

Trayectorias de la autonomía*

Paths of Autonomy

“Paths of autonomy”? When asked to speak on this subject, I was a bit dismayed. The "paths," in question I take to be the historical trajectories of various struggles for autonomy. By “autonomy” I understand the quality or state of being self-governing, or self-determining, and by “self” I understand *not* the self-originating, self-determining, rational individual constructed by Enlightenment liberal humanism, but *rather* a diversity of self-defined collectivities made up of social individuals. Given these understandings, “paths of autonomy” embraces a great deal. Such paths - created by people’s struggles to be autonomous from this or that institution, regime, nation state or social system – have been many and diverse. Of central interest must be how those people struggled, what they achieved and the insights and limitations of their thoughts about their actions. At the same time, neither their actions nor their thoughts can be adequately understood without a clear view of the actions and arguments of those against whom they struggled. Finally, and most importantly, of course, we want to know all these things to be able to judge the relevance of this history for our current struggles. The subject seems unspeakably huge, sweeping through much of known human history and across the face of the earth. Even if we limit our attention to bottom-up struggles for autonomy within the capitalist era – as I proposed to do - a serious, thorough treatment of the histories of the many paths of struggle could certainly fill a multi-volume encyclopedia. In what follows, therefore, I provide only a brief sketch of the history of such struggles for autonomy and of the thinking of those engaged in them.

As a prelude, we should keep in mind that the resistance of people like us to such subordination and the battle for autonomy began long before capitalism! Our struggles for autonomy today, against the efforts of the managers of capitalism to subordinate the amazing variety of our traditions, customs, desires, habits and other relationships to their uniform set of rules for organizing the world are only the latest chapter in a long, dignified and what should be an honored history. Our ancestors fought against ancient slavery, feudal bondage, indentured servitude, cultural genocide, gender, racial, and ethnic oppression long before our more recent forbearers began fighting against capitalism. Instead of being dismayed by the degree of success capitalists have achieved, we should take heart by remembering how, in the long sweep of historical retrospect, they are only the latest would-be eternal masters of our world – and as our ancestors defeated all the earlier would-be overlords, so too are we, or those who come after us, likely to defeat these. The imagination and creativity of our species have proven to be almost boundless and have, ultimately, broken free of every earlier attempt to constrain and harness them to a singular, hegemonic way of being.

That said, because methods of domination have differed over time, so too have our struggles for autonomy from domination. So while we can draw inspiration, energy and sometimes lessons from the entire long history of those struggles, the part most relevant to our own situation concerns those fought against our own would-be masters: the policy-makers and managers, or functionaries, of capitalism. Although the history of such struggles is relatively short compared to the much longer historical battle for autonomy, it provides the richest history of efforts and ideas upon which we can draw for our own purposes today.

Starting with their earliest efforts, everywhere, and in every period, where the functionaries of capital have sought to impose the capitalist organization of life upon society people have resisted. Sometimes that resistance has come from above, from existing ruling classes whose power to dominate and exploit has been organized differently with different sets of rules. But it is not from their resistance that we have the most to learn; it is rather from the legacy of struggles from below that we can draw.

The early capitalist accumulation of wealth and the power to control the means of production, subordinate people to their labor markets and endless work may have reasonably been called “primitive” – they were, after all, just learning how to impose their new methods of exploitation – but the struggles of those upon whom these new conditions were forced were rarely new, or “primitive”. Such a label has been, primarily, the result of judging past efforts in the light of later more “modern” efforts – and has often reflected considerable ignorance of earlier times. As more and more research has expanded our knowledge and understanding of those early struggles, the more we have come to recognize how sophisticated they often were, how their forms and methods drew upon existing

* Keynote address to the Conference on *La Autonomía Posible: Reinención de la política y emancipación* at the Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, October 24-26 2006.

networks of cultural ties, practices and communication or crafted new ones using the most modern, available tools. The same has continued to be true throughout the history of capitalism as it has been spread across the face of the earth, as its functionaries have sought to impose their new rules on more and more of us, to subordinate our lives to their way of being. Resistance and experimentation with alternatives have continued, building on past experience and inventing new methods.

Misrepresentations and Blindness

Unfortunately, both the heralds of capitalism - quick to trumpet its successes - and its detractors - equally quick to lament and condemn its victories - have either obscured or been blind to the efficacy of people's resistance, to their creativity in launching new initiatives in the wake of momentary defeat and to their ability to combine the old and the new to elaborate alternatives to capitalist ways. With respect to capital, it has generally been in its interest to misrepresent or hide from public view the capabilities of its enemies. Those who have resisted its impositions have been represented as backward, ignorant, underdeveloped, and as bandits, barbarians, savages, delinquents, and criminals. Such characterizations have been integral to its discourses in which all resistance, or alternatives, to its own policies have been denigrated, dismissed and attacked. Nowhere has this been more obvious – or demonstrated so thoroughly by scholars – than in colonial discourse. But the same has been true throughout the history of capitalism, everywhere.

At the same time, on the other side of the barricades, as it were, lamentations about the brutality of capitalist rule, from accounts of the “bloody legislation against the expropriated” to denunciations of colonialism and imperialism, have often amounted to paeans to capitalist power and too quickly dismissed resistance as so futile as to barely warrant attention.

Think, for example, of the doctrine of the *proletarianization of the peasantry*, long held by orthodox Marxist historians and anthropologists. That doctrine prevented many from recognizing either the depth, or the successes, of rural resistance to capitalist efforts to decimate communities and reduce the survivors to the status of readily available cheap labor. Certainly, in many areas resistance failed and many communities have been dispersed and destroyed. Yet, here we are, several hundred years after the rise of capitalism and six years into the 21st Century, and not only have a vast array of indigenous peoples survived and continue to resist, but in many areas we must recognize how the self-organization of those peoples has been generating a veritable indigenous renaissance. Not only has this renaissance been renewing long standing challenges to capitalism and posing a multiplicity of alternatives but it has been doing so in ways that have resonated among other kinds of people in struggle. Here in Mexico, for example, we no longer need to study Guillermo Bonfil Batalla to recognize the existence of “Mexico Profundo” or search for primordial indigenous essentialisms; we have only to follow the activities of the Congreso Nacional Indígena and the Zapatista “Other Campaign.” In the Andes, to cite another example, we no longer need to go into the tin mines of Bolivia or the Altiplano of Peru to discover the emergence of a pan-Andean movement; we have only to follow the activities of the Congreso de la Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas and take notice when and where the Wiphala is flying.

Think, too, of all those *analyses of crisis in capitalism* that have dwelled solely upon so-called “internal laws of motion” considered one-sidedly in terms of the interactions among businesses – analyses of disproportionality, of over-accumulation, of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and of under-consumption. Virtually every traditional variation of these theories have either failed to recognize our struggles or take them into account. They have been formulated with no regard to how our struggles against capital may have been determinant in the evolution of these tendencies to crisis; they have never questioned how our struggles for autonomy from the mechanisms of capitalist domination may have ruptured those mechanisms and precipitated wider problems. Yet, for the last thirty years we have lived in a period of generalized crisis clearly brought on by an international cycle of interlinked struggles that have indeed ruptured capitalist reproduction in virtually every dimension. The neoliberalism we resist today is the capitalist response to the crisis of Keynesianism we brought on yesterday.

Think of the *old theories of imperialism*, often built on those one-sided theories of crisis and focused on the capitalist search for markets, for cheaper raw materials and for more profitable investment outlets. Nowhere in any of these theories did our struggles play a role except as by-products, as resistance to our victimization. Yet, rarely has it been clearer than today how our struggles in some areas have driven capital foraging around the earth for

easier pickings. From “runaway shops” to “outsourcing” business has been desperate to pit those among us who are weaker against those among us who are stronger. And who has not noticed how quickly our strength has been growing where it has been thought weakest, as in China where workers in both rural and urban areas have been revolting against the savage enclosures and exploitation to which they have been subjected in order to undermine our strength elsewhere.

Finally, think of the *arrogant political theories* of self-aggrandizing intellectuals and professional politicians who have argued that we poor victims should subordinate our feeble struggles to their leadership, pretending to alone have the insight to lead us to an understanding of our own real desires and needs beyond mere economic, gender, racial or ethnic demands. Such leaders – whether social democrats or would-be revolutionaries - have long told us how they alone could formulate policies that would bring both an end to capitalism and the construction of a socialist path to communism. Yet, for more than a century now such “leadership”, even in full control of the state, has proved powerless to formulate or implement effective policies to transcend capitalism. Worse, they have formulated and imposed policies that actually strengthened the accumulation of capital in brutal ways. As a result, struggles for real autonomy have proliferated and grown, crafting diverse currents of resistance, creativity and imagination that have either swept away those architects of socialism, or left them talking to themselves as the tides of history have flooded past.

Awakenings

Fortunately, here and there, from time to time, there have been those who have recognized the strength of people’s resistance, appreciated their creativity, sometimes joined their efforts and sometimes added their written words to the angry cries from below. The red threads of such recognition and appreciation of the ability of people not only to resist victimization but to take the initiative and fight for better, freer, more self-determined lives have run through the entire history of opposition to capitalism. A few of those threads have been theoretical, others can be found in critical commentaries on various revolutionary periods and episodes.

For example, in Marx and Engels' work – up to and including the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) – we find analyses of the fundamental autonomy of the working class (e.g., living labor) vis-à-vis capital (e.g., dead labor) – although such analyses existed alongside arguments that workers should support bourgeois struggles against absolutism in Europe. The later position was abandoned in the wake of their experiences in failed 1848 Revolution in Germany and thereafter they argued for autonomous worker struggles. On the other hand, both in Marx’s very brief analysis (1851) of the role of the peasantry in France during the 18th Brumaire, and in Engels’ book-length analysis (1850) of the German peasant rebellions of the early 16th Century, we find decidedly superficial analyses of a realm of struggle beyond both of their experiences.

As their most substantial treatment of peasant struggles, Engel’s book, *The Peasant War in Germany* deserves comment. Just as a variety of earlier communalistic social movements had previously challenged feudal powers, so too did the peasants, miners, soldiers and clerics who rose up in 1525 against enclosure, taxation and repressive authority and who conceived egalitarian “communist” alternatives. On the one hand, Engels celebrated this struggle as an anticipation of the eventual transcendence of capitalism. On the other hand, as he later admitted, his own preoccupation with economic forces led him to downplay the role of religion in those struggles – among both peasants and their major spokespersons, e.g., Thomas Müntzer, the theologian who joined, fought and died with the rebels. While even today we still have little or no testimony from the hundreds of thousands who rebelled, we do have new research and Müntzer’s own letters that reveal how the desires of the time to create autonomous egalitarian communities were steeped in religious visions drawn from the New Testament. We also, of course, still have, among us, various autonomous Christian communities, e.g., the Amish, the Mennonites and the Hutterites, some of whom engage in similar egalitarian and communal practices.

First in the *Grundrisse* (1857) and then in the first volume of *Capital* (1867) Marx was able to work out a much elaborated theoretical analysis to support the conclusion that the working class had the autonomous power to overthrow capitalism and create a new world. This new work buttressed his much earlier vision in the *1844 Manuscripts* that the communism of present struggles could lead to communism beyond capitalism. He also provided historical analyses of how workers struggles had driven down the length of the working day and had so repeatedly contested the capitalist organization of labor as to drive technological change and reduce socially

necessary labor time. Even by the late 1860s, however, his and Engels' analyses of peasant struggles were no more elaborated than they had been almost two decades earlier. In Marx's later writings, however, alongside his appreciation of the moments of autonomous struggle within the Paris Commune (1871), we also find, in his letters (1881) to one of his Russian translators, Vera Zasulich, that his studies of available materials on peasant life and struggles in Russia led him to conclude that the autonomous self-organization in the peasant *mir*, or commune, might provide "the fulcrum for the social regeneration of Russia" and "an element of superiority over the countries enslaved by the capitalist system."

As for the history of autonomous struggle in the great revolutions of the 20th Century – those that took place in Mexico, Russia and China - time and space allow only the briefest remarks. First, it has been clear for some time that each of those great events depended far more upon the uprising of peasants - either recent rural-urban migrants to newly built factories or those still toiling in the countryside - than on the actions of any well-organized political party. Indeed, in each case it was the seizure of power by such parties that led to the re-subsumption of worker and peasant gains to the accumulation of capital. In Russia and China this was achieved via the creation of a "socialist" state, and the subsumption of the Marxian critique of capitalism to the Leninist program of engineering the socialist "transition". As a result, the official accounts, whether by such as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin or Mao, or by later historians hired to craft and re-craft the histories according to the changing policies of the party-state, have all had to be subjected to critical, independent historical research. What that research has revealed, unfortunately, has been the brutal reality of the socialist, or, more accurately, the state-capitalist repression and exploitation of precisely those peasants and workers who had made the revolution. Such critical assessment must also be applied to their more literate and vocal opponents, such as the anarchists who participated in the revolution but were ultimately repressed. While in general Russian anarchists, like the Populists, demonstrated a much greater awareness and appreciation of peasant and worker capacity for autonomous self-activity than the Bolsheviks, their attitudes and strategies were also mixed. We can look back and appreciate Pyotr Kropotkin's detailed analysis of "mutual aid," but one can only wince at Mikhail Bakunin's assurances to Sergai Nechayev that the old Czarist regime could be overthrown by a handful of strategically situated professional revolutionaries.

Here in Mexico, you know far better than I how carefully one must evaluate the surviving evidence and testimonies, how painstakingly one must sift to rediscover the forces of autonomy within the complex clashing forces of the revolution. As in Russia and China, the history of the Mexican revolution has all too often been reduced to a handful of icons useful to the state and the activities of those involved interpreted and reinterpreted to fit various ideological agendas.

For some decades now, however, so-called "bottom-up" and "subaltern" historians have been helping us to reconsider such struggles, by digging out new sources, reinterpreting old ones and figuring out how to reconstruct the histories of autonomous struggle from below. Theirs has been a difficult task when so few of the voices of those who have struggled in the past have been recorded. Their work has, however, restored some of our lost legacy.

Thanks to Rodney Hilton, for example, the crisis of feudalism that opened the door to capitalism has been seen less and less as the outcome of demographic changes or the spread of markets, and more and more as the result of struggles from below. His work on the peasant rebellions of the late medieval period, e.g., the English Rising of 1381, has demonstrated not only an emerging class consciousness within the spreading revolts, but clear conceptions of alternative, more egalitarian ways of organizing society – conceptions derived from their struggles (both legal and illegal) against feudal exploitation, from ancient beliefs in freedom in status and tenure and from the radical Christian movement of the time, e.g., John Ball, the Lollard priest, with his insistence on social equality.

Thanks to Christopher Hill we now understand a great deal more about the struggles of the Diggers or True Levelers during the English Revolution in the mid-17th Century. They – like the peasants in Germany a hundred years earlier – fought to reverse the enclosures and create alternatives to the rise of agrarian capitalism. His work has helped us situate the position, ideas and songs of Gerrard Winstanley – who, like Thomas Müntzer saw spiritual and material struggle as deeply intertwined. As a result we now know that theirs was no mere reactionary attempt to return to the way things were before the enclosures but was rather another imaginative effort to build a network of egalitarian Christian communities.

Thanks to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker we also now have a much better grasp of how the struggles of workers, seamen, peasants, slaves, and convicts circulated throughout England and across the Atlantic Oceans in the

17th and 18th Centuries and how those struggles repeatedly broke loose from capitalist control to found experiments in autonomous self-governance on both land and at sea (Maroon colonies and pirate communities). Similarly, the work of historians such as George Rawick, who was able to compile some twenty volumes of slave narratives, has revealed multiple, hitherto little known, terrains of self-activity, both on the plantation and off.

Within this history of struggle, alongside the refusal to be moved, has also been escape, exodus from places where past struggle has yielded defeat or few rewards to places of greater opportunity. This is an aspect of the history of the frontier – throughout the Americas – that must be of great interest to us. From the escape of the indigenous from Spanish exploitation (whether to the jungles of Mexico or the swamps of Florida), through communist communities founded in Texas in the wake of the 1848 Revolutions in Germany, to the founding of new communities in the Lacandona in more recent times, what we find are example after example of people both escaping repression and seizing new lands for self-organization. Sometimes such exodus has been carried out by culturally and linguistically homogeneous groups, e.g., Germans in Texas. Sometimes the people involved have been quite heterogeneous, e.g., in Maroon colonies founded by slaves taken from many different places in Africa, or in Lacandona villages created by very culturally mixed groups.

It is also true that such escape and the founding of new communities has sometimes brought one group seeking autonomy into conflict with another seeking the same thing. Unfortunately, our different struggles for autonomy have not always been complementary. Capitalism has long done its best to pit people against each other in a complex hierarchy of income and power. As a result, struggles for autonomy often clash as the struggles of one group have an impact on those of others. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of the “frontier” in the Americas. The influx of Europeans escaping exploitation and seeking autonomy repeatedly conflicted with the desires of indigenous peoples to retain their own autonomy. A few Europeans adopted local ways and mixed with the indigenous peoples, but more often they seized land, separating the indigenous from their means of livelihood, or killed them outright. Other conflicts have occurred as blacks have strived for autonomy from racist laws, or as women have fought for autonomy from patriarchal rule, or as one caste or ethnic group has sought to free itself from exploitation by another – despite the existence of struggles by various groups of white workers, men, and dominant caste or ethnic groups to achieve their own autonomy vis-à-vis those higher up the hierarchy of capitalist power. An obvious recent example in Mexico has been the struggles of indigenous women against patriarchal traditions within their communities in the same period that those communities are struggling for autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Fortunately, such conflicting struggles for autonomy have sometimes been productive. For example, the struggles of indigenous women inside Zapatista communities have certainly forced positive changes both in the balance of power between men and women locally, and in the ability of the Zapatista movement more generally to recognize, celebrate and make alliances with a wider array of struggles.

On the other side of the world, similar efforts can be found in the works of historian Ranajit Guha and his fellow crafters of “subaltern” studies in India. Wielding some Gramscian theoretical tools and digging below the dominant histories of Indian nationalism written by British and Indian historians who have privileged the roles of elites (not just Gandhi) and ignored the initiatives and self-mobilization among an array of “subalterns,” Guha et. al. have been reconstructing the complex history of popular struggle against colonial domination - partly through a careful dissection of official “counterinsurgency” reports and partly through what evidence can be found of the actions and thoughts of non-elite rebels. Thus, to give just one example among many, against the usual accounts that emphasize the role of various *taluqdars*, *zamindars* and other chiefs during the Rebellion of 1857, Gautam Bhadra retells the separate stories of four, non-elite rebel leaders and their roles in rupturing colonial patterns of domination. As such studies have revealed the nuances of both colonial rule and of the struggles against it, they have also led to the recognition of how the formal end of colonialism has meant neither the end of “colonial” mechanisms of domination and exploitation nor the end of struggles against those mechanisms. “Subaltern” studies gave birth to “post-colonial” studies.

Subaltern and post-colonial studies have also been one of the domains in which historical consideration of autonomous struggles soon included recognition and appreciation of the autonomy of women’s struggles amongst other challenges to colonial and post-colonial capitalism. Guha himself has spoken of the necessity of listening not just to the “small voices” of peasants, artisans and workers, but to those of women in particular. More deeply, writers such as Kamala Visweswaran, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Nirnanjana have examined those voices, the efforts to silence them, and the problematic intersections of gender, caste, class and community particularity within the history of bottom-up struggles.

In the West, with few exceptions, it has taken the initiative of anti-patriarchal feminist movements to open the eyes of many “critical” theorists, including most Marxists, to the autonomous character of many women’s struggles. As mentioned earlier, beginning with Marx himself some Marxists were willing to recognize, at least to a degree, the autonomy of the working class vis-à-vis capital. Even when they thought the eventual “gravediggers” of capitalism needed leadership, they assumed that class could not only overthrow capital but construct a new world. Unfortunately, because their concept of class was tightly bound to that of “class consciousness” and class consciousness was, in turn, conceived as an undifferentiated embrace of the “general class interest” (as opposed to concerns with the concrete “economic” interests of particular segments of the class), the only response of too many would-be Marxist revolutionaries to the autonomous demands of women (or of any particular subset of the working class) was to argue, often dismissively, for their subordination to the “general class interest,” i.e., to their mostly male leadership. With such an attitude, it is not surprising that among the works of Marxist historians – including some praised above – there has been, until recently, a veritable dearth of attention to or analyses of the specificity of women’s situations (whether in the sphere of production or in that of reproduction) and of their struggles. For the most part, feminists, not Marxists, began to delve into the particularities of women’s struggles, in both the past and present. The rich results of their work, however, inevitably led some to diverse, albeit often tense, but highly productive marriages of feminism and Marxism.

Not surprisingly, such marriages have tended to emerge among those who recognized, and valorized, other forms of autonomy. For example, in the United States, France and Italy the rebellion of rank & file workers against union bureaucrats led a few Marxists to a closer, “workerist” scrutiny of the particular “class composition” of such bottom-up rebellion at the point of production. Individuals in groups such as the Johnson-Forest Tendency and Socialisme ou Barbarie or within wider movements such as the Italian “New Left,” examined those rebellions and worked out theoretical tools – partly based on a rereading of Marx – to understand them in terms not only of the rank & file’s ability to act autonomously from capital, but also to act independently of their own official organizations, i.e., trade unions and socialist or communist parties. Rank & file workers, they found, were forming factory councils or base committees, were reaching out to other rank & file workers elsewhere, sometimes on other shop floors, sometimes in the wider community. Against the capitalist manipulation of the division of labor to guarantee its control over the labor force, arose workers’ struggles to “recompose” the patterns of power among themselves and between themselves and capital in such ways as to increase their autonomy from capitalist plans and policies.

Against the post-WWII period of the Keynesian orchestration of the class struggle through local productivity deals and a global hierarchy of development overseen by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, workers proved capable, over time, of building enough strength to refuse the deals, at every level. The ability of workers not only to fight successfully on the capitalist terrains of the wage and working conditions but also to carve out new spaces and times for their own activities beyond came to be theorized in terms of “self-valorization” – an appropriation and inversion of a term Marx used to describe capitalist expanded reproduction. Indeed, recognizing how these confrontations were spreading throughout society led to the concept of the “social factory” and, eventually to that of the “socialized worker.” From such worker activity in the big factories of the United States and Europe in the 1960s, through the spread of community-wide struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, to worker participation in the cross-border coalitions formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to fight against the NAFTA, this kind of autonomy has proliferated in recent decades. From this recognition of the power of workers to act autonomously to a political recognition of legitimate autonomous action by particular groups within the working class was an almost logical next step.

Actually taking that step, however, was spurred less by logic than by the impressiveness of such autonomous action when it erupted. It was one thing to recognize the existence of a “social factory” but quite another to embrace the autonomous character of struggles outside the labor movement. In the United States the first great wave of such struggles – that to many seemed to escape the category of “class” struggle – was that of the Black community: the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the explosion of rebellion in urban black communities. From the demand for equal civic rights to challenges to the patterns of economic discrimination on the job and in the community (red-lining and the imposition of ghettos), Blacks went on the offensive. Not only were they fighting against exploitation, discrimination and repression, but they also began to elaborate visions of “Black is Beautiful”, to celebrate the history of autonomous Black cultural creativity and to elaborate its future. These movements were soon duplicated by Chicanos, Native Americans and even Asia-Americans who rose up against exploitation and discrimination and also proclaimed their own cultural autonomy.

The second such wave, in Europe as well as in the United States, was that of students who challenged the power structures of the educational system, the dominant cultural values promulgated by that system and (in the U.S.) the way they were being disciplined for future jobs or drafted for war against apparently legitimate struggles of peasants in Southeast Asia. Students systematically disrupted schools and blocked induction centers but they also fought for new fields of study that corresponded to their own interests, whether within schools or outside them. In the US cooperative linkages grew among community organizers, student activists and, somewhat more tenuously, Asia peasants fighting for autonomy. Where community organizers and students abandoned the streets and schools to enter factories, they joined with the most rebellious elements of rank & file labor movements.

The third wave was made up of the struggles of women – prompted in part by continued patriarchal behavior on the part of men in the Black, student and labor movements where women were every bit as active as men but their concerns marginalized. Women began to organize themselves autonomously within existing struggles, but also to fight against gender discrimination. They also began the process of sorting out the character of their own desires and to define new paths to their fulfillment.

While many have refused to recognize the diverse but interlinked struggles of the unwaged as moments of “working class” struggle – preferring to think of them as “new social movements” – others have come to see how these autonomous efforts were rupturing the fabric of capitalist social reproduction and thus to broaden their concept of working class to include those who struggle against the production and reproduction of labor power as well as those who struggle at the “point of production” of other commodities. The key theoretical analysis of this broader concept grew out of the experience of Italian women in *Potere Operaio* (PO or Worker’s Power) an organization that supported autonomous workers struggles but was still male-dominated. In June of 1971 a number of women broke with PO and founded *Lotta Femminista* (Women’s Struggle). A key text - “Women and the Subversion of the Community” - was penned by Mariarosa Dalla Costa who pointed out the intimate connections between women’s unwaged domestic labor and the capitalist extraction of surplus value. The work of procreating and rearing children, of teaching them the affective social skills necessary for integration into the capitalist labor market had long been, she pointed out, overwhelmingly the work of women. So too had the work of repairing the daily wear and tear of spouses beaten down on the waged job been primarily that of women. The greater the amount of such work, the lower the possible wage and the greater the possible profit. Her analysis was soon translated into many languages and became a pivotal point of reference in the international wages for housework movement.

The recognition of the integral role of unwaged housework in capitalist exploitation inevitably led to the analysis of the interconnections among all kinds of unwaged reproductive and productive labor, thus providing more precise understanding of the interconnections among all kinds of autonomous struggles in both spheres. The analysis of the relationship between unwaged domestic labor and waged work was soon extended to unwaged school work and the unwaged work of peasants. These analyses have generated new understanding of the sources and consequences of phenomena as diverse as student unrest, peasant revolts, the refusal of procreation, struggles around immigration – in both source and destination regions and countries – and resistance to neoliberal policies of structural adjustment. Given the origins of this new understanding, gender divisions and the specific roles of women have usually been integral to the analyses of all these different currents of struggle.

These analyses have also led to an improved theoretical basis for the re-examination of the autonomy of women’s roles in history, of the sort being done by some in subaltern and post-colonial studies. A recent and important example of such re-examination is Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) that provides a detailed sketch of the scope and perniciousness of capitalist efforts within “primitive accumulation” to eliminate women’s autonomy and power, mostly in Europe, but also in the Americas. Perhaps most important, for the preoccupations of this talk, is her gathering of evidence from Mexico and Peru as to the role of women in the defense of local traditions, religious beliefs and gender practices that were far more egalitarian than those European conquerors and colonialists sought to impose. More recent original research in the Andes has confirmed the important role of women’s leadership in indigenous anti-colonial struggles, e.g., in the indigenous rebellion of 1780. But also, today, we find indigenous women in the Pan-Andean movement defending communal values and gender equality - much as the indigenous women of the Zapatista communities in Chiapas fought to impose a Revolutionary Women’s Law on the male leadership of the EZLN.

What has changed?

With the full recognition and appreciation of the diversity of current paths taken in the struggle for autonomy and, at the same time, of the cumulative ability to rupture the fabric of the social factory and begin to elaborate alternatives has come, not surprisingly, efforts to grasp the sources of that ability in recent decades. What changed? In what ways were people able to forge enough strength to rupture the Keynesian orchestration of the social factory and bring on crisis?

Part of the answer clearly lies in the organizational strength flowing from the acceptance of the legitimacy of separate autonomous self-organization among diverse groups in struggle. Although not without conflict, the emergence of autonomous struggles meant a multiplication of total effort because many who had previously stayed out of movements that did not valorize their concerns found new, more direct and more promising paths toward achieving changes in the things that mattered to them. Women who had shunned male-dominated struggles, or blacks who had heard nothing from white “revolutionaries” that spoke to the particularity of their situation, founded or joined new autonomous organizations. The formation of separate organizations clearly challenged existing ones who found their programs and their methods rejected. Some responded merely with anger and antagonism, but others were goaded into changes that made it possible for the old groups and the new ones to complement each other and the struggle as a whole to be strengthened – a process of “political recomposition” indeed. It was through such dynamics that anti-war student groups in the U.S., dominated by whites, Black student organizations and feminist groups came to make alliances and collaborate in struggles against the war, against government COINTELPRO repression of the Black Panthers, against apartheid, against gender discrimination and abuse, for new spaces within universities for “African-American studies,” or “women’s studies” and for expanded spaces and resources in the wider community for those trying to elaborate autonomous cultural projects. To the degree that many of these efforts were at least partially successful, e.g., programs founded that permitted women to study the history and issues of their own struggles or the creation of battered women’s centers, the movements themselves were strengthened, and so too was the sum of the movements.

Part of the answer also lies in the new abilities that people in struggle developed in the midst of combat, especially new abilities to communicate with each other, on the job and off, within autonomous struggles and across struggles.

On the job, the capitalist tendency to respond to workers’ struggles via reorganization of the division of labor has, for a long time, involved changes in technology and the substitution of machines for labor. But, as Marx pointed out in *Capital*, machines are the embodiment of labor - not just the manual labor that produced their corporeal forms but the mental labor of those who designed and figured out how to build them. Remember the passage from Marx's discussion of the labor process in Chapter 7:

"At the end of every labor process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the workers at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature: he also realizes his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of . . ."

At the same time, the degree of separateness between mental and manual labor must not be overstated. On the one hand, "mental labor" such as that of scientists, engineers or doctors generally requires a variety of "manual" skills that are often quite intricate and learned only through practice - such as the proper handling laboratory equipment or surgical tools. For example, while the conceptualization of a research project may be primarily "mental", omnipresent laboratory "protocols", like cooking recipes, spell out exactly the step-by-step sequence of manual operations to be carried out in the experiments required by the research. Each step may require mental judgments but the proper execution of those operations require manual experience and acquired skill to be successful. On the other hand, so-called "manual" workers have always developed concrete understandings of new labor processes beyond those of the engineers and scientists who designed them – understandings without which the processes would fail or be much less productive. An engineer, for example, may decide that costs could be reduced by positioning screws in one place rather than another. But the experience of repair workers may reveal that such positioning vastly complicates and thus lengthens the work-time of repair. Although the division of labor may be such that some individuals are paid to conceive the product and the mode of producing it and others are paid to implement that mode, all are workers, all are engaged in the labor process. The growing importance of machinery, or science and technology more generally, can be thought of as a rise in the ratio of mental to manual labor. But it is misconceived

to interpret this rising ratio as a marginalization of labor, *tout court*, or to conclude from that marginalization that Marx's labor theory of value is no longer relevant, as Antonio Negri and others have done. The displacement of workers by machines, and the reduction of manual labor to machine-tending of the sort that Marx evoked in the *Grundrisse's* "fragment on machines" is only the displacement of manual by mental labor, the displacement of manual gestures by conceptual and communicative actions.

The General Intellect?

Moreover, while an assembly line may be so organized as to virtually eliminate most direct communication among workers carrying out relatively deskilled tasks, mental labor cannot be organized in such a fashion. Mental labor has always been inherently social and communicative. Our thinking is always with shared ideas. We build on ideas we have learned from others. If we invent new concepts or come up with new insights we send them out into the world to let others test them for us. Research and development, or R&D, as it is known in the U.S., whether carried out in firms, universities or government laboratories, depends for the most part on widespread and intensive communication. The more advanced the substitution of mental labor for manual labor the greater the role of communicative activity – or, using Marx's language in that same passage from the *Grundrisse*, the greater is the role of "the general intellect."

But what exactly is the nature of this "general intellect"? Is there truly such a thing? It is much too indeterminate, I think, to merely equate the notion of a general intellect with the mental abilities of human beings, e.g., with "the linguistic-cognitive faculties common to the species," or with "the simple faculty of thought and verbal communication," as Paolo Virno has done. These have always been characteristics of our species.

While "abstract knowledge – scientific knowledge" may have become an ever more important productive force in our capitalist world, Marx's specification of a "general" intellect implies the existence of more "specific" intellects. Clearly, the history of humanity is a history of different kinds of "specific intellects", i.e., a wide variety of kinds of shared knowledge, mental activities, intellectual paradigms, world views, and cosmological visions. However, if one system of knowledge has become dominant in a given period – such as our own – one can reasonably ask how and to what degree?

Over ten years before Marx coined the term "general intellect" in his notebooks of 1857, he and Engels addressed, in the *German Ideology* (1845-46), the issue of general or dominant ideas. They famously wrote: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." Those ideas "rule" precisely because they become generally accepted and define the dominant mind-set of the epoch. But while that early formulation argues that this comes to be true because the ruling class has the power to impose its ideas, it doesn't delve deeply into exactly what is involved in that imposition, neither how those "ruling ideas" are shaped by specialists to form a more or less consistent whole nor how a new, more universal hegemony – the socially recognized "general" character of those ideas and the intellect that produces and utilizes them - is actually achieved – displacing previous ideas and intellects, both "ruling" ones and any existing alternatives (which can no more be assumed away in the past than they can in the present).

Clearly, despite the best efforts of all ruling classes, there have long been barriers to the imposition of "ruling ideas," to the integration of mental activity into a hegemonic whole and to the genesis of anything that might be called a "general" intellect of humanity as a whole. Although the array and pattern of the different kinds of mental activity, of "specific intellects" has changed over time, through gentle influence and violent conquest, there seems no good *a priori* reason to think that any particular set of "ruling ideas" – including those generated within capitalism - has ever achieved complete hegemony either locally or universally. That said, the relative success of capitalism in realizing its tendencies toward totalization – the conquest and imposition of its own form of social organization on most of humanity – has probably been more successful than any previous social system at generating a truly "general" intellect.

Such success has been the result of the tendency of capitalism to marginalize (often to the point of destruction) or to convert or instrumentalize alternative local knowledges and world views deemed incompatible with its own logic. As the result of considerable research we know a great deal about precisely how "the ruling ideas" of the capitalist epoch have been shaped and diffused throughout the capitalist world. We also know a great deal about how

alternatives have been denied, dismissed, destroyed or adjusted to become variations within the "general intellect" of capital. Work on colonial and post-colonial confrontations between "Western" or capitalist knowledge systems and indigenous ones has produced documented case studies of such dismissal and destruction.

Recent tendencies toward the "mining," or better "pirating," of indigenous bio-knowledge by profit-seeking multinational corporations are simply contemporary examples of such instrumentalization, ones that are, perhaps, more thorough and systematic than in past periods of capitalist exploitation. In their current efforts, as in the past, the wider value-systems and world views of the mental activities within which those knowledges were developed are largely ignored and discarded, and their authors threatened with impoverishment, dispersion and subsumption if not annihilation. The genesis of what Marx called a "general" intellect has thus involved the imposition of a very *capitalist* organization of knowledge and mental activity *as labor* to the exclusion of alternatives.

The result, of course, has been an ever widening and networked resistance both among the indigenous and between them and others opposed to these processes. Not surprisingly, many of the struggles for autonomy whose history I have been sketching have included efforts to preserve, recuperate or elaborate knowledges and world views that constitute alternatives to the hegemonic "general intellect" being fabricated by capitalism and celebrated by its critics.

There are, of course, other obstacles to this fabrication of a "general" intellect beyond the resistance of the indigenous and their supporters to expropriation and cultural genocide. For example, the exact nature of discoveries made by workers involved in R&D is often kept secret by capitalist firms seeking competitive advantages or by governments seeking strategic advantages. Those "intellectually property rights" capitalists use to monopolize knowledge stolen from their waged employees or from unwaged indigenous peoples also prevent others from using that knowledge – thus limiting the integration and thus the "generalization" of knowledge. Also, rigid divisions of mental labor, created and imposed in order to divide and control mental workers, result in ignorance about developments outside an individual or group's narrow specialty – an ignorance that limits the imagination and creativity of any one individual or group. Moreover, at many levels – but especially at that of so-called "manual labor" – the capitalist priority of command has often resulted in managers only grudgingly recognizing workers' intimate, hands-on knowledge – usually as a result of the failure of their own plans in the absence of worker intervention and adjustment - and either being blind to or dismissive of workers' inventiveness in labor processes. Given the antagonistic, exploitative and alienated context of all capitalist imposed work, including mental work, individual workers or small networks of workers, sometimes apply their creativity and develop new knowledges and processes that they keep secret from their employers. To the degree that these new approaches are deployed in acts of resistance, of sabotage, they remain antagonistically outside of capitalist command. In all the above cases, however, to the degree that various forms of knowledge and abilities, however isolated or hidden, do contribute to raising productivity they can be seen as moments of a mosaic of commanded "intellects". What is repeatedly missing is capital's ability to integrate them into a "general" intellect that is in any sense unified.

The importance of intellectual labor grew in the 1960s not only with spreading mechanical automation but also with the rapidly expanding commodification of "services" – everything from the provision of entertainment to the expansion of the health and financial industries. That expansion, in turn, was brought on by the changing composition of people's desires and struggles. The rapid expansion of the health industry, for example, was partly a response to the growing refusal of women to stay at home and provide nursing and other medical services. Now, service commodities, as every economist knows, tend to be produced by "labor intensive" methods. But the labor intensiveness is not just in the production of TV shows and movies, the nursing of the sick or the shuffling of papers. Every one of these industries is highly dependent on a wide variety of intellectual and affective skills and extensive communication both among producers and between producers and "customers." Moreover, to whatever degree there has been a tendency to substitute machinery for labor in service production, it has involved, once again, the substitution of one kind of intellectual labor for another, e.g. the replacement of financial paper shufflers by computer programmers and operators.

Something like this has also been true "off the job," i.e., in the sphere of the production and reproduction of labor power whether in schools, home or communities. This is, perhaps, most obvious in schools, especially at the university level where the training of future labor power feeds into and powers research and development. Schooling has become, more or less in tandem with the substitution of intellectual for manual labor in production, more and more about learning first, how to tap into the circuits of information and communication and then, how to contribute

to them. But going to school involves more than the acquisition of cognitive skills, it also involves the learning of affective skills, of how to deal with others – skills learned first at home and then refined in schools and in the larger community.

Over time, as Michel Foucault and later Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari pointed out, capital has sought to subtly manipulate such skill acquisition in its own interest. Foucault's study of Bentham's proposal for the management of prisons via panopticon arrangements led to his investigations into how such mechanisms of micro-control were spread throughout society, the bodies and brains of those living within it. In the process he revealed hitherto invisible arrangements of bio-power through which individual lives were subtly managed through induced forms of internalized control.

On the other hand, the more we develop our abilities to think, to gather information and to communicate, the greater our ability to struggle autonomously. Looking back over the history of autonomous struggles against capitalism we can see that, more often than not, the weakness of various movements has stemmed, at least in part, from their isolation and inability to connect with and learn from others and thus reinforce their numbers and widen their struggles. Conversely, one of the striking things about the struggles that threw the Keynesian era of capitalism into crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s was precisely the ability of people to use their communicative skills to build complex networks capable of mobilizing vast numbers of people, in many autonomous movements, more or less simultaneously.

Diverse analyses of both this new subjectivity in struggle, and of the capitalist response to it, led some European Marxists to reformulate their concepts of class struggle in the language of Spinoza: in the place of "working class" or the "socialized worker" they now speak of "multitude"; in the place of the creative force of living labor they now speak of the constitutive power of the general intellect or "mass intellectuality" - with the multitude's *power* to create being distinguished from the capitalist *Power* to command. Although developing over some twenty years of research and thinking in France and Italy, these reformulations have only recently become familiar to those who do not read French or Italian through Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's two books *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004) and Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). Although differing somewhat in formulation and analysis, all three of these works propound the thesis that the newest and most advanced form of autonomous struggle is to be found in the self-activity of the multitude where the multitude is understood to be an interconnected multiplicity whose oneness throughout global capitalist society, exists only through increasingly shared bio-political abilities to communicate and self-organize.

The attractiveness of the concept of multitude derives, it seems to me, first, from the way it summarizes in a word precisely the kinds of multiple but linked autonomous struggles that have emerged in recent years, but second, because the analyses which have framed it also argue that the strength of such struggles have the potential to grow in the future and to re-craft social relationships beyond the constraints of capitalism – in short it has recast the Marxist revolutionary vision on the basis of recent developments in our abilities to collaborate autonomously from capital. On the other hand, there are considerable differences as to difficulties involved in actually realizing these potentialities, given the methods developed by capital over the last three decades to control and channel these new abilities. Hardt and Negri, despite their analysis of capital as Empire operating on a global scale, are optimistic, some would even say triumphalist, while Virno and some others, like Bifo, are much less so.

Possible Autonomy?

Given the above, what can we say already, now, at the beginning of this conference, about possible autonomy, or possible autonomies? The most obvious things, I think, are these:

Foremost and most generally, both past and present demonstrate that we need not be just reactive victims who can only resist; we can often take the initiative and attack. We can, as so many have done before us and are still doing around us, define our desires, figure out what we think will satisfy them and fight for whatever changes we deem necessary for their satisfaction, individually and collectively. There are times, of course, when we are thrown on the defensive and can do little more than resist, but we must always be looking for openings to retake the initiative. Various currents of our struggles have in the past hurled capital into profound crisis; our goal must be to combine

those currents and create such a tsunami of linked and complementary struggles as to make the capitalist recovery of command impossible and our complete autonomy possible.

Taking the initiative means breaking out of whatever institutional frameworks capital has built to confine and channel our energy and redefining the terrain of struggle in our own terms. Such frameworks have been numerous, and so have been the struggles to escape them. Within the conflicts sketched above we can identify several such struggles.

First, capital's efforts to *manipulate our desires* in its own interest, via advertising, marketing and the creation of wage, racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies have been fought in every phase of the cultural revolutions of the last half century that have challenged virtually every dimension of the capitalist organization of our lives.

Second, those *legal relationships of property* designed to separate us and keep us separated from the means of production, have been defied by efforts to reverse enclosures or take control of the means of production. This includes the refusal and subversion of "intellectual property" through both direct appropriation and the free sharing of ideas, inventions and the activities that generate them.

Third, the *labor markets* in which we are all supposed to sell some aspect of ourselves have been sometimes refused or participation in them has been subordinated to other goals.

Fourth, *the subordination of life to work*, has been resisted in factories and offices by waged workers and in homes and schools by women and children.

Fifth, the *ideologies of domination* through which capital has sought to accustom us to subservience have been resisted by religious movements to escape dominant state-church hierarchies and by those who have liberated such concepts as liberty, freedom and equality from capitalist use and recast them in terms of real autonomy. More generally there has been a refusal of any imposed "general intellect" and an embrace of both diversity in ideas and dialog between them.

Sixth, the *constitutions* that confine our rights and freedoms within the capitalist rules of the game have been contested by struggles that have gone beyond civil disobedience of particular laws to demand a complete reorganization of collective life.

Seventh, those *spatial territorializations (displacement or confinement)* designed to disperse or isolate us have been resisted by those who have refused to be driven off the land or by those who have chosen the mobility of exodus to redefine the terrain of their struggles.

Eighth, *trade unionism* that began as a form of collective worker self-activity but was reshaped by capital into an instrument of its control has been bypassed by the struggles of rank & file workers and by the extension of their shop floor struggles to the wider community.

Ninth, the *formal electoral arena of party politics* that confides politics to professionals and excludes most people from effective participation in political life, has been challenged by struggles for participatory democracy via plebiscites or grassroots encounters.

Tenth, those hierarchal *gender relationships* that have been shaped to pit men against women, and women against men, for the benefit of business control and profit have been challenged, ruptured and bypassed by the struggles of women in both production and reproduction.

Eleventh, those *racial and ethnic divisions* that have also been orchestrated to pit us against each other have been undermined by Black and Chicano struggles in the United States and by indigenous struggles throughout the Americas and beyond.

Clearly, at this point in history, as in the past, the paths to autonomy are as diverse as the obstacles set up to block them. At the same time, while the character of the blockages may reveal that we all have a common enemy – capitalism – there is no reason to think that our desires are all the same or to think that any one new system will

satisfy them all. This point is, I think, well captured in the contemporary slogan “One No, Many Yeses!” “Many Yeses” means the autonomous, self-construction of each unique “Yes!” by a multiplicity of self-defined social individuals and collectivities. We should no longer think in terms of replacing the current “system” with another, singular “system” motivated by a common, singular consciousness or hegemonic “general intellect”, i.e., socialism or communism, but rather with many different ways of doing and being and a politics of negotiating the differences among them. At the same time, we don’t just have a disconnected mosaic of separate struggles and projects. We have, instead, amazing flows of dialog, debate, exchange of experience and mutual aid. These are being woven through encounters, collective demonstrations and internet communication into a fabric of interaction and collaboration that holds the potential for crafting a whole new set of social and political relationships that can both replace capitalist ones and realize our many, autonomous but interconnected ways of organizing our lives.

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October 2006