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## Politicising or opting out?

**Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital politically*, Leeds 2000, pp183, £8**

Without question, the greatest tool Marx gave to the working class movement was *Capital*. It is almost facile saying this, but - at a time when the academic study of this work has for all intents and purposes disappeared, and when the left is mired in its inability to transcend transparently outdated doctrines and categories - we have to re-examine what *Capital* gave us. The publication of this work was a revolution in human thought. For the first time we had the uncovering of the nature of the historical process of accumulation and the social relations so entwined with it.

From the understanding of the single commodity, Marx developed our understanding of value, labour and exchange. Historicising money, time and production, he outlined the ways in which machinery, the factory, the wage - the whole system of capital itself - bound the worker to the relentless process of accumulation. *Capital* was the science of capital - observing it, understanding it, transcending it - a capital giving birth to its proletarian gravediggers. Making that class which would remake itself against it and beyond it.

Altogether alien to that science and to emancipation is Harry Cleaver's work on the 'political' reading of *Capital*. We should be thankful for this republication, if only for the opportunity it gives us to reassess the kinds of readings of Marx which have been so disastrous over the last 30 or so years. Such a reassessment is important, not because its incorrect understanding of Marx is any worse than any other mistaken understandings, but because of the dreadful organisational consequences which follow from these kinds of ideas.

The sort of nonsense expressed in this book sustains all of those backward ideas manifested in the worst (yes, not the best) parts of the Socialist Alliance. How many times have we heard the rants against 'Leninist' forms of organisation from those who have never experienced the genuine article? How often do we find the experiences of the SA 'independents' validated because of terror at the very idea of organisation? *Reading Capital politically* is an exercise in how to perpetuate capital politically - it is the kind of book which should have been left to the "gnawing criticism of the mice", as Marx once said of *The German ideology*.

Originally published in 1979, *Reading Capital politically* has been reworked by AK press, well known for publishing what passes as theory in anarchist circles. It also publishes work by autonomist or left communist Marxists - Cleaver has long been a fellow traveller of new lefties, ecologists and anarchists, particularly in his guise as a teacher of Marxist economics at the University of Texas.

Cleaver's original work, at Stanford University, critiqued the role of US imperialism globally, whilst most recently he has tried to understand the peculiar emergence of the Zapatistas in the aftermath of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement. An ongoing project has been to popularise, in English-speaking circles, the ideas of Italian autonomist Marxism - particularly Sergio Bologna, Mario Tronti and Toni Negri. He has done electronically through the internet (with his Texas Archives of Autonomist Marxism) what people like John Merrington tried to do in the 70s and 80s with his Red Notes series on Italian autonomism.

There is no space here to develop any kind of sustained critique of this tradition, but it is worth making a few points. Firstly, although the philosophical insights of someone like Toni Negri on Spinoza and Marx's *Grundrisse* should be essential reading for all of us, these ideas cannot be accepted uncritically. Much of the Italian work on the planner-state is abstract and simply incorrect even on the Italian situation, whilst their ideas on class recomposition and the social worker and social factory are oversimplified.

Secondly, the political history out of which these ideas were born was of course that of post-war Italian 'official communism'. Groups such as *Autonomia Operaia*, with which Negri was associated, were not physically responsible for the atrocities of terrorist groups like *Prima Linea* and the *Red Brigades*, but the ideological logic of autonomist Marxism led directly to the emergence of this form of terrorism and the ensuing tragedy for the Italian left from which it is only now recovering.

Thirdly, the anti-organisational logic, particularly of Italian autonomism, leads to the clearly reactionary formulations of Negri's most recent work, where he abandons even the vaguest pretence to be a historical materialist at all. It is also worth noting that Negri had grave doubts himself about the value of Marx's *Capital* and considered *Grundrisse*, with all its mysterious and enigmatic formulations, to be the basis of the 'self-valorisation' rather than the self-emancipation of the working classes of Europe.

It is in this tradition that Cleaver's *Reading Capital politically* stands. Having worked with the journals *Zerowork* and *Midnight Notes*, he resolutely accepts what to many of us would be the abandonment of Marxism - the work is literally a manifesto for anti-Leninists and liquidationists.

So how does an autonomist read Marx? This edition has a new preface which explores the genesis of Cleaver's ideas in the early 70s new left, particularly with regard to the 'complementarity' of various struggles of women, ethnic groups and labourers across the US and beyond. Having been part and parcel of these struggles, Cleaver realised that most readings of *Capital* only recognised the one-sided focus on the objective aspects of capitalist exploitation. This was in contradiction to what he perceives as Marx's vision of a political weapon in the hands of a political class - hence reading *Capital* politically. Of course this is the great problem with the book - Cleaver's attempt to perceive *Capital* as a political tool (which of course it is *amongst others things*) leads him to focus on the most extreme form of economism as the recipe for resistance.

This extremist economism is for Cleaver simply part of the dialectic between capital and labour. If *Capital* recounts the process of capital accumulation, then the way we resist capital is to resist that accumulation - this means abandoning the political aspects of working class liberation and focusing purely on those diverse autonomous economic struggles which explicitly stand in opposition to those initially abstract categories Marx puts forward in *Capital*.

The effect of this is to dispense with any idea of a revolutionary programme and replace it with an ethics of eternal resistance in which complementary struggles limit capital accumulation without overthrowing it. Any attempt at overthrowing capital in a 'Leninist' manner is derided by Cleaver as the victory of a "planner-state" against the workers (p59). Socialist accumulation itself becomes a byword for counterrevolution. The supposedly elitist concepts of orthodox Marxism are just new ideological forms of capitalist exploitation and simply seek new ways of regulating the worker in the new social formation.

For Cleaver the dialectic of capital and labour in commodity form is based on the capitalist's surplus and the proletariat's use-value - in other words a radical oversimplification of Marx. The workers resist and threaten capital, capital extends into new areas of exploitation, and at the heart of all of this is a catastrophic sense of crisis which can never be resolved but only resisted.

His 'political' reading is counterposed against other readings of *Capital* - those who read it as political economy, such as Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, and those who read it philosophically, like Althusser and the Frankfurt school of critical theory. He argues that political-economic readings have largely failed because of their focus on the science of capital and a false hope to provide an understanding of the mechanisms of accumulation. Cleaver argues that working class resistance is absent from these kinds of readings, as they are from those who treat it philosophically with no interest in the political effect of Marx's work.

Cleaver states that it is necessary to stand in another tradition - that of autonomist Marxism. He lists three main tendencies in the political reading of *Capital* - the Johnson-Forrest tendency in the American Socialist

Workers Party (CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya); *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, led by Castoriadis and Lefort; and the Italian new left, such as Negri and his co-thinkers.

Now, you only have to look at these tendencies to see the problem. Whatever the great work of James on colonialism, Dunayevskaya on liberty and Castoriadis on the USSR, only with the most serious reservations could any of them be described as fully Marxist. James, for the last 50 years of his life rejected any form of *organised* revolutionary grouping, Dunayevskaya just went politically mad, and Castoriadis had very clearly rejected Marxism in the early 1960s (by his own admission) for the worst kind of psychotherapeutic mysticism. For all of their focus on history from below and working class emancipation these bankrupt tendencies effectively abandoned that struggle because they could not understand that political understanding and organisation are the only tools the working class have in their struggle against capital.

What Cleaver does in his ‘political’ reading is basically to substitute working class organisation with anti-wage and leisure time struggles, dropout refusal of work campaigns and a vicarious identification with a variety of third-worldist and national liberationist struggles. In other words, the usual raggle-taggle band beloved of Guevarist mischief-makers sat in the bedrooms of Surbiton.

In exploring Negri’s concept of self-valorisation, Cleaver calls for “the autonomous elaboration of new ways of being, of new social relationships alternative to capitalism ... not only work which escapes capitalist control, but all forms of working class self-activity that imagines and creates new ways of being” (p18). This is a self-valorisation which resists capital without *transcending* it, escapes it by creating *temporary* autonomous zones in the jungles of Chiapas, creates new ways of being *within* capitalism.

It seeks the solution to global capital in spectres and phantasms rather than in the real processes of ruling class exploitation and working class organisation which Marx discerned so well in his science of capital.

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