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 From: Sergio Fiedler <s.fiedler@unsw.edu.au>  
 Subject: AUT: Autonomism under attack

Dear autonomist minded companheiros,

This is an article published in the last *Green Left Weekly* run by the Democratic Socialist Party (leninist, ex-trotskyists) in Sydney, Australia. Love & Rage has directed me to write a response, but if comrades from this list want to write their own it would be a fantastic contribution to the political education of our group. Most of the criticism are directed to Harry Cleaver, so it would really good for us to have a few words from him. Thanks.

love & rage  
 Sergio

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## Autonomous Marxism – DIY revolution

By Zanny Begg

Amongst the student left there has been increasing support for "autonomous organising" of the oppressed. Tactical discussions about the best path towards liberation for groups such as women, gays and lesbians, and indigenous people -- including when to forge alliances and when to organise separately, the relationship between ideology and class society, and the role of revolutionary organisations which unite oppressed individuals in struggles for liberation -- have been subsumed into a strategic panacea: organise autonomously. "Autonomous Marxism" has emerged as the theoretical justification for this emphasis.

As the name implies, autonomous Marxists see themselves as within the Marxist tradition. They point to the factory occupations in Italy in the 1920s as examples of autonomous organising.

Many of their theorists came out of the section of the socialist movement which described the Soviet Union as a new form of capitalism, "state capitalism" (such as the International Socialist Organisation -- ISO). Those grouped around the journal *Aufheben*, which was first produced in the United Kingdom in 1992, explain in their editorial that they reject capitalism in its "Eastern" and "Western" varieties.

The *Aufheben* editorial in issue one attributes the collapse of the "New Left" (the non-Stalinist left and social movements that emerged in the mass radicalisation of the 1960s) to three errors. The first was the collapse into reformism by many former revolutionaries who joined social democratic parties (such as the Greens). The second was the collapse into "frantic party building" and the "bankruptcy of Leninism" of the small revolutionary parties (hence these theorists break from currents such as the ISO). The third was the fall into the "wet liberalism" of identity politics and postmodernism.

Harry Cleaver, a US theorist, provides one of the clearest explanations of autonomous Marxism. He describes it as a tradition within the Marxist movement which emphasises the "autonomous power of workers, autonomous from capital, from their official organisations (e.g. trade unions and political parties) and indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g., women from men)".

### Work and exploitation

Cleaver argues that capitalism is a system based on the "boundless imposition of work". He asserts that traditional Marxists have focused on the form of exploitation under capitalism, wage labour, but have ignored the substance, the reduction of life to work.

Cleaver rejects the notion, which he ascribes to "traditional Marxists", that it is possible to end exploitation but keep work; that is, to create a classless society in which people still labour, but in an unalienated form. He argues that Karl Marx, in writings such as *Capital* and *Grundrisse*, recognised that people struggle against work "not just because it is capitalist work (through which they are exploited) but because there is more to life than work".

But Cleaver distorts Marx for his own purposes. Marx and Frederick Engels argued that it is human beings' ability to labour which sets them apart from the rest of the animal world by allowing them to develop consciousness, language and society. Capitalism alienates people from their labour because its product is privately owned and in the hands of the capitalist becomes the means of oppressing them.

Under socialism, workers will no longer be alienated from their labour because they will collectively own the means of production and their product will be distributed to each according to their needs.

In a classless society, labour itself will wither away as the notion of work becomes meaningless in a society without scarcity or oppression. This is the meaning of Engels' famous dictate, “Freedom is the recognition of necessity”.

Cleaver distorts Marxism in this manner to justify what he thinks should be the demand of revolutionaries: “Refuse to work!”. Of course, for the mass of unemployed people locked into long-term poverty, this demand has already been realised. Unperturbed, Cleaver asserts that the focus of revolutionaries should be on alternative “ways of being” rather than “working”.

Cleaver proposes a lifestyle solution whereby “every nook and cranny” becomes a “site of insurgency” against the system: housewives strike in the home, students refuse to study, workers play computer games rather than process data and the unemployed refuse to look for work.

Cleaver takes this idea further when he asserts that it was not the power of the imperialist economic system which divided the world into rich and poor, but the power of the people in underdeveloped countries who refused to work for a low wage which led to these countries' economic situation. He argues, “Underdevelopment is a measure of their [workers in the Third World] strength not just their weakness”.

### **Workers and ownership**

The only way wage labour can be freed from exploitation, giving working people the luxury of exploring “alternative ways of being”, is if workers abolish private ownership of the means of production. At the moment, workers who played computer games all day would probably just get the sack, and the unemployed in the Third World can starve to death if they refuse to look for work.

It is the central feature of a social revolution -- the change in ownership of the means of production from one class to another -- that autonomous Marxism rules out. According to Cleaver, “Unfortunately ... a great many Marxists have been all too quick ... to fall back again and again into the ideology of turn-of-the-century revolutionaries who wanted to ‘take over the means of production’”.

Organisations influenced by autonomous Marxism, such as the student group Love and Rage, try to cover this retreat from class by arguing that domestic labourers, students and the unemployed are “equal partners in the struggle with waged labour”.

It is true that the student and other social movements (such as the women's liberation movement) can inspire people into action and lead struggles against capitalism. The mass radicalisation of the 1960s was spurred by such movements.

But, on their own, these movements do not have the power to overthrow the capitalism system. It is only when the various movements of the oppressed fuse with the struggle of the working class against capitalism that revolution is possible. It was precisely the inability of the students in the 1960s to make a revolution alone that meant the mass radicalisation subsided, leaving the capitalist class shaken but still in power.

The unquestioning acceptance of the “principle” of autonomous organising by oppressed groups misses this point. Independent movements of the oppressed, be they the women's liberation movement or a movement for indigenous rights, are essential, both in the struggle against the injustices of capitalism and in the

construction of a new, socialist society. As Marx pointed out, the liberation of the oppressed must be the work of the oppressed themselves.

Even after the revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, the gay and lesbian movement had to keep fighting homophobia, and in Cuba, a vibrant women’s liberation movement is needed to combat persistent sexist attitudes in the population.

But liberation from oppression that is entrenched by capitalism is impossible whilst capitalism remains intact. Therefore, revolutionaries need to build alliances between the different movements of the oppressed and seek to organise the mass of the working class into action.

It is not a “principle” that demonstrations, such as rallies for women’s rights, should be “autonomous”. The feminist movement should seek to convince all sectors -- trade unions, migrant organisations, student organisations and so on -- to actively support its demands; what forms this takes is a tactical decision.

### **Revolutionary organisations**

Bringing down capitalism requires more than various “autonomous” social movements exerting pressure on the system. Marxists understand that the working class and all oppressed people need to create an organisation which brings together the disparate struggles for justice into a struggle against capitalism.

At the heart of every successful revolution there have been revolutionary organisations: Lenin’s Bolshevik party led the Russian Revolution, the Sandinista National Liberation Front led the Nicaraguan Revolution, the July 26th Movement led the Cuban Revolution.

Because autonomous Marxists reject the idea that the goal of revolutionary organising is that the working-class seize power, they also reject the idea that workers need to form organisations or parties around this aim. Cleaver asserts that the Leninist party is “worse than useless” because it “freezes working-class self-activity in manageable forms”. Love and Rage’s platform rejects the “vanguardism” of revolutionary parties as “reproducing” the existing power structures in society.

Self-declared “vanguard” parties have a deservedly bad name. After Joseph Stalin’s rise to power in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, Communist parties around the world dictatorially imposed their line (which came from Moscow) on the masses, with tragic consequences for many revolutionary struggles. And in the Trotskyist tradition, small groups calling themselves “the vanguard” have proclaimed from the margins of struggles that they have the only program capable of leading the masses to power.

But for revolutionaries, the challenge is to understand the dynamic between mass struggle and revolutionary leadership. As Jim Percy, a founder of the Democratic Socialist Party and a pioneer of party building in the anti-Stalinist left in Australia, pointed out:

“Revolutions are made by masses of people, not by parties, not by elites. We may help organise the masses, we may help educate the masses around the ultimate goal of socialism, we may help unify the social struggles that develop spontaneously, but the motion itself, the force for social change, comes not from a small party, not even from a large party, but from social reality as a whole, from the masses, not from the vanguard.”

Revolutionary situations open up only when masses of people start to reject the exploitative nature of capitalism. But if they remain disunited, the various social movements will not develop revolutionary perspectives or have the power to dismantle the structures which oppress them.

It is only by coalescing into a united organisation or party that our power can match the power of the capitalist state. Revolutionary parties collectivise the lessons of past struggles and bring together the needs of oppressed groups into a systematic fight against the capitalist ruling class and its state.

Autonomous Marxism rejects both the importance of the working class as the key agent of fundamental social change and the need for the working class to take state power. It proposes instead that revolutionaries focus on the different oppressions that people suffer under capitalism -- sexism, racism, homophobia, class -- as isolated forms of oppression. It thereby fails to provide a strategy capable of moving beyond capitalism.