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From: Sergio Fiedler <s.fiedler@unsw.edu.au>
Subject: AUT: Zanny Begg's reply to Harry Cleaver

Comrades,

I think Harry is getting really popular in Australia lately. This is an article written by Zanny Begg from the DSP on *Green Left Weekly*. All comments and replies welcome...
A lot of people here are really interested in the debate....

in solidarity
Sergio

Three flaws in autonomist Marxism

By Zanny Begg

In *Green Left Weekly* issue #384, Resistance magazine carried an article, by me, which looked at some of the key ideas of "autonomist Marxism". The piece focused on the ideas of US theorist Harry Cleaver, an enthusiastic proponent of autonomist Marxism who has helped publish works of autonomists such as Antonio Negri.

Harry Cleaver has responded to the ideas raised in this article on the National Broad Left's e-mail discussion list. Since many readers of Resistance are neither students nor subscribers to this list, some of this interchange has been summarised here.

The debate between Marxists and autonomist Marxists has revolved around three points: labour and the role of the working class in struggle, how revolutionaries should approach the state and whether we need a revolutionary party.

Cleaver argues that Resistance suffers from a "stubborn refusal to recognize students and women and their struggles as moments of the working class" and that "the insistence on limiting the application of that August title to waged workers not only reeks of Marxist orthodoxy but blinds one to actual class dynamics".

It may be "orthodox", but Resistance believes that what defines whether one is a worker or not is their relationship to the means of production and their consequent social role. Workers are those who have no means of living other than to sell their labour-power to an owner of capital.

This definition is not reducible to the "old industrial proletariat". It includes most women, most indigenous people and most migrants (i.e., all those of these groups who work); it includes white-collar workers, "knowledge workers" and so on. The development of technology and of the "information age" has not fundamentally undermined the basic class antagonism between workers and capitalists. On the contrary, it has intensified it by massively increasing the numbers who are part of the working class.

Students, on the other hand, do not have a definite relationship to the means of production and so cannot fit the title of "waged worker". The usual Marxist definition for students is a "layer in transition" -- some go on to be capitalists, most go onto find work.

Students, and the various social movements such as the women's liberation movement or the gay and lesbian movement, play a crucial role in building and inspiring movements for change. But neither students nor these movements are able to overthrow capitalism, unless they bring into political struggle the mass of the working class.

Cleaver goes on to argue that it is "a very old and orthodox formulation of the idea of socialism that centres on socialism being differentiated from capitalism by the property ownership of the means of production

shifting from capital to labor. Leninists in general, including Trotsky, argued that the workers `owned' the means of production in the Soviet Union and therefore it was socialist. But of course the `ownership' was purely formal and while the state controlled the means of production ... it actually used that control for very capitalist purposes: the imposition of work, the extraction of surplus and the expanded reproduction of these same relationships.”

Cleaver is right to draw a distinction between the “ownership” and the “control” of the means of production in the Soviet Union, although he is hardly the first to point it out. Workers owned the means of production (in as much as they were state property, and not privately owned as in the West), but under the undemocratic Stalinist regime, they had no control over what was produced or how.

For revolutionaries this meant that the task was to retake control of the means of production through a political revolution. Unfortunately, in 1991 the opposite occurred, and those supporting capitalism (under Yeltsin) took control and have started to give ownership of the means of production back to capitalists.

Cleaver argues that Resistance proposes “a united organization or party” that can “match the power of the capitalist state”. What is either not understood or is rejected by this “old Leninist argument”, he argues, is that “the seizure of power and the construction of an alternative organization that can match the power of the capitalist state amounts to no more today than it did in 1917: the creation of a mirror image, which remains the same only inverted ...

“The point of revolution is to change the meaning of power, not to substitute the power of one class for that of another. The point is to abolish the state, not to substitute one state structure for another. What history teaches is that every attempt to substitute the mirror image fails to get us beyond the image itself.”

Autonomist Marxism falls into the anarchism camp by its rejection of “state power” as a key goal for the revolutionary movement. Cleaver argues that the point of revolution is not to substitute the “power of one class for another”. But what other point is there for revolution? Do we want to build a huge movement against the system and then leave the capitalist class in power?

Marx was not prescriptive on how exactly the transition from capitalism to a classless society would take place -- he expected the experience of struggle to reveal the necessary organisational forms. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx argued that the capitalist state was to be replaced by the “proletariat organised as the ruling class”. After the experience of the Paris Commune, Marx wrote that the organisational form “at last discovered” by revolutionary struggle was a “working class government”.

The experience in Russia, the first attempt at building a socialist society, gives more information about the necessary forms of the transition from capitalism to communism. In October 1917 the revolutionary movement, led by the Bolsheviks, took state power. They abolished the political power of the capitalists and set about constructing a socialist society.

Rather than creating a “mirror image” of capitalism, they decriminalised abortion and homosexuality, instituted workers' control of production, appropriated the wealth of the capitalists and reorganised society in the interests of workers and poor peasants. It was for these reasons that they were invaded and attacked by the capitalist powers, and weakened to such an extent that a bureaucratic caste was able to usurp control.

Stalin's rise to power in the 1920s, and the tragic consequences for the socialist movement, do not destroy the revolutionary democratic content of the Russian masses' seizure of power in 1917. Nor does that tragedy take away from the revolution's theoretical conquests: the need for the working class to organise itself as the ruling class and the necessary, and vital, role to be played by a revolutionary party.

Those who would like access to the full debate can visit the Resistance web page at [???] .