



Cracks and the Crisis of Abstract Labour

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Abstract: In this article I suggest that the key to understanding autonomies is the revolt of one form of activity against another. I relate this revolt to Marx’s concept of the dual character of labour, and suggest that the rise of autonomist politics should be understood as an expression of the crisis of abstract labour.

Keywords: autonomy, crack, abstract labour, Marxism, revolution, crisis

Introduction

The core of autonomies is a negation and an alternative doing. The very idea of an autonomous space or moment indicates a rupture with the dominant logic, a break or a reversal in the flow of social determination. “We shall not accept an alien, external determination of our activity, we shall determine ourselves what we shall do.” We negate, we refuse to accept the alien determination; and we oppose to that externally imposed activity an activity of our own choice, an alternative doing.

The activity that we reject is usually seen as being part of a system, part of a more or less coherent pattern of imposed activity, a system of domination. Many, not all, autonomous movements refer to the rejected pattern of activity as capitalism: they see themselves as being anti-capitalist. The distinctive feature of the autonomist approach, however, is that it involves not just hostility to capital in general, but to the specific life activity imposed by capitalism here and now and an attempt to oppose capital by acting in a different way. Against capitalist activity we set a different activity that seeks to follow a different logic.

There are two different sorts of activity here: one that is externally imposed and experienced as either directly unpleasant or part of a system that we reject, and another that pushes towards self-determination. We really need two different words for these two types of activity. We shall follow the suggestion of Engels in a footnote in *Capital* (Marx 1965 [1867]:47) by referring to the former type of activity as *labour*,

the latter simply as *doing*. Autonomies, then, can be seen as revolts of doing against labour.

Doing

The option of doing has a very strong emotional and ethical appeal. We dedicate our lives to activities that we enjoy or that seem to us to be important. It is morally satisfying and personally fulfilling to reject the logic of money or the requirements of capital and devote ourselves to creating a more just world, a world that takes as its starting point not the maximisation of profit but the struggle for a world based on the mutual recognition of human dignity.

The difficulty is that our attempts to act differently run against the dominant logic, the dominant social synthesis. The labour that we reject is part of a tight social weave, a cohesive logic of capital. This logic governs access to the means of survival and of production. To reject this logic and opt for a different sort of doing means that we will have difficulty in getting access both to what we require for living and also to what we need in order to undertake whatever creative project we have in mind. To opt for doing is to opt for exclusion: exclusion from a logic that is clearly destroying the bases of human existence, but a logic that at the same time is the basis of human reproduction.

Our alternative doings always exist on the brink of impossibility. Logically, they should not exist—at least according to the logic of capitalism. But they do exist: always fragile, often ephemeral, often with lots of difficulties and contradictions, always in danger of disappearing or, worse, being reintegrated into the dominant logic, being transformed into a new element of the political or social system. They should not exist, and yet they do, and are multiplying and expanding.

Cracks

We can think of these spaces or moments of other-doing as cracks in the system of capitalist domination. They are not really autonomies, because they do not in fact rule themselves: they are pushed in that direction. They are pushes against, because they push against the logic of capital, so we need a negative rather than a positive concept: cracks rather than autonomies.

The problem with “autonomy” is that it lends itself easily to an identitarian interpretation. “Autonomies” can be seen as self-sufficient units, spaces to which we have escaped, spaces in which we can construct or develop a distinct identity, a difference. In a world based on the negation of autonomy or self-determination, autonomy in a static sense is impossible. Self-determination does not exist: all that exists is the constant drive towards self-determination, that is to say, the drive

against-and-beyond the negation of self-determination, and as part of that drive, the creation of extremely fragile spaces or moments in which we live the world that we want to create.

The crack is a negative and unstable concept. The crack is a rupture of the logic of capitalist cohesion, a break in the fabric of domination. Since domination is an active process, the cracks cannot stand still. They run, extend, expand, do or do not join up with other cracks, get filled up or papered over, reappear, multiply, extend. They break through identities. Necessarily, then, the theory of cracks is critical, anti-identitarian, restlessly negative, a theory of breaking-and-creating, not a theory of self-sufficient units.

There are cracks in capitalist domination all over the place. Today I shall not go to work because I want to stay at home and play with the children. This decision may not have the same impact as the Zapatista uprising, but it has the same core: “No, we shall not do what capital tells us, we shall do otherwise, do what we consider necessary or desirable.” The most obvious way of thinking of these revolts is in spatial terms (“here in Chiapas, here in this social centre, we shall not submit to capital, we shall do otherwise”), but there is no reason why we should not think of them in terms of time (“during this weekend, or this seminar, or for as long as we can, we shall devote all our energies to creating relations that defy the logic of capital”). Or again, our defiances may be thematic or related to particular sorts of resources or activities: “we shall not allow water, or education, or software, to be ruled by the logic of capital, these must be understood as commons and we shall do them according to a different logic”. And so on, and so on.

Revolts against the logic of capital exist everywhere. Often the problem is to recognise them, but the more we focus our mind on cracks, the more our image of the map changes. The map of the world is not only a map of domination, it is also a map of revolts, of cracks opening, reaching, running, joining, closing, multiplying. The more we focus on cracks, the more a different image of the world opens up, a sort of anti-geography that not only reverses the signs of spatiality but challenges dimensionality itself.

Only by starting from there can we think how the world can be changed radically. Revolution can only be the recognition, creation, expansion and multiplication of such cracks: it is difficult to imagine any other way of changing the world radically.

Obviously these cracks or spaces-moments of negation-and-creation face enormous difficulties, deriving from the fact that they are not autonomous spaces but attempts to project against-and-beyond the logic of capitalist rationality. They are threatened by repression or cooptation by the state, by the internal reproduction of patterns of behaviour acquired in the society that we reject, and perhaps most powerfully and insidiously of all, by the corrosive force of value, the

rule of the market. Seen from the perspective of the social totality, they should not exist. From the perspective of capitalist rationality, they are logical impossibilities, absurdities, madnesses. And yet there they are; a growing revolt of doing against labour.

The Dual Character of Labour

These cracks are anti-systemic movements, movements against the cohesion or coercion of the social system. If we understand that system as being capitalist, then they are anti-capitalist movements, whether or not they use the term “capitalism”. They are not the only form of anti-capitalist struggle, but they are a form that has grown greatly in importance.

An important question that arises is whether the most important anti-capitalist theory, Marxism, is relevant for understanding these movements. Many activists reject Marxism as irrelevant to their struggles and see it as being closely tied to the forms of struggle that they are rejecting, the old anti-capitalist struggle of trade unions and of reformist and revolutionary parties. And very often, Marxist analysis seems to wander in a world of its own, far removed from the recent wave of struggles against capitalism. The question of the relevance of Marxism, then, is an important one both for these movements and for Marxist theory.

The cracks (or autonomies) are revolts of doing against labour, of one form of activity against another. Human activity has a dual, self-antagonistic character. The dual, self-antagonistic character of human activity, or as he called it, the “dual character of labour” is the central theme of Marx’s work. Any theory of the cracks, of the revolts of doing against labour, must start here.

The young Marx makes a distinction in the *1844 Manuscripts* between alienated labour and conscious life activity. Conscious life activity is self-determined, purposeful activity, which distinguishes humans from other animals. Under capitalism, Marx argues, this conscious life activity exists in the form of alienated labour, a labour that we do not control, an activity that separates us from our fellow humans and from our species being. In *Capital*, Marx no longer uses the same vocabulary, but he does insist from the very first pages on the two-fold character of labour as “the pivot on which a clear comprehension of Political Economy turns” (1965 [1867]:41)—and therefore a clear comprehension of capitalism. After the publication of the first volume, he wrote to Engels:

The best points in my book are: 1) the two-fold character of labour, according to whether it is expressed as use value or exchange value. (All understanding of the facts depends upon *this*. It is emphasised immediately in the *first* chapter) (Marx 1987 [1867]:407).¹

The two-fold character of labour in *Capital* refers to the distinction between abstract labour and useful (or concrete) labour. Useful labour produces use-values and exists in any society, but in capitalism it exists in the form of abstract labour, labour abstracted from its specificities, labour that produces value. The distinction between abstract and useful labour is a developed form of the earlier distinction between alienated labour and conscious life activity. Useful labour is creative-productive human activity (or doing), irrespective of the society in which it takes place; abstract labour is non-self-determining labour in which all quality is reduced to quantity.

In capitalism, our activity (doing) is transformed into abstract labour. It is treated as an activity that is devoid of concrete specificities, an activity that is to be quantified and measured against other activities in the exchange of commodities. The abstraction is not just a conceptual abstraction: it rebounds upon the quality of the doing itself. I bake a cake. I enjoy baking it, I enjoy eating it, I enjoy sharing it with my friends and am proud of the cake I have made. Then I decide that I will try to make a living by baking cakes. I bake cakes and sell them on the market. Gradually the cake becomes a means to gaining an income sufficient to allow me to live. I have to produce the cake at a certain speed and in a certain way so that I can keep the price low enough to sell it. Enjoyment is no longer part of the process. After a while I realise that I am not earning enough money and think that, since the cake-making is in any case merely a means to an end, a way of earning money, I might as well make something else that will sell better. My doing has become completely indifferent to its content; there has been a complete abstraction from its concrete characteristics. The object I produce is now so completely alienated from me that I do not care whether it is a cake or a rat poison, as long as it sells.

What is important is that this abstraction not only converts the activity into something that is alien and oppressive for ourselves: it is also the way in which the social cohesion of capitalism is created. The activities of different people are brought together precisely through this process of abstraction. When the baker sells her cakes and uses the money to buy a dress, then a social integration between the activities of the baker and the activities of the dressmaker is established through the purely quantitative measure of their labours. The abstraction of doing into labour (or the abstraction of labour from the specificities of doing) is both immediately oppressive for the doer and at the same time the creation of a social cohesion (a system) that stands outside any conscious social control. This is the social cohesion that our cracks or autonomies reject.

The dichotomy between abstract labour and useful doing is the central theme of *Capital*. The two-fold nature of labour creates the two-fold nature of the commodity as use-value and value (introduced right at

the beginning of the book); it structures the discussion of the labour process (as labour process and process of producing surplus value) and of the collective process of work (as co-operation on the one hand, division of labour and manufacture, machinery and modern industry on the other). Abstract labour develops as value-producing, capital-producing wage labour, while useful doing is developed in the category of the “productive power of social labour”, or more briefly, the “forces of production”.

In-against-and-beyond Abstract Labour

We saw that cracks can be seen as revolts of doing against labour. This implies a fundamental and live antagonism between the two types of activity. If we are to ask about the relevance of Marx to the understanding of the cracks, we must ask whether in *Capital* too there is a fundamental and live antagonism inherent in the two-fold nature of labour.

There is clearly an antagonism between abstract and useful labour, but it is generally understood as a contained antagonism, as domination. In capitalism, useful labour exists *in the form of* abstract labour. My baking exists *in the form of* an activity that is totally indifferent to me. This *in the form of* is usually understood as complete containment without remainder, as a one-way relation of domination. And since useful labour is simply contained within abstract labour, it is a category that requires no attention.

And yet it cannot be so. My baking certainly exists as something that is indifferent to me, but there are also moments in which, as I bake, I fight against this abstract indifference and try to recapture the pleasure, there are even moments when I say “to hell with the market!” and do everything I can to make a really good cake—a crack in which doing revolts against labour. In other words, when we say that something exists *in the form of* something, we have to understand this as meaning *in-against-and-beyond* the form of. To say that useful labour exists in the form of abstract labour is to say that abstract labour is its mode of existence. In other words, since abstract labour is the negation of the particular characteristics of concrete or useful labour, we can say that it exists in the “mode of being denied” (Gunn 1992:14).² But it does not and cannot take its own denial lying down: inevitably it reacts against its own denial, pushes against-and-beyond that denial.

Useful doing exists *in-against-and-beyond* abstract labour. We are all aware of the way in which useful doing exists in abstract labour, of the way in which our daily activity is subordinated to the exigencies of abstract labour (to money-making, in other words). We also experience this as an antagonistic process: the antagonism between our drive towards the self-determination of our own activity (doing what we want to do) and doing what we have to do to earn money. The existence

of useful doing against abstract labour is experienced as frustration. Useful doing exists also beyond its form as abstract labour in those moments or spaces in which, individually or collectively, we succeed in doing that which we consider necessary or desirable. Although abstract labour subordinates and contains useful doing, it does not subsume it completely: useful doing exists not only in but also against and beyond its form.

Is this what Marx says? Clearly it is a matter of interpretation. Marx's work is a critique of the categories of political economy. He opens up the categories and shows that they are not a-historical, but historically specific forms of the antagonistic social relations of capitalism. Crucially, he opens up the category of labour and shows it to contain an antagonism between abstract and useful labour. The whole of *Capital* can be seen as a critique of abstract labour from the perspective of useful labour: precisely because it is from this perspective, useful labour does not loom large in the narrative. A re-reading of Marx in the context of the current struggles against capitalism forces us to focus on the antagonism between abstract and useful labour and to interrogate (whether with or against-and-beyond Marx) the nature of this relationship between labour and doing.

Abstract Labour and the Marxist Tradition

There is a mystery in all this. Marx wrote in the opening pages of *Capital* that the two-fold nature of labour was the pivot on which a comprehension of political economy turns; he wrote to Engels that this was one of the two best points in his book. What could be clearer? And yet the apparently impossible happened: the Marxist tradition makes virtually no mention of this point. Generations of activists and scholars have analysed *Capital* and yet what Marx proclaimed to be his central argument has been almost entirely overlooked. It is true that there has been more attention to the point in recent years, but even then the focus has been almost exclusively on abstract labour rather than on the two-fold character of labour.³

How do we explain this extraordinary neglect? To some extent it can undoubtedly be blamed on Marx's style of critique, his looking outwards from the perspective of the suppressed useful labour. And yet that does not seem an adequate explanation: the neglect cannot be explained in terms of lack of scholarship, there must be some social explanation.

A possible explanation lies in the fact that the dual character of labour inevitably gives rise to a dual character of anti-capitalist struggle. Capital is founded on two types of antagonism. The first is the antagonism that we have already characterised as pivotal: the struggle to convert doing, the everyday activity of people, into abstract, value-producing labour. This struggle is often associated with primitive accumulation,

the historical creation of the bases of capitalism, but it would be wrong to relegate these struggles (or primitive accumulation) to the past.⁴ The struggle to impose the discipline of labour upon our activity is a struggle fought by capital each and every day: what else do managers, teachers, social workers, police and so on do? It is only on the basis of this first level of antagonism that the second level arises. It is only when people's activity is converted into labour that it becomes possible to exploit them. Human activity is converted into value-producing labour, and then we are forced to produce not only the equivalent of the value of our own labour power but also a surplus value to be appropriated by the capitalists. The second antagonism, the antagonism of exploitation, depends on the first antagonism, the antagonism of abstraction, that is, the prior conversion of useful doing into abstract labour.

There are thus two levels of conflict. There is the struggle of useful doing against its own abstraction; that is, against abstract labour: this is a struggle *against* labour (and therefore against capital, since it is labour that creates capital). And then there is the struggle of abstract labour against capital: this is the struggle *of* labour. The latter is the struggle of the labour movement; the former is the struggle of what is sometimes referred to as the other labour movement, but it is in no sense limited to the workplace: the struggle against labour is the struggle against the constitution of labour as an activity distinct from the general flow of doing. In talking of our cracks as revolts of doing against labour, we are clearly talking of the former, deeper level of anti-capitalist struggle, the struggle *against* the labour that produces capital.

Both types of struggle are struggle against capital, but they have very different implications. At least until recently, the struggle against capital has been dominated by abstract labour. This has meant a struggle dominated by bureaucratic forms of organisation and fetishised ideas.

The organisation of abstract labour against capital is centred on the trade union, which fights for the interests of wage labour as wage labour. Trade union struggle is usually seen as an economic form of struggle that needs to be complemented by political struggle, typically organised in the form of political parties oriented towards the state. Both "reformist" and "revolutionary" conceptions of the labour movement share this basic approach. The organisation of abstract labour is typically hierarchical, and this tends to be reproduced in the organisations of the labour movement.

The abstraction of labour is the source of what Marx calls "commodity fetishism", a process of separation of that which we have created from the process of creation. That which is created, rather than being seen as part of the process of creating, comes to be seen as a series of things that then dominate both our doing and our thinking. Social relations (relations between people) become fetishised or reified. The centrality of our doing is replaced in our doing and thinking by "things" (reified

social creations) such as money, capital, the state, the university and so on. The labour movement (as the movement of abstract labour) typically accepts these things as given. Thus, for example, the labour movement tends to accept the self-presentation of the state as the organiser of society (rather than seeing it as a moment of the abstraction of labour, which is the real force of social cohesion). Abstract labour leads to a state-centred concept of social change. The movement of abstract labour is entrapped within an organisational and conceptual prison that effectively strangles any aspirations for revolutionary change.

Orthodox Marxism is the theory of the labour movement based on abstract labour. As such it is almost totally blind to the question of fetishism and to the dual nature of labour.

It is, then, the domination of the anti-capitalist movement by the struggle of abstract labour (or wage labour) against capital that explains why a unitary concept of labour has dominated both the labour movement and the Marxist tradition, and why Marx's insistence on the centrality of the two-fold nature of labour has been almost entirely neglected. Recent Marxist discussion has been trying to overcome this legacy by returning to the question of abstract labour, but still fails to take seriously the other side of the two-fold character of labour.

The Crisis of Abstract Labour

If we insist now on the importance of returning to Marx's concept of two-fold labour, it is simply because the struggle of abstract labour (the struggle *of* labour against capital) is in crisis, while the struggle *against* labour and therefore capital is rising in importance.

The indications of the crisis of abstract labour are plain to see: the decline of the trade union movement everywhere in the world; the weakening or practical disappearance of social democratic parties with any commitment to radical reform; the collapse of the Soviet Union and other "communist countries" and the integration of China into world capitalism; the defeat of the movements of national liberation in Latin America and Africa; the crisis of Marxism not just within the universities but above all as a theory of struggle.

All this is widely seen, even by the "left", as a historic defeat for the working class. But perhaps the defeat should be seen rather as a defeat for the labour movement, for the movement based upon abstract labour, a defeat for the struggle of labour against capital, and possibly an opening for the struggle of doing against labour. If that is the case, then it is not a defeat for class struggle, but a shift to a more profound level of class struggle. The struggle of labour is giving way to struggle of doing against and beyond labour.

The crisis of abstract labour can be seen as an expression of our reluctance to be converted into robots. Capitalist accumulation has an

in-built dynamic that forces capital constantly to increase the rate of exploitation in order to maintain its profitability. Capital requires an ever-greater subordination of human activity to the logic of capital accumulation in order to survive (this is basically what Marx argues in his theory of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall). Over the last 40 years or so (especially since 1968), the struggle against capital has increasingly taken the form of multiple revolts against the constant encroachment of this logic on our lives and our activities. The root of the present crisis is our insubordination, our refusal to subordinate our lives totally to the logic of capital, to convert all our doing into abstract labour.

The crisis can be seen too in terms of classic Marxism as the revolt of the forces of production against the relations of production. However, the forces of production must be understood not as things, but simply as the “productive powers of social labour”, as our social power-to-do. And the way in which our power-to-do is breaking the integument of capitalist social relations is not through the creation of ever bigger units of production, but through millions of cracks, spaces in which people are asserting that they will not allow their creative powers to be enclosed by capital, but that they will do what they consider to be necessary or desirable.

The movement of useful doing against abstract labour has always existed as a subterranean and subversive current in-against-and-beyond the labour movement. Since the movement of useful doing is the push towards socially self-determining creativity, its forms of organisation have been typically anti-vertical and oriented towards the active participation of all. The councilist or assemblyist tradition has always stood opposed to the state- and party- centred tradition within the anti-capitalist movement. Now, with the crisis of abstract labour, this tradition is flourishing again, in new and often imaginative forms.

Since useful doing is simply the manifold richness of human creativity, the movement tends to be somewhat chaotic and fragmented in character, a movement of movements struggling for a world of many worlds. From this perspective it is easy to fall into thinking of the struggles as being disconnected, the struggles of so many different identities, the struggle of and for differences. However, this is not the case. Although useful-creative doing is infinitely rich in its potential, it always exists in-against-and-beyond a common enemy, the abstraction of doing into labour. For this reason it is important to think in terms of contradiction and not just difference.⁵ It is the struggle of human creativity (our power-to-do, the “social power of productive labour”) against-and-beyond its own abstraction, its reduction to the grey production of value-money-capital.

Situating the Argument

Who am I arguing against and why? One of the anonymous referees of the original version of this article kindly suggested that it would be good to situate the argument in relation to other approaches. She (or he, I know not) is quite right: the article hits out in various directions, and it would be good to make this explicit.

The first object of attack is the academic treatment of these movements as *objects* of study, rather than as part of the struggle for humanity in which, regardless of choice, we are all involved (on one side or another, or usually on both). Such approaches are academic in the sense that they are favoured by the structures and traditions of the universities. Although I am a university professor, I recognise that the university is not the best vantage point for a discussion of autonomies. On the contrary, precisely because I am a university professor, I am intensely aware of the rapidly growing breach between the demands of academic work and the challenge of scientific research. In the present historical situation, I take it as obvious that scientific work must be directed against the suicidal rush towards human self-annihilation. In other words, the only scientific question that remains to us is: how the fuck do we get out of this mess? This includes the question: how do we stop the reproduction of this self-destructive society, capitalism? This is a question that it is becoming more and more difficult to pose within a university framework.

Secondly, the argument is directed against those who abandon the study of Marx as a source of inspiration. Many of the discussions within the Marxist tradition have become so divorced from the current directions of anti-capitalist struggle that very many activists dismiss Marxism as being irrelevant to their struggles. This is a mistake and easily leads to an oscillation between euphoria and despair, between the over-estimation of the achievements of the struggles and an exaggerated discouragement when difficulties arrive.

The argument here is directed, thirdly then, against those discussions of autonomies that focus almost exclusively on their achievements. It is extremely important to blow the trumpet of autonomism,⁶ but in the last few years it has become clear that we must talk more openly and fully about the enormous difficulties that we face.⁷

A fourth object of critique is those approaches that move too lightly from a recognition of the difficulties of autonomist movements to a dismissal of their importance.⁸ The autonomist movements often fail, are sometimes pathetic or ridiculous, and can certainly be co-opted into the decentralised structures of power characteristic of neo-liberalism, but where else do we go? Back to the parties? No thanks. Into the ostrichism⁹ of the universities? No: it is better to see the difficulties as a challenge, not as a disqualification.

Fifthly, the argument is directed against all those approaches that take for granted the unitary character of labour and overlook the central importance that Marx attached to the dual character of labour. This is characteristic of traditional Marxist approaches and is often associated with a definition (whether broad or narrow) of the working class as the revolutionary class: the struggle of the working class may or may not be seen as complemented by the “non-class” struggles of the “new social movements”. Against these approaches, the argument here is that the revolutionary struggle is not the struggle of labour, but of doing against labour, and that the struggle of the working class is against its own existence as class, its own classification.

The sixth object of criticism is those approaches which, excellently and correctly, emphasise the importance of the dual character of labour, but then concentrate exclusively on abstract labour, assuming that the category of concrete or useful labour is either unproblematical or that it is effectively contained within abstract labour. Contradiction is separated in such approaches from social antagonism, so that the critique of capital is indeed understood as a critique of abstract labour, but the critique remains abstract in so far as the relation between abstract and concrete or useful labour is not understood as a living antagonism.¹⁰ This approach is stimulating but politically disastrous, in that it leads us back to the old conclusion that an anti-capitalist revolution is necessary, but leaves us entirely in the air as to how this might be achieved.

Seventhly, and importantly, the argument is against those approaches, often influenced by Deleuze¹¹ or Hardt and Negri, which sideline the centrality of capital as a category for understanding the nature of social antagonism in this society. The argument here is that the central issue is our doing, the way in which our daily activity is organised. Under capitalism, our doing is subordinated to abstract labour, or in other words, our activity is subjected to a force that we do not control and that has as its fundamental determinant the expansion of value, the endless pursuit of profit. This organisation of our activity has catastrophic results and must be changed. Current struggles have as their focus the revolt of doing against labour, the push to shape our own activity. The assumption of control over our own activity is the dissolution of capital. If we substitute for struggle against capital the concept of a struggle for democracy,¹² then we dilute the struggle and, worse, miss the point: a more genuine democracy will, of itself, do nothing to change the form and content of our daily activity. That is why we pose capital as the central issue, understanding by capital not an economic category but the historically specific form of organisation of human activity.

An eighth object of implicit critique is the concept of self-valorisation, a term coined by Negri and widely used in discussions of autonomous movements. Self-valorisation, according to Cleaver (1992:129), “indicates a process of valorisation which is autonomous

from capitalist valorisation—a self-defining, self-determining process which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorisation to a positive project of self-constitution”. Later in the same article (1992:134), he speaks of “the many processes of self-valorisation or self-constitution that escape the control of capital”. It is clear that we are speaking of, and trying to understand, the same processes of revolt. What worries me is the notion that these processes are “autonomous from capitalist valorisation” or “escape the control of capital”. I prefer to insist that the relation of other-doing to capital is a relation of in-against-and-beyond for four related reasons. Firstly, there is a danger that the notion of self-valorisation, or indeed exodus, may create a deceptive image of stability. As we have seen in the previous discussion of the difficulties of the cracks, it is probably more helpful to see the cracks as points or moments of rupture that have an evanescent existence and can only survive through their own constant re-constitution. Secondly, the notion of self-valorisation can lead to the idea that this is a specific form of activism that *may* arise from the refusal of labour (thus Cleaver 1992:130: “the refusal of work . . . creates the very possibility of self-valorisation”), whereas the concept of doing locates antagonism in the very process of acting, not as a possibility but as an inevitable part of living. Quite simply, life is the antagonism between doing and abstract labour.¹³ Thirdly, the concept of self-valorisation does not lead us into the critique of abstract labour and its manifestations in the same way as the dual character of labour does. And finally, self-valorisation, being external to valorisation, does not constitute its crisis, whereas doing is the crisis of abstract labour.

Ninthly, the argument here takes issue with the notion that our spaces or moments of revolt or other-doing are external to capital.¹⁴ Capital does not exist side-by-side with other forms of doing: rather, the material and hegemonic force of capital as a manner of behaving is such that it is better to think of capital as a form of social relations that is imposed and constantly re-imposed upon all the doing in the world. Thus, abstract labour is the form in which doing exists in a capitalist society, such that doing exists in-against-and-beyond that form, as stated or unstated rebellion. Playing with our children is not an activity that takes place outside and alongside capital: rather, playing with the children takes place in capital (because we reproduce capitalist patterns of authority), against capital (because we reject those patterns of authority and push against capital in insisting on the importance of playing) and beyond capital (because there may be a real point of rupture in which we create a world beyond capitalist social relations, but always as struggle, always on the brink of crisis). As with self-valorisation, the idea of externality can lead easily to a positivisation of concepts, a slide away from the central antagonism: living is a struggle against the capitalist forms of activity which are so rapidly destroying the world. Enough.

Conclusion

The argument presented here suggests that we need to re-read Marx in order to understand the autonomist movement. Does this really help us? I think it does. The re-reading of Marx from the perspective of current struggles shifts the emphasis from exploitation to abstraction: rather than seeing the discussion of abstraction as a prelude to exploitation, it sees exploitation as a development of the core issue of abstraction. If we do not do that, we nail Marx to a form of class struggle that is both oppressive and in decline. To abandon Marx like that is both to lose the enormous richness of his stimulus and to lose the lines of continuity that, in spite of everything, are so important for our struggles. Perhaps worst of all, to abandon Marx is to lose ourselves, to blur the questions surrounding our struggles, to pave the way for a reintegration of our refusals into the system we are refusing.

To understand autonomies from the perspective suggested here, as cracks in capitalist domination, that is, as cracks in the fabric of cohesion woven by abstract labour, helps us to see that these movements are not just a fashion, not a sign of the weakness of class struggle, not a mass of fragments, but the push towards humanity that constitutes the crisis of abstract labour. Hence their importance: our movements are the crisis of abstract labour, and on the outcome of this crisis the future of the world depends.

Endnotes

¹ Marx continues: “2) the treatment of *surplus value independently of its particular forms as profit, interest, ground rent, etc*”, but this does not concern us here. Note that Marx also saw this as his distinctive contribution: “I was the first to point out and to examine critically this two-fold nature of the labour contained in commodities” (1965 [1867]:41).

² On this, see Gunn (1992:14): “Stasis *exists*, in the Marxist conception, but it exists as struggle subsisting alienatedly, i.e. *in the mode of being denied*” (emphasis in the original).

³ For an excellent discussion of recent contributions to the debate on abstract labour, see Bonefeld (2010).

⁴ For the extremely important debate on the understanding of primitive accumulation as a continuing process, see the articles in Bonefeld (2009).

⁵ On the distinction between contradiction and difference, and its political importance, see Bonnet (2009).

⁶ In the Latin American context, the great apostle of autonomism has been Raúl Zibechi, for whose work I have a great admiration, but who perhaps does not focus sufficiently on the difficulties of these movements. See Zibechi (2009).

⁷ For an excellent discussion of autonomies in the context of the Argentinian revolt, but from a generally opposing perspective, see Thwaites Rey (2004).

⁸ I am thinking in particular of the helpful article by Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer (2010).

⁹ Ostrichism, because there is no longer anything so beautiful as an ivory tower in the universities. Would that there were!

¹⁰ I have in mind the stimulating work of Postone (1996) and of the Krisis group (in their journal of that name; <http://www.krisis.org/>).

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of Deleuze and his influence, see Bonnet (2009).

¹² This seems to me the implication of the work of Hardt and Negri: see especially Part III of Hardt and Negri (2004).

¹³ In other words, *life* is not to be taken as a trans-historical category, as it is often treated. On this, see again Bonnet (2009).

¹⁴ The outstanding source for this is the book by Máximo De Angelis (2007).

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