Anti-Capitalist Movements

Leeds May Day Group

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Communism is not for us a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement, which abolishes the present state of things (Marx and Engels 1970, pp. 56-7).

WHAT'S MY NAME?

From Seattle to Gothenburg and Genoa, from Evian and Gleneagles, and from Argentina 2001 to France 2006, a new movement has come into existence: and one of the labels to which it has been attached is ‘anti-capitalist’. We should not underestimate the significance of this terminology. Following years of defeat and disarray among oppositional movements, we’ve enjoyed new-found energy and experienced moments which have punctured the world of money and power. Once again we can just make out the spectre of communism haunting the world.

But what does it mean to talk of an ‘anti-capitalist movement’? What do we mean by the word ‘movement’? Its most straightforward meaning is a collection of individuals connected by means of some shared ideology or practice. This new anti-capitalist movement is, then, quite simply composed of those individuals who are consciously, collectively and actively opposed to capitalism. By this definition, it clearly includes those who danced in the streets at the J18 Carnival against Capitalism in London in 1999, and those who took to the streets of Genoa and Gothenburg in 2001. But beyond this things get more problematic. The movement may also include those on the streets of Seattle in 1999, but would it also incorporate those who attempted to defend Nike stores from the violence of some of the Seattle demonstrators? More recently, where can we place those who took part in the Make Poverty History mobilisations of 2005? Or those who went to the Live8 concerts? Or Bob Geldof and Bono?

Even such a simple understanding of ‘the movement’ soon starts to unravel. For one thing, it quickly falls into the trap of playing the numbers game: this many demonstrators, that much damage. As one contributor to Reflections on J18 put it: ‘we congratulate ourselves through commodifying our resistance, 2 million quid of damage—good demo!’ (G. 1999). It’s an approach that tends to exclude those who can’t or won’t attend the big spectacular demonstrations and actions, or who aren’t even aware of their happening. In fact it dovetails neatly into the recruitment practices of much of the organised Left, as well as the ‘activist’ mentality of many in the current movement. Both perspectives suggest that just one more paper-sale, one more demonstration, one more action can tip the balance decisively in our favour, as if a real qualitative transformation of our lives will be simply a matter of quantitative change. Despite their protestations to the contrary, both are driven by the same

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The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change... Defining ourselves as activists means defining our actions as the ones which will bring about social change, thus disregarding the activity of thousands upon thousands of other non-activists. Activism is based upon this misconception that it is only activists who do social change. (Andrew X. 1999).

A further problem with this numbers approach is that it tends to be Eurocentric, and almost always privileges those groups that have been identified in advance as ‘political formations’, regardless of whether such groups style themselves as an ‘organisation’ or ‘party’ (for example, the Socialist Workers Party), a ‘network’ (for example, People’s Global Action), a ‘disorganisation’ (for example, Reclaim the Streets) or something even looser. In fact the vast bulk of the movement is made up of people who do not consider themselves ‘activists’ or ‘political’ but who nevertheless have to struggle against oppression and exploitation in their everyday lives—people who, just like us, are struggling for new ways of living.

However, simply expanding the definition of movement—to include millions of workers and peasants and any other number of social groupings across the world—is still limited by the fact that it conceives of movement as ‘a thing’. As something that can be defined, whose boundaries can be clearly mapped, and which stands outside and against something else called ‘capital’. We may argue over the exact terms of the definition (for example, do we include Make Poverty History?) and we may agree that these definitions will shift but this movement is still seen as a ‘thing’. It is increasingly difficult, though, to reconcile such a static, ‘thing-like’ view of the anti-capitalist movement with the realities of everyday life—not least our own—where the vast majority of the world’s population exists both within and against capital.

In trying to rethink this, we have drawn heavily on our own political experiences (mainly but not exclusively within the libertarian revolutionary milieu) and on the analysis developed by ‘autonomist Marxists’. We have found two aspects of the autonomists’ analyses particularly helpful: first, the idea of workers’ autonomy—the potential autonomy of labour from capital—and, second, the understanding that ‘capital is nothing other than the product of the working class’ (Holloway 1995b: 163) and hence, as we mentioned above, we exist within-and-against capital.

While many orthodox Marxists emphasise the power of capital, taking at face value the ‘inevitable’ unfolding of its laws, this first insight—that of workers’ autonomy—reverses the perspective entirely. It instead asserts the primacy of working-class struggle and recasts capital in a reactive role. As one of its earliest theorists puts it:

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and 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. (Tronti 1979: 1.)

If the first insight reverses the polarity between capital and labour, the second attempts to dissolve this polarity entirely. Instead of seeing capital as a ‘thing’ external to the working class, the relationship between capital and labour is viewed as internal. Fundamental is the
view, developed from Marx, of capital as a social relation, one that contains labour within it. As Marx characterises workers:

Their co-operation only begins with the labour process, but by then they have ceased to belong to themselves. On entering the labour process they are incorporated into capital. As co-operators, as members of a working organism, they merely form a particular mode of existence of capital. Hence the productive power developed by the worker socially is the productive power of capital. (Marx 1976: 451; our emphasis.)

‘Capital’ is not something ‘out there’, something that we can fight against as if it were external to us and part of someone or something else—even if we sometimes talk about it as if it is. ‘Capital’ is not a person or group of people, nor an organisation or group of organisations. It’s not the sum total of ‘capitalists’ or ‘capitalist enterprises’. Capital is a social relation mediated through commodities. Capital is the way we live, the way we reproduce ourselves and our world—the entire organisation of the ‘present state of things’ as they are today.

But capital is reliant on the expenditure of our labour power to valorise itself. What lies under capitalist development is the social production of co-operative labour. While labour can never be autonomous from capital, through its constant insubordination it tries to affirm itself as the social subject beyond capital. Conversely capital constantly tries to contain the working class within the limits of its form as a mere living container of labour power, reducing the whole of life to work – for the sake of work. This forms the fundamental cycle of what is termed ‘class composition’: our autonomous struggles provoke capital to restructure the production process and the division of labour in order to reassert its command. This in turn leads to the development of new antagonistic subjectivities, a ‘recomposition’ of the working class, not as a wage-labouring class demanding a better, new deal, but as the multitude-in-resistance that demands the end of class. The only possibilities of escape from this cycle of decomposition and recomposition, of imposition of work and resistance to this imposition, lie in the asymmetry at the heart of the relationship between capital and labour: while capital needs labour, labour does not need capital. Instead of the familiar view of capitalism as confident and monolithic, we are left with a picture of a social order constantly forced to recompose itself in attempt to co-opt, channel and cap the ‘creative unrest’ of human labour.

In short, it is human practice—what we do—which is central. Although we do not choose our conditions, nevertheless we do, collectively, make our own history: ‘Men make their own history ... not under circumstances they have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted’ (Marx 1973, p. 146). Or, as the graffiti in Genoa expressed it: ‘You make plans. We make history!’ Orthodox Marxist thinking has tended to read off human action as a function of class, or as a function of some other social category. But if human practice—doing—is central, then we should begin with the doing. Class and ‘movement’ then become truly dynamic categories which develop with the doing. As an English historian put it, ‘[class] is a historical phenomenon. I do not see [it] as a "structure", nor even as a "category", but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships’ (Thompson 1968: 8). Or, in the words of autonomia: ‘We don’t start with the class: we come to it. Or better, we reach a new level of class composition. We begin with struggle ... We go from the struggle to the class’ (Tronti 1976, pp. 126–27).

It is far more fruitful then to conceive of movements as the moving of these social relations of struggle—in crude terms, movements not of people, but of people doing things: that is, the multitude-in-practice. This dynamic approach allows us to sidestep many of the traps that lie in wait for more orthodox theorists. For instance, from this perspective what people
do is far more important than what they say. We no longer have to rely on people’s own self-definition (‘I’m a communist, therefore everything I do is anti-capitalist’). Communism is, after all, not a label but critical, purposeful social practice.

Moreover, if movements are the moving of social relations of struggle, it no longer makes sense to talk of static boundaries or limits (“these people are in the capitalist movement, those people aren’t…”). But it makes no more sense to adopt a simple anti-identity position (one which would itself offer an ‘identity’). Living a life will always involve some sort of definition, however temporary and tentative, if only to ward off entropy. More crucially, social movements (the moving of social relations) travel through moments of expansion and contraction. In this, the act of drawing boundaries, of defining ourselves in some way, can prove immensely productive, by generating further moments of expansion as we fight to overcome the limits we have set ourselves. In the UK, the trajectory of the anti-roads movement is a good example. What started out as an ‘environmentalist’ struggle in the early 1990s became an explicitly ‘anti-capitalist’ one within a few years, not through a conscious adoption of a communist ideology but simply because people’s practices kept coming up against, and overcoming, the limits set by capital.

Finally, the dynamic approach to ‘movement’ opens our eyes to the everyday activities, both individual and collective, of millions upon millions of ‘ordinary’ people. Closer to our own political histories we can start to see how, in the rush to abandon the ‘lifestylism’ and ‘single issue politics’ that were so pre-dominant in the mid to late 1980s, many of us also jettisoned its actual social practices—practices which were in retrospect far more radical than those of the more formal ‘revolutionary’ groups (in our case Class War) to which we gravitated. (See, for example, Anonymous 1999). Here we can also see a way out of the traditional ‘means and ends’ dichotomy. Historically anti-capitalist movements have too often thrown up organisational forms which ran counter to their long-term objectives. We only need to glance at the history of the ‘communist’ movement in the twentieth century, for example, to see party being put before class with devastating consequences. This is a theme to which we will return later.

**LOST IN THE SUPERMARKET**

Anti-capitalist movements, then, are movements of social relations. As such they occur across a number of dimensions, both spatial and temporal. One of the key characteristics about the current movement is its immediately global nature. In this respect ‘globalisation’, far from being a one-sided extension of capital’s power, entangling the whole world in the logic of the market, is actually a response to the flexing of our muscles in the 1960s and 1970s—which temporarily forced capital on to the defensive. From capital’s perspective globalisation is an inevitable corollary of its ceaseless self-expansion. From our perspective it is as much a flight from our insubordination as a flight to new untapped markets (see Holloway 1995a). And here it is useful to think of circuits of struggle, of the ways in which struggles in one country reverberate and are amplified around the world. This process can occur simultaneously at a number of levels—for instance the Zapatista uprising, besides inspiring many thousands, even millions, around the globe, gave birth to the encuentros, which in turn inspired many similar events across the globe. On another level, labour militancy in, say, South Korea may cause some sectors of capital to relocate to South Wales, while other elements move to Seoul to assist in decomposition of the class there. Of course, as some have argued, the current ‘anti-globalisation’ tag is a misnomer: ‘it should not be called an anti-globalisation movement. It is pro-globalisation, or rather an alternative globalisation movement, one that seeks to expand the possibilities of self-determination’ (Hardt and Negri 2001, pp. 102–3). The current phase of globalisation is a real response by capital to our own ongoing dissension and revolt across the world, to the ways in which we have attempted to
undermine the capital relation, to refashion social relations in our own interests.

Movements of social relations also occur across time. It may appear a truism, but anti-capitalist movements of the early twentieth century are vastly different from those of the present day. Again, just as at a global level, what we see here is the operation of that spiralling ‘double helix’ identified by Tronti: working class composition and capitalist restructuring chase each other over the span of historical periods in ever more complex ways. More specifically, we can reconsider Negri’s historical phases of capitalist development in the light of our new understanding of movement. At the risk of being over-schematic, Negri identifies three broad phases. First we have the era of the ‘professional worker’, which we might characterise as running from the middle of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War One. This is the ‘classic’ period of large scale industry which sees the dominance of productive factory labour (‘skilled workers’) and the formation of the first workers’ political parties. The second phase is the age of the ‘mass worker’, which we could say runs from 1918 to the late 1960s. This phase is characterised by increasingly alienated work processes (Taylorism), mechanisation and mass production (Fordism), and a heavily interventionist State model (Keynesianism). The third, current, phase is that of the ‘socialised worker’. In this phase the factory is dispersed into society, giving rise to the ‘social factory’ and the ‘real subsumption’ of social labour under capital.

In the era of the professional worker, capitalist command and control is based firmly within the factory, and outside of this there are areas which are left relatively untouched (although that is not to say they were havens of peace and freedom as they were subject to other forms of hierarchy and domination). We can see the transition from this era to that of the mass worker as a result of, on the one hand, labour’s flight of insubordination and, on the other, capital’s flight from insubordination. Through its struggles over the length of the working day and over ‘skills’, labour sought to escape the discipline of the factory. Capital, in its turn, was forced to respond on two fronts. Within the factory, it sought to flee labour’s insubordination by ‘displacing’ workers with machines and by increasing its control over the remaining labour-power with those self-same machines. But capital can only exist through labour, through dominating living labour. As labour fled the factory, capital was forced—to secure its very existence—to pursue it and thus developed the political, economic and social strategies associated with the era of the mass worker.

Turning now to the late 1960s and ’70s, the transition from the era of the mass worker to that of the socialised worker, we can see how this too was a product of the flight of and from insubordination, as the movement of the capital relation. Throughout society, insubordinate labour refused capitalist domination. While factory workers practised strikes, go-slow and industrial sabotage, there was an explosion of new social movements, typified by the rise of the Black Power, women’s and lesbian and gay rights movements, and importantly also the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s. Some factory workers, besides demanding more money and less work, experimented with alternative uses for the factory; the new social subjects fiercely proclaimed their autonomy, their difference, their individual and collective identities; beyond the factory floor, all the activities associated with the ‘counter culture’ were nothing other than explorations in new ways of being. Once more, capital was forced to flee, yet also to chase. Taking flight from insubordinate waged workers in the North, it has relocated much physical production to the South and East (cf. Bonnet, 2002). And it has ‘taken on’ the counter-culture, commodifying what previously appeared unruly and domesticating ‘dissent’ by making it a profitable and marketable asset in the burgeoning ‘culture industry’. Labour power as a category and capitalist command is extended throughout society to such an extent that it now makes sense to see the whole of society functioning as a moment of production. Time for ourselves is increasingly time spent either preparing for work or time spent engaging in ‘leisure’— regimented forms of ‘free time’ that seem closer to break time at school than periods when we can decide what we really might want to do with our lives. In
short, capital is now entirely social and its power is almost completely diffuse throughout every level of society. Negri (1996: 157) captured this development well when he argued that ‘productive labour is no longer "that which directly produces capital", but that which reproduces society’.

Of course it is important to recognise that the most modern and technological expressions of this ‘social factory’ sit side by side with more brutal forms of capitalist domination. No matter what the hype says, we are not all web designers now, and in some parts of the world capital is still attempting to carry out the enclosures and expropriation of common land that it enforced in the UK over three hundred years ago. Elements of ‘primitive’ and ‘developed’ are frequently intimately entangled: the new technology worker’s lunch-time latte is made by close-to-minimum-wage employees, while the metallic ores—cobalt, copper, coltan—which end up in computers, cell phones and other electronic equipment are frequently mined in conditions that would have been unthinkable even in the darkest hours of the pre-Chartist nineteenth century. But even where capital is struggling to impose itself, it’s impossible to deny that capital is starting to suffuse all forms of social life: when TV images show those resisting expropriation are wearing last year’s Nike cast-offs from the west, how can the principled distinctions of the past be maintained?

In this nightmare vision of invisible, even ‘totalitarian’ control, it might appear hard to see what space is left for anti-capitalist movements. But if capital is primarily a social (class) relation, and if the capital relation is a global relation, then capital is contested everywhere. Or, in a neater summation, ‘[t]he proletariat is everywhere, just as the boss is’ (Negri 1989: 178). A vicious circle develops: because capital is so diffuse, so the sites of resistance and antagonism become generalised and diverse—and are automatically social. In contrast to the earlier periods, the state’s primary role is now one of decomposition, of neutralising our resistance to capital, rather than one of mediation. Thatcherism and Reaganomics were just early expressions of this deep structural shift. Low intensity conflicts and ‘slow riots’ are the order of the day—‘low intensity’ both because they rumble on and on without end and, crucially, because there are no longer any Winter Palaces to storm. In fact the real subsumption of labour under capital means that there is no space left between capitalism and anti-capitalism—there is no ‘outside’ any more, if indeed there ever was. So while capital might appear stronger than ever, its grip is more precarious than ever. Without the safety valves of the past, everything now goes straight to the heart of its mode of domination. As one of our former Class War comrades succinctly put it, ‘There’s now only one question worth asking: what sort of world do we want to live in?’ This formulation is echoed elsewhere: ‘How are we to become what we already are?’ (Smith 1996: 154); and: ‘What is it to live in a society completely constituted on the basis of freedom?’ (Surin 1996: 203). It is on this basis that a whole new anti-capitalist politics has started to flourish.

**COMPLETE CONTROL**

With the development of the social factory, the entire terrain of politics has shifted to what could be described as the abstract and the universal. Capital has ‘socialised’ itself to escape the battles we waged in the factory, and in so doing has unwittingly opened the way for a new form of politics (‘postpolitical politics’ in Surin’s words). For us the key issue here is not just the emergence of a self-defined ‘anti-capitalist’ movement. It is also the real experimentation with social practices and organisational forms that can prove adequate to the task. Here we think of the tendency to develop horizontal networks, non-hierarchical information and skills exchanges; the imaginative attempts to move beyond sterile, ossified positions (e.g the efforts of Tute Bianche (White Overalls) to transcend the violence/non-violence issues in Genoa); the shift to more flexible, informal ways of organising; the rejection of representation (other people doing things on our behalf) in favour of direct
action; the reintroduction of notions of pleasure and fun into ‘politics’; the increasing recognition of our vulnerability as human beings and attempts meet the need that spring from that (as shown by the Activist-Trauma support group at Gleneagles); and, above all, the willingness to be open and honest, to think sideways, and to do things differently. As De Angelis (2001) has pointed out, two interdependent fronts have been opened up: ‘one is of the limit to capital, and therefore against the limit that capital places upon us—the other is that of relations with the other, a network based on respect, dignity and direct democracy.’ This simultaneous struggle against capital and for new, unexplored and diverse ways of being is encapsulated in the Zapatista slogan ‘One No, Many Yeses’. That is to say, the ‘anti-capitalist movements’ fight on the one hand against capital, and on the other for us. And it is the shift to the second front which seems to be the most decisive. Having created a space from where we can start to pose limits to capital, we have also created a space from where we can start to create situations which go beyond capital. Here we return to Marx’s formulation from his German Ideology with which we began, or as it has been more recently expressed:

The aim is not to force the creation of something which has never existed but to free those forces which already exist, to ‘develop potentialities slumbering within’ existing social being. The task is to discover, hidden inside the chaos of modern life, the elements of a set of relations between human beings, including their relations with the natural world, which are ‘worthy of their human nature.’ (Smith 1996: 165)

From this perspective, anti-capitalist movements are concerted attempts to discover what we already are.

However, we need to introduce a note of caution. Neat as this scheme might appear, it would be foolish (and dangerous) to mistake the map for the territory. Anti-capitalist movements at particular points in time throw up new forms of political organisation, but these organisational forms also have a life and a power of their own. They quickly become limits which react back upon the real movements of social relations from where they arose—the Bolshevik model, for example, is an organisational practice which still has an enormously damaging effect on our ability to organise ourselves effectively against capital (cf The Free Association 2006). In this respect, it’s possible to talk of a third front opening up, one against outdated and alienating political forms. After the attempted criminalisation of the entire movement in Genoa, and increased repression and marginalisation by the ‘war on terror’, there has been pressure on the movement to define itself, to offer up its programme for inspection and negotiation. Crucially, part of this pressure has come from ‘within’ the movement, from political organisations which can only think in terms of ‘demands’, ‘lobbying’ and more of the same old mediation (see Schnews 2001, De Angelis 2001, Harvie et al 2005). Outright repression and clumsy attempts to freeze and channel these movements of social relations both belong to the same strategy of enclosure. In refusing to be defined and limited, we both defend and deepen a process that represents the dynamic, self-expanding unfolding of our power—a real attempt to work out in practical terms new ways of being.

REFERENCES


