



H. Cleaver
on
Self-valorization
in
Mariarosa Dalla Costa's
"Women and the Subversion of the Community" (1971)

One important limitation to Mariarosa's essay, in my opinion, is its failure to directly address the issue of self-valorization, either in general, or in the specific case of women's housework. "Self-valorization" is my translation of the Italian word *autovalorizzazione*. A more literal translation would be auto-valorization, but such a word is a bit weird in English so I prefer self-valorization even though it is a bit misleading. It is misleading for two reasons: first, because it is a term appropriated from Marx but changed in its meaning. Second, because the English prefix "self-" risks evoking the individual whereas the Italian prefix "auto" is less likely to do so and is more conducive to a more appropriate interpretation in terms not just of individuals but of groups and classes. Let me explain further.

In Marx the term self-valorization referred to the self-valorization of capital - everything involved in its expanded reproduction - which is most basically the expanded reproduction of the class relation but includes every element of that relation, e.g., every element that appears in his analysis of Volume I of *Capital* and reappear as moments of his analysis of the "circuits" or "reproduction schemes" of capital discussed at length in volume II of *Capital*, e.g., labor power, constant capital, money, exchange, work, commodities, and all the class antagonisms those elements embody and structure: exploitation, alienation and working class resistance and struggle. Capital successfully "self-valorizes" when it is able to juggle/manage the class relationships at all points sufficiently to achieve the expanded reproduction of those relationships.

When Italian autonomist Marxists, especially Toni Negri, appropriated the term "self-valorization" they changed its meaning from the expanded reproduction of capital to the autonomous, self-determination or self-development of the working class. The new use of the term was designed to denote working class self-activity that went beyond being merely reactive to capital, e.g., fighting back against exploitation, to denote working class self-activity that carried within it the basic positive, creative and imaginative re-invention of the world that characterized the "living labor" that capital-the-vampire has fed on but which is always an autonomous power that has frequently ruptured capital's controls and limitations and that will ultimately, hopefully, be powerful enough to break free completely and craft new worlds beyond capitalism.

Whatever the limitations of this particular term, or of its use by the Italians (Steve Wright has argued that Negri's use was essentially so abstract and synthesizing as to be void of concrete content.), I think this focus on the inventive, positive content of our struggles was one of the autonomists' most important contributions to the elaboration of Marxist theory because it helps us to see beyond the orthodox Marxist vision that focuses almost uniquely on reactive struggles against capitalist domination and relegates the building of a new world to the post-revolution "transition" and beyond. It helps us look for,

and recognize when we see, our power to create the world autonomously of capital, not just in theory, not just in some future after the seizure of state power, but in the present, within those struggles, evoked by Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts*, that are constituting communism now, or as C.L.R. James put it: creating "the future in the present."

Now, in Negri this notion of self-valorization was more closely tied to Marx's concept of "living labor" than I think it should be. Although Toni's formulation of concepts to denote the phenomena associated with self-valorization evolved - under the influence of Deleuze's and his own reading of Spinoza and the distinction between *potere* and *potenza* - from *self-valorization* to *constitution* (*potere costituente* or the "power of constitution"), this self-determining, self-constituting power is still largely conceived in terms of living labor. This conception involves what I view as a reductionist understanding in which all "purposive" human activity is collapsed into the category of "labor", instead of the concept of labor being used, as I think it is in Marx, to denote only one particular kind of human activity, i.e., the active human transformation of passive non-human nature through the use of tools into commodities (the analysis set forth in Chapter 7 of Volume I of *Capital*).

If "labor", or work (I use the two terms interchangeably, unlike Engels and many Marxists), is understood in this fashion, then self-valorization must be understood more broadly than the constructive self-activity of "living labor"; it must be understood to include all kinds of human self-activity that is autonomously (from capital) constitutive of human being and human society. For example, people have often invented new kinds of music, e.g., folk, or more recently punk or hip-hop, that have been designed to escape and indeed have escaped, at least temporarily, capitalist commodification and have contributed to the elaboration of new kinds of social relationships that have escaped, at least temporarily, the capitalist reduction of life to the work of commodity production (including the production and reproduction of life as labor power). Or, in an example germane to the discussion of Mariarosa's analysis, women have sometimes invented new kinds of gender relationships, e.g., androgyny, that have escaped the patriarchal forms of power then being imposed by capital and contributed to the elaboration of human life as something other than, and thus effectively antagonistic to, "labor power", i.e., the ability and willingness to work for capital.

Now, when I bring this concept to bear in the reading and evaluation of Marx's own writings, or of Mariarosa's analysis in "Women and the Subversion of the Community", I don't look for the word *per se* but for recognition and hopefully analysis of phenomena that constitute moments of self-valorization. In the case of *Capital* I find them principally in the same place Toni does: in the concept of living labor. In the case of Mariarosa's article I find only eleven passages that seem to me to evoke elements of "self-valorization" but no sustained discussion. The eleven passages are the following: (page numbers refer to the pdf formatted version I put on the web)

p. 2 "the possibilities of a relationship free of a sexual power struggle, free of the biological social unit, and asserts at the same time our need to open ourselves to a wider social and therefore sexual potential."

p. 6 "the infinite possibilities of learning"

p. 7 "It is in our interest to conquer the freedom to procreate for which we will pay neither the price of the wage nor the price of social exclusion. . . . the new

social ambience that the movement constructs offers to children social space, with both men and women, that has nothing to do with the day care centers organized by the state"

p. 8 "possibility of developing their creative capacity"

p. 9 "possibility of affection and intimacy . . . men and women to be in touch with each other, physically or emotionally"

p. 13 "If women demand in workers' assemblies that the night shift be abolished because at night, besides sleeping, one wants to make love and it's not the same as making love during the day if the women work during the day that would be advancing their own independent interests as women"

p. 15 "we also want choices: to eat in privacy with few people when we want, to have time to be with children, to be with old people, with the sick, when and where we choose. . . . re appropriate the social wealth; to be re integrated with us and all of us with men, not as dependents but autonomously"

p. 16 "Sexual creativity and creativity in labour are both areas where human need demands we give free scope to our "interplaying natural and acquired activities. . . . the possibilities of uninhibited sexuality."

p. 17 "Now we can begin to reintegrate sexuality with other aspects of creativity, . . the vagina . . is part of our natural powers, our social equipment."

p. 21 "restore to the woman the integrity of her basic physical functions, starting with the sexual one"

p. 22 "Women must completely discover their own possibilities"

In the face of these few passages that repeatedly evoke various kinds of "possibilities" - that are clearly being realized to some extent but are cruelly limited by capital - I ask myself "why?" Why so little discussion of those "possibilities", of such elements of "self-valorization."? And when I ask myself that question, the main answer that comes to mind is the following:

Mariarosa, like Marx, was primarily focused on analyzing capitalist domination, the way it organizes, limits and distorts individual and social life. Her analysis, like his, is first and foremost an attempt to clarify the character and power of the enemy in the class war and the negative effects of that power on workers (alienation, exploitation, poverty, disease, violence, etc.). In her case, attention is particularly focused on something Marx paid little attention to: the specific ways in which capitalist power organizes and negatively affects women. Inevitably for a woman coming out of an Italian New Left that had recognized and insisted on the determining power of workers' struggles for capitalist development such clarification also includes some discussion of the power of workers/women to resist, and in that resistance, shape the evolution of capitalist Power. But within the space of *autonomia*, and *potere operaio*, or the group Potere Operaio (PO) more specifically, much less attention was initially paid to the positive efforts by workers, including women, to craft alternatives that go beyond resistance. The Italian New Left was born in the struggles of rank and file workers against capitalist development and against the collaboration of union and party bureaucrats in that development. Although a few, like Ferruccio Gambino had identified the "inventive power" of workers within the factories, it was only as the movement spread beyond the factories

into the communities that it experienced and recognized a flowering of "inventive power" or creative self-valorization that took all kinds of new forms, e.g., pirate radio, self-created youth centers put together in squatted buildings, women's collectives to explore alternatives to the limitations of patriarchal capitalism. As Mariarosa recently clarified, and I posted here, this essay was written at the end of 1971 as an early element of her "feminist break" with the male-dominated group PO; it was both an exposition of an analysis that had been missing from PO and the movement more generally - the recognition of housewives as part of the working class and their struggles as part of working class struggle - and a sketch of an agenda for an autonomous women's movement within the space of "workerist" politics or *autonomia*. It was one early step, and after all, she could hardly deal with everything at once.

When I recently discovered and read her Rome intervention of 2002, "The Door to the Garden", I was also struck by her memories of the simultaneous absence of joy and energy and "an enormous, immense fatigue" in the period in which this essay was written. She wrote: "What I missed was something which could positively generate emotions, a strong imaginary which could open different scenarios. I needed to encounter other questions and new subjects who desired and were able to effectively think a different world." In other words, her political work was cut off from precisely those moments of self-valorization which are positive responses to desire, the embodiments of positive, creative energy and generative of new worlds. In short, perhaps there is little analysis of self-valorization in this essay because there was little of it in her immediate political activity of that period. As she indicates at the end of the "Garden" intervention, eventually that changed, and her recent work pays more attention to things that were given short shrift in that essay written some 23 years ago.

Well, whatever the reasons, the absence of an analysis of self-valorization has meant a difficulty in juxtaposing her analysis of housewives' work as reproducing labor power to more traditional interpretations, e.g., housework as simply the patriarchal exploitation of women by men, housework as a labor of love. While in the former case her analysis allowed her to re-situate the patriarchal exploitation of women by men within the exploitation of the working class by capital, that analysis resulted in either the simple dismissal of the understanding of the idea of housework being a labor of love as an ideology that hid the violence of patriarchal relationships or relegated it to the kind of evocations listed above. Those brief passages make it clear that she recognized that people are capable of things like cooking and eating together, or making love together, sharing of affection and intimacy in ways that do not serve the capitalist goal of recreating life as labor power. But, within this essay they are mere evocations and there is no effort to address the problem that while sometimes real, everyday housework may be pure work for capital, more often it is simultaneously work for capital (because it does produce and reproduce labor power) and yet involves, at the same time, efforts to get beyond such work and create or sustain relations that achieve, to some degree, precisely the kind of affectionate and intimate relationships as are repeatedly undermined by the subordination of life to capital.

With the concept of "self-valorization" we have a general way of characterizing the kind of self-determined activity Mariarosa was evoking and thus a conceptual tool for helping us confront and analyze the daily mixture of the reproduction of labor power and of self-determination that moves beyond it. We can look at something like cooking and eating together, or making love together and instead of concluding that such activities "just reproduce labor

power", or of deluding ourselves by saying they are just acts of "friendship or love", we can try to understand "the degree to which" those activities involve one dimension or the other.

Let's look at some situations taking off from the reference in the passage above about eating together. In the case of the business power-lunch, where competitive white collar workers gather, talk shop and play out all the usual petty games of their work and hierarchical relationships, Mariarosa's analysis draws our attention to how everything that is said and done involves either a continuation of the work of production (talking shop) or the reproduction of labor power (eating and drinking to have the energy and dulled awareness necessary to carry on working for the rest of the day, interchanges that maintain or challenge the existing pecking order, and so on). But what about meals such as a romantic dinner between lovers far from the madding crowd where two people are totally focused on each other and forget all about things like their waged jobs or their housework, or a family dinner where parents and children sit down to eat together and seek to renew or strengthened personal connections of affection and intimacy that have been weakened or broken by their experiences in working for capital on the job or in school. In these cases when we look at such gatherings from the perspective of Mariarosa's essay, we are inclined to see, first of all, that regardless of the individuals' subjective intentions and perceptions, their meals are likely, to some degree, to renew their ability and willingness to return to work in the near future. The food they eat will nourish their bodies and their interactions will sooth and heal the psychological wounds of work at least enough to get them back to work for a while. Yet, most of us know that in such settings the people involved, be they lovers or family members, are often trying, with more or less energy and more or less skill, to achieve more than this; they really are seeking those possible moments of "affection and intimacy" that Mariarosa evokes. They are trying to "self-valorize" - not just as individuals but in relationships with others. And, hopefully, they often succeed - "to some degree" and however momentarily.

To take a broader example: a collective meal of a community such as a fiesta where a large number of people gather and, among other things, share food that they have fixed for one another as part of, say, a celebration of their shared history of struggle - a fiesta that gives them the strength not just to work but to continue to struggle to elaborate various kinds of relationships that are the very antithesis of the ability and willingness to work for capital. Here again, there will be mixed effects. Eating, relaxation and sharing will certainly give them strength that will be partly be available for subsequent work, but it may also be available for going beyond work as well.

Finally, we can extend our analysis from such meals backward or forwards through the material circuits of social reproduction of which they are only moments: backwards through domestic labor such as cooking and shopping to agricultural labor such as processing, storing, harvesting, tending and planting; forward through cleaning up, washing dishes, and handling/recycling of waste. At each point, on each terrain, we can query and analyze in what ways and to what degree capital has organized our activity for its own reproduction and to what degree and in what ways have we sought and/or been successful at free our activity from its grasp and organizing ourselves differently, better, in a more healthy manner and more joyfully.

Unfortunately, of course, in all these examples the degree and the frequency of such moments of self-valorization will be limited by the context of their efforts: the constraints and strains and horrors of the capitalist society within

which all these people are striving to be something beyond mere workers; but strive they do, and sometimes, fortunately they succeed and their (as well as our) futures, quite frankly, depends upon building on those successes.

If this is true, then we need to recognize the antagonistic two-sidedness of everyday activities: *to some degree* they contribute to the reproduction of labor power and *to some degree* they may break free of such subordination to capital and achieve some degree of self-valorization. This also means we need to decide how to use terms like "housework" or "schoolwork". In as much as both contain the suffix "work" should we use them only to designate the dimension of the activities normally associated with them that contribute to the production and reproduction of labor power? Or, do we accept Marx's generic concept of work (labor) in Chapter 7 of Volume I of *Capital* and simply differentiate between housework or schoolwork for capital and housework or schoolwork that is self-valorizing - say, the way many have differentiated between "capitalist" development and "socialist" development during much of the 20th Century? I'm inclined to adopt the former approach. For reasons I spelled out elsewhere (the essay "Work is still the Central Issue!"), I think we are better off using specific terms to characterize specific activities that we succeed in crafting that escape subordination to the expanded reproduction of capital and create new ways of being and of being-together. So, if, for example, in one of those meals evoked above, two people actually succeed in establishing a moment of intimacy and affection that goes beyond reproducing each other's labor power, we could call it a moment of "self-valorization" but that is only a beginning, a point of departure for trying to understand what specifically about that moment takes us beyond capital.

["Work is Still the Central Issue!" can be found at:

<http://www.eco.utexas.edu/facstaff/Cleaver/workiscentralissue.htm> or at:
<http://www.eco.utexas.edu/facstaff/Cleaver/workiscentralissue.pdf>]

In short, the concept of "self-valorization" opens a whole field of research and political work that is barely glimpsed in this essay. The field of research includes both past forms of self-valorization that have been either destroyed or instrumentalized by capital and present forms through which people are crafting new ways of being and relating to each other and to rest of nature that are both incompatible with capital's own reproduction and interesting in and of themselves as creative alternatives to the insane and murderous way capital attempts to organize the world. Mariarosa's own recent work, without abandoning Marx, has drawn on both eco-feminist thinking and on some of the ways of thinking and doing in indigenous communities. In doing so, she has argued for the continuing centrality of the sphere of reproduction in the class war, analyzed the character of capital's attack on that terrain, especially its ongoing efforts at the enclosure of land/nature (which involves the separation of people from the land/nature and the murderous exploitation of both people and land/nature) and highlighted the importance of widespread grassroots networks of resistance to such attacks and of innovation in creating alternative forms of social reproduction. She has called for the appreciation of the power of the thinking and doing in those struggles both North and South and East and West and for multiplying and strengthening those networks through understanding and mutual aid.

Starting from her evocations in this 1971 essay we can arrive in the same area by extending our analysis from any point, say the meals she evokes, backward or forwards through the material circuits of social reproduction of which they are only moments: backwards through domestic labor such as cooking and

shopping to agricultural labor such as processing, storing, harvesting, tending, planting, ground preparation; or, forward through cleaning up, washing dishes, and handling/recycling of waste. At each point, on each terrain, we can query and analyze in what ways and to what degree capital has organized our activity for its own reproduction and to what degree and in what ways have we sought and/or been successful at freeing our activity from its grasp and organizing ourselves differently, better, in a more healthy manner and more joyfully. Basically, we can recognize every moment of everyday life as a terrain of struggle - not merely as a terrain to fight against the various ways that capital now tries to shape our activities for its own purposes, but as a terrain upon which we can and must seek to develop alternative ways of being in the world and relating to each other in which we thrive and capitalist Power is outflanked and therefore negated.