those influenced by the *autonomia* tradition is the stress on the class struggle as a struggle not in relation to value but for *control over work*: imposing it or resisting it.

A major thrust of the whole American 'autonomist' scene has been to argue not to follow Negri too far. But it seems to us that Cleaver's attempt to both embrace certain post-*autonomia* and 'heretical' ideas that go 'beyond Marx' while at the same time claiming fidelity to *Capital* gives rise to ambiguities in relation to this question of value.

Thus, on the one hand, *Reading 'Capital' Politically* suggests, at least in a footnote, that control is always tied to

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<sup>33</sup> For Marx formal organizations were only episodes in 'the history of the party which is growing spontaneously everywhere from the soil of modern society.' Quoted in, J. Camatte *Origin and Function of the Party Form*

([http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/camate\\_origins.html](http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/camate_origins.html)).

Camatte's discussion there in a sense takes the discourse on the party to the extreme where it dissolves, allowing his later perspectives of this in *On Organization*.

<sup>34</sup> Wright (p. 66) suggests that the earlier workerists had no time for the left's Third Worldism and support for nationalist struggles. However, a front cover of *Potere Operaio* magazine from the 1970s called for victory to the PLO-ETA-IRA.

<sup>35</sup> This (moralistic) attitude of cheer-leading 'Third World' (national liberation) struggles and contempt for the Western working class was an expression of the middle class social relations characteristic of these students.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example,

<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/Zapatistas/INTRO.TXT>

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<sup>37</sup> See 'Crisis of the planner-state: Communism and revolutionary organization' (1971) in *Revolution Retrieved* (op. cit.).

<sup>38</sup> Though we like his phrase 'money is the face of the boss'.

value; and in the second edition of the book, against those ('autonomists') who forget, Cleaver re-iterates that the labour theory of value is the 'indispensable core' of Marx's theory (p. 11). On the other hand, throughout *Reading 'Capital' Politically*, food and energy (Cleaver's main examples) appear essentially as means to struggle for control itself rather than value-producing sectors; and work appears as a means of control in its own right:

the ultimate use-value of the work, which is the use-value of labour-power, is its role as the fundamental means of capitalist social control. For the capitalist to be able to impose work is to retain social control. But the use-value of labour-power for capital is *also* its ability to produce value and surplus-value. (p. 100)

The use of the word 'also' seems indicative of the relative weighting given to control over value as an explanation for the dynamics of class struggle.

We accept that, although capital essentially treats all use-values as arbitrary sources for valorization, capital cannot be unconcerned with the particularities of use-values. Thus Cleaver is right, for example, to point back to the moment of primitive accumulation where capital creates the working class by driving peasants off the land and thus their source of food. Moreover, with contemporary features like the Common Agricultural Policy and similar measures in other countries, it is true that the special use-value of food (and the political significance of classes engaged in food production) has led to it being perhaps more subject to strategic planning measures by capital-in-general in the form of the state and supranational bodies.

Retrospectively, however, it now appears to us that the politicization of the prices of food and energy – their appearance as manipulated instruments of struggle between self-conscious capitalist and working class subjects – was a particular feature of the crisis conditions of the 1970s (e.g. the energy crisis and the focus on inflation state intervention in bargaining between the working class and capital). Cleaver, like others in the post-*autonomia* tradition, uses these historically specific moments in the class struggle to make generic points. In the present period, there has been a 'depoliticization' of these price issues in conditions of low inflation; and the ideological model has been that 'there is no alternative' to the 'globalized' market.

As we have argued in these pages before, there is a problem with the abandonment of the law of value by theorists identifying with *autonomia*.<sup>39</sup> On our reading of Marx, and our understanding of capital, capital as a whole comes to constitute itself as such out of disparate and indeed conflicting elements. The conceptualization of capital as a subject in conflict with the working class subject, each with their distinctive strategies ('imposition of work' versus 'refusal of

work'), which Cleaver ultimately shares with Negri,<sup>40</sup> if taken as more than a shorthand or metaphor, suggests an already-unified capital. Capital as a subject can have a *strategy* only to the extent that there is a (price-fixing) conspiracy among the different capitals *or* that one particular capital (who? US capital? The World Bank?) agrees to act as capital-in-general in the same way that a national government acts for the national capitalist interest. Capital as a totality of course has its *interests*; but these – all founded on the need to exploit the working class as hard as possible – arise from and operate precisely through its conflicting elements: the competition between individual capitals. Capital may attain more consciousness at times of heightened class conflict, and this consciousness may become institutionalized. But capital is not essentially a conscious subject.

#### 4. Grasping retreat

Tronti famously argued that each successful capitalist attack upon labour only displaces class antagonism to a higher, more socialized level (Wright, p. 37). Following this, Negri, Cleaver and others in and influenced by the *autonomia* current stress the role of working class struggle in driving capital forward. Working class activity is seen not (just) as a response to the initiatives of capital but as the very motor of capitalist development – the prime mover.<sup>41</sup> In this account, capitalist crisis – the shutting down of industries, mass unemployment and austerity – means that working class struggle simply changes form rather than retreats. Class struggle is argued to be ubiquitous and manifold in form.

This perspective therefore offers a valuable corrective to traditional Marxism's objectivist account of the workings of capital. Traditional Marxism's frozen and fetishized conceptions of class struggle could lead one to wonder where resistance has gone and whether it will ever reappear. By contrast, 'autonomist Marxism' finds it everywhere.

However, we would suggest that workerism in general and Cleaver in particular perhaps bend the stick too far the other way. In arguing that class struggle is 'everywhere' and 'always', there is the explanatory problem of the evidence of historical retreats in class struggle, as well as the 'political' problem of responding to this retreat in practice. These problems are linked.

##### 4.1 Confronting the evidence of decomposition

In positing the 'unity of abstract labour' as the basis for the recomposition of the class, Negri almost welcomed the 'disappearance' of the mass worker and believed the defining moment of confrontation was approaching: 'At the very moment when "the old contradiction" seemed to have subsided, and living labour subsumed to capital, the entire force of insubordination coagulates in that final front which is the antagonistic and general permanence of social labour'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See Cleaver's useful summary of Negri's position in his Introduction to Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York/London: Autonomedia/Pluto Press, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> See for example Toni Negri, 'Keynes and the capitalist theory of the state post-1929' in *Revolution Retrieved* (op. cit.).

<sup>42</sup> Negri (1976) *Proletari e Stato* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Milan: Feltrinelli).

<sup>39</sup> See 'Review: Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-92' (*Aufheben* #3, 1994) and 'Escape from the Law of Value?' (*Aufheben* #5, 1996).

At a time which could arguably be characterized as the beginning of capital's counter-offensive of restructuring which resulted in a decomposition of the class, he gave an account of a massive process of recomposition – a qualitative leap in class unity. Wright (p. 167) concludes that this account did not match up to Italian experience of the time. There appears little evidence of the concrete unification between sectors upon which Negri's whole argument rested; the fierce industrial struggles in the small factories of the North were cut off from other sectors of the class. Wright suggests that, in 1975-6, it was proletarian youth circles rather than the factory struggles that were making links across the wider working class. The workers of the large factories were in a state of 'productive truce' at best, rampant defeat at worst – and subordinate to the official labour movement, which had regained control in the factories after the explosion of autonomous struggles in 1969 and the years after. The unions' commitment to tailor labour's demands to the requirements of accumulation was mirrored in the political sphere by the PCI's 'historic compromise' with the ruling Christian Democrats. The historic left, PCI and CGIL were committed to the 'management' of the nation's economic difficulties.

Bologna (1976, cited in Wright, pp. 170-1) accused Negri and *autonomia* of 'washing their hands of the mass worker's recent difficulties'. He argued that there had been a 'reassertion of reformist hegemony over the factories, one that is brutal and relentless in its efforts to dismember the class left'. Negri had failed to come to terms with the disarray and defeat of the mass worker and preferred instead to 'ply the traditional trade of the theorist in possession of some grand synthesis'. The *Comitati Autonomi Operai*, the Roman wing of *autonomia*, also rejected Negri's optimistic vision, and criticized his lack of an empirical basis for his abstractions, something which had been so important to the earlier workerists.<sup>43</sup>

In the intervening quarter of a century, little has happened, it seems to us, to bear out Negri's optimistic prognosis. The mass worker has been decomposed through the flexibilization of labour, territorial disarticulation of production, capital mobility in the world market, the rationalization of production, decentralization; but the 'socialized worker' that has supposedly emerged from the ashes of the mass worker has not been visible as a new universal proletariat capable of fundamentally challenging the capital relation. Decomposition just *is* decomposition sometimes, rather than necessarily being itself a recomposition.

The 'autonomist Marxism' of Cleaver and those close to his perspective argues that we need to acknowledge the validity of diverse and 'hidden' struggles (absenteeism, theft at work, various forms of work to rule etc.) which are alive and well, despite the decline of the older forms of overt collective

resistance.<sup>44</sup> There is, of course, always resistance to the specific way in which surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct producers. However, the fact that the working class currently tends to resist in a mostly fragmented and individualized form - the fact that resistance *is* so fragmented or hidden - reflects the historic weakness of the class as a whole. The significance of this is that it is not clear how such hidden and individualized forms of resistance can in themselves necessarily take us to the point of no return. Unless they become overtly collective, they operate merely as a form of antagonism that capital can cope with if not recuperate. This is the moment of truth in Tronti and Panzieri's warnings about the limits of autonomous struggle.

#### **4.2 Escaping the harness?**

Linked to this issue of retreat is the question of whether the working class will be driving capital forward forever. Do the 'autonomists' argue too successfully that class struggle is the motor? If working class struggle is always harnessed by capital, how does it escape the harness?

The argument that class struggle is alive and well in manifold forms is empowering; but it risks ending up as a satisfaction with the current limits of the class struggle. The focus on the validity and importance of the (plurality of) autonomous struggles themselves can mean the abandonment of revolution as a totality. And as the possibility and necessity of total revolution fades, so reformist campaigns, premised upon the continued existence of the capital relation, become the focus. A symptom of this worst side of post-*autonomia* is illustrated in demands for a guaranteed income, which have allowed those influenced by *autonomia* to link up with other reformists in campaigns which have dovetailed with capital's current needs for welfare restructuring.<sup>45</sup> Although not all the major figures of *autonomia* or the 'autonomist Marxist' scene would endorse this ultimately conservative view of the adequacy of fragmentation, it is not inconsistent with an understanding of class struggle based around the concept of autonomy.

### **5. A political reading of *Capital*: From 20 yards of linen to the self-reduction of prices in one easy step**

In his attempt to render a political reading of Marx's critique of political economy, Harry Cleaver is again following in the workerist tradition: Negri's 'Marx on cycle and crisis', which was written in 1968, is an earlier example of the attempt to connect Marx's categories with notions of strategy and struggle. However, a sub-text of Cleaver's book is his defence of the importance of *Capital* against the arguments made by (the later) Negri that, for the revolutionary project of our time,

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<sup>43</sup> 'Your interest for the "emergent strata" (proletarian youth, feminists, homosexuals) and for new, and reconceptualised, political subjects (the "*operaio sociale*") has always been and is still shared by us. But precisely the undeniable political importance of these phenomena demands extreme analytical rigour, great investigative caution, a strongly empirical approach (facts, data, observations and still more observations, data, facts).' (*Rivolta di classe*, 1976, cited in Wright, p. 171).

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<sup>44</sup> For a good account of the extent of recent 'hidden' struggles in the US today, see Curtis Price's 'Fragile prosperity? Fragile social peace' in *Collective Action Notes* (available at [http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/2379/fragile\\_prosperity.htm](http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/2379/fragile_prosperity.htm))

<sup>45</sup> See Wildcat's article 'Reforming the welfare state in order to save capitalism' in *Stop the Clock! Critiques of the New Social Workhouse* (Aufheben, 2000).

*Capital* is superseded by the *Grundrisse*. In *Marx Beyond Marx*,<sup>46</sup> Negri argues that *Capital* has served to reduce critique to economic theory, that the objectification of the categories in *Capital* functions to block action by revolutionary subjectivity and to subject the subversive capacity of the proletariat to the reorganizing and repressive intelligence of capitalist power. The point of Marx's critique as whole is not 'intellectual' but revolutionary; hence the *Grundrisse*, which is traversed throughout by an absolutely insurmountable antagonism, is, according to Negri, the key text and can even serve as a critique of the limits of *Capital*.

Cleaver's *Reading 'Capital' Politically* argues that the right way to read *Capital* and its fundamental categories such as value is 'strategically', from the perspective of the working class. Cleaver therefore contends that any 'blockage' is due only to the inadequate ways in which *Capital* has been read, and that the solution is to read it politically.

We can agree with Cleaver that, despite the power of the *Grundrisse* and its crucial indications that Marx's theoretical project was wider than the material which appears in *Capital*,<sup>47</sup> *Capital* is nevertheless the better presentation of the critique of political economy (as Marx himself clearly thought). But this is not the same as arguing that a 'political' reading of *Capital* is useful or even tenable. Our argument is that Cleaver's 'political' reading ultimately fails.

### 5.1 Aims of Reading 'Capital' Politically

The focus of *Reading 'Capital' Politically* is the first three parts of Chapter 1 of *Capital* Volume 1. Here, Marx shows how the commodity has two aspects - use-value (a product of the concrete useful labour that creates that particular commodity) and value (a representation of that labour considered as general abstract labour); he shows how value must take different forms; and from this he derives the logical necessity of money as the universal equivalent form of value. Along with the chapter on money, these are undeniably some of the most difficult parts of *Capital*. While a lot of the rest of the book is fairly straightforward, this beginning is often enough to make the reader turn away in frustration. Thus it is worth acknowledging the merit of Cleaver's attempt at an accessible commentary.

The central thesis of Cleaver's reading is that the category of value, in its various forms (and aspects), needs to be related to class struggles around human needs - to the subjective - rather than (simply) to the objective workings of capital as a 'system'. In Cleaver's words, to read *Capital* politically is 'to show how each category and relationship relates to and clarifies the nature of the class struggle and to show what that means for the political strategy of the working class' (p. 76). Cleaver's attempt to render the subjective in Marx's account of value operates by short-circuiting most of Marx's mediations, leaping directly from the commodity-form to particular struggles. He relates the material in *Capital* Chapter 1 partly to later material in the same volume over the struggle for the working day and primitive accumulation, but most of all to more contemporary struggles - around energy

and food prices - in a way clearly distinct from Marx's own method.<sup>48</sup> He justifies this by saying 'to the extent then that I bring to bear on the interpretation of certain passages material from other parts of *Capital*, or from other works, I do so with the aim of grasping Chapter One within the larger analysis rather than reconstructing the evolution of what Marx wrote and thought' (p. 94, second edition).

### 5.2 Aims of Capital

A question Cleaver does not address is why it was that Marx said very little about struggles in Volume 1 Chapter 1. If it is so necessary to read *Capital* politically in the way that Cleaver does, then why didn't Marx save us the trouble and simply write *Capital* politically? In promoting *Capital* as a weapon for our struggles, Cleaver wants to stress the moments of de-reification and de-fetishization in relation to Marx's categories. Indeed he claims that this project of a political reading 'is exactly the project called for in Marx's discussion of fetishism' (p. 76). Thus for Cleaver there is no need for a 'separate analysis of Section 4 of Chapter One which deals with fetishism, simply because ... this whole essay involves going behind the appearances of the commodity-form to get at the social relations' (p. 80). Cleaver is right that the section on fetishism is crucial for 'getting at the social relations'; but why did Marx insist on the type of presentation he does despite the possible difficulty it entailed for his intended audience, the working class? Moreover is Cleaver's kind of political reading really the way to understand what Marx deals with as commodity fetishism?

An interesting comparison is Isaak Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*,<sup>49</sup> which Cleaver mentions only briefly and dismissively, in a footnote.<sup>50</sup> While Cleaver does

<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Cleaver also contends that what he is doing is not so different from Marx: 'Marx illustrates these relations [of use-value and exchange-value] with a variety of apparently innocuous commodities: linen, iron, watches, and corn (wheat). I say apparently because most of these commodities played a key role in the period of capitalist development which Marx analysed: linen in the textile industry, iron in the production of machinery and cannon, watches in the timing of work, wheat as the basic means of subsistence of the working class. To be just as careful in this exposition, I suggest that we focus on the key commodities of the current period: labour power, food and energy. (p. 98). However, while Cleaver is probably right that Marx did not make an arbitrary choice of which commodities to mention in Chapter 1, their function in Marx's presentation is arbitrary. Unlike the political economists, Marx does give attention to the use-value side of the economy; but here in his opening chapter he makes no mention of the concreteness of these use-values in the class struggle. At this point of Marx's presentation of the capitalist mode of production, the precise use-values are irrelevant. Marx's reference to linen, corn etc. is a part of a logical presentation, not a reference to concrete struggles.

<sup>49</sup> I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (1973, New York/Montreal: Black Rose Books).

<sup>50</sup> Cleaver's claim (p. 138) that while Marxists have examined the question of the content of value at length almost no work has been done on the issue of the form of value (and hence the necessity for Cleaver's own analysis) includes reference to Rubin. But this in itself suggests that Cleaver hasn't understood (and perhaps hasn't even read) Rubin's book, the whole of which is concerned precisely with the social form of value.

<sup>46</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> See F.C. Shortall (1994), *The Incomplete Marx* (Aldershot: Avebury).

not comment directly on the section in *Capital* Chapter 1 on fetishism, the whole first part of Rubin's book is on this subject. Rubin's book was seminal precisely for systematically grasping the inseparability of commodity fetishism and Marx's theory of value: 'The theory of fetishism is, per se, the basis of Marx's entire economic system, and in particular of his theory of value' (Rubin, 1973, p. 5). Thus the value categories are expressions of a topsy-turvy world in which people's products dominate the producers, where people are related through things, and where objects behave as subjects and subjects as objects. Since Rubin's book became available in the English-speaking world through Fredy Perlman's translation, a whole school of Marxism has developed, insisting like Rubin does that Marx's is not a neo-Ricardian embodied labour theory of value but an abstract social labour theory of value;<sup>51</sup> such an analysis brings fetishism to the fore and emphasises Marx's work as a critique of political economy rather than Marxist political economy.

Thus Rubin can be seen to make similar points to Cleaver but to do so by explaining and illustrating value-categories in terms of such basic mediations as social relations, labour and commodity fetishism, rather than through the directly political reading favoured by Cleaver.

<sup>51</sup> Up until the 1970s, at least in the English speaking world, Marx was seen as having simply developed and refined Ricardo's labour theory of value. In this traditional interpretation, Marx, like Ricardo, was seen to adhere to an embodied labour conception of value. What was common to all commodities, and hence what it was that made them commensurate with each other as manifestations of this common factor, was that they were all products of the 'expenditure of human brains, nerves and muscles', that is of human labour in general. Consequently, the value of a commodity was seen to be determined by the labour embodied in it during its production.

With this physiological, or quasi-physicalist, conception of labour, the Ricardian labour theory of value conceived value as merely a technical relation: the value of a commodity was simply determined by the amount of labour-energy necessary for its production. As such the Ricardian labour theory of value could in principle be applied to any form of society.

For Rubin, what was specific about the capitalist mode of production was that producers did not produce products for their own immediate needs but rather produced commodities for sale. The labour allocated to the production of any particular commodity was not determined prior to production by custom or by a social plan and therefore it was not immediately social labour. Labour only became social labour, a recognised part of the social division of labour, through sale of the commodity it produced. Furthermore, the exchange of commodities was a process of real abstraction through which the various types of concrete labour were reduced to a common substance - abstract social labour. This abstract social labour was the *social* substance of value. Rubin's abstract social labour theory of value necessarily entailed an account of commodity fetishism since it was concerned with how labour as a social relation must manifest itself in the form of value in a society in which relations between people manifest themselves as relations between things.

In the mid-1970s the labour theory of value came under attack from the neo-Ricardian school which argued that it was both redundant and inconsistent. Rubin's abstract social labour theory of value was then rediscovered as a response to such criticisms in the late 1970s. Although Cleaver dismisses Rubin there have been attempts to address his abstract social labour theory of value from the tradition of *autonomia* - see for example the article by Massimo De Angelis in *Capital & Class* 57 (Autumn 1995).

Moreover, the case of Rubin questions the schema Cleaver develops in his Introduction, summarized in the following table:

	<b>Ideological readings</b>	<b>Strategic readings</b>
<b>Political economy readings</b>	From capital's perspective	From capital's perspective
<b>Philosophical readings</b>	From capital's perspective	<i>Empty set</i>
<b>Political readings</b>	<i>Empty set</i>	From a working-class perspective

**Approaches to the reading of Marx** (Cleaver, p. 31)

Cleaver (p. 30) defines the bottom right box of this table as:

that strategic reading of Marx which is done from the point of view of the working class. It is a reading that self-consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning and relevance of every concept to the immediate development of working-class struggle. It is a reading which eschews all detached interpretation and abstract theorising in favour of grasping concepts only within that concrete totality of struggle whose determinations they designate. This I would argue is the only kind of reading of Marx which can properly be said to be from a working-class perspective because it is the only one which speaks directly to the class's needs for clarifying the scope and structure of its own power and strategy.

Though the Stalinist state recognized the political significance of Rubin's 'abstract reasoning',<sup>52</sup> Rubin's book does not meet Cleaver's 'political' criteria. But neither does Rubin's book seem to be obviously a political economic or a philosophical reading. We'd contend that one of the reasons that Rubin's is a seminal work is precisely because it transcends such a distinction. Prompted by the revolutionary wave of the 1910s and 1920s, Rubin, like writers of the same period such as Lukacs and Korsch, was able to go beyond Second International Marxism and to understand *Capital* as a critique of political economy - but without, like the Frankfurt School, retreating into mere philosophy.

The fourth part of *Capital* Chapter 1, 'The fetishism of the commodity and its secret', is crucial because in it Marx shows how the forms of value are an expression of reification, and hence fetishized in our experience. Rubin's approach is key for drawing one's attention to the inseparability of fetishism and the theory of value. By trying to short-circuit the process, by immediately moving to the de-fetishising aspect of class struggle, Cleaver jumps levels of abstraction. Our argument would be that, analytically, it is necessary to explain

<sup>52</sup> 'An official Soviet philosopher wrote that "The followers of Rubin and the Menshevizing Idealists ... treated Marx's revolutionary method in the spirit of Hegelianism... The Communist Party has smashed these trends alien to Marxism." ... Rubin was imprisoned, accused of belonging to an organization that never existed, forced to "confess" to events that never took place, and finally removed from among the living.' (Fredy Perlman, *About the Author*, in Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (op. cit.))

reification before examining its reversal. In other words, in order to relate value to the kind of struggles Cleaver refers to, a whole series of mediations must be developed,<sup>53</sup> not least the categories of absolute and relative surplus-value, constant and variable capital, and the relation between price and value (which Marx introduces later in Volume 1), circulation (which Marx introduces in Volume 2) and the distributional forms of surplus value - profit, rent and wages (which don't come until Volume 3). Volume 1 concerns capital-in-general, presented as particular examples of capitalist enterprises as an analytic device to derive the later, more developed, categories.

For us it seems essential to grasp what Marx was trying to do in *Capital*. If Marx's overall project was 'capitalism and its overthrow' it was nevertheless necessary for him first to show what the capitalist mode of production was, how it was possible; this led him methodologically to make a provisional closure of class subjectivity in order to grasp the logic of capital as an objective and positive system of economic 'laws' which is apparently independent of human will and purpose.<sup>54</sup> Objectivist Marxism takes this provisional closure as complete. What Cleaver is doing could be seen to be an attempt at opening up the provisional closure by bringing in the subjectivity of class struggle; but because he does not properly explain the marginalization of the class struggle in the pages of *Capital*, what he does comes across as bald assertion at variance with the flow of Marx's argument.

In short, in his understandable quest for the concrete and immediate, Cleaver abandons the analytic rigour needed to make the connections between *Capital* and the class struggle. While we may agree that *Capital* needs to be understood as a weapon in the class war, it does not need to be the crudely instrumental reading offered by Cleaver.

## 6. Whither *autonomia*?

### 6.1 Negri and the retreat from the universal revolutionary subject

The continuing influence of *operaismo* and *autonomia* is evident today in a number of recent movements, most notably perhaps Ya Basta! in Italy, who draw upon some of the ideas of Negri. Negri himself has lately caused interest in some circles. *Empire*, the book he has co-authored with Michael Hardt,<sup>55</sup> has struck a chord with the concerns of some 'anti-capitalist'/'globalization' activists, academics and even a New Labour policy adviser.<sup>56</sup> While Negri's ideas were sometimes controversial when he was part of the area of autonomy, after losing his connections to the movement he ceased to produce worthwhile stuff, and instead slipped into an academic quagmire whose reformist political implications are

all too clear.<sup>57</sup> The disconnection of ideas from the movement, following the repression which culminated in the mass arrests of 1979, has also meant that there has been to some extent a battle for the heritage of the movement. Through journals like *Zerowork* and *Midnight Notes*, Anglo-American theorists have kept 'autonomist Marxism' going. Through emphasizing the continuing importance of value (albeit ambiguously, as we have seen), these and Harry Cleaver among others have distinguished themselves from the late Negri with his embrace of both post-structuralism and the ideas of the (pre-Hegelian) philosopher Spinoza.

But - and despite his innumerable self-contradictions - a continuity can be traced from the early Negri, through *autonomia* to the late Negri. For example, his recent arguments, along with other reformists, for a guaranteed income can be traced back to the demand for a 'political wage' made by the radical Negri of *Potere Operaio*. It would seem to be significant that, despite his earlier valuable insights, his relatively recent theoretical work can be seen as at one with the arguments of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari justifying fragmented forms of resistance and denying the need to confront the state.

*Empire* contains any number of arguments we see as problematic if not counter-revolutionary and recuperative, including the abandonment of value, the centrality of immaterial labour, the call for 'real democracy' and political proposals for 'global citizenship'. What stirred people's interest, it seemed, was the thesis of 'empire' itself - that of the emergence of a single unified global political-economic capitalist entity - which seemed to offer an alternative to unsatisfactory orthodox theories of imperialism. With the US war on Afghanistan, however, the notion of imperialism has returned to the forefront of political discourse.<sup>58</sup> What we are left with, then, as Negri's take on *autonomia*, is a celebration of fragmentation. The abandonment of the concept of the proletariat (now replaced by 'the multitude'), the universal revolutionary subject, is the abandonment of world revolution. Negri's work might therefore be said to express the profound sense of defeat and disillusion that followed the failure of the Movement of 1977.

### 6.2 History as ideology

Two different ways of writing history are evident in the books by Steve Wright and Harry Cleaver. Wright's is a history of the politics of a movement. But it is also critical, from a

<sup>53</sup> We made this same point in our reply to Cleaver's associate George Caffentzis of *Midnight Oil/Midnight Notes* (see 'Escape from the Law of Value?' in *Aufheben* #5, 1996, p. 41).

<sup>54</sup> See F.C. Shortall (1994), *The Incomplete Marx* (Aldershot: Avebury).

<sup>55</sup> Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Leonard, 'The left should love globalization', *New Statesman*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2001. Leonard is director of the Foreign Policy Centre think-tank and apparently a Blairite.

<sup>57</sup> This break was, as for a lot of militants of that period, quite physical. Arrested in 1979, Negri went into exile in 1983. However, his particular form of escape (getting elected as a MP) and the warm welcome and relatively cushy position that awaited him in France were based on the different status he held (as a professor) compared with other militants; thus sections of the movement saw him somewhat as a traitor. His return to Italy has not succeeded in redeeming him; nor has his credibility been restored by recent pronouncements, such as his advice to the anti-globalization movement that the '20% of voters' alienated from the political system need to be won back to electoral politics. (See 'Social struggles in Italy: Creating a new left in Italy', <http://slash.autonomeia.org/article.pl?sid=02/08/10/1643246>)

<sup>58</sup> Of course, it is possible to reject the leftist inanities of 'anti-imperialism' while recognizing the realities of imperialist rivalries.

communist perspective. We therefore thoroughly recommend it as an invaluable resource in helping our understanding of the development, contributions and tensions of workerism and *autonomia* in their historical context of Italy in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

By contrast, for us, Cleaver's account of the tradition of *autonomia* is far more tendentious. Rather than focusing, as Wright does, on what is clearly a single historical episode, Cleaver selects a number of different movements and theorists, going back as far as C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, which he then designates as representatives of what he calls 'autonomist Marxism'. Again, here Cleaver is consistent with the tradition of workerist historiography which, looking back, found the mass worker and hence a commonality with its own perspective in earlier struggles, such as the Wobblies and the working class movement in Germany in the 1920s.

In one sense it might seem there's nothing wrong with Cleaver's attempt simply to identify what he sees as the revolutionary use of Marx as a particular tradition. And if we look at the groups and theorists that he refers to (both in *Reading 'Capital' Politically* and also in his university course on 'autonomist Marxism'<sup>59</sup>) a very great deal of it corresponds with our own assessment of the most valuable contributions.

However, there are two, related, problems. First, in grouping the various movements and theorists together in the way that he does there is an element of the same homogenizing or flattening out – a neglect of differences – that we saw in Cleaver's 'autonomist' class analysis, as well as in the workerist concepts of mass worker and so on.

Second, it is revealing to consider which tendencies are excluded from Cleaver's canon, or at least addressed in only a cursory way. How might these neglected tendencies be in tension with the rest of the material? What contradictions might the formulation 'autonomist Marxism' suppress?

For us, as an account of developments in theory over the past century, the most notable absences from *Reading 'Capital' Politically* are the Situationist International<sup>60</sup> and the Italian left and those influenced by it, such as Barrot/Dauvé and Camatte. We can go so far as to say that the attempt to specify such a thing as 'autonomist Marxism' is ideological, with its emphasis on 'similar' ideas and its concealments (the glossing of the limits of the 'good' theorists and movements, the silence on those that don't fit). This is not unusual or strange. The capitalist counter-offensive which culminated in the defeat of the Movement of 1977 saw a disillusionment with the possibility of mass revolutionary change that was expressed in the destinations of those coming out of the area of autonomy: most went into the PCI or the armed groups. Likewise, the turning of the general insights of the *operaismo* and *autonomia* theorists into 'autonomist Marxism' can be seen as a reflection of the retreat of the movement giving rise to the ideas. Ideology is the freezing of theory; theory freezes when the practice on which it is based is halted. 'Autonomism' seems to be non-dogmatic and dynamic because of the emphasis on particular needs and diverse

struggles etc.; but the very principle of openness to new struggles has itself become ideological as the wave of struggles has ebbed.

Thus the glossing of the limitations of those currents that Cleaver gives approval to, and even cites as exemplifying autonomous struggle (e.g. Wages for Housework),<sup>61</sup> goes hand in hand with the exclusion of those that would contribute to the critique of those same currents. Any radical current needs to critique itself in order to transcend itself, as in the proletariat's self-liberation through self-abolition. Cleaver's identification of a thing with the label 'autonomist Marxism' is ideological in that it is partial and attempts to close off rather than open up a pathway to its own self-critique.

### **6.3 Towards a critical appraisal and appropriation of the contributions of the workerists**

While Cleaver's book, and particularly his Introduction, has been important to many of us in the past, we would suggest now that Wright's book is more helpful than *Reading 'Capital' Politically* in allowing us to appropriate the best contributions of the workerist tradition. Wright ends his book with the sentence 'Having helped to force the lock ... obstructing the understanding of working-class behaviour in and against capital, only to disintegrate in the process, the workerist tradition has bequeathed to others the task of making sense of those treasures which lie within.' In many ways Italian workerist analyses of class struggle promised much, but delivered little. The whole tendency, increasingly divided into separate camps, collapsed at the end of the '70s. Whereas one camp favoured libertarian themes of autonomy, personal development and the subjective determinations of class identity; the other instead turned to debates over the 'armed party' and the feasibility of civil war. Both camps abandoned the traditional workerist focus on the relationship between technical and political class composition – that is, between the class's material structure in the labour process and its behaviour as a subject autonomous from dictates of both the labour movement and capital.

But what can we take from the whole experience? The 'complex dialectic of decomposition and recomposition' of class forces, first elaborated by Tronti and others, was a significant departure from traditional leftist understanding of class struggle; the right questions were being asked: what material determinants are there in understanding the behaviour of the working class as (revolutionary) subject? But if the right questions were being asked, the answers the workerists provided were not always satisfactory; and tendency was often confused with totality. The early workerists were rightly criticized for their unwillingness to theorise moments of class struggle outside the large factories, and perhaps also for seeing the wage as the privileged locus of struggle; however their *autonomia* successors could be equally criticized for their problematic abandonment of the 'mass worker'.

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<sup>61</sup> While Cleaver's decision to leave *Reading 'Capital' Politically* as it was rather than re-write it is understandable, what is perhaps less understandable – unless one wants to suggest that he is simply dogmatic – is his failure to use the new Preface to acknowledge the weaknesses in his analysis that have emerged with hindsight. The continued uncritical lauding of 'Wages for Housework' is one example; another is the claims made about the role of inflation made in the 1970s.

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.eco.texas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/>

<sup>60</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle*, at least, appears in Cleaver's bibliographical history of the 'autonomist Marxist' tradition, appended to Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx* (op. cit.).

Wright's book focuses on the concept of class composition, workerism's most distinctive contribution. Class composition was important as an attempt to express how the working class is an active subject, and thus takes us beyond the poverty of objectivist Marxism which portrayed the working class as passive and dependent. The concept grew from the experience of autonomous struggle when the working class was on the offensive, but it has come to seem less adequate when relied upon in periods of crisis and retreat. To what extent was there a political recomposition of the class with the decline of the mass worker? Was the 'socialized worker' made concrete by the self-reduction struggles of the 1970s and the student and unemployed movements of 1977? Certainly a multiplicity of struggles erupted on the social level. But did the struggles merge, did the new subjectivities forged in struggle coalesce? Class recomposition would entail the formation of an increasingly self-conscious proletarian movement. The dispersal of workers (*operaio disseminato*), and the displacement of struggle to the wider social terrain, because of the fluidity of situations and multiplicity of moments of struggle, make it harder for a self-conscious movement to emerge. But some in the area of autonomy point to the very same factors as having the potential for rapid transmission of struggles to all sectors of the class. But, while the refusal of work and the liberation of needs manifested themselves in many different ways in the struggles of the '70s (proletarian youth circles, riots, 'free shopping' or reappropriations, squatting, organized 'self-reduction' of rent, utility bills and transport fares etc.), they did not develop into the political movement around the wage (redefined as a guaranteed social income) that Negri theorized – let alone into any coherent class movement capable of overturning capitalist social relations.

If this review article has devoted so much space to the problems of workerism and *autonomia* it is only because of the historic importance of this current. Today, ideas such as the non-neutrality of machinery and factory organization, the focus on immediate struggles and needs (rather than a separate 'politics'), and the anti-capitalist nature of struggles outside (as well as within) the workplace are characteristic of many radical circles, not all of which would call themselves Marxist. The workerists were among the first to theorize these issues. The extent to which their arguments have been echoed by radicals down the years (as well as co-opted and distorted by recuperators) is an index of their articulation of the negation of the capital relation.