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 Subject: AUT: Comments on Z. Begg

Folks: As promised, here are a few comments on the article Sergio posted attacking autonomist Marxism.
 Harry

Preliminary comment:

I agree completely with Dave Grahm that engaging in a polemic with Zanny Begg et al is pointless, and with Jerry Levy that they attack because they feel threatened. Therefore my comments are directed to their readers and not to them. My remarks are aimed at clarifying views that they have partially obscured and misrepresented and in so doing making clearer some of the ways in which I, and perhaps some other "autonomist Marxists" really do differ from their perspective, both in theory and in political orientation. I would note, as well, that many of those I would, or have, associated with what I call "autonomist Marxism" do not view themselves in those terms at all.

Autonomous Marxism -- DIY revolution
 By Zanny Begg

Amongst the student left there has been increasing support for "autonomous organizing" 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.

Comment: the term "autonomous Marxism" suggests that this Marxism is autonomous from something, but from what? From "orthodox marxism"? Certainly. But it was to avoid such interpretation that I coined the term "autonomist Marxism" (-ist not -ous) to describe a thread within the Marxist tradition in which the idea of working class autonomy was central to both theory and politics.

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.

Comment: those I have associated with this perception and its highlighting of the power of workers autonomy have pointed to many historical moments including the worker and peasant risings in Russia, the workers councils in Germany and Italy, workers councils in Hungary in 1956, and so on. But more basic has been the exploration of how bottom-up worker struggles have both forged and transcended various forms of organization, how the changing composition of the class has generated and left behind specific organizational forms. This exploration has generally been motivated by efforts to understand the rejection of various official organizations of the class, e.g., political parties and trade unions, and their policies by the rank and file, or how those organizations have come to play a repressive and constraining role vis a vis workers struggles and how workers have taken the initiative (i.e., acted autonomously) either against or outside those organizations.

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.

Comment: The critique of the Soviet Union as "state capitalist" predated the ISO by decades, but did indeed involve people such as C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya who had been Leninists-Trotskyists within the socialist movement. *Aufheben* is a very recent arrival on this terrain.

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.

Comment: I'll let *Aufheben* speak for themselves.

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)”.

Comment: This is correct.

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.

Comment: This is also correct.

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”.

Comment: I do NOT reject the notion that “it is possible to end exploitation but keep work”. What I reject is the notion that human being is reducible to homo faber, or put differently that the transcendence of capitalism should or must involve the replacement of capitalist class society by a one class society of workers. Chapter 10 in Volume One of *Capital* makes quite clear, as far as I am concerned, that Marx understood that workers struggle against being “mere worker.” And his forecast of the displacement of labor value by “disposable time” in the *Grundrisse* also shows his perception of the struggle to go beyond lives defined uniquely by work. This said, I would add that the category “work” or “labor” as a meaningful generic concept applicable to a wide range of human activities is a modern concept that only make sense within capitalism. Both before and, hopefully, after capitalism there is no justification for regrouping the diversity of human activities under this singular rubric.

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.

Comment: In a body of work that exceeds 50 volumes (the current *Collected Works*+) these two men said many things at many times and they are not always consistent. They were both men of the Enlightenment with its anthropocentric perspective and desired to clearly differentiate human beings from “the rest of the animal world”. But what made the “worst of architects better than the best of bees” for Marx (section one of chapter seven of volume one of *Capital*) was not that humans work and other animals do not, but that that human work (and other activities) is guided by a self-conscious mind and will. (Clearly they were city boys without much connection to other kinds of animals, but no matter.) The notion that human beings are defined as such by work is merely a secular version of the protestant work ethic and has served as an ideological rationale for the imposition of work and the subordination of life to work. 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.

Comment: Marx specified four, not one, form of alienation. First, workers are alienated from their work (not because the product is privately owned but because the capitalist commands their efforts telling them what to produce, how to produce it, at what rhythm, with what machines, etc. In short their work is no longer an expression of their own will and personality, neither individually nor collectively). Second, workers are alienated from their product (partly because the product is the property of the capitalist but mainly because access to their own products is premised upon their continued work for capital, in other words, capitalist ownership of the product is one means through which the imposition of work is reproduced). Third, workers are alienated from each other (because the division of labor is organized by the capitalists for purposes of control as well as production, to divide and conquer a resistant working class, a necessary condition to retain control and generate profits, where the power of cooperation of the collective worker is managed and usurped by capital [assuming everything goes according to plan of course]). Fourth, workers are alienated from what Marx called their species-being, i.e., that which defines their humanity, both individually and collectively: their ability to act according to their autonomous will vis a vis nature and each other. All this is spelled out in the *1844 Manuscripts*.

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.

Comment: This is a very old and orthodox formulation of the idea of socialism that centers 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 (to the extent that it was able) “in the name of” the working class 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. Distribution, of course, was rarely “according to need” as the even older communist maxim would have it, but mostly “according to work” just like in Western capitalism. The history of 20th Century socialism - East and West - makes it quite clear, I think, just how inadequate this focus on property ownership is. Not only have self-titled “socialist” countries used state control to exploit, but many Western self-titled “capitalist” countries have had many, many state enterprises where the means of production are owned by the state but where that ownership has meant exactly the same as private ownership: more work and more exploitation. The real issue is control, ownership is just a juridical relationship, and what is done with that control. What makes capitalism capitalism is that control is wielded to impose work as the fundamental form of social organization and to impose it endlessly. The transcendence of capitalism, therefore, must involve an end to that dynamic and the liberation of work from being a means of domination. That can only happen, I maintain, through the creation of a society in which work is one, but only one, valid form of human self-realization.

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”.

Comment: If, as this author believes, human being is defined by work, then how could work wither away and the species survive? And why would the absence of scarcity end work when work is defined by Marx (in chapter seven of volume one of *Capital*) as human beings transforming non-human nature? For Marx work may not be either the only, or even the most, important form of human activity but he certainly viewed it as, in its unalienated form, a creative, life-giving process. Indeed in the fetishism of deistic religions human-being-which-creates is projected as God-the-creator.

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”.

Comment: I have never sought to “justify” the struggle against work, which has been very real and continuing from before Marx’s time through our own, but to understand that refusal in terms of Marxist theory. As for “the mass of unemployed people,” not only has their struggle against work not entirely succeeded but they are often condemned to way too much work: the work of looking for a job/wage (and thus making the labor market function), the work of reproducing their labor power, i.e., themselves a potential waged and immediately unwaged labor, the work of procreating and rearing the next generation of both waged and unwaged workers, and so on. We all work, whether we are waged or unwaged, the point is that people struggle to reduce their work for capital and co-opt what work they must do for their own purposes. The above statement shows an abysmal ignorance of the reality of “the unemployed” who are all too “employed” in the ways mentioned.

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.

Comment: It is not that I “propose” such a solution, but that I (and many others) have pointed out how the capitalist colonization of “every nook and cranny” of everyday life reproduces the class antagonism on all these terrains and that such struggles inevitably follow. As a result capital’s would-be total hegemony (celebrated by the critical theorists) is actually challenged and subverted at every turn.

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”.

Comment: This statement reflects an inability to understand imperialism as the dynamic of class relations. It pictures imperial power on one side and worker resistance on the other. But imperialism is capital working at an international level to ensure control at the local level and the dynamics of that process is the dynamics of the class struggle. In Lenin’s book *Imperialism* there is nice, to the point, quote from Cecil Rhodes (that Lenin made no use of) to the effect that British capital required an empire abroad to control the workers at home. Africa was enslaved and put to work in the New World as an integral part of the class struggle in Europe. Recent work by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediger on the rise of an Atlantic proletariat is rewriting this history in a most useful manner. Of course capital “divides” and “divides” hierarchically, e.g., higher and lower income, rich and poor. But the history of that division, like that of other “divisions of labor,” e.g., on the shop floor, is not a one-sided history of business shaping the world to its heart’s desire. It is the history of class struggle and the power of workers against the power of capital. Thus there are many areas in the world where workers are poor, i.e., low on the international income hierarchy but where there is little direct investment because they are also rebellious and insistent on their right of self-determination. The post-WWII

history of capitalist counterinsurgency has been a history of the attempts by business and the state to pacify such resistance and stabilize pools of not only cheap but useable labor. The two things are not the same and should never be confused. The above statement is typical of a kind of Marxism that is blind to the power of so-called poor workers to resist and sees them only as victims.

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.

Comment: The portrayal of the struggle for alternative ways of being as “a luxury” which can only come after the revolution is typical pie in the sky Leninism in which the crafting of post-capitalist society is confided to the wisdom of the party and communism a distant, some-day, goal. How different from Marx who wrote “communism for us is not a state at which we aim, but the process of working class struggle.” The creation of alternatives to the alienated being of capitalist society is not a luxury but a necessary part of regaining and maintaining ones self-determined humanity amidst the madness of capitalist society.

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’”.

Comment: Once again, a repetition of the focus on “ownership” without regard to the content of control. Those that I have associated with the autonomist tradition of Marxism have never ruled out workers taking over the means of production. Some have even thought about it in traditional ways, the councilists for example. But more recently with growing demands by workers for less work, many have recognized that one fundamental reason why workers want to “take over the means of production” is so they can work less, as well as work more safely, at their own rhythm, be in control, cooperate, etc. Just as the author of this article would define capitalism by capitalist property ownership without regard to the social content of the control that ownership conveys, so too, here, we see a evocation of revolution without regard to what workers would do with the control of the means of production if they had it. The Bolsheviks probably suspected, and soon discovered, that Russian workers wanted to work less, and immediately began to devise ways of making them work longer and harder -processes that led from Lenin's embrace of Taylorism and “organizing competition” to Stalinist slave labor camps and Stakanov.

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”.

Comment: There is no “retreat from class” in autonomist Marxism --as in some forms of postmodernism and identity politics. On the contrary, there is a close preoccupation with the diverse forms of work and with the complex composition of the working class. To recognize that the working class includes unwaged labor takes no more than a reading of Marx on the reserve army. To recognize that the struggles of the unemployed are important takes no more than familiarity with the struggles of the unemployed in the 30s or with the welfare rights and civil rights struggles of the 60s, etc. To recognize that in capitalism education is designed to reduce human beings to workers and that student struggles can subvert that reduction requires only looking around, at the student movement of the 1960s or at current UNAM student strike in Mexico City. To refuse to see these things, to hunker down in a blindness to contemporary class dynamics seem symptoms of a petrified ideology.

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.

Comment: First, the stubborn refusal to recognize students and women and their struggles as moments of the working class, and 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. Second, the “various movements of the oppressed’ in the 1960s were complemented by the struggles of the waged, struggles that ruptured the Keynesian productivity deals and undermined profits helping to throw capital into crisis. “Mass radicalisation subsided” NOT because these struggles were unconnected but because capital succeeded in shifting the terrain of conflict and by so doing outflanked the movements of the time. At any rate no one ever suggested, that I can remember, that any specific movement, or subset of movements had the power to “overthrow capitalism on its own.” On the contrary a central theme of autonomist Marxist analysis has been that of the circulation of struggle and the limits to it. The argument above attacks false targets.

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.

Comment: The kind of autonomist Marxism being attacked here has never existed. Autonomist Marxists, as I just pointed out above, have been extremely preoccupied precisely with the issue of the building of alliances, the search for complementary in struggle, the acceleration of the circulation of struggle and so on. What is denied, on the other hand is the special privilege Leninists arrogate to themselves (like the academic gurus of critical theory) of “seeking to organize the mass of the working class into action.” This old arrogance has demonstrated its powerlessness over and over again. Today, with a multifaceted class struggle taking place all over the world, the arrogance of thinking that several billion people can be “organized” by enlightened Marxists is ludicrous.

People organize themselves, in diverse ways according to the varying patterns of the class composition and yes, they do it, to some degree, autonomously of what others are doing. The problem is in crafting linkages among the diverse struggles and in finding ways (not *one* way) for them to complement and reinforce each other.

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.

Comment: To be autonomous does not mean to be isolated, it means to take the initiative in one's own struggles vis a vis others with different preoccupations. It means not to subordinate particular demands to some abstract general demand of “the class” as dictated by Marxist intellectuals or Party gurus. Of course different struggles or movements “should” seek support; indeed as a general rule they DO seek support, certainly the ones mentioned above have. But the issue of complementarity goes beyond “support” or “solidarity.”

Revolutionary organizations

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.

Comment: Here we get to a real, practical disagreement. What is evoked here is the old orthodox Marxist myth: the central Leninist organization that “organizes” the workers to fight for the general class interest, that in fact subordinates the concrete “economistic” demands of various sectors to the “political” demand for the overthrow of capitalism (defined of course merely, as we have seen above, as the expropriation of capitalist ownership of the means of production by the “proletarian” state).

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.

Comment: The Bolshevik Party did NOT “lead the Russian Revolution”; it led the taming of that revolution and resubordination of the Russian working class to the accumulation of capital. Russian workers and peasants “led” the revolution, created organs of their own power which were undermined and subverted by the Bolsheviks as quickly as possible in order to concentrate power in their own hands. And to what end? At least Lenin was honest: to restructure the Russian economy along the lines of German state capitalism, only with the Party in command, in the name of the workers.

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.

Comment: for all the anti-Leninist rhetoric here, the authors perspective remains Leninist with the same solution: “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 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, to be substituted for the original image.

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. This is the point that Marcos has made in explaining the EZLN critique of the Left opposition in Mexico. And it is a good one. We know today that the power of class domination takes many forms. We know too that people struggle against virtually all those forms, on every terrain. But the struggle against capitalist domination is not only the struggle against capital but also a struggle against domination. Our political problem is neither the seizure of “Power” nor the creation of a “socialist” state. It is rather that of finding ways to abolish Power through the crafting of new kinds of politics, i.e., new ways of negotiating differences while minimizing antagonisms. Our weaknesses lie not in the absence of the mythological all uniting party, but in those differences which still obstruct our collaboration. Yes, about this we disagree most profoundly.

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.

Comment: Wrong on both counts. Autonomist Marxists have always insisted on the centrality of the working class. Where they have differed from orthodox Marxists of the sort we have here, has, over time, been their perceptions of the complexity of what constitutes the working class and of the ability of various sectors of that working class to take the initiative in the class struggle. The need to recognize the complexity of the class struggle - treated by this author as working class and non-working class struggles - does not involve “focusing on different oppressions” but merely recognizing and understanding the diversity of issues and terrains of struggle with the object, not recognized here, of finding ways for these diverse struggles to become ever more complementary and mutually reinforcing so as to achieve the abolition and replacement of ALL the manifold forms of capitalism.

What is correctly observed here is that in general autonomist Marxists do *not* provide *one* strategy for moving beyond capitalism but rather seek a multiplicity of interrelated and complementary strategies for getting beyond capitalism and building a new world which, as the Zapatistas say, contains many worlds.