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Autonomy, Recognition, Movement

In 1964 Mario Tronti began putting forward an analysis of working class autonomy that would come to be identified—and not always accurately—with an entire period and milieu of radical politics in Italy. The argument went something like this: while capitalists must necessarily equip themselves with the state so as to enter the field of class struggle, working class struggles can occur independently of any given form and level of representation. In “Lenin in England,” he dismissed claims of any “inexorable necessity of working class mediation,” insisting that, to the contrary, the state amounted to capitalist subjectivity *as such*.¹ Put otherwise: the subjectivation of capital consists of law as well as necessity accounted for through law and the state, whereas working class struggles imply an indeterminacy but not, for all that, a haphazardness.

Moreover, for Tronti, “the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital’s own reproduction must be tuned.” As an instance of this, Tronti argued that the unification of the world market was imposed on capital by the unity of movement of the working class at the world level. He would later characterise this unity of the movement of the working class as the “strategy of refusal.”² In the rejection of work, widespread non-cooperation and the desertion of traditional forms of working class representation (such as unions and parties) that characterised the 1960s in Europe and elsewhere, Tronti (and others) discerned not the end of class struggle—as the optic of socialist orthodoxy would have it—but a *different strategy*. In retrospect, and with a nod to historically parallel theoretical discussions in a French idiom, Franco Berardi described these insights as “the emancipation from the Hegelian concept of subject.” For him, the distinct innovation of class composition analysis developed through *Potere Operaio* and *Autonomia* consisted of a reappraisal of the understanding of class, seen not as an “ontological concept, but rather as a vectoral” one.³ Therefore, there was no essential form of organisation or struggle that was valid for all time but, instead, movements and compositions.

More recently and well beyond Europe, the theme of autonomy has become pivotal to discussions of migration, border policing and global capital. There it has come to imply—in view of the intervening conjuncture of debates over 'globalisation'—an emphasis on the strategic-analytical priority of the movements of people over those of capital.⁴ As the so-called 'anti-globalisation' protests began to circulate in the late 1990s, so too debates over the analysis of 'globalisation' become more acute. By 1999, what had become apparent was the dominance—both presupposed and disseminated by the designation of the anti-summit protests as 'anti-globalisation' campaigns—of a perspective in which the 'unification' of the world market was accomplished at the expense of nation-states, in turn regarded as the necessary condition for the defense (and/or representation) of the working class against capital. Though, to be more precise, the concept of class had long receded behind or been redefined as that of 'the people' and, in so doing, counterposed nation-states to global capital in a move that was as historically forgetful as it was analytically untenable.

In other words, the reverse of Tronti's argument as noted above, which is also to say: the standard democratic socialist account prevailed as both a condition and the result of the mediation of those protests as a substantively homogenous campaign. The stakes and implications, therefore, were by no means hypothetical. *De Fabel van de Illegaal*, a Dutch antiracist organisation, was among the first to raise the alarm at the presence of nationalist and, in some cases, explicitly xenophobic groups and perspectives around the anti-summit protests.⁵ In the USA, an unflinching alliance between Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader ferried stacks of paper, photocopiers and fax machines to Seattle for the protests against the World Trade Organisation in 1999, while ATTAC similarly concentrated on capital's movements, and lobbied for a Tobin Tax throughout Europe. But if in the US and Europe at this point, this displayed a typical distance between lobbyists and protesters that was also a difference of orientation toward the state and, by 2000 the demarcations were starkly posed as riots broke out in, and mass escapes occurred from, Australian internment camps, some just days before the protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne.⁶

And so, if one aspect of the radical response to the nationalist figuration of anticapitalist protests was to argue for the organisational decentralisation of the anti-summit protests—against the recurrent demands for unity and mediation and for the political creativity of irreconcilable differences—the other, and not unrelated, response was to insist that the globalisation of finance and trade was historically preceded by the globalisation of labour. Only this could account for the apparently

paradoxical circumstances of the post-1989 period that consisted of *both* the deregulation of capital and trade flows *and* the re-regulation of the movements of people. The first as a catching-up measure, the second as a means to reinstate control and manage the flows. The analyses that located deterritorialisation on the side of capital and, more or less implicitly, territorialisation on the side of labour, were obliged to erase an entire history of struggles against the enclosures just as they were inclined to proffer an argument for their fortification.

The calibrations of capital flight are *always* premised on the organisation of differential and segmented markets. To put this another way, and to echo Tronti's initial formulations: capital's global unification—'globalisation'—was imposed on it by a widespread refusal and flight of people. This flight took shape not only as an exodus from the factory and the unions that the writings of *Potere Operaio* sought to analyse, but as a simultaneous exodus from what has usually been referred to as the 'Third World', the poorhouses and workhouses of 18th and 19th century Europe which had been exported across the world as the very meaning of its partitioning as 'first', 'second' and 'third'. The attempted global reorganisations of finance and trade of the late 20th century, as well as the post-1989 border regimes introduced in the US, Australia, Europe and Canada, postdate the movements of people from 'periphery' to 'core.' This is in no way to suggest that there has not been a world market prior to this, which is as absurd as the suggestion that the world market has not always been an *inter*-national system. Rather, it is to note that what has been called 'globalisation' of late can only be explained with regard to the recent history of movements that were an attempt to escape the specific conditions of exploitation of the post-WWII period. Those conditions being, in short: a Fordist production system divested of its early resort to a relatively higher wage and 'Third World' nationalisms increasingly, and in the least violent moments, operating as Bantustans. It might be worth noting here that it is precisely the failure of that attempt to secure the movements of people—to accomplish a repartitioning of the world into spaces of exception and spaces of norms that was once constitutive of the distinction between 'First' and 'Third Worlds'—that has precipitated the more recent resort to a seemingly permanent global war.

In a more specific sense, then, in discussions of migration the notion of autonomy comes to imply both an analytical proposition and a political disposition. First, it not only suggests the political-strategic precedence of the movements of people over those of capital and, not least, the state's policies which give strategic and subjective form to capital, as outlined

above. It also involves an insistence that migration is a *strategy*—a strategy, that is, undertaken in and against the cramped spaces of the global political economies of work, gender and desire, among other things, but a strategy for all that.⁷ Of the terms of such an approach, and echoing Sergio Bologna's earlier work on class composition, Yann Moulier Boutang noted that it is not only important to “look only to the tip of the iceberg: the institutionalized forms, or the word of the people, the way in which they speak, supposing that, as soon as they aren't saying anything, they aren't acting.” It is important to heed “the silences, the refusals, and the flight as something active.”⁸

Secondly, what is at stake in this attentiveness to a subterranean analytic becomes apparent if one considers the ways in which migration policy is crucial to the organisation of differential and segmented labour markets, on national, regional and global scales, and not least through the creation of illegalised strata of workers. Therefore, migration, particularly that which is undocumented and criminalised, means movements in the face of global divisions that are as biopolitical and affective as they are legal, economic and military. In one sense, then, the flight from devastation can be akin to a strike for higher pay, the withdrawal of one's labour from impoverished layers of the market, in which destitution is routinely deemed to be a ecological and/or biological condition, inherent to those regions and/or the bodies of those who inhabit them. What often comes into play here—not only in the organisation of state policy but also in ostensibly 'progressive' responses to it—is racism, sovereignty, the entire terrain upon which it becomes possible, habitual even, to depict migrants as bereft of political action, indeed of activism.

In the Australian context the concept of the autonomy of migration came to imply a more explicit opposition to racism, perhaps because here it requires a good deal more effort than usual to distinguish the nation-state from colonial, missionary and carceral undertakings. As Brett Neilson argued, “to oppose racism [...] one first needs to question the constituted power of the Australian state and its correlate forms of identity and subjectivity.” And, as Sandro Mezzadra added, in this discussion with Neilson on Australian and European borders, there has been a tendency to “depict those who suffer the effects of globalisation in the global south as mere victims, denying them a position as protagonists or active social subjects in contemporary processes of global transformation. From this perspective, migration becomes just one in a long line of catastrophes occasioned by neoliberalism.”⁹ This is also why the path of an assumed political expediency at work in 'mainstream' defenses of migration so often

involves the re-victimisation of those whose movements have been criminalised by the state. Consider here the preference among many NGOs for depictions of otherly-complexioned migrants as mute victims who, in the very spectacle of this inability to speak or act, invite the observer to assume the task of representation.

At issue here is not simply the objectification of migrants, but also a very particular form of subjectivation of the non-migrant that is assembled by implication. Namely, the construction of a more or less furtive bond between 'activist' and 'state', in which political subjectivity is invoked on condition of assuming the perspective of the state—or being, literally, a subject of it. Moreover, in the absence of manifestoes, programmes and spokespeople, much of the Left is all too ready to assume that migration implies the absence of political decision and action; thus reserving for itself the semblance and definition of political struggle, movement and representation. In this way, the form of the political decision—what it means to be and enact the political—is made synonymous with the structure of the sovereign decision. In the wake of the Australian military's seizure of the Norwegian freighter that had rescued over 300 undocumented migrants from drowning, the Prime Minister pithily summarised the conceit of the sovereign decision in the form of an election slogan: "We will decide who comes here and the circumstances under which they come." The prevalent and ostensible counter-slogan of 'Refugees are welcome here' not only repeated the classificatory machinery of migration policy that obliges the other to beg, but positions the 'we' as the one who must be persuaded by such pleading, who has the authority to welcome, or not. The affective economy of migration policy involves a resignation to the state as the model behind which political action and thinking always lurks and—perhaps more captivating than this—the wish to hold fast to the right to decide the exception that is bestowed by rights-based politics. In other words, as Hannah Arendt put it, the right to decide who does and does not have rights and, it should be added, the processes through which the sovereign state and its exceptions are constituted.¹⁰

At stake in every politics of border controls is control over the border of the political. In presenting the act of migration as outside the field of politics, the very definition of what a movement and politics is remains tied to the organisation of democratic representation in a very precise sense, and so, *in turn*, the terrain in which migration appears as that which must of necessity be controlled, regulated and mediated. For if democracy means the rule of the *demos* ('the people'), then the formal emptiness of the proposition of who 'the people' are is nevertheless constantly played out

along both anthropological and racialised axes of differentiation that are as eager to make of 'humanity' the beginning and end of the sense of the world as they are to adjudicate upon the non-human.¹¹

In this regard the concept of the autonomy of migration is not a claim about the absence of economic or other pressures around migration and migratory flows, as Nicholas Bell from the *European Civic Forum* supposed.¹² Nor is it, similarly but in a philosophical register, the proposition of an autonomous or unconditioned subject as it appears in the works of Kant or Locke, where autonomy is defined as self-possession. Even less does it mark the contours of an identity that calls out for recognition. As Maurizio Ricciardi and Fabio Raimondi have argued, viewing “migrants as subjects deprived of rights and citizenship” means that they are presented as indicators of a political lack and a sign of the inexorable necessity of the nation-state.¹³ In any case, the concept of autonomy, as a way to orient oneself around the issue of migration, means above all that one does *not* concern oneself with the reasons why an other wishes to move across borders, simply put: it insists that the other is autonomous from oneself, particularly where one's *self* is most liable to assume the pose of deciding on such matters for an other, either because one's own belonging is not in question *or* as a means to prove that it should not be. More generally, the concept of the autonomy of migration is an insistence that politics does not need to be the property of the state and those who—however implicitly and by dint of a claim to belong to it, as the subject that is *proper to it* (its property)—can claim to reserve for themselves the thought and action that is deemed to be properly political. Therefore, it amounts to a challenge to the sovereign and representational dispositions within what passes for the Left, to the very construction of what it means to be an activist, to do politics and to recognise movements and struggles as such.

One of the questions that arises, then, is of the relation between cognitive labour and movements, particularly as this gives form to the question of the relationship between recognition and autonomy. Throughout its recent history in radical politics, the concept of autonomy has not simply indicated a distance from the state, forms of mediation and representational politics. More specifically, it has called into question the role of recognition and, thereby, the particular role that has been assigned to cognitive labour since Fordism of managing as well as representing the figure of the working class.¹⁴ For while it would be more than plausible to read Tronti's early account of the autonomy of working class struggles as pointing toward its more recent appearance in discussions of migration in almost every respect, for Tronti the explicit sense of autonomy remains that of an autonomy

which admits no heteronomy—save for that of the work to be done by research. This research, Tronti argued, was necessary to “work out the form that will be taken by a future dictatorship of the workers organised as a ruling class.” Therefore, while he insisted that the existence of working class struggles was independent of its formal organisations, that working class struggles menaced every category of political-economy, every policy of the state and economic reorganisation, the means by which this could be *recognised* and translated into organisational forms remained the province of “theory.”

However problematised the role of cognitive labour was by Tronti, it nevertheless came to assume the task of recognition and, thereby, the terrain upon which the autonomy of the working class is not simply identified but, in a very specific sense, constituted. Yet if what survives from Tronti's early analysis is less the explicit “project to research a new Marxist practice of the working class party” than the concept of autonomy, this is in part because the presumed externality of 'theory' to the 'working class' was undergoing a significant shift that has, likewise, become a significant theme in post-*Autonomia* writings. Indeed, such a shift was already more than apparent, even if ambivalent. In “The Strategy of the Refusal,” Tronti also argued that culture is “always a relation between intellectuals and society, between intellectuals and the people, between intellectuals and class; in this way it is always a mediation of conflicts and their resolution in something else.” The reformulation of the question of the role of the 'intellectual' was part of the importance which Tronti and others assigned to the shift from formal to real subsumption: “now that capital itself is calling them back' into the world of production, they arrive as objective mediators between science and industry: and this is the new form that is being taken by the traditional relationship between intellectuals and the party.” He argued, therefore, that it was necessary to refuse to be intellectuals. In posing the question of the shift from formal to real subsumption, the very understanding of cognitive workers as a distinct and managerial strata was, subsequently and in its most interesting aspects, transformed into a question of the forms of exploitation of cognitive work (and immaterial labour).¹⁵

But if the writings of Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri and others have focused more recently on the theme of immaterial labour, there is a sense in which the reception of such writings, if not always the analyses themselves, have retained an impression of cognitive work as a privileged site for the recognition—or, perhaps, the very constitution—of a revolutionary subject. Some of this is due to the uninterrupted transfer of political models from Leninism to so-called 'autonomist Marxism', in which

Leninist organisational forms are deemed to have been adequate for an earlier epoch but not for the present or, at the very least, where the task of analysis is one of discerning the presence of a revolutionary subject. Yet, this is also due to a continuing reluctance to treat cognitive labour as *labour*—that is to say: as labour with its particular forms of exploitation, subjectivation and command that must, as a question of habit, shape an approach toward other kinds of labour let alone the world. And here it becomes crucial to restate a critical understanding of the philosophical concept of autonomy given that, in the specific context of cognitive work, autonomy is intimately bound up with exploitation. In other words, it is precisely through a degree of self-management that cognitive labour is mobilised as labour and made available for exploitation.

As Augusto Illuminati warned some time ago, the “movement of the exodus is ambiguously marked by the opposition to dominant ideas and their molecular renewal.” The terrain of autonomy might well be “the practical beginnings of communism,” but for others it amounts to the “liberalism of the market.”¹⁶ In retracing the history of the concept of autonomy from the early writings of Tronti to its more recent appearance in discussions of migration, the very ambivalence of this notion might be emphasised by mentioning another theme prevalent in the early writings of *Potere Operaio* and *Autonomia*, that of self-valorisation. Insofar as autonomy means something like “to give oneself one's own law,” self-valorisation means “to determine one's own value.” There is a deep ambivalence in both the question of law and value. Radical notions of value may well manifest a refusal of the determinations of value *as established* or presently recognised by capital, but it can also exhibit a striving for self-possession. The latter articulation retains distinctly capitalist aspects of valorisation which function as a prelude to—or aspiration of a future—exchange.¹⁷ But they can also indicate a bid for autonomy from the world that is also, in another sense, a kind of enclosure: the attempt to seek a cognitive shelter from the impact, whether troubling or invigorating, of the touch of the world.

The questions of the internalisation of law as habit remains to be more fully examined than I can on this occasion, as this might be illustrated through the relation between the ostensible contractual freedom of the wage and the persistence of slavery, or as this inflects associations between, say, 'chainworkers' and 'brainworkers', given that the latter are compelled (as Lazzarato would say) to present themselves as subjects and, to a degree at least, self-manage their exploitation.¹⁸ More broadly, it is perhaps not necessary to reiterate here the banality of a cognitive labour, given over to calculation and exchange, which sees in movements not the potential for the

world to be otherwise but the capacity for accruing value, to recall that capitalism remains characterised by expropriation.

The question at this juncture is more precise than this. It is important to consider the extent to which a subaltern analytic adopts the demeanour of 'making the invisible visible', of conceding, in other words, to the role of representation that has been regarded as the province of intellectual labour and the gesture of its managerial rank.¹⁹ Here, it becomes apparent that while the concept of autonomy assumed something of the character of a self-sufficient subject in its earlier *Operaisti* manifestations—autonomous *viz* the state and capital—as it has passed through to a discussion of migration it has undergone a significant modification. In other words, the question that has been thereby posed is of the relation to the other, whose difference is irreducible to, even while it is conditioned by, understandings and compositions of the working class, or more broadly of who 'we' are and the world is.

Autonomy is not the proposition of a self-sufficient working class but of the discrepancy between a labouring on the sense of the world and the sensory impacts of movements on the world. The autonomy, if you will, of an aleatory materialism from any given representations of it, which is by no means confined to a discussion of struggles against migration controls.²⁰ Nevertheless, the concept of the autonomy of migration has emphatically posed the question of the association—and breach—between a state-bound definition of movements and their kinetic existence. From that point it marks the space not of an accomplishment, nor a substantive political identity in which the presence of a revolutionary subject might be recognised, but an ongoing tension in which mediation always risks positioning itself as an instance of capture. This is the question that arises for cognitive labour—for research, reading or simply thinking on the sense of the world—each and every time.

¹ "Lenin in England". First Published: in *Classe Operaia*, January 1964, and republished in *Operai e Capitale*, Einaudi, Turin, 1966, p.89-95, under the heading "A New Style of Political Experiment." (1964)

² "The Strategy of the Refusal" This essay was written in 1965 as part of the "Initial Theses" in Tronti's *Operai e Capitale*, Einaudi, Turin, 1966, pp.234-252. The whole of *Operai e Capitale* has yet to be translated into English. (1965)

³ "What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today? Subjectivation, Social Composition, Refusal of Work." Available at: <http://info.interactivist.net>

⁴ Mitropoulos, A. "Virtual is Preamble: The Movements Against the Enclosures." Available at: <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/133> (Orig. 1999) See also more recently the conversation between Manuela Bojadžijev, Serhat Karakayalō and Vassilis Tsianos (Kanak Attak) and Thomas Atzert and Jost Muller (Subtropen) on migration and autonomy, and "Speaking of Autonomy of Migration." Available at: <http://www.kanak-attak.de>

⁵ Merijn Schoenmaker and Eric Krebbers, "Seattle '99, marriage party of the Left and the Right?" Available at: <http://www.gebladerte.nl>

⁶ See <http://antimedia.net/xborder>

⁷ See Sabine Hesse, "I am not willing to return home at this time." Available at: <http://www.makeworlds.org>

⁸ "The Art of Flight" Interviewer, Stanly Grelet. Available at: <http://slash.autonomedia.org>.

⁹ Mezzadra, S. and Neilson, B. (2003) "Né qui, né altrove - Migration, Detention, Desertion: A Dialogue" *Borderlands* 2:1 Available at: <http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au>

¹⁰ See Mitropoulos, "The Barbed End of Human Rights," <http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au> (Orig. 2000).

¹¹ See Agamben, *The Open*.

¹² "Migration, Autonomy, Exploitation: Questions and Contradictions," Available at: <http://thistuesday.org>

¹³ Ricciardi and Raimondo, "Migrant Labour." Available at: <http://thistuesday.org>

¹⁴ It is not necessary here to reiterate the managerialist parallels between Fordist production methods and, say, Leninist understandings of the relation between the party (conceived as a gathering of radicalised bourgeois intellectuals) and the masses. Suffice to note that the more interesting question is of the post-fordist arrangement of this relationship, as discussed, for instance Maurizio Lazzarato's discussion of the reorganisation of the relationship between command and autonomy, in "Immaterial Labor." Available at: <http://www.generation-online.org>.

¹⁵ See Jason Read's *The Micro-Politics of Capital* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003) for a discussion of formal and real subsumption and some of its implications.

¹⁶ Illuminati, A. (1996). "Unrepresentable Citizenship" in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds) *Radical Thought in Italy*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press pp.166-85.

¹⁷ For a brief discussion of this in relation to the university and the militarisation of the intellect, see B. Neilson and A. Mitropoulos, "Universitas, Polemos." *Borderlands*.

¹⁸ For the first, see Caffentzis; for the second, Mitropoulos, "Precari-us?" Also, see Barchiesi for an English-language review of Moulier-Boutang's work. Available at: <http://www.generation-online.org>.

¹⁹ For a longer discussion of the ways in which the task of 'making the invisible visible' played itself out in the noborder networks, see A. Mitropoulos, "The micro-physics of theoretical production and border crossings," *Borderlands* 3:2 (2004). Available at: <http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au>.

²⁰ See edition of *Multitudes* on aleatory materialism, as well as *Borderlands*, forthcoming.