

Paths to Autonomy



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Paths to Autonomy

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Preface

A path is created when a direction is taken; its production marks the imbrication of personal choice, communal action and subhuman (structural, historical, ecological) conditionings. We are at the same time the makers of our paths and subject to the inheritance of paths we have made with others and which have arrived before our own makings. And just as class is not a static, abstract, transhistorical form, neither are the paths of its articulation as autonomous revolts of selves against capital – there are many paths to, for, and of autonomy. The autonomist tradition, that politically experimental effort to build autonomy within and against capitalism, has been intensely variegated from its inception in the 1970s. From an initial focus upon the question of proletarian autonomy, its paths have multiplied, bifurcated, and diffused. Following the legacies of decolonial and feminist autonomism, we would argue for an embrace of autonomy's differences and bifurcations. We see not one path to autonomy but many. A diffusion that not only amounts to the proliferation of oppositional subjects – i.e. a proliferation of the modes by which we refuse to be subjects for capital – but also of the geographies, ecologies, and temporalities that mediate the articulation of selves.

Paths to Autonomy began in 2020 as our effort to think these manifold paths through assemblies, talks and readings situated in the post-state socialist, Eastern European context of Lithuania.* For we, ourselves, begin in the East. It is the circumstance within and against which our path to autonomy is necessarily mediated. We, the present inheritors of state socialism's experiments, catastrophes,

* The assemblies unfolded over five sessions. Video documentation can be found here: <http://luna6.lt/paths-to-autonomy>.

and subterranean potentialities step into a future conditioned not only by its highways, nuclear plants, wars, and imperialist historiographies, but also by the manifold paths of autonomy, resistance, and rebellion that arose both within and against its territories. In *Paths to Autonomy* you will find excavations of this parallel history of Eastern autonomism; the opening of dialogues between militants in the East and the global autonomist movement; and some critical interventions in contemporary autonomist theory. Threaded throughout the book is a lexicon of concepts formed by contributors, which can be approached on the one hand as a red thread - suggesting connections and affinities amidst notable differences - and on the other as a toolkit for the journeys and struggles that await us in the cultivation of paths to come.



Introduction

**Noah
Brehmer**

Individuals are never autonomous: they depend on external recognition. The autonomous body is not exclusive or identifiable. It is beyond recognition. A body of workers, it breaks away from labor discipline; a body of militants, it ignores party organization; a body of doctrine, it refuses ready-made classifications.

Sylvere Lotringer, *Autonomia: Post-political Politics*, (1981).

Amidst a protest in Rome that mobilized tens of thousands against the state – as a response to the threat of new social restrictions being imposed on individual freedoms via the green pass system – the Fascist organization Forza Nuova manifested and directed the crowd’s collective rage toward the headquarters of a labor union, The Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL). Forza Nuova accused CGIL of failing to defend employees from the state’s requirement for the vaccination of the labor force and incited the looting and occupation of the CGIL HQ. It is not only in the streets of Rome that the antivax movement has championed a notion of freedom as the private liberty of the individual. Such a position might be exemplified by a statement such as: “I do what I want in disregard of the other.” Mobilizations against public healthcare have been essential for the building of contemporary neofascist ideology: authoritarian individualism.¹ The contemporary fascist movement is clearly no longer only concerned with the building of an ethno-nationalist collective body, but also orientates toward a declassed, individualist populism. This reconciles billionaires like Trump and the

1 As coined by Sergio Bologna, in “We can’t leave the idea of freedom to the far right!’ – on the ‘anti-vax’ movement,” *Angry Workers*, December 2021.

ever growing disenfranchised masses aligned with him and his international cohort, through the figure of the market individual as owner of themselves and their fate. Responding to the attack on the union and the rise of neofascism in Italy over the past years, Sergio Bologna – a veteran of Italy’s *operaismo* (workerism) movement and a forerunner of the *autonomia* (autonomist) movement of the 1960s and 1970s – theorized the connection between this new politics of authoritarian individualism and the transformation of global production:

The old model of multinational capitalism maintained hierarchical command and exclusive access of companies to the market. The individual’s material and economic survival was solely in the hands of the companies who employed them as a dependent and subordinated workforce. Today, the natural inclination towards individualism is increased by the belief that access to the internet can be access to the market and thus to survival, without the mediation of any institution through subordinated labor and the wage – in this sense, the freelancer is the symbolic figure of our time.²

And, as we see, for the contemporary neofascist ideology of authoritarian individualism that has risen out of this shift, the state is centered as the greatest enemy of individual advancement in the networked marketplace’s world of free competition. Importantly, however, it is also the unions, squats, community centers, communes, and any other articulations of collectivity that are also its enemies. That is, any

2 Ibid.

collective body involved in the material reproduction of a “we” broadly based on social principles, contrary to authoritarian individualism, must be negated in order to realize the freedom for which it stands. The freelancer is hence symbolically produced within the contemporary neofascist movement as a kind of saintly character: a self-made subject, a radically flexible yet constantly employable individual. A surfer of financialized risk always prepared to ride the latest wave, bearing responsibility for its course, regardless of outcome. However, the projection of this rugged individualism by the populist right and neofascism is not the only notion of freedom that has contested state responses during the pandemic.

While the right stands behind the banner of private liberty the anti-authoritarian left has long held to principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and a lesser known but deeply influential concept of autonomy. This is a notion of freedom that always arises with and through the other without being utterly dependent on the “Other” – a higher authority – for self-constitution. Contemporary autonomists, responding to the Covid crisis, have practically enacted such principles in demonstrating that we need not choose between a blind defense of the state as a sovereign distributor of life chances and the biopolitical marketplace’s dismal prioritization of private profit over ecology and social wellbeing. Carenotes Collective, taking inspiration from autonomous health clinics in Greece, is one of many such groups advocating and organizing for a struggle to communally organize healthcare.³ This,

3 See: Carenotes Collective, *For Health Autonomy: Horizons of Care Beyond Austerity – Reflections from Greece*, Common Notions: 2020.

Carenotes suggest, is based on a dual movement of the deinstitutionalization (public) and decommodification (private) of healthcare.⁴ Rupturing the apparatus of individuation at the core of the doctor–patient service relation, we arrive at a radically deterritorialized ecology of care.⁵ The latter is now reproduced by the autonomous social body that has reclaimed the material conditions that determine “wellbeing” in the urban commons.⁶ From this standpoint we in turn arrive at a very different understanding of the subject and with it politics as such. Abandoning the quest of modernity for the fulfillment of the subject as a figure of separation and sovereign consciousness, autonomists call for an “autonomy of materializations” as opposed to an “autonomy from materializations.”⁷ Rather than embracing the latter, the bourgeois and patriarchal tradition of humanist idealism, autonomist politics embraces the subindividual and subhuman dependencies and conditionings of subjectivity, those heteronomies – economic, ecological, social forces – that mediate the subject. This, as Stakemeier and Vishmidt write, “thus depends

4 See: Carenotes Collective, “Reclaiming Care in the Urban Commons” in *The Commonist Horizon: Futures Beyond Capitalist Urbanization*, Common Notions and Lost Property Press, 2022.

5 “There is no encounter between suffering bodies in the architecture of the clinic; the doctor/healer diverts the potentiality of collectivizing around suffering to instead individualize disease with coded complaints and a prescription exchanged for a bill. Suffering = the biological = the commodifiable.” *For Health Autonomy*, op. cit., 16.

6 “Reclaiming Care in the Urban Commons”, op. cit.

7 Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis & Contemporary Art*, Mute Publishing: 2016. 58.

on the purposeful expansion, reorganization, and individuation of heteronomies: those heteronomies that rule, form and reproduce our lives.”⁸

Although what could broadly be called the left may agree on the concept of freedom as always mediated by the social body, the paths to/of/for such freedom have taken different and at times radically conflicting directions. The left encapsulated by the state socialist regimes was often viewed as hostile to individualism per se, never mind autonomy. Indeed, as the cold war discourse had it, “world communism” was set on dissolving the individual – their desires, interests, and preferences – into the undifferentiated macrosubject of history and class. Such a socialism was a mere antipode to the free world’s centering of the individual.⁹ The “really existing left” of modernity, found in state socialism, was rivaled by the early philosophical founders of neoliberalism – the Austrian Positivists – in the postwar era. The latter formulated their world view through “methodological individualism”: the individual as a rational monad, acting on their own sovereign interests and producing social forms as the mere aggregation of these shared individual interests and preferences.¹⁰

Ayn Rand would appear as the prime narrator of the free world’s post-war mythology of the cowboy market individual.¹¹ The emergent 1960s artistic counterculture

8 Ibid., 62.

9 For an insightful, although dense, ultraleft critique of this collectivism as a metaphysical speciesism, see Camatte’s 1972 commentary: Jacques Camatte, “Bordiga and the Passion for Communism,” *libcom.org*, 2018.

10 For an introduction to the methodological individualism/collectivism debate, see: Daniel Bensaid, *Marx For Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, Verso Books: 2009. 145.

11 See for instance: Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, Penguin: 2007.

would be swept up in this mythological crusade. Artists, figures like Jackson Pollock, would find themselves exported around the world in the CIA's cultural war against socialist realism. Pollock, a forerunner of this counterculture, evidenced how open to recuperation the antagonisms articulated by this movement, still in formation, actually were. The countercultural rebellion against the routine, disciplinary, sterile securities offered by capitalism in its modern industrial phase, were weaponized by these very regimes to promote the emergence of a new mode of capitalist production and accumulation: neoliberalism. Already by 1962, Andy Warhol delivered a wry commentary on how easily commodified the new countercultural, bohemian philosophy of the creative spontaneous individual might be, through his series *Dance Diagram*. In it, we bear witness to the industrial duplicability of Pollock's spontaneous foot movements, charted, indexed, and reproduced as a commodity in themselves.¹²

However, Warhol's amused cynicism was not the only response to the recuperation of the avenues of revolt opened up by the counterculture. There were also more revolutionary responses. Responses that threatened to usurp the cold war's partitioning of the globe into collectivist and individualist camps. These tendencies arose at the very moment of the subsumption of the counterculture by capital and state. They were an effort to restrategize this new social composition's microrevolutions of the everyday, not just as individualist bohemianism, but as totalizing negations of the capitalist world system. Broadly situated within the 1968 New Left, such tendencies – in

12 For a sociological account of the recuperation of the spirit of May 1968 and the rise of the figure of the artist as the new spirit of advanced capitalism, see: Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso Books: 2017. 97.

some cases – described themselves as autonomist. Not only in Italy and neighboring Western European geographies, but also in Eastern Europe, the global south and Asia, autonomists saw in the antiwork, anti-establishment ethos of the counterculture both the crisis of the “collective worker” and its institutions – the union and revolutionary party – and the emergence of a new language or sensibility of politics characterized by the absence of a recognizable political subjectivity.¹³ Simultaneously, they saw how the self-romanticizing marginality of the same counterculture – its affinity for flexible, precarious, at times illicit work and its propensity to enchant decrepit urban centers with the aura of creativity – was becoming the new core of capital accumulation in the so-called post-Fordist metropole.¹⁴ The question of autonomy was posed as a break from both market and state socialist capitalisms as well as their associated

13 *Endnotes* in “A History of Separation” have an interesting account of this idea of the “collective worker” as a subject symbolically articulated and posited within the labor movement, serving as an essential mechanism of unity, its prime political expression being the collective demand. *Endnotes*, unfortunately, only seem to find in the crisis of this subject the call to search for another composition of political collectivity. A composition they at one moment thought to have discovered in the figure of the surplus population. Having eventually dispensed hope in this subject too, *Endnotes* seems to linger in a certain pathos, while turning to the tradition of nihilist communism in the hope of arriving at a certain nonsubject: politics as the refusal of the self as a subject-project of the political. For a take on this crisis of the collective subject and a like-minded articulation of the nonsubject, from an autonomist standpoint, see: Mario Tronti, “On Destituent Power” (2008), trans. Andreas Petrossiants, with revisions by Jose Rosales, *III Will Editions*, May 22nd, 2022. See for *Endnotes*’ account: *Endnotes*, “A History of Separation”, in *Endnotes* No.4 2015. 70–193, 4.

14 See, Felix Guattari, “The Proliferation of Margins” in *Autonomia: Post-political Politics*, Semiotext(e): 2007. 108.

myths of freedom through the individual/collective subjects.

Autonomist praxis was realized in myriad forms. These ranged from the proliferation of social centers that functioned as hubs for the communalization of daily life in the neighborhoods (or “social factories”); free party milieus that weaponized libidinal desire, to fierce waves of urban insurrection, occupation, and organized looting.

Paths to Autonomy begins at this moment of subsumption, crisis, and revolutionary strategization, from the perspective of the state socialist East and its post-socialist aftermaths. The book can be approached as an effort to excavate these lesser known, and temporally parallel paths of Eastern autonomism under state socialism, while also pointing to the deeper regional roots of this tradition. Evidenced in the vibrant and variegated histories of stateless socialism and anarchist communism found here. Building from our path to autonomy in the East, the book opens into conversations with our comrades and friends in the global autonomist movement.

In *They Call It Creativity, We Call It Exploitation!*, the Serbian theorist and labor activist Katja Praznik analyzes how reforms that began in the 1970s used cultural workers and the figure of the artist as a “sort of experimental vanguard” for the neoliberal counter-revolution in the making.¹⁵ Praznik introduces how the ideology of an independent, spuriously “autonomous,” culture came to play a systematic role in undermining the social equalities and economic autonomies at least

15 Katja Praznik, “They Call it Creativity, We Call it Exploitation!” in *Paths to Autonomy*, Lost Property Press, Minor Compositions, Autonomedia: 2022.

partially won by the working class in the Yugoslav system of socialist self-management. Tracing the bourgeois, patriarchal, and ruling class essence of “aesthetic autonomy,” Praznik shows how Yugoslav cultural policy failed to overcome this legacy and in this failure sowed the seeds for the later onslaught of neoliberalism. Praznik turns toward Yugoslav “autonomists,” such as the Praxis Group, who advanced radical criticisms of these social and cultural policies for their failure to abolish the hierarchical, specialized, “autonomous,” position of art as a profession in society. As one member of Praxis Group, Golubović, demanded: “All professional activities and professional groups must be eliminated, as institutionalized units of society and conditions must be created for human labor to become truly a *universal activity*.”¹⁶ Building on the critique of this Fordist style professionalization and hierarchization of labor, Praznik introduces the feminist autonomist concept of “invisibilized labor” to open up our thinking on what is at stake in the total “emancipation” of labor, as a socially autonomous “universal activity.” Finally, calling upon the legacy of both Yugoslav socialist era autonomists and their Italian counterparts, Praznik argues that a true path to autonomy must begin by organizing around our *common* unfreedoms, as an exploited working class under capitalism.

Yet, what exactly is meant by the “working class” and what does it mean to organize as a part of it? The concept of class composition – as unpacked by Stephen Shukaitis in his contribution *Learning Not to Labor* – was the Italian autonomists’ means of making

16 Zagorka Golubović, “Culture as a Bridge between Utopia and Reality” in *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, eds. Mihailo Marković and Gajo Petrović, D. Reidel Publishing Company: 1979. 178.

sense of the social body's articulation of new strategies for resisting domination by capital, and capital's defensive reorganization of the production process, in order to control, discipline, and subsume these new threats.¹⁷ Class, in turn, as Shukaitis advances, is not the transhistorical abstraction "proletariat," but an autonomously enunciated social form arising out of the ever-changing composition of the social body in its resistance to what could broadly be called work. That is, the manifold experiences of control, exploitation, oppression, and discipline we encounter under capitalism as parents, queers, women, factory workers, care workers, indigenous and all the abject others of the planet, marked off as less than human by capital.

Sharply contrasting with Shukaitis' own take on class composition as a living multiplicity of forces, the dominant tendency of post-*autonomia* came to prioritize the quest to locate a new vanguard subject.¹⁸ It's here that we eventually arrive at the contentious figure of the creative multitudes. Heralded as the new vanguard composition by post-*autonomia* figureheads – such as Negri, Hardt, and Virno – the creative multitudes were seen as the post-industrial counterpart to yesterday's factory proletariat. Immaterial and affective laborers, whose subjectivity – language, desire, creativity, or simply political existence – is

17 Stephen Shukaitis further builds on the concept of class composition in, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labour After the Avant-Garde*, Rowman & Littlefield International: 2016.

18 For a trenchant critique of this quest, see "Reality Check: Are We Living in an Immaterial World?"

centered as the ultimate object of production.¹⁹ And, as romantically articulated by Hardt and Negri in their movement-shaping book *Empire* in the early 2000s, this new creative composition was seen to hold within itself the elementary components for a stateless, networked, communism.

Today productivity, wealth, and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks. In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labor thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism.²⁰

The strength and continuing relevance of canonical autonomist theory is in the versatility of its conceptual mechanisms, articulated in the theoretical capacity to welcome new class compositions and social forms. However, its weakness is also clearly shown in its assumption that the “most advanced” tendencies of capitalist production are at the same time the sources for the most advanced patterns of antagonistic political subjectification.²¹ As Kuba Szreder

19 The idea of political existence being centered is deduced by Paolo Virno through his observation on the collapse of the historical division of the intellect and labor under post-fordism. See: Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitudes*, Semiotext(e): 2004. 81.

20 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press: 2001. 294

21 For instance, see the collaborative effort of the artist and theorist Warren Neidich and the Italian postautonomist Bifo on neurocapitalism and the corresponding new vanguard subject of this global class composition, the cognitariat. See, Arne De Boerver and Warren Neidich eds., *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part One*, Archive Books: 2017.

succinctly puts it, the essential problematic of the tendency falls on: “whether social production of value is an autonomous process that is organized within the multitude and only secondarily captured by capitalist mechanisms of extraction – or whether capitalist mechanisms of organization play a significant role not only in extracting value, but in molding the very process of its production, which needs to be dialectically overcome, just as the factory-form of industrial capitalism was supposed to be.”²² Whether assuming the form of the cognitariat, the immaterial laborer, or creative multitude, postautonomism sides with the former standpoint, the “social production of value” being inherent to the “multitude.” Even if inadvertent, this is a centering, even an alignment with the Western techno-imperial cores of accumulation. This is evident, however latently, throughout the postautonomist political camp.²³ As is well articulated by Italian feminist autonomists of the era and after it, such a centering of the multitudes has unfolded as the erasure of antagonisms on the peripheries of techno-imperial development.²⁴ Such erasures include: indigenous land struggles, the nonwaged reproductive labors of women, the many around the world who continue to labor without the supposed novelty of being affective

22 Kuba Szreder, “Instituting the Common in Artistic Circulation: From Entrepreneurship of the Self to Entrepreneurship of the Multitude” in *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, Vol.27, No.1, 2018: 197.

23 See: Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Common Notions: 2012. 121-122.

24 Silvia Federici has been one of the more outspoken critics of this tendency, herself hailing from the historical Italian *autonomia* movement and a foundational theorist of the feminist theory of reproductive labor. Federici is also notable for her later participation in and research on global movements of the commons in Africa, Latin America, and other territories of struggle peripheral to “immaterial production.”

or immaterial, in industrial manufacturing, or those who continue to work the mines from which the resources for immateriality derive. In sum, all those excluded from, yet essential to the reproduction of what Hardt and Negri call the "network."²⁵

In *Unionism, Diversity of Tactics, Ceaseless Struggle*, workers from Lithuania, Poland and the UK intervene in these romantic, theoretical, conceptualizations of the networked, creative, multitudes through an exchange of dispatches on contemporary labor struggles in and beyond the cultural sectors of their respective regions. Engaging with a letter by Marina Vishmidt – a theorist and militant, who has been active in autonomist debates around the problematic of artistic labor over the years through her writings and also participation in platforms like W.A.G.E. – the respondents critically take on what Vishmidt describes as the "anomalous" and "exceptional" composition of artistic labor as a *barrier* to emancipation. In this they oppose how it is romanticized, as noted above, as the position of the new historical vanguard. Vishmidt takes note of a recent unionization wave in the arts field catalyzed by the socioeconomic *decomposition* of artistic subjectivity. From this, she suggests that a new sense of belonging and solidarity is emergent between art workers and workers more generally, as a class in the struggle against capitalism. The respondents, in turn, interpret the potentials of this emergent de/composition through reflection on their own union activities and ambitions for their unions. And this emergent de/

25 For instance, see chapter 12, "Biopolitical Production," in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press: 2001. 22–41. And for a well-developed critique of the emancipatory capacity of network politics see, Gregory Sholette, "Art, Politics, Dark Matter: Nine Prologues" in *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto Press: 2011.

composition is reflected both within and beyond their occupations in the cultural field, widening the scope of autonomy through a wider path of social contestation.

In advocating a path to autonomy through such a call for the antagonistic embrace of all that opposes it in the present, the question may arise as to what – if any – positive horizon is imagined? Autonomism, as Guattari famously proclaimed, “involves not only the struggle against material bondage and visible forms of repression, but also, from the outset, the creation of many alternative set-ups.”²⁶ This resonates with *Paths to Autonomy*. A number of “alternative setups” are suggested from the standpoint of multifarious forms of labor and the manifold paths for its autonomous refusal. There is Praznik’s excavation of the revolutionary struggle to “emancipate labor” through the movement of free associations and councils, carried out by Yugoslav militants. Then, Shukaitis’ sketching of the creative strike, wherein creation for capital is replaced with “ludic creativity” for all. And, in concordance with these, Vishmidt and the union respondents’ suggestions for infrastructural and dual power strategies.

Similarly, confronting the problematic of cultivating a path to autonomy both through and beyond the standpoint of our shared heteronomies within capitalist political economy, is a historical essay by Edward Abramowski. *Stateless Socialism* advances a revolutionary strategy from the standpoint of the cooperativist movement in early twentieth century Poland. Newly translated from Polish to Lithuanian, the text features a preface by Bartłomiej Błesznowski.

26 “The Proliferation of Margins”, op. cit., 109.

Błesznowski is a theorist and historian who has worked elsewhere on the connection between Abramowski's revolutionary philosophy of Polish cooperativism and contemporary autonomist theory.²⁷ Drawing from Abramowski, Błesznowski contends that the institution of the cooperative arising out of the class struggle enables the flourishing of the communal individual, the task of stateless socialism being: "to transform the consciousness of social actors in such a way that they develop their individual strengths within an immanent, nonhierarchical, and voluntary community which strengthens them."²⁸ Abramowski saw the cooperative as supporting a form of life that traversed the shortcomings of both the market individual and state socialism's imposition of a collective body. Free association, mutual aid, and autonomous self-organization were found to prosper in the communes and cooperatives of this revolutionary movement in action. Writing of the Owenite neighborhood cooperatives in England, Edward employs the idea of "communization" to describe a movement that enacts its theses in its actions, not waiting for communism, as some forever delayed promise of salvation by the state.²⁹

Turning toward our own immediate present and position in the Baltic East, there is then the record

- 27 See: Bartłomiej Błesznowski and Mikołaj Ratajczak, "Principles of the Common: Towards a Political Philosophy of Polish Cooperativism." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1, No.27, 2018.
- 28 Bartłomiej Błesznowski, "Preface to Stateless Socialism," in *Paths to Autonomy*.
- 29 A concept that will be further developed in the aftermaths of 1968 as communization theory. See: Benjamin Noys ed., *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique and Contemporary Struggles*, Minor Compositions: 2011.

of a conversation between two comrades. In this, they share their experiences with the regionally particular forms, and inheritance, of “autonomism” as they’ve encountered it over the past decades in political milieus in Lithuania and Estonia. In *Looking for Autonomist Politics in the Baltic States*, Airi Triisberg (Estonia) and Tomas Marcinkevičius (Lithuania), navigate the sharp historical discontinuities that generally mark regional histories of the left. They conceptualize autonomism as a “slippery concept.” As such, autonomism is both a living form and the outcome of manifold – and even conflicting – inheritances. On the one hand it arrives as a political grammar from the German *Autonome* tradition, via Poland in the early 2000s. Marcinkevičius and Triisberg detail the efforts, frustrations and failures of *Autonome’s* translation into the local landscape.³⁰ On the other hand, the idea of cultivating a regional, Eastern, legacy of autonomism is posed as both an urgent task and an already emerging movement undertaking. A task that we have contributed to in our own small way through facilitating the first translation of *Stateless Socialism* into Lithuanian and, more generally, throughout this book.

Concluding the book is a correspondence between Arnoldas Stramskas, Ayreen Anastas, Rene Gabri, and myself, *We, the Inheritors, of Worlds*. Here, one finds a broad, yet personal, set of reflections on core concepts raised in the book. Amongst other considerations, it introduces a radical problematization of workerist autonomism through a lively, idiorrhhythmic, correspondence in the form of an exchange of propositions. Navigating the colonial-imperial dynamics

30 See, Geronimo, *Fire and Flames: A History of the German Autonomist Movement*, PM Press: 2012.

at the heart of these majoritarian workerist histories of autonomy, reflections are stirred on how to best sustain erased and peripheralized histories of autonomy within our movement spaces and infrastructures. Departing from our shared experiences in building and maintaining autonomous spaces – which have taken varied forms over the years as 16Beaver (NYC), Dr Green Squat (Vilnius), Emma Social Center (Kaunas), Luna6 (Vilnius) – this correspondence ventures into the question of cultivating and reproducing autonomous worlds. By this we mean transversal movement formations organized through the infrastructural and infrapolitical – understood as paths not conventionally legible as politics – standpoints of social reproduction and decolonialization.

Paths to Autonomy is intended as a contribution to the further elaboration of an autonomist politics. An autonomous politics that suggests how the proliferation of paths *towards* and *of* autonomy might ultimately overcome the tenacious global reign of capital and the state as a power of control and command over our lives.

Katja Praznik

**They Call It
Creativity,
We Call It
Exploitation!**

**The Legacy of Yugoslav
Socialism and the Class
Character of Autonomy**



“Whoever has money in their pockets has well-determined conceptual abstractions in their heads, consciously or otherwise’, says Sohn-Rethel, and he isn’t joking,”¹ Costanzo Preve once pointed out in the newspaper *Lotta Continua*, an important paper of Italian *operaismo* (workerism).² This statement was made at a moment when heated battles were taking place in Italy between workers, intellectuals and feminists against the forces and agents of capital accumulation. In these struggles the concept of autonomy featured prominently, though its definition and use remained ambiguous.³ The ambiguity surrounding the idea of autonomy was perhaps most visible in the split between feminist groups and male dominated factions of *operaismo*.⁴ It was hard for some men to embrace autonomy as a standpoint for the working class as a whole: from unwaged domestic housework(ers), the gender nonconforming to the racially oppressed. As Silvia Federici points out, the contemporary left’s issues with feminist autonomy can be traced back to this period of struggles: “Not accidentally, most of today’s left polemics against

- 1 A newer version of this quotation published in the recent translation of Sohn-Rethel’s book reads: “Whoever has money in their pocket and understands its function, must have fully determinate conceptual abstractions in their head!” Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Brill, 2020. 183.
- 2 Costanzo Preve, “Commodities and Thought: Sohn-Rethel’s Book” (originally published in *Lotta Continua*, 5 August 1977, 6) in “Materials from Lotta Continua on Alfred Sohn-Rethel,” in *Ibid.*, 175. A more accurate translation appeared later in *Lotta Continua* and is reproduced in the note above.
- 3 See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press: 2002 and *The Weight of the Printed Word: Text, Context and Militancy in Operaismo*, Brill: 2021.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 498–505.

feminist autonomy are dedicated to denying that wages for housework is a feminist and, therefore, working-class strategy.”⁵ Autonomy as defined by Marxist feminists within *operaismo* (as economic autonomy) and by other factions of *operaismo* (as the power of workers) stands in stark opposition to the dominant western genealogy of autonomy as capital’s power of abstraction, as alluded to by Preve in his quotation from Sohn-Rethel. I refer to this insightful statement by Preve precisely to consider the fate of autonomy in a very particular realm, where numerous abstractions, including autonomy and creativity, stand as the hallmark for an endemic exploitation of labor. This is the world of Western institutionalized art wherein the concept of autonomy was articulated by people with a lot of money in their pockets and often tons of power in their hands.

Beginning with an analysis of how the obfuscation of art as work in the Western tradition of aesthetic autonomy enables the reproduction of inequalities and the exploitation of art workers, I turn towards the struggle against this tradition in socialist Yugoslavia. It is here that I engage with the contradictions and unfulfilled aspirations for the emancipation of labor through the system of self-management practiced under Yugoslav socialism. I show how the bourgeois banner of artistic autonomy was in fact crucial to the undermining of Yugoslav socialism’s partial emancipation of cultural labor. Referring back to the diverging standpoints on autonomy within Italian *operaismo*, I show how the male dominated vision of workers’ autonomy, as secure and productive labor, undermines itself by enforcing a hierarchy within the working

5 Silvia Federici, “Capital and the Left,” in *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism*, PM Press: 2021.

class that invisibilizes other forms of labor that fall outside the classic wage relation. I turn toward the theories of autonomist and Marxist feminists to expose this invisibilization of labor and the importance of the conclusions they reached about the character of women's work for the problem of the exploitation of labor in the context of the western institution of art.

Just like housework, which was historically and socially constructed as a natural attribute of female subjects or as a "labor of love," the labor of the artist has historically been redefined as embodied creativity, an inborn faculty of genius. In both cases, particular skills get essentialized, declared, or culturally constructed as naturally stemming from the subject's essence or nature. Neither is defined as work: they are invisible in relation to the process of their production. But while we owe much to Marxist feminists who demystified the essentializing principle that turns housework into nonwork and becomes the fulcrum of exploitation and oppression of women under capitalism, the discourse of aesthetics and art theory uncritically perpetuates ideas about artistic practice as nonwork or as an exceptional kind of labor that reproduces the essentialization of artists' work as an attribute of creativity or creative genius. In other words, essentialization in the case of art work is perceived as positive (unlike domestic labor), and it makes art look natural (so not work); it therefore legitimizes the invisibility of labor in a way that may be worse than with domestic labor. With artists, the positive valence associated with an essentialism that maintains the difference and exceptional nature of each artist makes it harder to rebel and to want to

reform this exceptionality. This makes it easier to accept a nonremunerated approach to art work.

Examining the opposition between autonomy and labor in the arts through the case of Yugoslav socialism, I argue that the autonomy of art is a class construct, a specifically bourgeois invention that impedes the emancipation of “art work.” I go on to demonstrate that the material conditions and policies through which art became a form of labor in Yugoslavia represent an alternative conception to that of the bourgeois definition of artistic practice as creativity, and in doing so they offer a terrain to challenge the class character of art’s autonomy today. I conclude by arguing alongside Yugoslav era militants that the emancipation of art work has broader stakes in the emancipation of work more generally as a truly free, universally autonomous, activity.

What is Autonomy Without Economic Autonomy?

Autonomy, an otherwise cherished principle frequently undergirding movements for political and social change, has a quite ambivalent role in the context of institutionalized art production in the West. The meaning of autonomy in the context of art is not only ambivalent but also ambiguous: it can refer to the autonomy of an artist, work of art or an entire field. The variety of meanings has divergent effects on art as a form of labor. Regardless, in this discussion I refer to a historically specific idea of the autonomy of art that developed alongside the philosophy of aesthetics

in the eighteenth century.⁶ Structurally speaking, the division of labor by the end of the eighteenth century turned art into a professional social sphere. Art became a relatively autonomous social occupation with its organizations, agents, relations of production and so on. As the capitalist mode of production became endemic, the autonomy of art also became an ideological notion that defined art as a field which is separate from the drudgery of capitalist wage labor and commerce. As any ideology worthy of being called an ideology, artistic autonomy mystified the real exploitative conditions and arrangements that govern the relations of production in the arts. Autonomy of art from the viewpoint of labor brings out this unsettling element because it separates the labor of an artist from remuneration and affects the definition of art work as a practice that is or should somehow be unaffected by pecuniary concerns.

In Herbert Marcuse's essay "On the Affirmative Character of Culture" we see how the eighteenth century conceptualization of aesthetic autonomy as capitalist ideology originates in Greco-Roman idealist philosophy which, in positioning abstraction, truth, and beauty above matters of subsistence, served to enforce the social order:

The ancient theory of the higher value of truths above the realm of necessity includes as well the 'higher' level of society. For these truths are supposed to have their abode in the ruling social strata, whose dominant status

6 Peter Bürger, "Critique of Autonomy," in Michael Kelly ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press: 1998; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Hackett Publishing Company: 1987; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, Harper & Row: 1965.

is in turn confirmed by the theory insofar as concern with the highest truths is supposed to be their profession.⁷

During the bourgeois era, the separation of aesthetic enjoyment and art from economic survival was established as something universal. Art and culture were proclaimed to be a universal value and humans “as abstract beings . . . are supposed to participate equally in these values.”⁸ This abstraction, as Marcuse underscored, emerges and obscures the reality that was clear to the Greek philosophers: it is only the economically secure classes that could afford to enjoy these universalities. Or, if we recall Sohn-Rethel’s thought – those with money in their pockets. The autonomy to ponder higher values was based on economic security and not the other way around.

Thus, despite the fancy proclamations regarding universality that are characteristic for the “bourgeois liberation of the individual” and the “new happiness” that this freedom should bring, Marcuse underscores the illusory status of the universality proclaimed and its class determination:

But the universality of this happiness is immediately canceled, since *the abstract equality of men realizes itself in capitalist production as concrete inequality*. Only a small number of men dispose of the purchasing power required for the quantity of goods necessary in order to secure happiness. *Equality does not extend to the conditions for attaining the means*. For

7 Herbert Marcuse, “On the Affirmative Character of Culture,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, MayFly Books: 2009. 67.

8 *Ibid.*, 69.

the strata of the rural and urban proletariat, on whom the bourgeoisie depended in their struggle against the feudal powers, *abstract equality could have meaning only as real equality*. For the bourgeoisie, when it came to power, *abstract equality sufficed* for the flourishing of real individual freedom and real individual happiness, since *it already disposed of the material conditions* that could bring about such satisfaction. Indeed, *stopping at the stage of abstract freedom* belonged to the conditions of bourgeois rule, which would have been endangered by a transition from abstract to concrete universality.⁹

Building on Marcuse's arguments about the importance of understanding the social function of art in bourgeois society and its class character, Peter Bürger has shown how Kant's philosophy of disinterested aesthetic enjoyment is built on this false universalism and how it is related to the autonomy of art as class ideology.¹⁰ Kant's definition of art as an activity that is free in a double sense – free from utilitarian purposes and free from remuneration (that is, it shouldn't be a mercenary occupation) – furthers the "invisibilization" of labor in the arts and removes art from considerations about the relations of production and labor.¹¹ Clearly it also implies that art is an activity that is available to the classes unconcerned with securing subsistence. In this sense, Bürger's contention

9 Ibid., 72 (emphasis added).

10 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press: 1984. 41-43.

11 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Hackett Publishing Company: 1987. 190.

that the autonomy of art is a bourgeois ideological category is central, as is his question about what it conceals.¹²

Enjoyment of art then, is exclusive: it belongs to classes that can dispense with certain material conditions, and as I argue, this is also the case for the production of art including the labor of artists – art work. To practice art work autonomously in the bourgeois sense, that is without worrying about payment, means one’s economic security is not in question, especially under capitalism where people are structurally conditioned to work to live. What classes, after all, can afford to practice art independently of remuneration? The autonomy of art is instrumental to the mystification that produces the invisibility of labor in the arts, which in turn goes hand in hand with exploitative relations of production.

Therefore, from its historical emergence onward, the autonomy of art stands in distinct opposition to art as a form of work; it is part and parcel of artistic labor’s invisibility and its exploitation because the autonomy of art is premised on a disavowal of the economic relations of art. Labor’s invisibility in the arts and its “autonomy” converge, but as we have already seen through Italian autonomism, they are not conflatable. It is a peculiarity of Western art that autonomy should be thought of and philosophically grounded in opposition to economic autonomy. It is here that the case of Yugoslav socialism (1945–1991) and the transformation of art work into invisible labor, during the last decades of its existence, is instructive. While the political economy of socialist

12 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, op. cit., 46.

Yugoslavia, known also as a system of self-management, was based on a policy of full employment (including artists), Yugoslav socialism's incorporation of bourgeois aesthetic traditions produced a mystification of art as a realm of freedom. The autonomy of art played an important and detrimental role in the process whereby art as work was gradually overpowered by an understanding of art as creation. The dynamics of this transformation is relevant for a critical reconsideration of the autonomy of art and the ways in which a critical analysis of its class character may offer pathways to the emancipation of (art) work.

Autonomy of Art vs. Autonomy of Labor in Socialist Yugoslavia

The attitude toward art as labor developed in the first half of Yugoslavia's existence (1945-1967), through progressive labor policies and social protections for artistic labor.¹³ Yugoslavia developed a socialist version of a state welfare system that was based on social insurance and social protection; all cultural and artistic activities were publicly funded. It was also importantly connected to a policy of full employment. Socialist Yugoslavia recognized artists as workers and as an important part of the new socialist state including their welfare provision, economic, and labor rights. Artistic labor was integrated into the political

13 I detail these developments in *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism*, University of Toronto Press: 2021, especially chapters three and four, "The Making of Yugoslav Art Workers: Artistic Labour and the Socialist Institution of Art" and "The Mystification of Artistic Labour under Socialism."

economy predominantly in the form of full-time employment in cultural organizations, art academies, and high schools for applied arts. Art workers were also employed in primary and high schools, publishing houses, newspapers, and in radio and television.

While the majority of art workers were employed, a very small percentage, initially, operated as freelancers with protected social and workers' rights.¹⁴ In 1952, authorities passed a contract ensuring social insurance for freelance writers, poets, and film production workers (screen writers, film directors etc.).¹⁵ In 1955, this was extended to other art workers, for example musicians and translators.¹⁶ In sum, laws and decrees passed in Yugoslavia during the late 1950s and 1960s provided freelance art workers with similar protections to those enjoyed by employed workers.

The socialist labor policies that established full employment did not circumvent the institutional framework of autonomous art, as a professional endeavor. Rather they bolstered autonomy but on different terms than under capitalism since art workers' labor and economic rights were acknowledged and also protected. This overlap ensured not only the emergence of art workers but also the practice of art as an economically viable form of professional work. The cultural policies also strengthened the capacities for cultural production in terms of infrastructure,

14 In 1955 the SFRY passed a decree on social insurance of artists: Uredba o socialnom osiguranju umetnika, *Službeni list FNRJ*, No. 32, July 13, 1955. 536-9; and three separate decrees for translators, music and film workers: Odluka o socijalnom osiguranju muzičkih umetnika; Odluka o socijalnom osiguranju prevodilaca naučnih i književnih dela;

15 "Ugovor o socialnom osiguranju književnika, zaključen 24.

16 Uredba o socijalnom osiguranju umetnika, *Službeni*.

which supported democratic access to culture, enabling art appreciation and cultural engagement for the majority of people in their everyday life.

In recognizing artists as workers, Yugoslav self-management took the first step in a broader movement for the emancipation of labor: creativity's generalization as a universal social right. In the words of Stevan Majstorović – a sociologist who pioneered the study of cultural policy in socialist Yugoslavia – this implied a “reintegration of the hitherto alienated and divided spheres of human activity,” and an aim to supplant “historically conditioned division of culture from the life, work and interests of the broadest strata of the people.”¹⁷

Autonomy and Class Character of Art in Yugoslav Socialism

A more radical transformation of the bourgeois institutional model of art became stalemated due to the unoriginality of the socialist institutionalization of art, which preserved a traditional understanding of autonomy as an attribute of genius artists and the formal aesthetic laws of their works of art.

While Yugoslav cultural policy recognized the economic needs and labor rights of art workers, the attempts to radically redefine the institutional framework for art and its function in socialist society were limited and constrained. The autonomy of art was

17 Stevan Majstorović, *Cultural Policy in Yugoslavia*, Paris, UNESCO: 1972. 26.

not challenged despite the fact that the socialist government understood culture as “a wide range of opportunities for the expression and confirmation of the human personality in all spheres of public activity.”¹⁸ The overlap of socialist labor policies and the institutional framework of autonomous art functioned to produce the artist as an employee. By securing funds for art projects, remuneration, and social security for art workers, cultural policy regulation acknowledged artistic labor as work that deserved payment and protection thus turning it from invisible to visible labor. Yet, the adoption of the Fordist paradigm based on standardization of production, stability of employment, and workers’ consumption limited the actual transformation of artistic labor into a form of emancipated labor and enforced hierarchies between labors in the arts – invisibilizing some while recognizing others.

Alongside the professional sphere of culture embodied in traditional arts institutions, such as theaters, operas, ballets, museums, galleries, philharmonic orchestras, film production houses, cinemas and so on, a whole realm of so-called associational culture existed that encompassed everything from amateur culture to professional art associations and art groups that took place in a well-developed supporting infrastructure, such as cultural homes, clubs, etc. Additionally, art production and art work also took place in a network of youth and student centers. Moreover, there were whole sectors related to the production of popular music and film. In these sectors art workers eventually came to work in less favorable economic conditions. Such a hierarchy was enforced through both the bourgeois model of aesthetic

18 Ibid., 28.

autonomy and broader issues in the political economy of Yugoslavia and the geopolitical shifts from the late 1960s onward.¹⁹

The autonomous artistic sphere, which was to be evaluated through abstract, formal principles of aesthetic judgment, was based on an undemocratic gatekeeping model. Cultural policy regulation secured social security and workers' rights for artists, but the decision about access to these rights was in the hands of professional artists' associations and based on aesthetic criteria (artist training/education, number of exhibitions, publication, performances, etc.). The artists had to demonstrate professional qualifications based on these aesthetic criteria, which in turn enabled access to rights. Socialist labor policies and the aesthetic ideology of art concurred and were aligned. This contradiction was later exploited by neoliberal policies that redefined rights as privileges for only the most creative by transferring the entire burden of social security to art workers and depriving them of workers' rights.²⁰ Culture was thus "a system of specialized and professionalized social activities," in which "workers cease living *for* creative work and begin to live *off* it," as argued by Zagorka Golubović, a member of Praxis group.²¹

19 *Art Work*, op. cit., 55–60.

20 *Ibid.*, 101–140.

21 Zagorka Golubović, "Culture as a Bridge between Utopia and Reality" in *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, eds. Mihailo Marković and Gajo Petrović, D. Reidel Publishing Company: 1979. 178.

Yugoslav era militants indeed criticized these contradictions, advocating for a total liberation of labor. Golubović offered one such articulation when she defined what a true self-management society in respect to art and culture entails: "All professional activities and professional groups must be eliminated, as institutionalized units of society and conditions must be created for human labor to become truly a *universal activity*."²² The latter was qualified in Marxian terms as meaning the prospect for individuals of taking on any number of activities for which they have talent, and an elimination of "social and class considerations in the division of labor which bind the individual to a single activity for his entire life."²³ Moreover, Golubović also argued against the separation of social spheres: "Free associations" should therefore be created in such a way that they would "reintegrate the currently fragmented activities and spheres of life, such as politics, economics, art," thereby enabling an individual "to cease to be a partial being (*homo oeconomicus, homo politicus, artist, etc.*)."²⁴

Further, Golubović criticized dogmatic Marxist views concerning the base (or infrastructure) and superstructure. According to these views, culture is a part of the superstructure that pertains to the spiritual and not the material aspects of social organization. In her critique of this narrow and schematic understanding of culture in orthodox Marxist aesthetics, Golubović noted that "the concept of 'superstructure' holds culture to mean exclusively the objectivized attainments of mental activities," which positions

22 Ibid., 178

23 Ibid., 184.

24 Ibid., 184.

culture as “secondary to infrastructure.”²⁵ And, I should add, doesn’t consider art and culture’s relations of production. Culture, therefore, had only “a secondary, reflexive influence” as if material and spiritual aspects can be divorced.²⁶

Creative labor in the realm of associational culture, also labeled amateur culture, was reserved for the spare leisure time of all working people and particularly the youth. Associational culture was therefore opposed to professional creative labor in the context of institutionalized art and the cultural and entertainment industry. In the socialist institution of art, a paradox of socialist cultural policy emerged. The latter established platforms and support for creative labor and art production, but it did not support a transformation of art’s social function because it maintained the distinction and division of labor. In the final analysis these contradictions contributed to the undoing of the status of Yugoslav art workers and the turning of artistic labor into invisible labor. It is precisely the exceptionality of creative work and the unique status of artists, which Yugoslav socialism maintained and glorified, that made artistic labor vulnerable to exploitation and disavowal as a form of labor. What is more, very few artists were critical of how the system invisibilized and exploited artistic labor.

By contrast, Goran Đorđević, a member of Yugoslav conceptual art circles, articulated a formidable critique of Western art first by pointing out that creativity is a theological notion and secondly that the idea of artist as creator is befitting for an understanding of

25 Ibid., 171-2.

26 Ibid., 172.

art as a form of religious practice that has a strong class character.²⁷ Đorđević, as well as a few other critical intellectuals in Yugoslavia such as Golubović, criticized the emergence of a class-determined idea of art under socialism. In his text “On the Class Character of Art,” Đorđević proclaimed: “In countries that are building socialist relations in society, not only is the class character of the artistic consciousness not understood, on the contrary this consciousness is upheld and asserted.”²⁸ Zagorka Golubović provided a similar reading of art under socialism when she argued:

The class character of culture in socialist systems is revealed in a double limitation of culture. First, culture has a class-interest function (the existing system is identified with this class interest) rather than having man as a human being as its goal. Second, culture performs the function of socialization *in accordance* with a class conception of socialization, preparing the individual for life in a given system in its existing state . . . In other words, culture aids in the formation of the conformist personality, in fact, the nonconformist is the creator of true culture.²⁹

27 See Goran Đorđević, “Postoji samo istraživanje,” *Novi Svet*, No.24-4: 1972. 11; Goran Đorđević, “Subjekt i pseudosubjekt umetničke prakse,” *Vidici* Vol.23, No.3: 1977. 2; Goran Đorđević, “Art as a Form of Religious Consciousness,” in *SKC and Political Practices of Art*, ed. Prelom Kolektiv, ŠKUC: 2008. I discuss Đorđević’s work in Praznik, *Art Work*. 76–91; and in Praznik, “Artists as Workers,” *Social Text* Vol.38, No.144: 2020. 83–115.

28 Goran Đorđević, “On the Class Character of Art,” *The Fox*, No.3: 1976. 164.

29 “Culture as a Bridge”, op. cit., 179 (original emphasis).

Golubović maintained that “in Yugoslavia, cultural nonconformism has not yet reached the point of radical opposition to the practice of assigning culture a special place in society and reserving it for particular social strata.” However, “this nonconformism is still *class conformism*,” she asserted.³⁰

As we see, self-management’s emphasis on the idea of all labor being creative did not eliminate the structures through which art production operated as a separate autonomous field that became an exclusive concern of professional and political groups in larger urban areas. If self-management’s goal was to liberate labor from constraints of capitalist exploitation and commodification of labor, it developed a blind spot in terms of understanding artistic labor and the institutional organization of art practices as an autonomous sphere.

For example, Stipe Šušvar, a sociologist and at the time the secretary of culture and education in Croatia, clearly expressed this problem, when he wrote in 1975: “It seems that the misunderstandings that occurred at the beginning of the development of socialism, that also trouble our contemporary society, which is still a relatively young and underdeveloped socialist society, mostly stem from the fact that what we call culture has been inherited from the bourgeois society as a set of institutions, as a system of values, and as a form of traditional structure of cultural creators.”³¹ The socialist institution of art was “inclined to reproduce or emulate bourgeois models in art and culture rather

30 Ibid., 183 (original emphasis).

31 Stipe Šušvar, “Kulturna politika: vizije i stvarnost (1975),” in *Kultura i politika*, Globus: 1980. 139.

than to engage in creating new alternative ones," the critic Predrag Matvejević commented.³²

Along with professionalization came also elitism. For instance, Šuvar admitted: "Even today, we are mostly concerned about the fate of traditional, inherited cultural institutions and the traditional content of their work. And this is still the focus of our cultural policy. This is also the focus of the traditional consciousness of cultural creators and the majority of intelligentsia."³³ Golubović echoed this view resolutely by noting that in the cultural sphere "the major demand [was] not for the *elimination of the professionalization of culture*, but for freedom for professional cultural activities."³⁴ Despite an awareness of a "need to create an enlightened public," art workers "failed] to make any great efforts to close the 'unbridgeable' gap between professional 'creators' and 'non-creative' consumers."³⁵ Golubović was critical of this divide when she noted that there is "quite evident disinterest of many creators of so-called 'high-culture' toward the penetration of 'mass culture,' and its disastrous effects on the general population."³⁶ One of the reasons for this condition was, in Golubović's view, a demand to expand "the circle of 'culture customers'" and a lack of "struggle for the provision of the conditions and the means to make culture a daily need and a way of life for all."³⁷ This means that ideas of emancipation of human labor whereby culture

32 Predrag Matvejević, *Prema novom kulturnom stvaralaštvu* [Toward a New Cultural Creativity], Naprijed: 1975. 98.

33 "Kulturna politika", op. cit., 140.

34 "Culture as a Bridge", op. cit., 179 (original emphasis).

35 Ibid., 182-3.

36 Ibid., 182.

37 Ibid., 183.

would become a way of life was in contradiction not only with the idea of cultural consumption and commodification of culture, but also with bourgeois ideals of art's autonomy.

Golubović and Đorđević's critiques have two things in common. They are not only critical of the economic conditions that generate class systems and exploitation, but they also both brought to the fore the reproduction of a class system in culture. Culture both under capitalism and under socialism was burdened by class character and bourgeois ideology, which is exemplified in the individualistic and exceptional ethos that is ascribed to artistic labor as well as to the autonomy of art. This contributes to an elitist understanding of art and culture that became prevalent after the violent dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia even though these attitudes, as we have seen, were already burgeoning during the final two decades of its existence.

Late Yugoslav Cultural Policy: the Housewifization of Art Work

Socialism's mystification of art as a realm of freedom and its attachment to the understanding of creative work as an autonomous practice made it easier to divorce these productive activities from other kinds of labor. Together with the shifts in economic policies, which introduced market elements in Yugoslav socialism, cultural workers and artists were turned into a sort of experimental vanguard for the neoliberal reforms that began in the 1970s.

The housewifization³⁸ of artistic labor in socialist Yugoslavia, and in particular of freelance art workers, during the late 1970s and 1980s took place not only due to the marketization of self-management but also because artists of the postwar generations – with very few exceptions – saw themselves as creators and not as workers. Due to the lack of available appropriate cultural and economic models and the concrete geopolitical constraints in which the cultural and social transformation epitomized by socialist Yugoslavia took place, the socialist institution of art failed to live up to its revolutionary aims. The most telling sign of its disintegration was found precisely in the emergence of unpaid artistic labor during the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s.

Specifically, the emergence of unpaid artistic labor was, on the one hand, a consequence of the unrealized transformative potential of the alternative art movements, in particular their attempt to transcend the bourgeois institution of art, its autonomy, and art understood as commodity production. On the other hand, the emergence of unpaid artistic labor was related to the liberalization of market principles and the federal government's response to changes in the international economic conditions that went counter

38 The term "housewifization" or "housewifed labor" was coined by Maria Mies and refers to flexible, atypical, devalued and unprotected forms of labor. See Maria Mies, "Housewifization – Globalisation – Subsistence – Perspective" in *Beyond Marx: Theorizing the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century*, eds., Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth, Brill: 2013.

to the aims of securing a rising living standard for all working people in Yugoslavia.³⁹

The conflict generated a dissonance between the socialist provision of culture based on secure employment for art workers and an implementation of market principles in the field of culture, which began to redefine art workers as socialist entrepreneurs. While art workers were treated both as specialists endowed with creative powers and recognized as laborers that deserve equal rights with other workers, an implementation of market principles in the sphere of culture affected the demand for and provision of cultural goods.⁴⁰ On the heels of competition and existing divisions within the autonomous sphere of art, working conditions began to deteriorate, and the process of class stratification in the field of Yugoslav culture began.

The 1980s in socialist Yugoslavia offer further evidence of the skewed politics that emerged under the banner of autonomy of art while the socialist welfare regime was slowly being deconstructed under the imposition of the well known actors in the play called "The End of Communism," such as the IMF, World Bank, etc. The generations that were politically active during the final decade of socialist Yugoslavia

39 Susan Woodward, "The Political Economy of Ethno-Nationalism in Yugoslavia," in *Socialist Register 2003: Fighting Identities - Race, Religion, and Ethno-Nationalism*, eds., Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, The Merlin Press: 2003. 77-8.

40 For example, the federal Council for Education and Culture commissioned a study "Kultura kao delatnost i stvaralaštvo u uslovima robneproizvod" (Culture as activity and creativity under the conditions of commodity production), conducted by the Yugoslav Institute for Economic Research in Belgrade in 1968. Reviews of the study point to the problem of commodification of culture.

were mostly oblivious to the economy and the transformations of class composition, especially in the field of arts and culture – simultaneously demanding an alternative to Yugoslav socialism and drinking from the well of liberal dogmas, freedom and liberty in particular. The intellectuals and art workers that belonged to the so-called alternative movements of the 1980s disregarded the role of socialist welfare regimes that were vital to social reproduction. Instead, they attacked the oppressive state apparatuses and self-management ideology and inadvertently contributed to the fall of Yugoslav socialism.

While art workers of the alternative art practices in the 1980s critiqued the socialist institution of art either in an attempt to create parallel new art organizations or to occupy the existing cultural institutions and transform them from within, the cultural policy regulation of working conditions implemented during the 1980s pulled the rug from beneath their feet. Such policy redefined independent cultural workers as self-managed socialist entrepreneurs through juridical arrangements that planted the seeds for the flexibilization of art work and the housewifization of art workers.

The situation was the effect of neoliberal rationality, but it was also importantly connected to the autonomy of art. In the 1980s socialist cultural policy reinforced the valence of creativity and exceptionality of art work. Artistic exceptionality or if you will, creativity, became the foundation for basic social rights. Independent art workers had the right to social protection not because they were working but because they were exceptionally creative. As a consequence, they were no longer art workers but

independent creative individuals. The payment for their work became optional and seen more as a reward for their creativity. This dynamic caused a reversal of the initial acknowledgment of art as a form of labor in socialist Yugoslavia. Art work transformed into invisible labor and returned to the realm of art guided by the autonomy of art and its flipside – disavowed economy, including unfair remuneration.

In lieu of Conclusion: From the Autonomy of Art to Economic Autonomy

But how does all this matter today in the post- and non-Yugoslav world? The Yugoslav case shows us why the autonomy of art cannot be based on an illusory independence from the economy, especially not under capitalism where social domination and oppression are organized through economic relations. Work in capitalism is an alienated form of labor and not a free activity or emancipated form of labor. Positing the autonomy of art in opposition to the economic structures that govern its relations of production is in fact counterproductive to any kind of liberation from capitalism and from alienated forms of labor. By defending the autonomy of art without reckoning with its problematic history, art workers participate in the reproduction of their own oppression and are politically contributing to the reproduction of the system that is based on the exploitation of labor. By obscuring the relations of production in the arts and its economic exigencies rather than acknowledging the inevitable imbrication of art and economy, we contribute to the mystification of the labor

process, exploitative working conditions, and unfair remuneration.

Under the false flag of creativity and the autonomy of art, the class character of art is not only neutralized, it is also depoliticized. Creativity and the autonomy of art join all art workers of different socioeconomic backgrounds under the mirage of a classless banner. Calling art labor offers a tactical vantage point for rejecting the understanding of art work as essentialized creativity and the social role capitalism intends for art workers. On the heels of the struggles of Marxist feminists who argued that reproductive labor is not a personal, affective, service outside of capital, it becomes easier to recognize that art work is not a autonomous activity outside of capital either. While work is not the only means of reproduction, most people under capitalism work to secure their livelihoods or are supported by someone whose work is paid. Art work is a private, autonomous matter only for those who can afford to practice it without remuneration. But that luxury is guaranteed by a structural exploitation of both wage labor and even more by enormous swaths of exploited invisible work. So defending and enjoying the autonomy of art by practicing creativity without proper remuneration means we obscure the economic exploitation involved in it.

If the autonomy of art reinforces the invisibility of labor and essentialization of art work as creativity and contributes to the system of merit which rewards it, it disables the possibility for a political struggle against the specific form of (capitalist) exploitation, and for workers' rights and fair payment. Art work under capitalism needs to be based in economic

autonomy and that is possible when art workers' labor and economic rights are acknowledged and protected. The struggle in the world of Western art therefore begins with a recognition of artistic labor as work, and a redefinition of autonomy as economic autonomy. That is why labor rights discourse in the arts matters much more than a depoliticized gloss of autonomy: firstly, because it builds alliances with other exploited workers, and secondly because it allows us to struggle for the emancipation of labor and for alternative new economic relations beyond capitalist accumulation.

Lexicon

**Katja
Praznik**

**Invisibilized
Labor**

The autonomy of art's dark side is artistic labor's invisibility. By invisible labor I refer to unaccounted, unrecognized and unpaid work – a central political term defined by Marxist feminists in the 1970s.

The origin of the concept of invisibilized labor can be traced back to the groundbreaking Marxist-feminist theorization of wageless or unpaid and thus invisible housework/domestic labor.¹ Through a process of essentialization or naturalization, certain forms of work become invisible and thus subjected to capitalist exploitation and the accumulation of capital. The quintessential form of invisible labor is housework/ domestic labor – so much so that it is culturally still referred to as “women’s work.” Some North American scholars tend to obscure this history of the term and its links to Marxist methodology by positing that Arlene Kaplan Daniels coined the term “invisible work” to talk about women’s unpaid labor.² Daniels may have coined the term but she most certainly did not develop the theory of the exploitation of labor that appears invisible.

Invisibilized labor, as theorized by Marxist feminists, developed as a response to Marx’s oversight regarding the role of social reproduction in capitalist accumulation, while also drawing from Marx’s own critique of labor exploitation. In his critique of the political economy, Marx exposed how the exploitation of labor is made

1 Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Falling Wall Press: 1973; Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, Falling Wall Press: 1975; Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Zed Books: 1986.

2 See for example, Marion G. Crain et al. eds., *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World*, University of California Press: 2016.

invisible in the process of commodity production and capital accumulation. Marxist feminists then went on to demonstrate the double invisibility of housework, or reproductive labor, that is unpaid and exploited, and as such part and parcel of the capitalist exploitation equation.

In contrast to Marx's unwillingness to account for various forms of work other than wage labor as relevant to the accumulation of capital, and in spite of his contribution to the codification of the idea of a worker as a white male waged industrial worker, Marxist feminists demonstrated and theorized the mode in which the patriarchal omission of housework took place, and the construction of women's role as unpaid houseworker. Feminists showed that in the process of establishing the primacy of wage labor a redefinition of work took place through which certain types of work became disregarded as work through their naturalization and romanticization as identities - enabling exploitation as an unquestionable social role.³ Maria Mies therefore devised the term "housewifization" or "housewifed labor" to describe flexible, atypical, devalued and unprotected forms of labor.⁴

Understanding art as a form of invisibilized labor gives insight into the very mechanisms that drive the economic exploitation of artists' labor to this day. Two theoretical contributions in feminist epistemology are particularly resonant when it comes to theorizing the invisibilized labor of the artist. First, the structural component of invisible work rests on the separation

3 Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage*, PM Press: 2021. 89.

4 Maria Mies, "Social Origins of the Sexual Division of Labour," *SS Occasional Papers*, No.85, Institute of Social Studies: 1981; Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Zed Books: 2014.

of public and domestic/private sphere (or, if you will, the spheres of production and reproduction) under capitalism, whereby the latter is excluded from the economy but is nevertheless a site of both value creation as well as social and economic exploitation. Second, the essentialization of particular types of work or skills leads to their economic devaluation. In other words, the first contribution helps us understand that treating art as nonlabor under capitalism leads to its invisibility and consequently exploitation. The second insight helps us understand the operating logic behind the invisibility. Finally, looking at art work as a form of invisibilized labor helps us to conceive of art work and its poorly remunerated condition as a political question and a site of struggle for the labor rights of art workers. In this struggle we can learn from and use the feminist analysis as the necessary tactical tool for demystification. Or to paraphrase a Marxist feminist slogan: "They call it creativity, we call it exploitation!"

**Stevphen
Shukaitis**

**Learning
Not to
Labor**



In autonomist history and theory, the refusal of work is frequently invoked but seldom expanded upon in a significant manner. From the celebration of laziness to mass industrial strikes, work refusal takes many forms. This essay develops an expanded autonomist conception of work refusal, understanding work refusal as a compositional practice and arguing for analyzing it through the forms of collectivity and social relations that it creates. Based on this analysis, a form of “zerowork training,” or a pedagogy of learning not to labor, is proposed as a process through which antagonism and refusal can be further socialized. Learning not to labor sits at the junction of the refusal of work and the re-fusing of the social energies of such refusal back into supporting the continued affective existence and capacities of other forms of life and ways of being together, as practice and as a form of embodied critique.

The “right to work”
is for the birds
one of the turds
I can do without
GIVE IT TO THE WORKING CLASS
wherever it’s foolish enough to be.

Alexander Trocchi, *Man at Leisure*, (1972)

What is, or what can be, the meaning of refusing work today? The refusal of work is a concept and practice—an approach to and understanding of the political, not an incantation. It is one of the most popular and widely circulated concepts associated with post-*autonomia*, and also one of the most misunderstood. In the English-speaking context it is

far too easily understood as primarily individualistic, along the lines of a clichéd hippy dropout culture. But historically, work refusal has taken many forms, from mass exodus from the factory and wildcat strikes to attempted individual escape plans. The point is not to exclude any one form from consideration but to see the relationships between them: how different modes of refusal work together to animate new forms of social composition. In that sense refusal oftentimes serves more as a provocation or a utopian demand, in Kathi Weeks's sense, than something elaborated in an expanded way.¹

If we are to approach the question of the meaning of post-*autonomia* today, it is from this understanding: to engage with concepts not so as to precisely understand them but rather to productively misunderstand them—to bastardize and rework them in present conditions, which have shifted greatly since the period of the 1960s and 1970s. And these shifts are not just temporal but also political, economic, cultural, and so forth. If the current state of political discussion is marked by the hegemony of Italian theory, as Matteo Pasquinelli has suggested², then a mutating and reworking of the key concepts of post-*autonomia* is even more important so that they do not become ossified by their preservation. One could go so far as to propose that today it is necessary to develop a kind of “zerowork training,” to learn how to not labor,

1 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke University Press: 2011.

2 Matteo Pasquinelli, “The so-called Italian Theory and the revolt of living knowledge,” *UniNomade*, 4 April, 2011.

rather than to fall back on previous assumptions about refusing work.

Indeed, what form could such zerowork training take? That is a question for consideration here, as well as to ask its method—to rework the notion of the refusal of work in an expanded framework that is adequate to the changing conditions of the present. Paul Willis in his classic book *Learning to Labor*³ analyzes how British lads’ attempted refusals of school discipline and educational advancement end up fitting them for another form of control: namely, the reproduction of the class relationship as they are then sent off to work in the factory. In other words, the refusal of a certain type of social structure is part of interpellating them into the industrial class structure. Today it seems that many of those factories are gone, at least from much of the UK and Europe, and with them much of the social antagonism of industrial labor. Where then to find the kinds of practices fitted to learning not to labor? How can we develop this kind of zerowork training?

A Plurality of Refusals

I don’t bother work. Work don’t bother me.
I’m just as happy as a bumblebee.

Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, “Work Don’t Bother Me” (1926)

An important realization to start from is that the refusal of work is not a single thing but rather a concept that brings together a plurality of different

3 Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, Columbia University Press: 1982.

kinds of refusals. These range from the nonconformist preacher William Benbow's call for a "grand national holiday"⁴ (a month-long general strike) during the 1830s to anarchist provocateur Bob Black's call for the "abolition of work"⁵ in the 1980s. The refusal of work as a concept brings Guy Debord – who embraced as a political slogan Rimbaud's call to "Never Work!" – together with collective refusals to work, wildcat strikes, and acts of sabotage prominent in factories in Europe and the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. Such conditions led management consultants and union bureaucrats to wonder out loud, *Where Have All the Robots Gone?* – which is also the title of a book from that time analyzing the origins of wildcat strikes and sabotage and linking them less to specific demands around wage increases than to the rise of the "anti-authoritarian worker."⁶ We can see the refusal of work as a key and important focus in the writing and discussions to emerge from Italy in the 1970s, but more broadly than that, it can also be connected to how Jim Koehline and Ron Sakolsky have explored (with others) the idea of "going to Croatan,"⁷ or forms of escape from modern civilization. And we can also look at the hobo dream of the "Big Rock Candy Mountain,"⁸ where they hanged the jerk that invented work. In these examples are many different forms of practice with different ideas and different interactions

4 William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday, and the Congress of Productive classes*, Pelagian: n.d. (1832).

5 Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*, Loompanics: 1986.

6 Harold L. Sheppard, and Neal Q. Herrick, *Where Have all the Robots Gone? Worker Dissatisfaction in the 70s*, Free Press: 1972.

7 Jim Koehline, and Ron Sakolsky, eds., *Gone to Croatan: The Origins of North American Dropout Culture*, Autonomedia: 1994.

8 See, Omasius Gorgut, *Poor Man's heaven: The Land of Cokaygne and Other Utopian Visions*, Past Tense: 2011.

involved. Much as Walt Whitman put it, work refusal is a multitude unto itself, filled with possibilities, potentials, and contradictions. It is not one thing or one approach. In that sense it might be impossible to trace an exact genealogy at all, or an account of the lineage and influences between different times and spaces.⁹ It is rather a shared sensibility transmitted through an undercommons of submerged social practices and spaces. It is part of what Marcus Greil described, in his elaboration of the connection between the insurgent aesthetics of punk and the medieval heresy, as “the secret drift of history”¹⁰ – a drift that remains secret to those who make it. In these infrapolitical histories, the development of a politics often unseen and not encoded as political, there exists a constant process of translation between infrapolitical insurgency and the development of collective imagination.

In that sense, when we discuss the refusal of work, it is only part of the story that is usually considered: namely, the aspects that are most socially visible. Something always remains hidden away, tucked below the gaze of power. Although that is more often than not a benefit rather than a downfall to many forms of social resistance, for the purposes of this essay we are considering the moments when these subterranean social currents burst through the surface and openly declare themselves. These are the moments when Marx’s old mole emerges from the burrows

9 Simon During suggests that literary production and culture, once divorced from the spiritual realm, provides tactics for escape from the domination of work. This is backed up by Henri Lefebvre’s declaration that he became interested in thinking about work refusal not because of a political tradition but rather after reading a science fiction novel, *City*, by Clifford Simak.

10 Marcus Greil, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press: 1989.

into the sunshine of social antagonism, and most important are the effects this has upon emerging social compositions. The Midnight Notes Collective has defined working-class struggles precisely as those that “attempt to reduce the unpaid labor capital appropriates throughout the social circuit.”¹¹ The refusal of work plays a key role in fermenting class struggle as it provides a framework for moving from discontent to action, underpinned by a concrete utopian desire to reduce and if possible eliminate the influence of work over social life.

This is the center of an autonomist refusal of work: a perspective that focuses specifically on the compositional elements of that refusal. The twin concepts of political and technical composition, which are of great importance for understanding what makes *operaismo* different from other forms of Marxism,¹² are likewise important in understanding work refusal as a compositional practice rather than as an individualistically oriented gesture. Jason Read, in his analysis of the affective composition of labor, has argued that the autonomist hypothesis – or refocusing on working-class revolts rather than on capital as the motor of transformation – is only possible through an understanding of class composition.¹³ Otherwise, such a reversal of perspective – calls for the radical possibility of the present divorced from an understanding of material and political conditions – risks falling into a form of idealist invocation, a millenarian call or prophetic gesture. The same could be argued

11 Midnight Notes Collective, *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992*, Autonomedia: 1992. xii-xiii.

12 See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press: 2003.

13 Jason Read, “The Affective Composition of Labor,” *Unemployed Negativity*, May, 17, 2011.

for the refusal of work, that it is only possible when approached through a compositional framework: to work from material conditions and practices and the kinds of political and social formations they enable and support.

A compositional analysis of refusal thus is not concerned with just the actions and practices of refusal itself but how these actions and practices are socially embedded and what effects they produce. Such an analysis asks questions like: How is the refusal of work deployed as a practice? How is it understood? What social energies do varying forms of refusing work enact? And this analysis considers, perhaps most importantly, the affective dimensions of those refusals, focusing specifically on the forms of care, social reproduction, and organization that exist to sustain and support the continued self-reproduction of refusal. This consideration of the affective and relational dynamics of refusal moves beyond notions of individualized “dropping out” precisely because any attempt to escape from capitalist logic is only possible through the animation of affective relations capable of reproducing the sociality produced by that refusal. This moment – the negativity of refusal, the drive to escape – carries within it another moment that enacts a different mode of social becoming. This is the movement of refusal that leads to the re-fusing of common life and energy back through the social.

Refusals and Typologies

But what if feminist political analyses and projects were not limited to claims about who we are as women or as men, or even the identities produced by what we do, but rather put the accent on collectively imagined visions of what we want to be or to do?

Kathi Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics" (2007)

The autonomist feminist tradition – oftentimes ignored in the histories of *Autonomia* and post-*autonomia* (and even more so in recent debates that draw from them) – offers much to the reconsidering of work refusal. Although these contributions might seem negative at first glance or to be based on concerns over the limitations of certain forms of social and political practice, I would suggest that only through understanding such limitations and blockages is it possible to work around them. In her article "Where is Jocasta?," Alisa Del Re argues that forms of refusing work that do not take into account the dynamics of social reproduction have a tendency to reinforce and reinscribe labor demands upon women who are most involved in the tasks of social reproduction.¹⁴ We can imagine this dynamic in terms of women being left to keep the house together and provide support during a strike. In other words, this ends up creating a negative affective recomposition of labor in the way that the tasks of social reproduction fall upon some people

14 Alisa Del Re, "Women and Welfare: Where is Jocasta?" In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. M. Hardt and P. Virno, University of Minnesota Press: 1996. 99–113.

and not others.¹⁵ A different approach is necessary to understand class itself: one that is much more compositional in the sense of being formed through ongoing antagonism and conflict rather than as a fixed identity or status. This more fluid and flexible version of understanding class has been developed within the autonomist tradition more generally, although for some reason it has not seemed to filter through into more recent debates on immaterial labor.

One of the best perspectives for this rethinking can be found in the work of the Madrid-based collective *Precarias a la Deriva* (PAD), originally formed in 2002 in response to a call for a general strike in which many found it quite difficult to participate because of their positions in precarious and gendered forms of labor. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to go on strike without causing harm to themselves or others. PAD's approach thus starts from a rejection of understanding changes in work by analyzing its technical composition – for instance, by distinguishing brain workers from chain workers. Rather, their typology starts from forms of political composition corresponding to the forms of labor – in particular, with different kinds of refusal associated with the varying forms of work. This is a key insight: namely, that refusal is not one thing but that the form of refusal varies according to one's position in a broader labor process and by social positioning. *Precarias a la Deriva* breaks work into three main categories:

15 This dynamic can be seen at work in the film *Made in Dagenham*, in which male workers deride and dismiss the validity and importance of striking female Ford workers based on the assumption that ultimately their incomes are not necessary for social reproduction but are merely additional to the necessary wages of the male workers.

Jobs with repetitive content: telemarketing, cleaning, textile workshops; little to no subjective engagement with the task; conflict takes the form of generalized absenteeism, dropping out, sabotage

Jobs with varied content, vocational/professional work: nursing to informatics, social work to research; subjective implication with the task performed is high; conflict is expressed as critique of the organization of labor, its logic of articulation, and the ends toward which it is structured

Jobs with content that is directly made invisible and/or stigmatized: the most paradigmatic examples are cleaning work, home care, and sex work; conflict manifests itself as a demand for dignity and the recognition of social value¹⁶

This is a useful framework for approaching work refusal, not as one thing but as a practice closely connected to broader changes in the labor process. Thus, rather than lamenting that the heroic years of mass wildcat strikes by industrial workers have seemingly ended (although there is some debate on that depending on where you're looking), the task is to look at the multiple forms that refusal takes in the current composition of the workforce and then, based upon that understanding, to find ways to work between these different patterns of subjectivation, encouraging from that the emergence of new forms of political composition.

16 Precarias a la Deriva, "Adrift through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work, *EIPCP*: 2004.

EuroMayDay and the organizing around precarity can thus be understood as one attempt to rethink political organizing in such a fashion. And while it was often critiqued for lumping together forms of work that seemed to have little to do with each other from a technical perspective, this was precisely the point. One could make a similar argument for the functioning of the more recent occupy movements: it is not that they share an assumption about the subjective position of all involved and seek to work from that position but rather that they seek to find common ground for politics despite the variety of positions and experiences of the participants.

Refusal and Cultural Labor

Art products are the objects of intense financial speculation; cultural productions are top hit-makers in the jackpot end of the New Economy; “cultural districts” are posited as the key to urban prosperity; and creative industries policy is embraced as the anchor of regional development by governments around the world on the lookout for a catch-up industrial plan.

Andrew Ross, “The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?” (2007)

If we take seriously Precarias a la Deriva’s notion that different forms of refusal relate to varying positions in the labor process more generally, this would be a good reason to digress into a discussion of cultural labor. By cultural labor I refer mainly to the kinds of jobs that have been discussed as relating to the creative class, the media and cultural work, artistically

oriented professions, and related ideas. These are forms of work that have been generally understood in relation to debates around immaterial labor. Much interesting work has been written about them from multiple perspectives. But for the moment I'm most interested in thinking about how the perspective that PAD proposes could change the way we think about these kinds of jobs, both sociologically and politically. From a compositional perspective, the importance of the forms of cultural labor is in the way they shift the politics of work from a direct refusal of work to embracing it.

In PAD's categories this is a shift from the first type of work to the second, a move from work that is repetitive and leads to pure refusal to vocational work that is more critiqued than refused. Richard Neville makes a number of insightful observations about this in his book *Play Power*, which explores the dynamics of 1960s counterculture. In countercultural projects "work is done only for fun, obsession, hobby or art form,"¹⁷ which transforms every "Monday morning into a Friday night."¹⁸ Neville describes such ventures as mostly undercapitalized, leading to a precariousness that makes it necessary for those involved to "work hard at not working."¹⁹ And while the subjective composition of such projects is motivated by searching for enjoyment and freedom, he notes that "the laxity of the (non) working conditions is beyond a shop-steward's dream (or nightmare?). Gone are contracts, time clocks, fixed holidays, strikes, division of labor and doing things in triplicate."²⁰ Or one can look at the role

17 Richard Neville, *Play Power*, Paladin: 1971.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 213.

that a greater emphasis on cultural labor played within the squatting milieu of Amsterdam in the mid-1980s. According to the history of that time written by Lynn Owens, it involved a shift from a politics of pure refusal to one that tried to negotiate spaces for autonomy in production and community by arguing that there was something valuable in having these sorts of spaces, both from an economic and cultural angle.²¹

In an overall shift and transformation of class composition, the most important aspect is how the shift enacts a broader change in the relationship to work, in particular the higher degree of subjective investment in work itself. In some ways this is a new version of Joseph Beuys's famous statement that everyone is an artist, except that it has now been realized as everyone is a worker, all the time, everywhere. And the higher degree of subjective involvement with and relationship to the work itself has tended to lead away from a refusal that takes the form of pure refusal – or even that of union organizing – and more toward forms of individual critique and the discussion of conditions. At some level this has been seen as the absence of labor politics from many forms of cultural labor. Cultural politics has become a form of political entrepreneurship more than anything else. But this seems a bit unfair in the sense that one can also approach these changes as shifts in the form of refusal rather than its absence altogether. And from an autonomist perspective, that seems much more encouraging.

Recent debates on shifts in cultural labor and politics and on work within the arts economy have tended

21 Lynn Owens, *Cracking Under Pressure: Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters' Movement*. Amsterdam University Press: 2009.

to focus specifically on the changing nature of work within the world of arts and cultural production.²² There is much to be gained in this kind of exploration. But I would suggest, from a compositional framework, that most interesting is how the changes in relationship to work that have developed within arts and cultural work have then expanded beyond that particular sphere into much broader patterns. This is the argument made by Pascal Gielen: that the arts world becomes a laboratory where the post-Fordist work ethic is developed and then generalized beyond it.²³ One could make similar arguments concerning the role of what Greg Sholette calls the dark matter of the arts world, or the necessary but undervalued mass of labor that sustains the functioning of the arts economy without being celebrated, or the increased importance of internships first in the cultural sector and then more generally.²⁴ Here we have the same dynamic: a different relationship to work is developed (for interns often very little or no pay) based upon a high level of subjective involvement, a process of subjectivation through the work. And this relationship and its intensified forms of exploitation are then generalized beyond the arts and culture world – for instance, by making the recipients of social benefits engage in free labor in order to maintain their benefits. In these cases we see a change in the form of labor, in the refusal involved, and in the overall social composition created.

22 Geert Lovink, and Ned Rossiter, eds., *My Creativity Reader: A Critique of Creative Industries*, Institute of Network Cultures, 2007.

23 Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and post-Fordism*, Valiz: 2009.

24 Greg Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto: 2010.

Renewing the Art Strike

Resistance has never been more internal, and more inadequate, to the material conditions that support its realization (as value) – this is notable in the currency of critique in contemporary art, for instance, even and especially when it addresses itself to the evils of exploitation or the aporias of emancipation. Selling labor-power to live has never been more conflated with life itself – this indeed conjures away any disparity between capital and labor, when they become indiscernible as variables in the compulsions of life as it is.

Marina Vishmidt, “Value at Risk: From Politics of Reproduction to Human Capital” (2010)

Finally, I would like to turn to a brief reconsideration of the art strike as a possible way to think through the refusal of work where conditions include a high level of subjective involvement in work itself. While the idea and practices associated with art strikes are generally little known, I would suggest they provide an interesting way for rethinking questions around labor politics today.

Historically, the art strike has come about in four main iterations, with variations among them. The Art Workers Coalition issued the first call for an art strike in the 1960s in New York City.²⁵ It brought to light the connections between the art economy and the war economy, through the role of people such as the Rockefellers in supporting both. It commented on

25 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, University of California Press: 2009.

the Vietnam War as well as on issues of racism and exclusion in the art world. Its main focus was thus the politics of the institution, and in many ways it could be understood as a form of institutional critique.²⁶ This is in some ways quite similar to Gustav Metzger's call for 1977–1980 to be “years without art.” For these three years, Metzger produced no work, apparently going on strike by himself, likewise with the idea that such a strike could create the potential to change the institutional structures of the art world. The call for an art strike was taken up again by Stewart Home and the Neoists from 1990–1993, with the specific goal of disrupting the role of the artist itself. Thus it was less focused on the institution and more on the position of artists generally. And finally, during the past few years, calls for an art strike have been coming from Lithuania, organized by Redas Diržys and the Temporary Art Strike Committee. The focus of this iteration is the role of Vilnius as a creative city, as Vilnius was recently named one of the European capitals of culture for a year. The goal of this strike is thus to disrupt the functioning of the arts in a cultural economy.

In each of these iterations there has been an expansion of the scope of the action or strike call, from the role of the gallery and arts institution to the role and position of the artist to the place of creativity in the economy more generally. In this way the art strike directly takes up the theme that seems to underpin practices of work refusal more generally, as it works between the utopian promise of possibility found in human labor, the wealth that can be produced and is

26 Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, MIT Press: 2009; and Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, MayFly: 2009.

already in motion, and the compromised and exploitative forms that work takes. The art strike doesn't seek to do away with this tension but works with it. Stewart Home once argued that the importance of the art strike is not in its feasibility but in the ways that it expands the terrain of struggle.²⁷ That would be even more the case today. This argument was echoed recently by Paolo Virno in an interview discussing the relationship between art production and social movements. Virno suggests these connections are less significant within the content of artistic production than through creating new forms of interaction and new public spheres, especially those that are separate from the state.²⁸ Given the ever greater enmeshing of creative activity in people's everyday lives (and not just in terms of paid employment), it would seem difficult if not impossible to throw down the tools of creative labor without also throwing down one's own life in the process.

This is a theme to which Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović has returned throughout his decades of work. First, Stilinović proposed to reclaim one's being and energy through laziness rather than through labor. This can be seen most clearly in his 1977 piece "Artist at Work," which comprises a series of eight images of Stilinović in bed in his pajamas, apparently in a condition of doing nothing at all. In a Yugoslav context where productive labor was constantly celebrated as a virtue, the key foundation of building and maintaining a socialist society, this can clearly be seen as a

27 Stewart Home, *The Neoist Manifestos / The Art Strike Papers*, AK Press: 1991.

28 Paolo Virno, "The Dismasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno by S. Lavaert and P. Gielen," in P. de Bruyxe and P. Gielen eds., *Arts in Society: Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, NAi: 2009. 17-44.

provocation and challenge. The theme carries through Stilinović's work as he celebrates laziness as being necessary and integral to artistic activity. Conversely, Stilinović derides artists who are not sufficiently attentive to developing their own capacity for laziness, referring to them as mere "producers" rather than artists. But a subtler point underpins Stilinović's celebration of nonwork: precisely, that laziness is a form of artistic labor rather than an escape from labor.

This comes out most clearly in his 1993 work "Chinese Business," in which a series of collages explores the question of whether artists can ever truly go on holiday. The work provocatively asserts that it is impossible for the artist to ever truly stop working, that the apparent refusal of productive labor that Stilinović explores through his work at the same time represents the development of new forms of artistic labor and production. The outside of labor sought through artistic laziness has become another form of production rather than an escape from it.

Another way to approach this is from the observation that real subsumption as a condition, if it should actually come to be true, is such that pointing out that condition would no longer produce any political effect. In other words, if all of life has become part of an overwhelming labor process – the social factory – then the condition of naturalizing the expanded exploitative work relationship is taken as a given rather than experienced as something which is disturbing or could nurture an antagonistic relationship to that condition. This is along the lines of what Franco "Bifo" Berardi calls the necessary alienation that precedes a compositional moment

and new forms of struggle.²⁹ But it seems clear, given the changing composition of labor and the shifting ground of politics, that new forms of necessary alienation leading to new antagonistic movements would not likely be similar to those that Bifo describes as having occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. We might look instead to what he describes as the pathological and overwhelming nature of immaterial labor³⁰ – the condition of those who find themselves “dreaming in code”³¹ – rather than to industrial alienation.

In short, looking to the dark side of the multitude may help with understanding the potential for new forms of subjectivation: to look not just at the conscious activities of labor and politics but also at the ways that sociality is put to work more generally, such as through the use of geolocative data and mobility.³² And most importantly, this means to look for new routes of political recomposition, not just in the obvious moments of labor and politics but also through understanding blockages to emerging social composition. Working from the blockages of composition is not to mourn them or to fall into a melancholic trap but is rather to realize that new moments of social recomposition emerge from the decomposition of that which has become before. It is to embrace

29 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, Semiotextle: 2009.

30 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, Minor Compositions: 2009.

31 Rob Lucas, “A Sleep Worker’s Enquiry,” in *Endnotes 2*: April, 2010. 154–166,

32 Trebor Scholz, and Laura Y. Liu, *From Mobile Playgrounds to Sweatshop City*, Architectural League of New York: 2010.

what Frederic Jameson calls the cynicism of the intellect with the utopianism of the will.³³

The Shape of Refusal to Come

For at the sight of work – that is to say, severe toil from morning till night – we have the feeling that it is the best police, that it holds every one in check and effectively hinders the development of reason, of greed, and of desire for independence. For work uses up an extraordinary proportion of nervous force, withdrawing it from reflection, meditation, dreams, cares, love, and hatred. And now, horror of horrors! it is the “workman” himself who has become dangerous; the whole world is swarming with “dangerous individuals.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881)

To conclude, let us return to the beginning. It does seem today that work is, as Nietzsche argued, the best policeman. It holds a function of governing social life even when its role in adding productive value seems to slip away and we find ourselves in the position of what Peter Fleming and Carl Cederstrom refer to as “dead men working.”³⁴ It might seem that in times of biopolitical production, where the policing function of work is thus the policing function across all of

33 Fredric Jameson, “A New Reading of Capital,” *Mediations* Vol.25 No.1, 2010, 5-14.

34 Peter Fleming, and Carl Cederstrom, *Dead Man Working*, Zero Books: 2012.

life, the refusal of work is the refusal of life itself. Not surprisingly, this leads to some rather dismal-sounding conclusions about the possibility of autonomy and social recomposition. While I can appreciate a certain degree of questioning of assumptions surrounding the potentials of immaterial labor and of networking (as has been circulated in debates emerging from post-Autonomia over the past decade, I'd nevertheless argue that there's no reason to follow such arguments to rather dire conclusions. Stefano Harney suggests that an alternative can be found most readily within the black radical tradition, which takes up this problem of refusing work when one's life is the work. For Harney, this "is the dimension of original exodus; this is the practice of fugitivity found within the black radical tradition, the escape that does not need to go anywhere but remains escape."³⁵

The project to be undertaken, which I've tried to hint at here, is to instead take a more compositional approach to understanding and working with different forms of refusal. That is, to ask certain questions: What form of social surplus is produced by a particular refusal? What form of collectivity? And following from that, what circuits of value production and valorization are the refusal enmeshed in? What is the notion of value and of social collectivity embodied in the refusal, and how does it respond to circuits of capture and accumulation?

Bernard Marszalek, in the new introduction to Paul Lafargue's classic text *The Right to be Lazy*, hints at another important direction: namely, that the opposite of work, and what is produced by its refusal, is neither

35 Stefano Harney, "Abolition and the General Intellect," *Generation Online*, 2008.

leisure nor idleness. Rather, for Marszalek the opposite of work is “autonomous and collective activity – ludic activity – that develops our unique humanity and grounds our perspective of reversing perspective.”³⁶ A compositional approach to work refusal is thus not a question of doing nothing but of developing the skills, capacities, organization, and collective becoming that make possible and sustain these ludic activities and social wealth. In short, this is the very form of zerowork training that we need today: a pedagogy of learning not to labor, not as a form of individual refusal but as a socialization of refusal. This is the argument that Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Cutler make concerning the history of labor struggles for shorter hours: such struggles enable increasing freedom from work and act as a strategic locus for organizing.³⁷ This locus is capable of embracing the entire working class and creating collective resources to respond to capitalist offensives. Learning not to labor sits at the junction of the refusal of work and the re-fusing of the social energies of such refusal back into supporting the continued affective existence and capacities of other forms of life and ways of being together, as practice and as a form of embodied critique.

36 Bernard Marszalek, “Introduction,” in *The Right to be Lazy*, by P. Lafargue, AK Press: 2011. 19.

37 Stanley Aronowitz, and Jonathan Cutler, *Post-work: the Wages of Cybernation*, Routledge: 1997. 21.

Lexicon

Major

Waldemar

Fydrych

Passive

Resistance

and the Stay

Away Strike

A scene from the Polish Orange Alternative movement in the early 80s, advancing two strategies of refusal.

A tram arrived. They got on. Dziejewicz went to a validating machine. Major caught on when Dziejewicz took out a tube of toothpaste and began squeezing it into the machine. The passengers pretended they couldn't see. Dziejewicz went to the back of the carriage where he clogged up the remaining validating machines. Finally an elderly man asked, 'What are you doing?'

Major looked the old gent up and down. He actually didn't think blocking up validating machines was as effective as, for example, a stay-away strike, but he didn't like anyone criticising his friends.

'Can't you see?' he asked, 'my friend is gluing up the validating machines. It's a combination of active and passive resistance.'

'I don't understand,' said the elderly man. 'Didn't you know there's a state of martial law?'

'Yes, I did.'

'We have two kinds of resistance, as you know from anti-government handbills.'

'Yes,' answered the older man in astonishment.

'Active resistance is, for example, throwing bottles full of petrol at the police. You've probably heard of incidents like that.'

The tram reached the stop. Several people got off. Others got on. They tried to put their tickets in the validating machine, but couldn't. The tickets came out covered in toothpaste. The remaining people, seeing that the validating machines were blocked, gave up and sat down.

'Do you see?' asked Major after a moment's silence, 'the state treasury has been stripped of a few zlotys. Those people are engaged in passive resistance. They aren't paying. All that's needed is to create a pretext for not paying.' The elderly man was astonished. 'It won't achieve anything.'

'Why not?' reacted Major. He went closer. He wanted to tell him something discreetly. He leant over a little. The tram made a sharp turn, and there was a squeal. Major waited for the tram to join a section of straight track and took up the conversation again. 'We're going to fight until the government capitulates. With just a stay-away strike; no occupations. Absence. Outright victory. You won't go to work and the government will surrender. What's more,' he said, excitedly, 'you'll be able to rest during the strike.'

* excerpt from Major Waldemar Fydrych, *Lives of the Orange Men: A Biographical History of the Orange Alternative Movement*, Minor Compositions: 2014.



Mladen Stilinović, *Artist at Work*, 1977.



**Marina
Vishmidt**

**Unionism,
Diversity
of Tactics,
Ceaseless
Struggle**

**Dispatches from
Cultural Workers**



Bringing together different experiences and strategies of organizing seems really necessary, in general, but especially right now. Although there are several conceptual arguments that could be made for this heterogeneity and/or diversity of tactics, these could not be advanced in isolation from the actualities of what we're up against: an ever more intransigent, racist and oppressive far-right political environment in many places, normalized austerity, and authoritarian managerialism in operation, if not in policy, in all types of workplaces.

In this introductory piece, what I would like to focus on is an analysis of a limited Anglophone (US-UK) context, which the London-rooted Art Workers Forum will expand upon, and then to turn toward the Polish Workers Initiative union (Inicjatywa Pracownicza or IP) and a group of art workers in Lithuania for comparative analysis. Salient here is what could be observed as a shift in labor politics as they unfold in the institution of art (as a discursive whole) and in art institutions on the ground. This could be outlined as a shift from the W.A.G.E.-style (that's the acronym for Working Artists and the Greater Economy – the New York based group) organizing of artists in relation to institutions as individuals, to art workers and cultural workers organizing in traditional as well as independent trade union formations as collective bodies. For example, the museum workers branch of the United Auto Workers union in the US or the role of grassroots unions such as United Voices of the World and Independent Workers of Great Britain and the coordination with trade unions engaged in by independent platforms, such as the Art Workers Forum, in the UK. This new unionization wave is thus indicative of this shift in the organizing focus from artists organizing for better

working conditions to workers organizing in the arts with their artist status as secondary. In this light, it could be suggested that the main question is no longer how to get artists and other freelance cultural workers organized on the basis of being individualized, but rather how to get *art institutions* organized, like any other public or private workplace. This means it's no longer a problem of *exceptionality* that must be negated in common, one by one (W.A.G.E.) or as a specific class of professionals (CARFAC, other national artist union schemes like Artists' Union England), but rather as a problem endured throughout the working class: *precarity*. Perhaps the notion of artists organizing as workers (or even as 'WAGEnts') will always be more tenuous than of artworkers organizing along the lines of the wage labor relation. But equally it may be more informative not to compare incongruous fruits: the organization of waged workers is simply a different type of campaign from the one of ensuring freelance cultural workers are paid by the institutions which commission their work, even if both are about the value of labor in a capitalist marketplace, however more or less mystified that labor might be. In their differences as well as the alignment of their political objectives, these should augment and complement one another.

However, it may also be useful to use the idea of this shift in organizing focus as a way of understanding the relationship between organizational form and political content in spaces of cultural worker organizing. According to the Art Workers Forum, "the ideology of art's autonomy reinforces capital's heteronomy over workers in the arts," and this can be reflected on in the terms I have developed - in the lexicon entry that follows - on the speculative subjectivity of the

cultural worker who asserts their independence as a nonworker while locked in a cycle of dependency with the surplus wealth of philanthropic individuals, organizations, and enterprises. Yet it can also be a trap to overdetermine that subjectivity as the condition or the limit of organizational forms in that sector – rather than that condition being materially apprehended as comprised of the diversity of relationships to capital – making the most dominant of those relations the departure point for organizing strategies. Aside from the union form, there are also coops which have been emerging over the past several years in the landscape, to address the question of resources for artistic production, as well as social reproduction, from an angle other than the relationship to the employer or commissioner. Here we could mention the COOP fund in New York City or Interim kultur in Stockholm. The coop may not be strictly articulating a conventional form of labor politics in the cultural field per se. Rather, it presents something akin to administrative self-management, and this speaks to a certain pooling or resocialisation of roles previously carried out by exhibiting, publishing, etc. institutions, in response to the elimination of such administrative occupations by institutions pressured to restructure, cut costs, and streamline operations under neoliberal cultural policy.

With all this in mind, we haven't actually gotten much closer to the specific type of exceptionality constituted by artistic labor, whether it is to do with its class status or institutional location, its content or its organizational forms. For clarity, I've been up till now speaking of artistic labor as the work done by artists as artists, in distinction from the work done by people working in arts and cultural institutions who, of

course, often have an art practice as well. The reason to distinguish these is that it is the social and ideological position of the artist in Western (or capitalist more broadly) society that defines the problematic of labor organization in the field, with the obvious structural issues of having no employer, no collective workplace, no collective bargaining mechanism for artists as artists. This brings us to the impasse that institutionally and economically enforced conditions of artistic autonomy pose the chief barriers to labor organizing among artists and art workers qua independent artists. But this also generates a particular speculative subjectivity that splits the artist potentially into a politically concerned or engaged citizen, so to speak, who wants to represent and amplify political issues in their work, and a structural identification with capital, specifically with finance capital, in their material interests. This is a quandry which is often encountered in the personae found in the noxious ruling class composition of art institutional boards: they are the incarnation of capital in the privatized or nonprofit art world that we see in many places, and their denunciation is often met by the objection that private capital is the infrastructure of artistic support (the well-worn "all money is dirty" argument for political quiescence). What I've noticed in recent years, as I've already mentioned, stemming not just from my theoretical work, but from my involvement some years ago with the W.A.G.E. project as an advisor and sometime board member when they became a nonprofit, is that taking this impasse or these conditions as the basis for labor organizing in the arts can have some ambiguous results. We see that with W.A.G.E. there has been the pursuit of a narrow gauge artist fees-focused politics consisting of advocacy with institutions and funders to include artists fees in operating

budgets, and, through a certification program, work towards creating a reputation economy which would normalize paying artists and art by extension; other art workers, especially ones that do not produce marketable objects to sell; as well as translating this into a wider and possibly transversal debate around equity and social accountability for arts institutions. Yet it might also appear that this is an approach that preemptively rules out the existence of any but an individualized, contract-based road to labor politics for artists and art workers, with the hope of generating a critical mass of both certified institutions and eventually certified individuals that could introduce a kind of unionization by the backdoor, as it were.

While an enormously valuable project on its own terms, there may also be a sense in which we can see it as having been – at least in part – eclipsed by two other recent tendencies which don't focus on the peculiarity of artistic labor to develop their organizing program, but rather on its commonality with other forms of labor. This entails focusing on the lower hanging fruit of artists organizing in more traditional units, such as existing collective bargaining organizations, and organizing not as artists, but as employees of art institutions (often very casualized, of course). They are likewise not setting up new organs for the purpose, but seeking out existing ones. For example, big umbrella trade unions for support, such as the already mentioned UAW in New York, or taking advantage of the energy and results gained by grassroots and independent trade unions in the UK, such as UVW, IWGB, to initiate divisions for graphic designers or games programmers. Again, this is perhaps sidestepping the question of organizing artists as artists, but like W.A.G.E., this is a mode of organizing

that swerves away from defining what constitutes artistic labor in order to center the relation to the employer regardless of type of production. The other tendency we see in organizations in the UK around climate justice and divestments, such as BP or not BP, Platform, Art Not Oil or Liberate Tate; or around social justice, such as Black Lives Matter, and in New York City, for example, Abolish MoMA, Decolonize This Place, Fuck tha Police or Take Back the Bronx. These are some examples of how larger movements have used or exploited the arts institution as a platform to spotlight ecosystems of social violence, with the specific role of arts institutions in that. Especially their predatory capitalist boards, as highlighted by the 2019 campaign around the Whitney Biennial and which is now a regular tactic for a number of campaigns bringing to light the sources of wealth for board members, which are bound to be deeply unsavory.

What do these two tendencies represent and what can they tell us about the prospects for arts and cultural worker organizing? The first one seems to be an admission that serious labor organizing within capitalist relations of production and power cannot start from the anomaly, but from commonality. More precisely, a focus on the anomaly qua anomaly leads to a reformist trajectory, which is to say, petitioning to be included in the supposedly normal conditions of exploitation represented by a contract as a goal, rather than as a baseline. And the politics associated with that trajectory will have to be representational, since they'll be driven by an advisory body and empowered individuals, rather than a transversally coordinated group of people organizing in their shared material interests. The shift from the idea of organizing as artists to organizing as arts workers in relation to

an employer seems to have something to do with a realism of the inefficacy of anomaly-based reformism being disseminated by practical experience, leading workers to turn towards unionization as the “baseline” for more radical reforms – a more traditional opening to radical horizons through reformist means. But it’s a turn that is likely also prompted by a worsening political and economic climate of austerity supercharged by COVID-19 damage, and increasingly unchecked, violent and racialized exploitation undertaken in the “reproductive realism” of the same arts institutions that engage in ameliorative gestural politics around representation and reparation, as fashion dictates. With the second tendency, there is perhaps also the recognition that the infrastructure of exploitation that necessitates organizing as workers cannot be fully engaged or dismantled without confronting the structural violence that the infrastructure both unleashes and cloaks – which is the racialized, gendered and abled forms in which class is lived – thus thoroughly shaping the labor relation. Hence the art institutions become a hypervisible target but also a resource (hence my reference to exploiting them as a resource) for the convocation of different movements approaching the leviathan from different related and implicated directions. This would be an instance of what I have in other places discussed as infrastructural, rather than institutional, critique, as the tendency for the art institution’s material conditions – in relation to its workers and its others – to become the focus, rather than the focus being on the institution’s conditions of symbolic possibility and legitimacy. The arts institution here is viewed as just one more site of accumulation whose ideological and actual capital has to be dismantled and redistributed

as part of a process of generalized, as well as specific, social antagonism.

In conclusion, and with a view to the responses that follow, I wanted to briefly come back to the coop as a way of organizing artistic labor which is not about the labor-capital relation so much as a type of self-management or self-administration. So, it seems to amount to a delimited withdrawal and counterformation, rather than engaging in a relation of antagonism with holders of resources or power. The coops referred to here are ones that distribute the work of cultural producers' back office activity such as invoicing or grant writing, or those that function as an independent ecosystem for the distribution of funds for members for the realization of projects or also for holding funds on behalf of smaller organizations without bank accounts or tax status. This is something I'd love to give a bit more thought to, both as a strategy and as a piece of infrastructure in the cultural field, especially through thinking of the political implications of this kind of maintenance work or reproductive work as potentially a temporally extended form of antagonism. The politics of organizational form can here be examined from the point of view of their differences, but, as with the earlier note about W.A.G.E. and unions, perhaps also from the point of view of their mutual reinforcement or a diversity of tactics in a network of reproductive autonomy which draws on elements of both affirmative self-organization and ceaseless struggle.

Art Workers Forum

Roberto Mozzachiodi

Marina Vishmidt's contextualization of the shifting ground of political struggle within the institution of art provides a useful starting point to reflect on the agenda and activities of the Art Workers Forum (AWF) to date. Her question about the specific features of contemporary artistic labor, and by extension, the organizational form proper to its political interests, is one which AWF has been reckoning with. For us, however, this question is inflected by a prior and equally fraught phenomenon: the peculiarities of the waged labors that reproduce the institutional sites of the culture industry. This leads us to a related, though slightly different, question: what, if any, would be the strategic benefits of following the discursive and policy fictions that maintain culture as a distinct sector of the economy when trying to organize labor? As the building of class power in workplaces is always constrained by sectoral demarcations fabricated by capital, there is a risk that by using the culture sector as a site for labor organizing, as we seek to do, we repeat the mistake of exceptionalizing the labor and the political efficacy attributed to art and culture. It should be said at the outset, therefore, that our political aspirations remain modest insofar as we recognize the industrial status of the culture sector in the economy – in the UK context, the sector's role is not insignificant. But we do not believe the labor struggles of this sector ought to be burdened by the universalizing pretensions of art per se. And in that regard, we do not think it should be the responsibility of workers in this sector to redeem the *political* in art, any more than it is the responsibility of all workers to do so. But

we do recognize that the idealisms of art, including its professed autonomy from capitalistic exchange, are real, inasmuch as they take root in minds, shape funding criteria, and ultimately condition the managerial logics of our workplaces. It is this dimension of art's autonomy that we are concerned with, i.e. how it shapes the conditions of our working lives. And, more optimistically, how it might lend itself to forging what Vishmidt calls an "infrastructural critique," which may be the missing link between the economic dead end of trade unionism and the voluntaristic dimensions of social movement activism.

Responding to these broad problems of building workers' power in the cultural sector, the AWF was formed in 2019. In what follows I will give a brief introduction to our organization, explaining how we came to focus on cultural workers as waged workers, the historical background of our organization, and finally a framing of our ambitions and theoretical principles.

The AWF came into existence out of a series of meetings held in London framed around questions to do with the horizons of workplace organizing in the culture sector. The titles of the meetings were the departure point for discussions: "Can Art Workers Organize?"; "How are Art Workers Organizing?" There we met art/cultural workers who shared our curiosity about class power in the industry and who were interested in developing a sustained conversation about organizing the sector. As it happens, the workers we established longer-lasting ties with were those working in both major and small cultural institutions (galleries, museums, venues) across London and Liverpool, active in the trade unions (TU) in their

workplace. Representatives from a number of these TUs have remained part of the core group at AWF.

The AWF has since evolved around the regular participation of these TU activists. The direction the AWF has taken is toward sustaining and growing a network of TU activists within the sector that support each other's campaigns (usually workplace-focused but not exclusively), coordinate mass support for industrial disputes, amass cross-union support at picket lines and demonstrations, etc., and collectivize practical and legal advice around organizing in the sector. We also provide a forum for comparing notes about the shenanigans of our TU bureaucracies and other internal processes.

In principle we support the role of TUs in workplace struggles, but specifically we want to consolidate their strength within the arts and culture sector in the UK where the TU membership has been historically very low (even in the public arm of the sector, while other areas of it have far higher union participation). But while we support TU activism, we also recognize the limitations of traditional TU structures (I'll go into these limitations below), and that's why we are concentrating on cohering a sectoral rank and file network of TU activists outside of any particular branch structure.

There are a few key factors that have shaped the formation of AWF, our strategic aims, and our organizational principles. To begin with, it is necessary to say something about the public arm of the arts/culture sector, which is primarily where we are organizing within/across, and outline two related dynamics that have become quite apparent to us in practice. They

concern the broader history of cultural policy in the UK, and employment policy within its public sector. First, on the cultural policy in the UK: since the early 1990s, successive UK governments have identified the culture sector (or the “creative industries”) as a growth area of the national economy. This has also dovetailed with the aims of EU cultural policy, which has attempted to instrumentalize art and culture as solutions to postindustrial and regional integration. I’m thinking specifically of initiatives like the City of Culture which became a key inspiration for culture-led placemaking - now one of the central tenets of UK urban governance. Since the late 1990s, then, cultural policy in the UK has been characterized by consistent efforts by governments to further compel arts and cultural organizations to orient their objectives and internal structures toward the market in accordance with the private sector (largely determined by the conditions of state funding allocation). This growth of public-private infrastructure has resulted in a rapid socialization of labor in the sector, and accordingly shaped the workplaces we are organizing in. The expansion of workplaces linked to arts/culture across the UK has spawned an industry with a relatively sophisticated division of labor (if we consider the divisions of labor in and beyond exhibition sites, all of those formal and informal relations of dependency that have been established). It is a reality that is not lost on members of AWF: most of the jobs we do within this particular public-private configuration did not exist twenty years ago.

So, you have the rapid growth of the infrastructure of this relatively new industry (new gallery spaces and venues, transnational networks of traveling exhibitions, festivals, art fairs, all the various spin-off jobs

that come out of the ballooning of this sector) based on the speculation that this arm of the public sector can be profitable and can regenerate local economies. And along with this, you have the development of a new rationality in human resource management within the public sector: New Public Management. The thrust of it is to make organizations resilient to market fluctuations, for which it is necessary to integrate financial risk into the employment hierarchy of workplaces. From the perspective of human resources, this means differentiating between an inner core of employees with a high level of employment security and responsibility directly linked to the core objectives of the institution, and an outer layer of peripheral employees assigned to noncore activities, with a high degree of job insecurity. Policies such as Compulsory Competitive Tendering, brought in by the Conservative government in the late 1980s, and Best Value, brought in by the New Labour government in the early 2000s, put pressure on public managers to heavily budget on the costs of noncore activities (facilities work such as cleaning and security, and customer service jobs) within the public sector, and to look to the market to find solutions – such as the use of third party employers to separately manage workers on site; widespread use of insourcing/outsourcing and agency work; establishment of subsidiary commercial arms of public institutions; and as a result, the growth of a layer of differentiated insecure jobs in the public sector. This is what you see within the culture sector: growth of a layer of differentiated insecure jobs in the public sector and a mass of contingent workers, working on various types of atypical and insecure contracts.

This division between core and auxiliary services structures workplaces and therefore defines the

objective conditions of labor struggle. It is also important as a way of understanding the limitations of institutional critique as an artistic or critical gesture, which has tended to mirror this core/auxiliary dyad in the way that it conceives of political agency within the arts. The demands of institutional critique tend to be pitched toward, or issued from, the core (i.e. as a conversation between artists, art and institutional decision makers), which replicates the idea that contingent workers are somehow supplementary to the core mission of art and its publics. In this light, it is interesting to see solidarity actions taken by artists in support of contingent workers' struggles in the sector.

The trade union movement has also mirrored this core-periphery paradigm. Largely because they are institutions that were built and formed around the assumptions of job continuity and the maintenance of "typical" employment, they have been slow to adapt to the new reality of nonstandard, precarious, temporary employment, and to pivot away from an organizational structure shaped - from top to bottom - around the material interests of just the core workers. Indeed, it is significant that at roughly the same moment Tony Blair's Labour government set up a Task Force to define and measure the value of the "creative industries," the Trade Union Congress (the main trade union federation in the UK) was announcing its willingness to embrace the New Public Management doxa, its acceptance of privatization and its praise for flexibility in labor markets. Precisely because TUC leaders prioritized the conditions of core workers while celebrating the meritocratic promises of

flexibilization, they abetted the spread of casualization within the UK economy.

A big inspiration for AWF has been the appearance of a number of small trade unions that have consciously broken away from the TUC, organizing and campaigning almost exclusively with contingent workers. Unions like United Voices of the World (UVW), The Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), and The Cleaners & Allied Independent Workers Union (CAIWU) have been representing workers who have been abandoned by the traditional trade unions because of their contract types (outsourced, agency, gig economy, sex workers, and so on), and they've been making significant qualitative gains with these workforces in terms of reversing the logic of privatization. Their model of establishing an axis of solidarity around atypical employment conditions is something we are very much trying to replicate by developing an organizational form that can accommodate these dynamics at a sectoral level, to sustain links among contingent workers across the cultural infrastructure. For us, it means working with trade unions already present in the sector, notwithstanding their structural limitations. Our basic assumption then is that effective class power could be an intrinsic byproduct of the condition and the density of contingent workers in the workplaces that constitute this industry. By organizing for this class power we could not only transform the working conditions of the sector, but also draw a stratum of contingent workers towards more generalized social antagonisms which take on heightened form as art and culture become, to an increasing extent, focal points for broader political contestation.

These are principles that remain long-term aims for AWF. We are very keen to enrich this speculative

analysis through practice. We want to learn about the workplaces that make up this relatively new sector of the economy so we can understand what is possible and what is not, and ultimately where power lies in our working and political lives.

Inicjatywa Pracownicza

Paweł Nowożycki

In my response to Marina Vishmidt's dispatch I will focus on the strategic issues of commonality, social antagonism, and infrastructures of exploitation, drawing on my experience of years of working and organizing in the cultural field. Although all three strategies identified by Vishmidt are present in organizing efforts in contemporary Poland, my considerations of them will be from my standpoint as a member of the grassroots union *OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza* [Workers' Initiative Trade Union], both at workplaces (i.e. public cultural institutions) and in the cultural sector as such.¹ In conclusion I will address how these different campaigns/struggles, informed by different material interests, can, but do not necessarily have to, meet. Readers interested in WAGE-style organizing of artists, critics, and freelance curators in Poland can check the online resources of *Obywatelskie Forum*

1 It is important here to note that cultural production in Poland is mostly performed within the system of public cultural institutions funded in the vast majority by the state and local governments. After the transformation from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism in 1989 there was an important rise in the number of private galleries, art fairs, etc., but public institutions are still in a dominant position in the production and distribution of cultural works within society, especially in the visual arts, but also in theatre and music. However, public cultural institutions are also being transformed by neoliberal forces and management, which generates many problems for their workers.

Sztuki Współczesnej.² The coop strategy of organizing artistic labor in Poland, as suggested by Marina, is represented by the newly established *Spółdzielnia POMPUJ!*³

OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza organizes employees irrespective of the type of employment (labor law, civil law, cooperative employment contract, employment through temporary work agency, and self-employment) into different sectors: logistics, production, trade, transport, care, education, culture, and other services. The union was established in 2004 in the city of Poznań by activists and employees of Cegielski factory. It was inspired by anarcho-syndicalist (not autonomist!) ideas – imported to Poland from Germany around this time – as an attempt to renew the union and anticapitalist movements. *Inicjatywa* is based on values of solidarity, direct action, and direct democracy with the revolutionary end goal of gaining control of the economy by workers and abolishing the wage system. It currently has approximately six thousand members all around Poland organized in workplace

- 2 *Obywatelskie Forum Sztuki Współczesnej* [Citizens' Forum for Contemporary Art] was established in November 2009 on the initiative of artists, critics, and curators of contemporary art. Its aim was to achieve an impact through legal and institutional changes necessary for the environment, which would allow for the proper development of this area of culture. More info: <http://forumsztukiwspolczesnej.blogspot.com/>
- 3 PUMP! is an art cooperative taking shape within Biennale Warszawa since February 2020. The name of the association suggests water, and more broadly, life-giving artistic energies which we want to pump into the social circulation of ideas. At the same time, it alludes both to the area of our activities and our working methods – at Pump! we put emphasis on grassroots activities, pumped with the enthusiasm of the cooperative members. More info: <https://biennalewarszawa.pl/spoldzielnia-pompuj/>

committees, regional and sectoral branches, and a national committee elected by the delegates from the workplace committees during the national reunion every two years. OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza is a member of two international organizations (ICL-CIT – International Confederation of Labor⁴ and International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggles⁵). I will arrive at the importance of such networks only at the conclusion of this text.

Before I move to our ongoing campaign “High Culture – Low Wages,” I have to make an important distinction, something that was already noted in Vishmidt’s text, but needs to be elaborated on here.⁶ The majority of our members and the real driving force of actions are those who Airi Triisberg has called “backstage” workers of the arts and cultural institutions: such as technical assistants, producers, educators, editors, archivists, receptionists, administrators, exhibition guides, actors, sound and lighting technicians, or stagehands.⁷ As much as I hate the term “background” and think that after the COVID-19 pandemic all our work should be considered “essential,” for cultural institutions, it captures well the less visible and less valued – both symbolically and materially – position of these occupational groups in the hierarchy within the cultural sector, as compared to artists, curators and

4 More info: <https://www.iclcit.org/>

5 More info: <http://www.laboursolidarity.org/>

6 I’m referring here to the fragment where she writes about “artistic labor as the work done by artists as artists, in distinction from the work done by people working in arts and cultural institutions.”

7 Airi Triisberg, “Art Workers’ Movement in Tallinn: The Politics of Disidentification,” in: Erik Krikortz, Airi Triisberg and Minna Henriksson, eds., *Art Workers: Material Conditions and Labour Struggles in Contemporary Art Practice*, Konst-ig: 2015. 149.

critics, that our W.A.G.E.-style organization *Obywatelskie Forum Sztuki Współczesnej* [Citizens' Forum for Contemporary Art] aims to represent – or to the expanding managerial class within the cultural institutions. This important distinction has three implications: 1) our activities are automatically oriented toward infrastructural critique (to use Vishmidt's wonderful term) rather than institutional critique; 2) our practice is based on the commonality of problems (rather than anomaly), which are the shared material interests by which we understand both wages and types of contracts; 3) we identify ourselves as working class both within cultural institutions and within the society at large. The last one seems to be particularly important in the context of postsocialist society, as from my own experience one of the biggest problems of the unionization drive in the cultural sector in Poland is the ideology of the middle class imposed on us by the US-influenced economic transformation in 1989.⁸ This ideology of the middle class, as the anthropologist Hadas Weiss has shown, not only does away with such decisive categories as workers vs. capitalists/bosses and creates (very attractive for the cultural field!) an image of society as multiple, self-governed individuals – but also “exacerbates inequality by encouraging competitive consumption, lifestyle and investment to signal advantages over others.”⁹ For artists, curators and critics the politics of disidentification (to use another of Triisberg's terms) is about “a dissociation from two assumptions dominating the commonplace conceptions about the economy of art – the belief

8 Among the advisors to the Polish elites in 1989 and in the next years were the same American economists that designed the neoliberal transformation imposed by the military dictatorship in Chile.

9 Hadas Weiss, *We Have Never Been Middle Class: How Social Mobility Misleads Us*, Verso: 2019. 12.

that art making is a hobby that serves the purpose of self-expression and is not supposed to be a source of stable income, and the somewhat contrasting idea that art practitioners are entrepreneurs who are selling their products in the market.”¹⁰ For cultural workers it is first of all the disidentification from the middle class that enables them to engage in the redistributive struggles at their workplaces (cultural institutions), and to join the class struggle alongside workers from other sectors (public and private) within the capitalist system.¹¹

Having said that, employees of Polish public cultural institutions are among the most underpaid professional groups in the country for which the politicians of all parties are to blame – having encouraged the exploitation of public sector employees.¹² The “High Culture – Low Wages” campaign started on May 18, 2019 during the Night of the Museums – a regular event symbolic of the neoliberal takeover of cultural production. On this night, members of IP’s workplace committees in public cultural institutions in Warsaw – including myself – marched with a self-made, seven meter banner and union flags and vests through the streets of Warsaw, stopping at successive

10 “Art Workers’ Movement in Tallinn,” op cit.

11 This is becoming even more evident now with the new tax regulations introduced by the Polish government since January 1, 2022, which brought so-called “relief for the middle class” for people earning between 5701 and 11141 PLN gross a month. Most of the occupational groups from the cultural sector unionized in the *OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza* earn below 5701 PLN gross a month. For example at my workplace (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw) we were able to raise the wages of producers, educators, editors and archivists to 5500 PLN gross a month through the process of collective bargaining only in 2019.

12 The average wage is 4328 PLN (927 euro) gross a month according to the data of the Statistical Office (GUS) from 2019.

cultural institutions and government buildings, giving speeches, and distributing a collectively written leaflet describing poor working conditions and overproduction in the cultural sector. The protest was followed by an independent study concerning wages and conditions of employment in cultural institutions based in Warsaw that resulted in the publication of the report under the same title in September 2019. The report was later translated into English and made accessible to our international comrades to download from the union website.¹³ The report covered 113 institutions and provided data on the average gross monthly salary in 2018 (including gender statistics); the median gross monthly salary in 2018; the number of employees on labor law employment contracts (as per December 31, 2018), and the number of employees on civil law contracts for at least six months in 2018. Based on the results we have formulated five demands:

1. UNABLE TO MAKE A LIVING, WE DEMAND THE INCREASE OF GROSS BASE SALARY BY 1,564 POLISH ZŁOTYS!
2. WITH REAL WAGES DROPPING EACH YEAR, WE REQUIRE THE ANNUAL WAGE VALORIZATION ADJUSTED TO THE INFLATION RATE!
3. EARNING LESS DOING THE EXACT SAME JOBS, WE CLAIM THE RIGHT TO EQUAL PAY!
4. SUFFERING FROM JOB INSECURITY, WE DEMAND THAT DECISION MAKERS PUT AN END TO OUTSOURCING AND JUNK CONTRACTS!

13 <https://www.ozzip.pl/english-news/item/2663-high-culture-low-wages>

5. KEPT IN THE DARK ABOUT UNEQUAL PAY RATES, WE DEMAND FULL TRANSPARENCY REGARDING RULES OF REMUNERATION!

The next step in the campaign was a direct action in November 2019 at the City Council of Warsaw. Finding out that there is a disparity between average wages at public cultural institutions funded by the City Council and Ministry of Culture, we decided to intervene during the Town Council meeting with banners and union flags and vests. We gave the printed copies of the report "High Culture - Low Wages" to the councillors, which resulted in the invitation to the meeting with the Warsaw City Cultural Office. As a result, the City decided to allocate 9.2 million PLN for the wage increase of the library staff (the lowest earning occupational group in the cultural sector of Poland) and introduce annual valorization of wages. We perceived it as a partial win and planned the action in front of the Ministry of Culture, but then the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in the beginning of 2020 and we learned that the money for the pay rises for the library staff was withdrawn due to austerity politics. At the same time, public assemblies were banned by the government. During the pandemic we were mostly active at our workplace committees, checking the health and safety measures implemented by the Ministry, the City Council, and employers, and observing the situation of the civil law contract/precarious cultural workers. Some of us used the home office conditions applied to the public cultural institutions to find more time to engage with the IP members from other sectors and committees (for example Amazon and Volkswagen), and to help with their campaigning during the difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the division of

those who can work remotely and those who cannot became a problem for the whole working class.

The “High Culture – Low Wages” campaign was resumed in November 2021 during the legislation process of the budget bill by the members of the IP workplace committees at the public cultural institutions funded by the Ministry of Culture. Referring to our report and post-pandemic rise in the inflation rates, we brought back the demands of the annual salary adjustments and ended outsourcing and temporary contracts in the public sector. We sent the letter to the Minister of Culture signed by nine trade union organizations (some workplace committees of *Solidarność* and OPZZ [The All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions], the two largest unions in Poland, also signed) from five different public institutions in Warsaw. It demanded the intervention of the Minister to improve our material situation and draw attention to inequalities in the public sector, as we did not agree with the Polish government that cares only about and invests only in so called law enforcement (army, police and border guards), ignoring other professional groups. “The average gross monthly salary in the culture and entertainment sector (4328 PLN gross per month)” – the letter read – “is lower than the average gross salary of a professional soldier (nearly 6000 PLN per month). While soldiers got significant increases, we cannot wait for real valorization of our salaries due to the inflation rate and the related increase in the costs of living. We demand equal treatment for all people employed in the public finance sector who work hard for Polish society.”

Without waiting for the reply we organized a picket line in front of the Ministry of Culture headquarters in

Warsaw on December 6, 2021. The picket was attended by members of the IP workplace committees at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews; Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw; National Film Archive; Audiovisual Institute; Zachęta National Gallery of Art; and supported by the IP workplace committee at the University of Warsaw and the KNSZZ Ad Rem union of court and prosecution workers. As one of the picketers shouted through the megaphone:

“Minister, on the day we submitted the letter to you, the inflation rate was 6.8% year-on-year. According to the Main Statistical Office’s quick estimate for November 2021, it is already 7.7% year-on-year. Prices for energy carriers have risen by 13%. We know that our material situation will deteriorate with rising price indices for basic products and services . . . Our work is essential for society and we demand salary adjustments and stable working conditions!” “The situation in cultural institutions during the pandemic has not changed, in fact it is only getting worse.” – the other picketer added – “Cultural workers are still living on very low salaries. In Warsaw, it’s a drama if someone just wants to live with dignity. It’s very difficult to live from the first to first of the month on one salary.’ I would like to tell you that you are not alone in this protest. There is a red tent-town of court and prosecution workers in front of the Ministry of Justice. Next to it there is a white tent-town of healthcare workers. We are all treated the same and we need to count ourselves and see that there are more of us. We do not deserve the way we are treated. We don’t deserve the fact that our wages are losing value year after year. We are earning less and less, not more and more as we should” – concluded the unionist from

KNSZZ Ad Rem and invited the cultural workers to a red tent-town to strengthen the labor ties.

Just two weeks later, on December 20, we participated with banners and speeches at the picket line of IP's sister union *Związek Nauczycieli Polskich* [Polish Teachers' Union] in front of Warsaw University. The picket lines caught the media attention but did not result in a response or invitation to the meetings by the Ministries, and the budget bill passed the Parliament and was signed by the President on January 1, 2022. We are not giving up and are instead planning next actions both at workplaces and towards the state officials, distributing leaflets, posters and debating the situation of the workers in the public and private sectors in Poland and abroad.

Even if it sounds controversial, at the moment we – the cultural workers unionized in *OZZ Inicjatyw Pracownicza* – feel more in common with the workers from different public sectors than with organizations of artists, curators and critics. It is not just because they did not support us on the picket lines, but also related to how their different material interests and investments are reflected in the fight against the right wing takeover – it makes them blindly defend and idealize the liberal directors of the cultural institutions and the managerial feudalism they bring to our workplaces. In the near future, we plan to build more alliances with the union organizations in the public finance sector, because from our – the working class – perspective the struggles over the directors of the cultural institutions that presently dominate

the cultural field are first of all the struggles of the different factions of capital.

As a conclusion, I want to return to the importance of not only strengthening our intersectoral connections but also our transnational solidarities. As we can see from our own effort to do so through these discussions and dispatches, the comparisons of conditions, the sharing of strategies, is pivotal for cultivating the organizational bonds that will allow us to take on capital as a global, imperial system. And as I conclude this dispatch, I'm happy to report we have already seen the revolutionary fruits of this still young cooperation between *OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza* and the Lithuanian union *Gegužės 1-osios profesinė sąjunga*, who together with unions from the International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggles, went to Lviv Ukraine as a workers aid convoy, to deliver resources to the Independent Labour Union of Metalworkers and Miners in Kryvyi Rihson, for redistribution in the region.

Three Lithuanian Cultural Workers Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė, Emilija Švobaitė, Vaida Stepanovaitė

What follows is a joint response from three Lithuanian cultural workers, differently embroiled in the matters of labor relations in the cultural field: Emilija and Agnė through the independent labor union *Gegužės 1-osios profesinė sąjunga* [May 1st Labor Union or G1PS], and

Vaida as a worker in the arts field who had been involved in a slowly developing effort to establish an independent union for art workers in Lithuania.

Art and culture workers organizing as such in Lithuania has taken a more sporadic route than in the cases discussed elsewhere in Poland and the UK. Far from being a place from which to rethink existing cultural workers organizing forms – whether through labor unions or advocacy platforms – here the step of actually having an independent labor union for cultural workers is yet to be realized. On the other hand, the contemporary landscape is colored by its past, state socialism, wherein various state-established “unions” were present and persist to this day in their various and contradictory forms, together with newer iterations of “unions” or “artists’ associations” established after the Independence.

Although we find no real potential in entryism – i.e. strategically joining these existing unions to redevelop them as workers unions – their historical lineage needs to be reckoned with as we attempt to cultivate new paths *for* autonomy and *towards* autonomy as a future horizon. Our dispatch is structured in three sections, each engaging with different historical phases of the collective material structures that have variously provided for the reproduction of art and culture workers. Agnė begins by recounting the Soviet era and the dynamics between cultural workers and the institutional bodies that represented them. Picking up on transformations of the landscape after Independence in 1990, Emilija presents on the new material conditions artists and cultural organizations came to face in the neoliberal era. The dispatch concludes with a forward-facing mapping by Vaida of

the recent discussions about what to do with these lingering conditions and promises, highly inspired by the discussions that unfolded alongside these pages.

Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė

The Union of Soviet Artists established in 1933 was not in any way an exception in terms of the Soviet bureaucracy and its complicated organizations. Each of the fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics had its own republic Union of Soviet Artists and Ministry of Culture, these in turn were controlled by the Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Party. Regions, districts, and municipalities had their own sections of the Union of Soviet Artists, and the functions of the Ministry of Culture were performed by the cultural or ideological sections of these bodies.

According to art historian Erika Grigoravičienė, in July of 1940 the Soviet government transformed the organizations of Lithuanian artists into one trade union, and by the spring of 1941, the Union of Artists of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) became subordinate to the Union of Artists of the USSR. The union constantly expanded: in 1973 it had five hundred members and in 1975 it accepted forty-two young artists.

Gradually, being a visual artist became a very respectable and profitable profession, but only if the artist was loyal to the principles of socialist realism at the time. The Soviet artist received most of his/her means of livelihood from the system of state orders. However, a unified definition of socialist realism spanning the entire history of the USSR did not exist. Every Union of Soviet Artists had their own Art Fund as a republic.

Lithuania (LSSR at the time) was no exception. The Art Fund provided artists with the tools and materials necessary for their work, gave them cash advances, paid for trips of artistic purpose, and maintained the “houses of creativity,” the art salons, the exhibition halls, the special artshops, hospitals, workshops, etc.

The budget of every municipal committee: collective farm, factory, school and ministry, included funds allocated by the government for the acquisition of artistic objects. Only a negligible portion of this output consisted of original works by Soviet artists; most were copies of the most renowned masterpieces of the laureates of socialist realism. The life blood of Soviet artists was official exhibitions, the vast majority of which were thematic. The themes did not change rapidly through time and were rather formalistic. Some exhibitions were not open for the public since they consisted of artworks made by younger artists and required substantial prior discussion about the proper understanding of socialist realist principles. As Grigoravičienė summarizes the situation of the Union of Soviet Artists in Lithuania in the late 1960s and 1970s: the painters fought for the renewal of social realism, the expanded concept of “thematic” painting, a status for colorism and landscape.

Already by the 1980s art workers became very competitive, seeking bigger apartments, workshops, cars, travel abroad and equipment. In general, the Union of Soviet Artists was a huge machinery based on a brutal hierarchy. It was controlled by the state, but at the same time it was also fully and generously funded by it. Nevertheless, the state also learnt how to tolerate the disobedient artists who did not necessarily want to paint a portrait of the state

official or conform to an orthodox approach to the portrayal of historical events. They would still be included in the Union of Soviet Artists but they did not win the best state commissions or gain entry to the official exhibitions, and had far fewer benefits than the “winners” of the system.

Although, as we see, Soviet style state socialism did not provide great conditions for art workers or workers more generally, the innovations and autonomies of artists that produced monumental, public, works must be noted. Many great works of art were created in collaboration with architects. The Soviet era was a rather favorable period for both architecture and monumental, decorative art, as a synthesis was established between them, and cooperation between architects and artists became an area of substantial development. In the works that decorated the resorts, for example, there were no political demands at all. Stained glass, ceramic panels, tapestries and pieces made from leather were cleverly applied in interiors. Such works, borne out of the specific conditions provided under state socialism, would be unrealizable in any capitalist state or small arts organization.

Emilija Švobaitė

In the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic there were few members of the Lithuanian Communist Party (LKP) inside the artists' unions. Even before the declaration of independence, most unions actively expressed a desire to separate from the Communist Ministry of Culture and continue their activities independently. Their aspirations for independence were fulfilled, but

this led to difficult conditions for survival in the newly established neoliberal economy.

After Lithuania gained its independence in 1990, the unions lost their function of serving the Soviet ideological apparatus. The loss of commissions given by the state put artists at risk since it had previously been their main source of funding. In the same year, the first Prime Minister of Lithuania, Kazimiera Prunskienė, famously stated that during the economic crisis that unfolded over the 1990s it would not be possible to grant any social group exceptional conditions or financial aid, not even artists. Thus, the artists and the unions had to learn to operate in a free market and adapt to so-called wild capitalism with the rest of society.

State-funded unions are legally entitled not only to involve their members in the activities of the organization or to organize exhibitions, but also to represent the rights of the artists and provide them with legal support. Presently the tendency is that unions support their members in providing space for exhibitions and promoting artists, they are less active in defending the rights of the artists or providing legal consultation, with some notable exceptions.¹⁴ This can be considered a grave

14 The Lithuanian Artists' Association, which had its beginnings in Soviet times, subsequently separated from this centralized structure and became an organization in its own right in the independence period. Since then, it has been doing a fair amount of legal work concerning the social protection of artists – such as lobbying for artist status and for pensions for artists, consultation on social security matters with members and non-members of their union, and similar work. The Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association has also participated in legal activities to help their members, i.e. protecting artists' right to free artistic expression when their works have been attacked legally by opposing publics: such as in the case of an artwork 'desecrating' the Lithuanian flag that was taken to the police and to courts by bitter nationalists.

shortcoming since many artists are left with the burden of self-management in the free market-place, which makes them especially vulnerable to exploitation.

It is also worth mentioning the losses endured by the elderly generation of artists who belonged to the unions during the Soviet era. During the transformation period, there were no (or at least, not enough) discussions about pensions for these artists. Only in 2011 did the Lithuanian government renew the social security system for those who possess status as artists, either granted automatically by union membership or by applying individually. However, those artists whose active working lives took place between 1990–2011 suffered severe losses from their pensions, leaving many artists, after retirement, living in poverty.

Finally, the fact that most of the unions inherited both the organizational structures and properties allocated to them in socialism, has created tensions between actors in the field of culture. All the new organizations (e.g. Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association (LTMKS)), that were established in 1997 or after, were left with a very small chance of acquiring cultural spaces. The inequalities borne out of these inheritances have led to endless conflicts over access to space. Up to this day, the unions continue to struggle to prove their right to use certain buildings in the city to the municipalities. In addition, even for the unions who manage to maintain their own spaces, the support that comes from the state is not enough to maintain the buildings or to pay the utilities. Thus, some of the unions have established parallel organizations like publishing houses or other NGOs under similar names. During open calls for funding facilitated

by the Council for Culture, these organizations make multiple applications as different entities (in name only), making the whole process of the distribution of state funding less transparent.

Vaida Stepanovaitė

Arising from the clear pitfalls noted by Emilija of the artist unions we've inherited, an array of ideas have been gathering about what steps to take in cultivating a path towards cultural workers' autonomy. For some years now, proposals have been made for how to better attend to the needs of artists and cultural operators as workers. In 2020 these efforts were once again sparked amidst a conversation initiated through the Paths to Autonomy assemblies. In what follows I will outline the essential proposals and directions of this composition, beginning with a framing of the specific conditions our struggle for autonomy faces.

Let me outline a figure, an invocation of sorts of the neoliberal age of production. Imagine a person – which is a real example – today: a part-time employee at a state-funded cultural institution who also runs a non-profit organization and a self-organized art space; while at the same time maintaining personal creative practice mostly funded by the state either through state distributed individual grants or commissions by state-funded cultural organizations under their projects; while also, occasionally, supplying temporary work of many kinds (communications, curatorial, writing, invigilating, bartending . . .) for various cultural

organizations, state, non-governmental or private sector enterprises.

What could the traditional trade unions do for this person in ensuring their needs are met, in the convoluted multiverse of employment conditions, each of them lacking sufficient protection? Such a subjectivity seems to elude the organizing approaches of both official, bureaucratic, trade unions aligned with capital and state institutions, as well as syndicalist, federated, autonomous unions – like those in the UK or Poland. In Lithuania this problematic is only deepened by the fact that existing artist unions do not place labor issues at the center of their activities, as trade unions do in other countries – leaving little to no opportunity for those working in the arts and culture sector to have their labor struggles leave the individual realm and enter into a collective process of negotiation.

A proposal arising from such conditions, clunky to say the least, is for an intersectoral trade union (joining visual arts workers from different sectors of the cultural field, public-budgetary, public-self organized, private-commercial) that could simultaneously fight for the recognition of artistic labor as secure, decently paid work, while connecting struggles endured in the multiverse of employment conditions most cultural producers reproduce themselves within.

Firstly, such a model of unionism would be important in enacting a shift, as Marina has stated, of artists to art workers, by inciting art and cultural workers to see themselves as part of labor relations and not just

hobbyists or “creatives” who do not require sufficient pay (which of course is a paradox of the neoliberal economy configuring the artist as entrepreneur, and at the same time precarising them into oblivion and without decent material support structures). With this shift, another comes – that of ensuring the recognition of a certain worker subjectivity, and a leverage for demanding fair compensation for labor from prospective employers, as well as better social conditions from the state (such as ensuring pensions as mentioned by Emilija). In one of our meetings for establishing such a union, one idea drafted for achieving the status of art workers was to urge the Lithuanian Council for Culture – the main financial supporter of the whole cultural field in Lithuania from biggest to smallest – to tax individual grants for creators, so as to configure them not as subjects of support for their exceptional work but as workers. The reason for this being that while they are not undertaking paid (and supposedly contracted) work under the monthly grant, nor are they accruing social security (health benefits, pension, and else) and that is detrimental for their future.

Another strategy for recognising “art work” is the inclusion of not only artists as those needing labor protection, but also the backstage workers, as per Airi and Pawel’s emphasis. Those who ensure technical support for the events and exhibitions; those who lead educational activities; those who ensure the cleanliness of the necessary facilities; who sell tickets and offer guidance in the exhibition halls; design the posters; check the grammar of the exhibition texts and those who stay there after the lights go out at night. But here the curators also need to be mentioned, who even in state-funded institutions are paid barely above the minimum wage for work that

often exceeds full-time hours and requires unaccounted for labor. Through the union we may fight for the inclusion of the various types of labor that goes into the public outcome of art work, abolishing artist's exceptionality and thinking autonomy as reproduced through the material conditions we share across the field and beyond it.

Echoing Roberto's thoughts on the unionization of casualized workers, this new type of independent union would be one that includes those on temporary contracts, the self-employed on one off contracts, as well as those that pay monthly self-employed tax. It should be said that the initial idea for our union was to establish one exclusively for so-called 'independent workers' as they usually fall through all the cracks of recognition/regulation. Yet, after discussions that followed it became clear that those working only in one kind of employment are quite scarce – as in the example outlined at the start of my response, and therefore this approach would again serve in turn to only enforce the crooked exclusionary imaginary of the arts. Furthermore, since in Lithuania we do not yet have a great many movements as can be found in Marina, Roberto, and Pawel's dispatches – it would therefore make more sense to start from joining different workers in intersectorial solidarity than to start from the exclusion of one type of work. Since, after having short chats with a few colleagues, one can see how many of the problems are pertinent to all those working, whether in state-funded or private institutions, leading their own organizations and exhibition spaces, or being self-employed. Because it is not about a single employer, individualized case studies or "better contracts," but the precarious conditioning of the field as a whole. To reckon with such a multiverse a more robust approach is needed.

Lexicon

**Marina
Vishmidt**

**Autonomy
and
Heteronomy**

**Speculative
Subjectivity**

Autonomy and Heteronomy

Autonomy and heteronomy have been important parameters for my thinking on labor politics in the arts over the years. I arrived at these concepts through Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and *Negative Dialectics*. I've been trying to specify art's heteronomy or unfreedom with reference to the concept of abstract labor rather than by determinations in the market. "Abstract labor" here is taken to mean the general social form of labor subsumed by capitalist valorization processes. "Autonomy," on the other hand, I've tried to map onto forms of labor – artistic and otherwise – that are exceptional in their noncompliance with the logic of valorization. Artistic labor's exceptionality or autonomy arises in contrast to abstract labor, which is the predominant means of valorizing invested capital: organizing and regulating the labor process to maximize surplus value extraction – such as automation, deregulation, the investment into expanded production and standardization. Artistic labor is clearly anomalous to that and remains artisanal in many ways as a process and an experience, and this is important. But what is its place in contemporary relations of production? To begin, it is helpful to describe such labor in terms of "value relations" as opposed to "value production," given that the exceptionality of this form of labor is actually fundamental rather than anomalous to the capitalist mode of production. If we take surplus value-producing wage labor as standard, then what about domestic labor or unwaged social reproduction, forced labor, and, in line with the work of Jason W. Moore, the labor of nature, or, what capital produces as "nature," that is, nonsocial in terms of capitalist social relations of wage and commodity? Uncommodified labor then

starts to seem like it forms the majority of the sources of capital accumulation, or, as may be useful for bringing in the colonial dimensions, extraction. This has important consequences for how we conceive not just of labor normatively, but of class as the determining relation of capitalist societies, because if we consider the “division and multiplication” of labor through the impositions of gender and race, this gives us the possibility of understanding how both the exploitation and the absolute devalorization of labor (in all coercive labor relations, such as enslavement or prison labor) proceeds, and how it involves, as writers such as Silvia Wynter or Denise Ferreira da Silva note, the concentration of humanity at one pole and nature at another.

Speculative Subjectivity

We are left at a certain juncture with something of a nonanswer as to whether there is any way to combine the competitive, atomized, speculative subjectivity of the artist (or at least the subjectivity the artist is socialized to have) with revolutionary or even just practical labor politics. In my book, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, I suggest that labor is the negativity within speculation. Speculation here is understood in relation to philosophical idealism, and what I do is introduce a dialectical approach to that idealism wherein its negativity gains material implications as struggle “within” the heteronomy of class existence. Speculation is now given a position as the negativity within labor, emptying the moral claims of labor as “the source of value,” which labor power factually is for capital, and displacing labor from its use in the reproduction of the capital relation to its other pole: antagonism to that relation. While this can

generate a classic autonomist move, which is strongly resistant to the social form of capital as determining, proposing rather the idea of the independent agency (or the “self-valorization”) of labor, which sees capital as a sort of late coming, parasitic entity (as in Mario Tronti’s account of the primacy of class struggle, with capital always trying to catch up to the activity of the working class), my focus is rather on the relationality of the value relation, how labor forms a negativity within the class relation rather than an affirmative pole beyond it. Thus, I would suggest that the anomalousness represented by artistic labor, as with all so-called forms of exceptionality, can help unpick the centrality and seeming naturalness of wage labor as a political norm or aspiration. But unlike how, for example, *Wages for Housework* used domestic labor, at least initially, in their program of both affirming and negating the wage labor relation, we need to see how artistic labor, as distinct from all other forms of labor, also has a propensity to reaction, which is very specific to it insofar as its very criticality of capitalist social forms relies on its separation from any material route of transforming them. The ideology of art’s autonomy has thus to be approached as a completely material and structural force, as with ideology in general.

**Bartłomiej
Błesznowski**

**Preface
to Edward
Abramowski's
*Stateless
Socialism***

“Stateless Socialism” appeared in 1904 as a chapter in *Socialism and the State*. In this extensive work, Edward Abramowski (1858–1918), who was a member of several Polish socialist parties (the Second Proletariat, the Workers’ Union) and later one of the founding fathers of the Polish Socialist Party, summarized his critical theses on the socialism of the Second International. Abramowski was at the time already developing his own sociological and psychological concepts. Later, he would become one of the most important pioneers of experimental psychology in Poland. The impact of his scientific concepts, presented in the book, on the critique of socialism can hardly be overestimated. Although Abramowski had used similar arguments in his earlier texts, such as *Ethics and Revolution* (1897) or *Issues of Socialism* (1899), in this work his criticism of the mainstream socialist movement was clearly sharpened. Within the ideology of reformism, which focused on a “minimum program” of immediately implementable postulates concerning, for instance, social legislation or political democratization, he saw an abandonment of the ideal of a total transformation of the social system, which was instead postponed to an indefinite future. He identified so-called “Blanquist” tendencies (named after the nineteenth century French revolutionary socialist Louis Auguste Blanqui) with the imperative to take over the state and build communism through violent revolution, and he feared that the bloody consequences would lead to the emergence of a new party tyranny.

These trends were described by Abramowski as “state socialism.” In the case of both reformism and Blanquism (which can be understood as the harbingers of the two most important currents in twentieth century workers’ movements, social democracy and Soviet

communism), systemic changes were to be made from the top down as a result of state intervention. As history has shown, many of Abramowski's predictions have more than proven true – the social democratic parties of Western Europe and the Bolshevik revolution in the East became the foundation of top-down reforms and modernization programs, but never led to the emancipation of the working class or to cementing the link between the mass workers' social parties and state structures.

From the perspective of turn-of-the-century socialist politics, the state had grown to the rank of a metaphysical and political necessity, as an instance constituting the ultimate expression of the human spirit and the final form of society's organization. For Abramowski, socialist politics that focused solely on the institution of the state was only a kind of "intellectualism" reflecting the reality not of the popular classes but of the ambitions of party ideologues, who wanted power and imposed present structures of thinking; expressing their own social condition, on projections of the future world.

The fact that the liberation of the proletariat requires a transformation of social relations does not mean that it requires a new state; social relations are also conceivable as stateless organizations, and are not only conceivable but even exist and have always existed as such in various human associations.¹

Abramowski considered the idea that the state was necessary for social life – and in this sense also for

1 E. Abramowski, "Socializm a państwo. Przyczynek do krytyki współczesnego socjalizmu" in E. Abramowski. *Filozofia społeczna: Wybór pism*, PWN: 1965 [1904]. 220.

socialist politics – to be a different version of the dogma about the immutability of human nature, which derives from the essentialist-theological form of European thought.²

Abramowski did not see social transformation as a process that must lead through political violence toward a new state. Although for him, revolution was a process of the complete transformation of the social world, he believed that it was essentially a process of experimenting with various forms of self-improvement and self-government, which in the long term would result in large-scale social change. Therefore, Abramowski planned for the reconstruction of society “from the bottom up,” through the activity of the association movement, which would not need any external instances – the state or market – in order to organize complex social relations. Abramowski regarded the state as a *sui generis* type of political organization, appropriate to earlier levels of civilizational development and thus historically particular and geographically local. The domination of this organizational form in capitalist societies should not necessarily lead one to the conclusion that it was the end point of civilizational evolution.

In the emerging mass society, Abramowski found quite the opposite tendency – a powerful current of grassroots association. That current was an expression of the tendency to association, which characterizes the human race, not because of the specific properties of its nature but because of the condition of human beings in the material world. Using language developed by David Graeber, we could speak of a kind of “baseline communism,” which is the “foundation of

2 Ibid., 225.

all human sociability,” and “makes society possible” as such.³ Thus, Abramowski wanted to imagine popular institutions as institutions of “pure socialization,” corresponding to the increasingly diversified industrial society of the late nineteenth century.

Thus, there is the potential for the historical transformation of society by a different way than through nationalization – transformation through free associations that arise automatically out of the needs of life’s struggle, and whose outstanding feature is that they settle matters of life independently of theory and without any general hypothesis. However, this possibility and this development tendency seem to be completely forgotten by the politics of socialism, which presents the issue of revolution as if there were no other forces outside the state transforming society and no other path of liberation except through legislative reforms.⁴

Therefore, according to Abramowski, only if socialist thought goes beyond the category of the state will it be possible to avoid “scientific substantialism” on the one hand, and on the other, political “totalism,” which places political emancipation on the altar of short term strategies – reformist or revolutionary. The ideal Abramowski champions is not an overriding thought or logic of history. It depends neither on the state, nor on the church, nor on capital. The ideal does not have a single form – it is “historically changeable,” although in each era it is a universal imperative governing social development. It is the “conditions for the possibility” of emancipation, and therefore of reinventing life.

3 David Graeber, *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*, Melville House: 2011. 220.

4 E. Abramowski, “Socjalizm a państwo”. 237.

Stateless socialism does not require any philosophical thesis as the starting point for its politics. [...] This is because politics itself specifies the future as a matter of contemporary life, as an everyday transformation of people and relations. From the moment that people come together to fight for a new ideal, to fulfill their need for collective life, the new fact disrupts social causality, working to change the previous direction of development.⁵

This is why Abramowski perceives socialism not as ideals that stride through history to ultimately achieve fulfillment in an imagined future society, but as a social *praxis*, as the element of possible change present in interpersonal relations. Socialism does not therefore constitute only theory and doctrine, but above all – and this is primary in relation to all social formations – the self-immanent socialization of man, who changes the world by changing his conditions of existence.

Crucially for Abramowski, this moment of social *praxis* ought to be equated with an ethical operation; the human, understood as a creative being, is above all a moral subject, one that constructs values in relation to the world. Transformation of the social formation thus constitutes nothing other than a change in the subject's perception of itself: apperception as the ethical revolution. In *Issues of Socialism* Abramowski wrote that "Socialism, however, as a political party, considers it necessary to *acquire* new forms of life, even though these forms determine themselves elementally; . . . socialism can impose obligations,

5 E. Abramowski, "Stateless Socialism," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1 (27) 2018 [1904]. 35.

transform the *phenomena* of collective consciousness into *ethical* categories.”⁶ For the same reason, human transformation is governed by the logic of revolution, that is, by a re-evaluation that no longer allows us to look at the present in the previous categories. This identification of that which is active with ethics leads Abramowski to formulate an original conception of revolutionary practice which, in this context, becomes change of an ethical character. After all, as he puts it, “only that which passes as an idea through the consciousness of the masses becomes an historical fact, the reality of life in society.”⁷ If, as Abramowski claims, the human consciousness is a genetic factor of the social world, the active and, in this sense, performative part of the self, then all social change begins with the individual and is, in a certain sense, a cognitive process involving the self.

Like capitalism, socialism exists primarily as a “mental fact” and therefore it is change within the culture of work itself that is crucial to transformation. Stateless socialism does not try to civilize proletarians by means of state education, law, or party discipline. It instead attempts to enable individuals to develop harmoniously by co-creating the conditions for their own existence.

Communes and cooperatives are designed to operate in a way that does not restrict human creativity; on the contrary, their task is to create an appropriate environment for experimentation with social relations, including various forms of self government, mutual

6 E. Abramowski, “Zagadnienia socjalizmu” in E. Abramowski, *Filozofia społeczna: Wybór Filozofia Społeczna: Wybór Pism*, PWN: 1965 [1899], 71.

7 *Ibid.*, 147.

aid, democratic education and the role of women in organizing an association. The issue of empowerment is a crucial point in Abramowski's concept of socialism. Becoming a subject is always a political process that takes place within an association.

Abramowski's associative (or stateless) socialism is a counterbalance to versions of socialist ideology based on pure collectivism on the one hand, and on parliamentary reformism on the other, and on belief in overriding political categories such as class and state. The former category, treated as the mediated identity of grouped individuals, is exclusively an abstract concept that is used to maintain the leading role of workers' parties. The state, as the prize of the class struggle and the means by which the working class is to end it, represents for Abramowski an incarnation of the worst kind of transcendence – an involuntary apparatus of forced cooperation.

[I]n the emancipation movement of the masses of the people today, and even in socialism, two factors, two methods, two policies which are fundamentally different coexist side by side as a social fact – state-related and stateless: the first is contained in the party's programs and viewed in terms of the ideology, the second manifests itself in spontaneous movements of voluntary association, unrestrained by any ideology and not yet aware of its existence as a political revolutionary force.⁸

The task of socialism, as he understood it, is in fact to transform the consciousness of social actors in such a way that they develop their individual

8 E. Abramowski, 1965, op. cit., 236-237.

strengths within an immanent, nonhierarchical, and voluntary community which strengthens them; it is not to provide a transcendent disciplinary structure for which the lives of individuals are important only in so far as they reproduce and maintain that structure. From this perspective, the transformation of an individual's conscience seems to be at the same time the starting point, because conscience is first of all social, and also the arrival point of all emancipation. Changing the rules of the formation is de facto a change of the subject's perspective on those rules. "Only such free ferment coming from below, from the widest possible masses of people, from the depths of various individualities, can develop this new world of future communist democracy, which no legislation, no socialist parliament can define or predict in advance."⁹ Workers' institutions are to lead to changes in conscience: transformations, not so much in some specific content but, in the very form of the deepest layers – as Abramowski calls them – of fraternity, and of the rules of social life.

9 Ibid., 254.

**Edward
Abramowski**

**Stateless
Socialism**

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Stateless socialism does not require any philosophical thesis as the starting point for its politics. The state may be treated as always and ever necessary, in line with an interpretation of individual rights as an economically independent form that always demands some kind of organized repression. Or it can be seen as a historical and transitional form that disappears along with changes in the means of production. Such issues are very interesting for sociologists. They open an extensive field for various hypotheses and theories, even for romantic writers like Bellamy and Morris. However, these issues cannot serve as a backdrop for politics. Politics cannot depend on any thesis or scientific theory attempting to foresee the social future. This is because *politics itself specifies the future* as a matter of contemporary life, as an everyday transformation of people and relations. From the moment that people come together to fight for a new ideal, to fulfill their need for collective life, the new fact disrupts social causality, working to change the previous direction of development. This is something that the history of the future must take into account, even with the most precise theoretical predictions. Therefore, it is not politics that has to adhere to theory, but, to the contrary, the theories of sociologists that have to adhere to politics, consider its forces and developmental tendencies, the relationship between aims and other conditions, and, in accordance with these factors, it has to specify what kind of future awaits the life of societies.

If social movements were to follow the lead of science and only spoke out in accordance with commonly accepted theories, then no social movements would exist, nor would there be any social theories about social life. Politics, strictly following the results of

knowledge, would be forced to step back from creating any *novelty*, since the latter hadn't been predicted by and included in extant theories; it would have to castrate life from anything that had no proper place in the systems created by philosophers, or that stood in contradiction to their proven theses. As regards sociological science, while it may exert an influence on the minds of politicians and agitators, we cannot omit the fact that its experimental field is nothing if not politics and social movements. It is unable to be replaced; the truth or falsity of theoretical presumptions and deductions can only be determined when the history of the social movement, borne of this or that presumption, or realized within a specific set of conditions and social forces, has become the witness. The history of political parties plays the undisputable role of the sociological laboratory, in the broadest meaning of this word, and one could confidently think that if politics adhered to scientific theories, that means, if history was formed by itself in the offices of scientists, then we would run out of all of material and criteria of truth for the sociological science itself.

Fortunately, or not, things work in a completely different way. A nascent social movement usually has an exact purpose that, from a contemporary scientific point of view, is an absurdity. That is how the revolts of rural communities and peasant uprisings in medieval times were seen from the viewpoint of the theories of medieval lawyers. These latter uprisings aimed to reintroduce the roots of civil and public right through a complete reorganization both of feudal relations and of contemporary juridical and social theories. For the science of the economists, the class struggle of the proletariat was also absurd, since it desired to change things viewed as immutable "laws of nature" – or at

least until philosophers such as Marx and Lassalle appeared. *Under the pressure of this struggle*, they were able to see hidden economic contradictions and form some initial points of development of the new system of social forces. Of course, if the politics of the working classes had been meant to adhere to contemporary scientific conclusions, the concept of social antagonisms would not have seen the light of day. Neither would the struggle have come to express the specific interests of the proletariat, or even grasp the existence of class struggle and the need to change "capitalist laws." This possibility could have created a situation in which we would neither have a theory of socialism nor scientific theories that cohere with socialist movements and scientifically *develop* its existence and tendencies.

Thus, one of the most invalid arguments is that any newly created social movement should seek its justification in sociological theories and validate its existence before contemporary knowledge and, under threat of disappearing, try to change its nature in order to make itself totally consistent with the conclusions and theories of this knowledge. Only proposals for social reform or political programs, born in the minds of professors or officials and copied from prepared models, are forced to legitimize themselves in this way. On the other hand, in the face of the social movement, which appears as a natural matter of certain issues of life, the attitude of science is directly opposite; rather, it (science) should justify itself before a new social fact, and in fact, sooner or later, it is always forced to adapt its theories to the

existence of that fact and to recall all those concepts which have turned out to be inconsistent with it. Understanding this relationship properly, it becomes clear why stateless socialism can treat with complete disregard the theoretical question as to whether the future of societies will necessitate the state form, or, on the contrary, will it create the possibility of getting rid of this necessity. The future and direction of historical development depends largely on the way the social movement realizes itself and it is the social movement alone that resolves the theoretical issues and dictates the principles to be used by future sociologists, principles that are to serve as the cornerstone of their theories on the state.

What will remain of political programming after the removal of all theory that predicts the social future and imposes patterns of reasoning on it? What will remain of the socialist program after we reject both the hypothesis about the state's indispensability and the opposing theory of statelessness? What remains is the only real starting point of socialist ideology, namely the fact of class struggle. As a specific conflict between human needs and the conditions of life, this reality exists independently of all theories and serves as a starting point for socialism and its politics. It was on the basis of the theory of class struggle that socialist theory and its politics could begin. By accepting the hypothesis of the state, and by thinking about its social tasks in deductive fashion, previous socialist politics freely limited both the nature and the innate tendencies of this real fact, with a view to bringing the development of class struggle to an effort of state transformation. And politics, rejecting any doctrine of the future, has to accept the fact of struggle and, without any theoretical restrictions,

take it as the basis for a self-generating source of continuous revolution. After that it will grasp the ways of practice and define the aim on this basis alone. Naturalists do not start their surveys by choosing a general, reasoned postulate, but by providing a simple description of a given phenomenon, such that the goal of an experiment is introduced by the phenomenon's natural characteristics. A politics that is to guide life issues should employ the same methods – its guidelines must be found *not in a doctrine but in the fact of class struggle itself*.

Examined independently of other theories, the fact of class struggle contains a huge variety of different life issues and tendencies to reconfigure both the individual, as well as all social life. Class struggle is a fire, the source of incessant series of social transfigurations. Under its pressure old theses and moral habits slowly die off, whole systems of human thought fall apart, and previous institutions of collective life disappear, while new institutions and ideologies are born. Wherever class struggle is more accentuated, richer, more common, the development of the society takes place faster and the differentiation of economic and mental life appears greater. Wherever class struggle is less developed, we can see social and civilizational stagnation, lazy movement of thought and life. The secret of this subversive and productive power, a component of class struggle, relies on the fact that it affects human minds by providing them with *new needs*, which are the *essence* of social phenomena and a bridge between inner life and socio-material life. The effect of this power is twofold. On the one hand, it reconfigures the moral and intellectual nature of individuals by adapting spiritual systems and, on the other, it naturally aims to realize itself by

creating popular gatherings. These gatherings later on transform themselves into new institutions and, due to this, they change an individual's conditions of life. So here the unbroken nexuses of mutual interactions, individual, social, moral and collective configurations take place. These nexuses make for a situation in which society cannot be considered as a stable and finite being, but as a continuous process of *becoming* that connects, by imperceptible changes, basically conflicting types of collective human life and the corresponding types of people's morality.

Now, let us take a closer look at those unprompted transfigurations, both individual and social, which develop themselves due to the chief conflict in the history of modern nations - the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

At the very beginning of this conflict, a new moral characteristic shows up - the solidarity of workers, which initially takes the form of a simple mutual aid and aims at defending the common interest. It manifests itself in spontaneous associations, strikes, which break out when exploitation becomes too burdensome. Over time, the struggle transmutes into permanent, stable associations, into *workers' unions* that strive to curb exploitation. They turn out to create true comradeship, full of disinterested help for the disadvantaged. Because of the need for struggle, new institutions engender, fully changing the character of capitalistic economy in their basics, the wage labor. The typical hireling, who sells his labor power individually, by the authority of a free contract and the price that states the ratio of supply and demand, becomes outmoded in countries that have reached a developed stage of class struggle. Trade unions

come out as a new factor, regulating labor market and creating new norms of working conditions, on which wage labor can exist. They oppose the monopoly of workforce to the monopoly of the means of life, resulting in weakening the latter. A whole number of practices and institutions were shaped of their own accord due to the struggle, which serves those trade unions. This can be clearly seen in the example of English unions. At first, the labor offices of workers' organizations concentrate in their hands statistics and the workforce market. In order to remove damaging competition between those who look for earning and shelter and to prevent the workers from selling their labor power under the threat of starvation, unions keep special-aid funds for currently unemployed people. In the process of hiring a workforce, the new institution of collective settlement is set up and it changes the outgoing character of hired labor entirely. The wage contract is not concluded between manufacturer and worker, but between manufacturer and trade union, with its representatives. Trade unions try to keep working conditions at a decent level and limit exploitation. Up to three collective settlements are often there to secure the worker's work conditions. The first is one concluded between the central and nationwide management of the trade union and the general union of manufacturers. This settlement determines general conditions of hiring and regulates them equally for the whole country - minimum wage, work time. The second settlement is one concluded between the local committee of the trade union and the local committee of the trade union and local committee of manufacturers. This one discusses the more specific working conditions. The third is one concluded between the trade union of the exact company and the manufacturer. These settlements

cannot be inconsistent with one another. Even workers who do not belong to the trade union have to sign up to the collective settlement and approve only those working conditions that are described in this settlement. At the same time, trade unions force manufacturers not to accept those workers who do not belong to a trade union or break the rules of hiring. This is strictly supervised by delegates who visit and look over the workshops and mines. In cases of a breach of contract, the manufacturer is remembered, listed and watched and sooner or later he will be punished by a boycott. Some institutions, such as "mediation courts," exist that include representatives of both workers and manufacturers, that clarify those disputed points of the settlement. Besides standardizing the norms of wages and working hours, a collective settlement tries to regulate the sanitary conditions and protect workers from the risk of being fired. Entrepreneurs cannot fire a trade union member without an important reason, one that has to be approved by the trade union itself.

Thus, working class achievements become universally applied law, albeit the state police are not involved. Individual workers with all the characteristics of a hireling, forced to accept exploitation due to poverty, step aside to make way for a more powerful organization that consciously aims to curb exploitation. The more gathered the workforce is throughout the country, the more effective it becomes. Let's assume that this organization gathers the entire working class in its ranks and by collective settlements it tries to win more and more of the proletariat-articulated demands and to extend its watch over the process of production. In this case, capitalist monopoly and contract labor become completely worthless. The

privileges associated with private property and organizational capabilities would be turned into merely meaningless titles. Real power would be executed by the organized proletariat.

New forms of struggle present major developments in forging new relations between social forces. By using boycotts - this new form of proletarian-created revolution with "crossed arms" - trade unions can put constant pressure on the development of present social life, applying this pressure not only to economic matters, but also to political and moral ones. What often happens is that when trade unions are in conflict with a capitalist, the entire organization of workers does not need to be summoned, but, using their monopoly on labor power, they just go on partial strike. They summon the workers to stop work and simultaneously prevent any replacement of this labor power from taking place. For a trade union, the costs are often small, but a capitalist finds them sufficient motivation to give up. All personal issues, injuries, abuses, exploitation, expulsions, and also the limiting of workers' political freedom, find their resolutions in an organized resolve to boycott, even if oppressed people are unable to directly lead the struggle themselves. The history of strikes increasingly shows us a type of class struggle that is based not on carrying out individual interests, but that is done for the common justice of others. The boycott comes to replace the state courts, police or legal supervision. Its new form is being developed now in United States - the *leagues of consumers*, which start by informing clients about conditions of production of each product. They also boycott the company that owns the factory in which exploitation is excessive, or in which worker demands are not taken into account,

or some other mishaps occur. The agitation undertaken by the consumer association has the effect of reducing the number of products of this or that company, narrowing the groups of people who buy from it. Faced with this situation, the company enters a peculiar fight. Its opponents, by forcing it to respect the demands and interests of the working class, are not the workers as producers. Its opponents are an unnamed and undefined mass of proletarians as consumers and people from all sorts of social strata able to sympathize with a given fight slogan. The market becomes smaller, not due to economic factors, but because of being under the influence of a previously unknown power, which emerges only in order to stamp out injustice. The entrepreneur is not attacked at the site of production, but at the site of selling the goods. And this can result in even worse outcomes than a tidal break in production would. If the manufacturer wants to avoid such moral punishment, which totally hits profit margins, the demands of public opinion must be adhered to. The same action of defending working people against exploitation can be carried out by stable associations of consumers – cooperatives – with an even better outcome, as they control a wider part of the market. Often at issue are not only finished products, but also the market of raw materials. In the interests of the workers fighting alongside them, these associations are able to permanently push and influence entrepreneurs.

Consumer cooperatives emerge from class struggle as a separate kind of institution. As every person is a consumer, these cooperatives do not bear the mark of a specific economic class (as trade unions, for example, do). However, the economic character and factors that give rise to their creation often make

them very proletarian in their personal composition and in the tendencies they manifest. They are usually formed by a group of workers that is looking for practical means to improve their living conditions and culture. This group desires to gain some sort of economic independence, to establish some kind of protection against the insecurity of being hired workers, i.e. those who are dependent on crises and market liquidity and are unable to save money. Sometimes these associations form out of strikes, as a way to counter shopkeepers' refusal of credit. Rooted in these common, daily-life issues, a new slogan emerges of "saving through spending" and of disengaging from the broking of shopkeepers by cooperatively buying directly from the producer. This way of organizing in itself excludes the petit bourgeoisie from belonging to consumer cooperatives. The petit bourgeoisie gets its money from small trade and is thereby forced to maintain a class position that is hostile and adversarial towards the cooperative. Neither can the haute bourgeoisie and the bunch of scammers gathered around them find their interest in joining a consumer's cooperative, which, because of the democratic spirit it contains, makes gathering all stock in one hand impossible, but also because its economic and cultural aims can be of interest only to the working class.

For all these reasons, the consumer cooperative, while seeming to be a trans-class institution, is essentially an institution of the working class. Its specific, proletarian character is clearly notable in its further unprompted development and in the revolutionary tendencies that it manifests. The primary rule of the cooperative is extremely simple. A certain type of joint-stock association is established, though it differs significantly from the capitalist

one. Concentrating shares in one hand is forbidden. Every single participant is permitted to own a single share or the same amount of shares. The value of this share is determined by the purchasing power of the typical worker so that it can be bought without doing harm to the household budget. It can also be partly discharged and repaid. With capital raised, the association gains the ability to buy good at wholesale prices and sell them to participants at higher retail prices. In this way, the trading profit is generated and shared between members. The method is one of "saving by spending." The more one consumes, the bigger the profit. The consumer gathers this surplus, which is nothing more than the capitalist's income. That's why all the negative aspects of broking, such as largely falsified goods and artificially generated high costs, are negated. In addition, the association that owns a private grocery warehouse frees the worker from store debts and the truck system.

At this first stage, the cooperative is basically akin to a common warehouse operation, but here some revolutionary tendencies also become visible. First, the workers start to take control of the retail market as an association, acting consciously and according to a plan; an association that, taking into account its further development, may become a great weapon for boycotting industrialists. Secondly, they learn about both collective and individual economics. They learn about the complex mechanics of the vast present-day global economy, acquiring knowledge that is indispensable in the process of creating an industrial democracy able to replace capitalists as the organizers of labor and production. Next, they are emancipated from the tradesmen and, due to this and the level of agricultural technology, merchants

appear as an already defunct class who will be gradually eliminated through this process. As the consumer associations develop, changes that could not take place without undermining the essential ideas of capitalism appear possible. Finally, owing to the selection and affordability of goods and the process of "saving by spending," worker's living standards rise. Swiss cooperatives, for example, have by and large *consciously* set themselves the following goals:

1. Allow workers to buy good quality but cheaper basic necessities and, thereby, bring about an improvement in their standard of living, even if they continue to earn the same amount of money.
2. Habituate workers to using cash in order to emancipate them from debt and credit. This will allow them to win greater independence and teach them how to rationally budget for the future.
3. Widen the area in which one can take up actions. Teach workers about the administration and management of economic matters.

However, the cooperative's development cannot stop there for long. The tendency for the merchant class to be eradicated clearly follows the economic nature of the cooperative, and it creates the basics of a planned, consciously regulated market that supercedes the chaotic and blind capitalist one, which itself produces manifold crises and standstills. Assuming that the cooperatives progress only until they take over the retail market (providing that the retail market complies with the basic necessities of the proletariat and current data show that cooperatives

are developing in this direction) we have to ask - what impact would it have on the capitalist economy?

Capitalist enterprises would be made totally dependent on the *organized market*, which itself would be consciously led by proletarian democratic associations. This exact market would impose its requirements and both qualitative and quantitative requisitions on the enterprises. Production then would have to strictly adjust to the sizes of the wholesale directives set by the cooperatives. These directives would then match consumers' actual needs, leading to a reduced risk of possible financial crisis and capacity to flood the market with redundant products. We would thus end up with the same result as that of state collectivism. Organized, scheduled, adjusted production. Apart from this, other important results, ones crucial to class struggle, that would curb the monopolies of capitalists can easily be foreseen. With a decline in the possibility of crisis and industrial standstills, workers come away with more autonomy to fight for more and cement their gains. Industrial crisis is the important factor, as it greatly inhibits the current struggle against industrialists and forces a return towards the state in order to gain factory lawmaking. The workforce being expelled from time to time and the industrialist's liberty to lower production in a timely fashion in order to endure the standstill often prevents the strikes. This, then, gives the industrialist the upper hand, allowing him even to defeat previous workers gains. So, with these conditions in mind, the only safeguard can involve providing an executory, legal, state validity to workers' conquests. This is precisely why trade unions come to be more tied to state policy. This development is behind the popularity of the slogan "without a state there is no salvation."

As we can see, cooperatives may furnish another solution, organized by workers' associations who take control over the market. The importance of this struggle against exploitation is twofold. Not only is it able to become a bulwark against crisis, allowing workers to develop unfettered actions, but, as aforementioned, it also creates a new weapon in the class struggle - *consumer boycotts*, available to the proletariat not as united workers, but as *associated consumers*. Indeed, cooperatives that manage a huge market for consumer goods are able to make a difference from time to time in the struggle between industrialists and workers by simply refusing to buy the products of any exploitative and power-abusing company.

Those hidden or partly conscious concerns push cooperatives forward. A generic, commonly known incentive - getting a larger dividend from a grocery warehouse - transforms (in the proletarian environment) into something completely different, something that goes beyond the cooperative's initial mission. To increase their income, the cooperatives have to expand their business activities, and to expand their activities they have to expand their trading capital and centralize their markets. That's why, on the one hand, the broadest mass of people possible are encouraged to join the cooperative by setting the minimum share as low as possible and by providing an option to pay it gradually and thus to limit the share rate. From this, as in Belgian cooperatives, income is not divided between participants, but gathered as a collective capital and withdrawn in the form of vouchers. On the other hand, cooperatives aim to create a *federation*. They associate in one, overarching association with a joint central management

and periodical representative conventions. This type of organization can conduct and lead large economic operations. It has enough power to buy from the manufacturers themselves, transport materials on its own and, thereby, it is able to increase its income even further. A federation of cooperatives is able to win not only profits from groceries, but also the profit of mass trade. In this regard, by owning a huge retail market and capital, the federation can make a step forward. Just as in the beginning it aspired, owing to its economic nature, to collect the profit of merchants, now, as master of both the market and capital, it aspires to gain the profits of businessmen – to become an individual, independent, and self-sufficient economic organism. An organism that produces on its own and consumes on its own, the cooperative becomes *consuming-producing*. The struggle between cooperatives and merchants (sometimes including the producers, as occurred on a large scale in Scotland in 1896) may only serve as an incentive to this change. However, this incentive is occasional, incidental, and only accelerates the realization of the natural and stable tendency, that must appear in associations which administrate the collective capital and the regulated market. Even and especially the most important product for the lives of the working masses – bread – cannot be emancipated other than by creating cooperative bakeries.

The tendency of workers' cooperatives to transform into a self-reliant and self-sufficient economic system is explicitly present today in the English and Belgian cooperatives. Large English and Scottish "cooperative warehouses" (English Wholesale Cooperative Society and Scottish Cooperative Wholesale), federations, encompassing over two thousand consumers'

associations and one and 1.5 million member-families, not only own a system of small stores and information offices for smaller groups scattered across England, Europe, and America, but also run an extensive production. These federations own and run huge arable farms on which they produce wheat, vegetables, fruit, meat, poultry and dairy. In addition, they own factories that produce candies, preserves, footwear, soap, textiles, lingerie, clothes, furniture, pottery and other goods. The development and viability of the English cooperative's production can be described by comparing two figures that express the difference in this production's worth within a span of three years (quoting Bernstein): in 1894 it amounted to 4,850,000 pounds sterling and in 1897, to 9,350,000 pounds sterling. Two-thirds of this production came from consumer associations, the rest from producing associations. The reason for this development is the ensured, constantly expanding market inside the cooperatives, as well as inside the great capital administrated by the federation. This capital makes it possible to improve the technologies used in production. Cooperative factories are designed in accordance with all the sanitary rules; the workers' salary is governed by the highest norm the trade union has set for each kind of job; the number of working hours is lower than usual for the same job in the same city - in some workshops it totals only eight hours. When it comes to working conditions, cooperatives maintain a clear advantage over the capitalist workshop. They have already resolved all concerns regarding sanitation and consumption that the proletariat is still striving to find solution for by legal means. Bakeries provide a clear example of this. Seldom has any industry developed as complex a set of state laws and regulations as the English baking industry.

Even despite the law attempting to provide cheap and healthy bread, the weight and quality of the bread continued to be falsified. In England, between 1878 and 1995, the full set of regulations (Factory and Workshops Act) obliging local authorities to regulate sanitary conditions in bakeries were observable. In actual fact, however, these conditions did not improve at all; however, the cooperative bakeries stand out here, with their perfect machines and ideal sanitary conditions. The work itself, whether moving the sacks or mixing the dough, is mostly mechanized. The workers have access to their own kitchens and dining rooms, bathrooms and restrooms, while in most private bakeries they eat even in the bakery itself. The salaries are also higher thanks to the trade unions. The weekly amount of hours worked is fifty-one, while in private bakeries it ranges from seventy to eighty.¹

Let's look more closely at the most interesting issue and find out who the owner of this production is, who gains the profit and who rules it all? The co-owners of the business are shareholders. The shareholders are the consumers' associations and trade unions - they are the beneficiaries. This means that each and every worker of the cooperative workshop, after becoming a member of the consumers' association, becomes an equal co-owner of the workshop and participates in the general profit. The same is true of trade union membership, which acquires its own stocks in cooperative workshops. Apart from this, some dividends are still offered to workers independently of their affiliation to any union or association, but there is no general rule on this score. English Wholesale does not allow workers to share the profit if they

1 F.R. Rockell "Les Boulangeries Cooperatives en Angleterre," *Rev. d'Econ. Pol.* 1899.

do not belong to an organization, whereas many of the Scottish cooperatives, and even wholesalers, in Glasgow do. In the first half of 1896, the cooperative factory in Kettering paid forty percent of its dividend to the workers. In 1891, a cooperative bakery in Glasgow issued "vouchers" that served as a special fund and allowed the bakery's workers to buy shares in the cooperative.

This way of *governing* the cooperative evolved under the influence of two kinds of practical needs. On one hand, the autonomy of associations had to be linked up with united common action so that the system of federations could lead this huge economic organism. On the other, the administration had to be provided with the proficiency, elasticity and ability to perform actions, as the indispensable condition for such a developed and complex workshop as the cooperative. At the same time, the administration had to be put under the control and general leadership of the whole members' association as the only owner and governor. For these reasons, in cooperatives a democratic formation or federal republic exists, with its representatives and parliament. And, interestingly, after many long years of fluctuation and conflict, the same kind of formation also developed within the trade unions. The federation's main matters are directed by the representative delegates' meetings. Each consumer's association may send one delegate for every five hundred members (as with the English federation) or in accordance with the purchases it makes (as in the Scottish federation). This chosen delegate represents the associations in general and in specialized meetings has a voice in directing and setting the main issues. The appointment and selection of officials to the central and local committees is carried out

through a voting system whereby ballot papers are sent to each association to be filled in. The federal committee issues a paper and a monthly report, in which it informs the other members in detail of the needs and issues of managing the cooperatives. In some of the cooperative businesses, such as the bakery in Glasgow, the workers send their special representatives (one for every twelve people) to conduct debates in their name. The general feature of the cooperative administration can be described as a democracy that involves the working class's participation and leadership on various economic issues, which, thanks to the federal system, also provides a simple way of adapting those issues to the concerns of each group.

This form of democratic republic also allowed cooperatives to develop into clearly proletarian institutions and take spirited action in both the moral and mental emancipation of workers including their struggle with industrialists. Most characteristic is the way that the cooperatives spent their income. Examining this allows us to fully observe the social source of this income. In capitalist or petty bourgeois stock companies, profit goes directly to shareholders or becomes a flashpoint for some future financial affair. Here though, what is brought to the forefront are the common goals of protecting living conditions and mutual help in reaching higher culture and levels of emancipation. The contract worker does not display any kind of "devotion" or "inborn idealism," but instead the natural need to widen one's strength and horizons. The inability to do such in any other way rather than by organizing is the main attribute of the proletariat. This is why the consuming-producing organism of the cooperative becomes the nucleus for all constantly

growing working-class institutions that aim to satisfy moral and intellectual needs, defend individuals and shelter their existence. Such could not be achieved with the one hundred franc income usually offered to cooperative members. We can also observe libraries, museums, schools and parks being created alongside the British and Belgian cooperatives. We can also observe the process of shaping individual educational institutions responsible for educating children and youths in the spirit of a new society, one based on commonality. To this end, some political institutions were created to protect and defend the cooperative's interests within labor organizations. Moreover, there are loan facilities (the cooperative does not allow goods to be bought on account, but those strapped for cash can get an interest-free loan), unemployment benefits (protecting the unemployed from economic constraint), health care (including free medical care) and other measures designed for both those in old age and children. Independently, cases are known of cooperatives financially supporting strikes, such as the English Wholesale that provided 125 thousand francs to help maintain the Yorkshire miners' strike, or the Leeds cooperative, which also supported miners' strikes.

The cooperative's struggle, taken up to embrace all human needs, this strange, inner vitality, which transforms the small group of workers, itself held together by the modest slogan of "saving through spending," in fact gradually transforms the whole social world. This can be exemplified by the famous *Vooruit* from Gadawa - this association, established in 1883 by a few weavers, managed to gather 30 members. Each person saved 50 cents a week. After 10 weeks, the association commanded a budget of 150 francs and

with this capital it proceeded to establish a cooperative bakery called *Libres Boulangers* [Free Bakers]. Weaver's syndicate lent them two thousand francs, which were paid back within the space of a year. In 1884, the cooperative reached a high enough level of development to open a new, huge, refined, mechanized bakery with a meeting hall, theater, non-alcoholic pub, library and store right beside it. In 1885, they opened their own pharmacy and in 1886, a place to print their journal. By 1887, the association already owned three pharmacies, stores taken from the petit bourgeoisie or colonies and the coal warehouse. In 1889, the bakery was reopened in an even bigger version, so that the cooperative was able to produce seventy thousand kilograms of bread each week. In the following years even more shops selling lingerie, clothes and coal etc. were opened. The number of members rose to seven thousand families and the annual income to more than two million francs. Moreover a whole series of institutions was developed, such as savings and loans banks, free medical care, birth care, elderly care and education. The economic mechanism that lay behind it was incredibly simple. Membership costs were just one franc twenty-five cents for the cooperative book. Every week, each member buys a certain amount of vouchers for bread and coal depending on his family's needs and these products are delivered directly to his house. Every three months everyone gets some part of the bakery's income paid in vouchers, with which he or she is able to buy whatever products are available in the cooperative's stores. These purchases afford a new six percent income, able to be used to buy some necessary goods. In some sense, this can be seen as a realization of the collectivist dream of non-monetary exchange.

The sociologist might appreciate in the cooperative a sort of artistry of social autogenesis. Reforms are not implemented by the police of the democratic government but they happen on their own. The active element here is nothing else than the inner human power, a social lubricant and original creator of all social phenomena - a need for life, this rough product of struggles, free of any tenets. Inside this need there emerges, however, an individual aim. In the association, whose bonds stem from that fact that different people share similar needs, a social aim emerges. And as this social aim is embraced, new practical issues arise, forming a web or uncodified ideology of pursuits, wherein it becomes possible to find the shape of a new, emerging society. Almost all things postulated by the collectivist ideology find their original realization in the cooperative movement. All that the socialist parties tried to establish in their "positive politics" by democratizing the state and by giving up all that is revolutionary in their ideals together, with the soul of the modern man full of rebellious dreams, is achieved by the cooperative without the state, by this autogenetic power of coming together. This is the evident background to market organization and the idea of matching production to consumer interests. Today we see enterprises being run by democratic consumers' associations, which attempt to reconcile working conditions in the interests of workers and, more importantly, even to destroy the whole idea of wage labor itself. By doing so, they transform the laborer, who becomes a member of the cooperative, into a coowner and coleader of the enterprise where he works. We can also see a protection against unemployment, and social and financial security for elderly and ill people, that is, sometimes even unavailingly, gained by the socialist politics from the state, but

with many harmful compromises. And finally, we see the outline of a great struggle against exploitation. With the market boycott, combined with the strike led by the jobs syndicate, a continuing and successful limitation of the capitalists' monopoly and protection over wage labor becomes possible.

Next to this correspondence in economic tendencies, a great difference arises between socialist politics and the union-cooperative movement. This difference concerns their *methods for taking up action* and their views on emancipation. Socialism aims to democratize the state and also to *extend* it to every part of the collective's life. It aims to equate its organization with every type of social organization. Such is its path of economic liberation and even (those doctrines tend to be very ironic) about liberation *in general*. The syndicalist-cooperative movement, however, reveals a contrary tendency. It creates a *stateless* democracy, and behind the backs of ministers, the parliament, electoral combats and bureaucracy, it uses the power of independent association to transform society economically.

Conscious control over the market and production in free associations happens also outside proletarian struggle, that is, in *agriculture*. Such associations develop mostly within the wealthier parts of the peasantry, however, their various forms also infiltrate smallholding classes and encompass even the rural workers. Furthermore, these are constantly progressing institutions that, in their process of evolution, can follow with many new, hitherto unforeseen types of social organization and methods of taking up action. They show an increasingly strong tendency to step into various types of relationships that transform

society by changing both the economic and cultural conditions of the peasant social class. We can see here basically the same developmental tendencies that characterize consumer cooperatives:

- 1) To eliminate the merchant's brokering between producers and consumers, and to consciously regulate production according to the essential needs of the market measured by proper statistical institutions;
- 2) To replace an economy based on individuals by an economy based on *associations* by means of technological advance and agricultural knowledge;
- 3) To take consumer interests into account during production through quality control measures;
- 4) To develop institutions so as to enhance national culture, technical and general education, and that take care of insurance, pensions and credits based on mutuality between free association that group almost all over the syndicates and agricultural associations.

Those aims are not a product of the ideology being promoted throughout the peasant social classes – in fact, they stand in contradiction to this ideology, as the significant majority of agricultural associations remains under the influence of conservative and catholic ideology, which consciously and purposively formed these classes, hoping to turn them into a fortress for social ossification or a counterbalance to any subversive movements. Here we can see the fairly interesting duality between ideology – the preached, official one – and all the autogenetic

processes that vitally transform people and their relationships in a totally opposite direction. In this case, social dialectics is shown in its classical example. Under those conservative slogans some associations emerge that later consciously protect an economic system based on private property, by bolstering the class that is this system's strongest supporter – the peasantry. This bolstering of peasant property is met with the conditions set by the vast market of agrarian products to have been created across the development of industrial capitalism. These products are products of large, growing urban communities and a number of industrial regions and countries that are not self-sufficient in the provision of food. This market requires constant and organized supplies of consumer articles. The provision of goods to compete with those capitalist products is possible for peasant homesteads only if they agree to *associate* and corporately organize various cultural and market activities.² On the other side, engaging the peasantry in the general market matters, improving their living standards and the naturally progressing comminution of the homesteads with population growth, makes the aims of enlarging one's income, improving soil quality and freeing oneself from sales brokers, increasingly compelling and important. Again, realizing such aims is achievable only by leaving the individualist economy for a planned one.

Agrarian associations usually begin with a communal acquisition of fertilizers, fodder, seeds, farming tools and machines, and after some time their influence on the trade in those products starts to grow. As they further develop, agrarian associations, by carrying

2 See Krzywicki – Kwestia rolna [Ludwik Krzywicki, *Kwestia rolna – przełom w produkcji środków spożycia w drugiej połowie XIX wieku*, Warsaw 1903]

out drainages, regulations, experimental fields, afforestation of sandy dunes, subordinate more and more private homesteads to the association. Finally, they expand to the agricultural industry, rearing dairy farms, cheese dairies, bakeries, mills, preserves factories and so on. Even though land cultivation proper remains independent, the association of one industry branch inevitably leads to expanding it toward another, on which the first is based. Running the cooperative agricultural industry in a beneficial way requires increasing intervention of the association council in private homesteads, the providers of the necessary products. That is why, wherever cooperative dairying emerges, some rearing and controlling associations also arise, as happened in Denmark, Canada, Belgium and France. Having their own inspectors, they keep on extending their supervision to particular private business branches that deal in fodder, methods of rearing and health, or cattle species. Wherever cooperative distilleries exist, supervision concentrates on vineyards and potato fields. Similarly, it growingly influences the cooperative charcuteries, preserves factories and other similar workshops, the excess of agricultural products and homesteads in general. Various agrarian associations group into provincial unions and nationwide federations that directly interface with consumers' urban cooperatives within the storehouses. As they enter the market, the cooperative's products have to fulfill certain quality standards and production quotas, making several homesteads further subordinated to the decisions of the collective. Owing to this, they increasingly place greater emphasis on cooperation to match these conditions of production. Next to the joint acquisition associations, others are responsible

for *mutual loans* (the Reiffeisen coffers in Belgium, the “rural coffers” unions in France, Don Gerutti’s “rural coffers” in Italy, and so on), *mutual insurance*, agrarian schools or promoting rural *culture* and many other things. In this way the movement, which originally aims to bolster the property of individual peasants, slowly transforms into the full contradiction of property itself – into an autogenetic development of federal collectivism. It turns into a production system based on consociation and a planned economy, which undermines the current system at its economical and moral fundamentals. Conservatism generates the revolution. Here are some examples to give us an insight into the development of this movement. In France, in 1896, there were about 1,275 syndicates with 423 thousand members. In 1901 this number totaled over 1700 syndicates grouped in 10 provincial unions that consociated 700 thousand members. Through congresses and a Central Union, which gathered 600 unions, they managed to develop a general federal organization and build relations with French and foreign consumers’ cooperatives. Their functions are constantly being added to. Apart from buying tools, seeds and fertilizer (which brought about a reduction of up to 50% in the prices of fertilizers and farming tools) or running various agrarian services, the cooperatives have also developed milk houses, cheese dairies and manufactures of canned goods, sausages, starch, noodles, as well as some bakeries and mills. They are building loan facilities with a down payment, experiment stations and model farms as well as some informational bureaus, migratory agronomists and inspectors. The union in Belleville canton, which has 2352 members, comprising mostly vigneron and small farmers, has expanded vineyards, organized the selling of butter, founded a building society, instituted

conciliatory courts among peasants and mutual aid institutions to look after the elderly, inpatients and orphans. Should anyone in the neighborhood fall ill, the unions look after their crops. The Poligny union, with 1700 members, has organized agricultural classes in elementary schools and insurance against fire and disease. The department union of Loiret, with 7000 members, holds exhibitions on agriculture and lectures about agronomy, vine culture and horticulture and about developing experimental fields. It also organizes mutual insurance for fire, hailstorm and other accidents. Apart from this, it takes care of the conciliatory courts and has organized free legal aid.

In Belgium, according to official state statistics from 1899, there were 638 "farmers' trade unions" with 50,475 members, 623 associations that purchased fertilizers, seeds and tools with 50,375 members, 229 agricultural credit associations (the so-called Reiffeisen coffers) numbering 7,857 farmers and 1,838 non-farmers and 319 dairies (34,305 owners of 87,382 cows). All of them were established, and are currently run, by the cleric party. The law from 1896 does not allow farmers to handle trade and industry. They are able only to buy seeds, fertilizers, machines, cattle, etc. in order to sell it to other members. However, some other associations prove helpful here. In most cases, a parish will have trade unions, some of the Reiffeisen coffers, cooperative dairies, a rearing association, mutual insurance associations and some others. The unions are grouped together in federations that cover provinces. The federation of the socialist, urban cooperatives, which embrace twenty-three producer cooperatives and 166 consumer cooperatives, is also trying to penetrate the countryside. This federation currently possesses

three rural producing associations: dairies in Herfelingen, a tobacco producer *Lion Rouge* in Alost, and chicory production plant *Soleil de Zon*. Besides this, there is one association that buys farming items and a few rural cooperatives. The socialist cooperative in Zon, most of whose members are industrial workers in rural areas, owns a bakery that provides bread to those within a three mile radius, a community house, a library, a cafeteria and some storehouses for eatables and footwear. The footwear is produced in cooperative factories called *Vooruit*. The cooperative in Zon has also expanded to other villages. The dairy in Herfelingen sells milk and butter produced by the cooperative in Brussels.

In 1896 in Switzerland there were two-thousand-five-hundred agricultural associations, 838 cheese dairies, 763 rearing associations, 251 associations for buying proper tools, thirty-nine cooperative distilleries, thirty-two grain associations, eight cooperative brickyards, six butcheries, six cooperative vineyards, etc. In them, petty owners and rural workers made up the great majority. These cooperatives formed one union, based in Winterhur, and a huge central storehouse that provided almost all the necessary farm items. In 1900, sales were worth four million francs and provided two-hundred thousand francs profit. This profit is not paid out to the members, but it becomes part of the Union's common capital. Merchants boycotted the union of farming cooperatives and have forced manufacturers not to sell their products to the cooperatives, which is why goods are mostly imported. Besides this, the Swiss League of Associations (*Schweizerischer Genossenschaftsbund*) exists along with both unions (of agricultural and consumers' cooperatives) and all

other consumers' cooperatives outside the union as fellow members. This league is one that protects consumer interests. It was established under the pressure of deleterious state policies opposed to consumer associations. Influenced by tradespeople fighting against the cooperatives, state officials were forbidden from participating in the cooperatives, upon the order of the general council. It was also established that cooperatives should be treated as trade concerns and accordingly subject to taxes. The League has opposed this outcome. In addition, it has also aimed at getting a revision of the business code, gaining influence on tariff policy to protect consumers' interests, founding a cooperative bank and forging commercial links between rural and urban, domestic or external cooperatives.³ The Birseck cooperative, which is trying to become a general association of people from the local areas, for which reason it has adopted many social tasks and activities, is interesting for a few reasons. Its sphere of activity includes consumption, production, selling products, insurance, a building society, producing and providing electricity for small workshops, education, cantonal policy, community houses, bakeries and so on. It comprises fourteen communities from the Basel village canton, owns twenty-one storehouses and a Basel consumers' cooperative as its trade area. Its fellow members are mostly small-business owners and workers. Both the consumers' cooperative in Basel and that in Birseck abandoned the method of direct administration and decision making at general meetings of members, as they were considered useless for technical and administrative cases, where people are too easily influenced and unable to fully discuss their

3 See: Mutschler, *Le Mouv. Coopératif en Suisse Rev. d'Econ. pol.*: 1902.

choices. Instead, they have adapted the parliamentary system, which currently dominates in the cooperative and workers' union movement in general.

In Denmark, the most developed cooperatives are the dairy cooperatives. The first one was created in 1882. In 1897, there were already 986 associations for one thousand communities, so they are almost in every one of them. Moreover, they produce almost eighty percent of all Danish milk. Those cooperatives have linked together to form an export copartnership and they supply most of the storehouses of the federation of English consumers' cooperatives. They form a center for many other organizations, such as the associations that buy and control cattle. The inspector paid by the associations oversees the barns twice a month, he analyses the cows' conditions, the fodder they're being fed and provides advice on which of them are no longer useful. In addition, there are also cooperatives that breed swine, partly combined in a union that exports eggs to England (in 1896 there were 344 cooperatives with 18,000 members), a few hundred rural consumers' associations, unions to buy fertilizer and seeds, a cooperative sugar refinery, 146 horse riding associations, a company that provides insurance for hailstorms, fire and pestilence, some agricultural and apiarian clubs and an educational association. One in every three homesteads is the property of either a consumers' or a dairy cooperative.

Wage labor is common in most agricultural cooperatives, with some exceptions, such as the dairy cooperatives in Italy, the preserve factories in Rhone and the unions of some vineyards in the Ahru Valley, where the only workers are the members, sometimes

together with their wives and children. Many French unions exist that accept their workers as members, such as the union in Castelnaudary, which has six hundred workers out of one thousand members. The same goes for the Swiss cooperatives. Their attitude towards the farming proletariat has not yet been clearly specified. However, there can be no doubt that this movement of farming cooperatives, which today provides for so many aspects of social life and so deeply undermines current economic and cultural relations, will sooner or later have to progress to the topic of rural workers' interests. In this case, they will be forced to establish specific associations able to fight for this proletariat, associations that aim to improve their living conditions and enable them to achieve economic independence. The rural consumer cooperatives, and even the dairy cooperatives, can already become economic centers, flanked by a number of institutions that organize mutual aid and fight exploitation. Some of them, acting as collective individuals, would even be able to become coowners of the great, cooperative factories, just as the trade unions in England did. One also should take into consideration the fact that the unions, which include increasing numbers of the peasantry, whose living standard and culture they improve, simultaneously facilitate the organization and general struggle of rural workers, freeing them from the risky rivalry of petit holders, who search for easier profit and use wage labor to make up their budget shortfall. And the natural living and cultural proximity of these two rural classes does not allow the associations movement to be restricted to just one of them and not to lead to any subversion in wage relations.

Independently of the consumers and agricultural cooperatives, which form a center for many common social issues by giving them a new basis in economic collectivism, some other associations are developing in modern society; these associations are totally classless, and fight for common interests, but do not consider class struggle. To put it bluntly, there is no single field, nor a single need, in a human's life that does not lead to the creation of a corresponding associations' movement and that would therefore not open onto new types of inter-human relationships based on commonality and the freedom of convergence. Let us recall all those associations that are looking after social hygiene and those fighting alcoholism; those associations for the provision of low-cost flats, for mutual aid in cases of death or illness, as well as associations for fostering working-class gardens (*Ligue du coin Terre et du foyer, Oeuvres de jardins ouvriers*), associations for beautifying the countryside, associations for taking care of children and organizing summer camps, the associations around people's universities and education, lifeguard and firefighting associations, Red Cross associations and, lastly, some scientific, technical and artistic associations – all such associations are in fact the drivers of all civilizational progress. The commonalities they represent also tend to form alliances in larger unions with a view to reaching common goals collectively. In France, for example, three hundred mutual aid associations (the *Mutualités* or *Sociétés de prévoyance*) comprising three million members and a 350 million franc fund, have organized anti-tuberculosis associations in order to support popular hospitals. Similarly, the Paris producers' cooperatives established tuberculosis clinics designed to play an educational role in tuberculosis prevention, as well

as provide medical care, fish oil, raw meat and warm clothing for the inpatients. Also the Social Hygiene Union is preparing to group together associations of mutual aid, abstinence associations, associations for affordable flats, and lastly, international associations for tuberculosis prevention. A plan exists to promote the idea of social health for all people, sending children to villages, starting gardens in working-class districts, building hospitals, flats and so on. Special note must be taken of a new type of association – the so-called “community neighbourhoods” in London.⁴ Such associations have introduced an idea of community based on common living areas, i.e. living in the same district of the city and so they try to maintain a degree of everyday neighborly relationships or share knowledge about the area and its needs. This is why their form is close to that of the institution of the parish, but they are free from state coercion, which is characteristic for the latter. These community neighborhoods are trying to build an organized, collective change for the common health, safety, as well as basic material and cultural needs of the individual. They organize communal kitchens and summerhouses, and have their own doctors and lawyers. These associations may be considered as part of the first movement to attempt to communize the household.

The cooperative movement can be judged in two ways: from a revolutionary perspective or from a natural science perspective. The latter takes nature as the movement’s foundation, viewing it as a factor of development and transfiguration. Revolutionary doctrine has a specific feature – it tries to work over every fact and make it compatible. The logic it employs

4 Editor note. Community neighbourhoods (as translated from the Polish) refers to the cooperative movement also known as the Owenites or Owenism.

is not individual, specific. Upon encountering a new fact, revolutionary doctrine judges it as if they both had the same genesis, and thus was also a doctrine. Objections towards the union-cooperative movement are characterized precisely by this logic. The state socialists promulgating them impose on themselves an ideal of priestly chastity in all practical matters and have not yet set out on the broader road of "positive politics." They deem that cooperatives carry a double burden. First, cooperatives are conservative by nature and ward off any social upheaval and that they seek to look after their own interests, just like every enterprise. Workers who get influenced by cooperatives and become entrepreneurs are not only unprepared for the revolution, but also fear social catastrophe, just like the bourgeoisie and the peasants. Through the cooperatives, they are bound to the existing order and respect it, so they listen to slogans about the final fight but fail to feel its necessity. Second, state socialists charge that cooperatives aim to divide the proletariat into two groups, by categorizing workers by their ability to join cooperatives. Those who are unable to do so include, for example, country workers, the court service, which is still paid partially in products, workers without permanent employment who live from day to day, tramps and the unskilled proletariat, which is unable to organize itself on a regular basis and whose labor force is deemed substandard. Anyone without access to work in cooperatives creates a kind of "fifth state," and their social interests develop in opposition to the interests of elite workers, who are organized in professional unions and consumers' associations.

These charges initially indicate to us that something like a "revolutionary formula" exists and enables a

statement on whether or not a fact is *revolutionary*. The confessor, to take one example, does a similar thing, judging people's conscience in accordance with catechism. Second, a social fact is judged by opponents as if it was something finite, motionless, closed in itself. That is to say, as a doctrine that must always be settled logically, is isolated, and inaccessible to unrelated thoughts, and thus jealously guards its separateness. However, neither cooperatives nor trade unions nor any other similar organizations have any specific ideology, codified slogan or article of faith that might determine any specific direction of their development. These organizations comprise a great variety (as does everything that autogenetically results from life needs). They adapt every demand of the workers' fight, precisely because they do not come from any principles, and no principle leads them through their evolution; thus they are able to appear anywhere that the needs of a particular community are present – they match the general circumstances. They are able to destroy things that, according to their founders, were destined not to be destroyed and carry out social revolution even where the conscious interests of people were striving to fetter it.

The revolution, according to socialist doctrine, basically amounts to an aim to reconfigure the state for collectivism, or to speed up "the general catastrophe" that will come about with the birth of a new state. According to this idea of the revolution, the cooperative is a conservative institution, because it carries out reforms without state interference. Above all, the revolution means to create a new *legal system* and to interfere in existing lawmaking to change it for the sake of the proletariat's well-being, going as far

as a complete reconfiguration of the order. The revolution requires political struggle in the broadest sense, everything from elections to barricades. However, cooperatives try to avoid government mediation. They reform society without reforming the state and thus they withdraw the working class from political struggle and even from the idea itself of "social catastrophe." That is why every people's assembly, insofar as it forms its demands towards the state, whether this is "socialization" or the implementing of an eight hour work day, is a revolutionary fact, even if it fails. On the other hand, meetings of customer associations that implement an eight-hour work day and abolish wage labor in their factories are not a revolutionary fact and are called the mutual aid of the petty bourgeoisie. People's assemblies aim to create a new legal system and new state institutions to destroy the foundations of capitalist order. Cooperatives do not create any new system; they count neither on parliament, nor on cabinets of ministers. So, no revolution can occur without "nationalization" and with this definition in mind one has to judge whether a particular social fact is revolutionary or not.

However, we may put this issue differently and demand something other than a settling of the concept of revolution a priori, according to rules of historical-philosophical theory. Conversely, we can aim to create this concept on the basis of *new* facts, ones simultaneously created by class struggle. That is, not to use the concept of revolution to judge whether the fact is revolutionary, but conversely, to judge the concept on the basis of facts alone. Because the concept of revolution refers to life itself, this demand is truly legitimate, just as is using the induction method to understand those things that do

not come from our thinking. It is legitimate as long as we would like to see what the doctrine has hitherto hidden from us.

This is why every social fact, owing to its existence as "a social fact" pure and simple, includes some conservative features by nature. These features bound it to the entire social environment, adapt it, that are the result of a further branch of events that existed prior to it or that exist contemporaneously to it, and that anchored its existence. Absolute novelty would not emerge and develop in society if it had nothing in common with social life. In a certain sense, the cooperative is a conservative fact. It arises from the eternal fight for prosperity; it adjusts to the mechanism of the capitalist economy, because the fight for prosperity cannot duplicate the patterns set by cavemen or feudal barons. A cooperative conducts its cash operations right where the big trading houses do, because it deals in capitalist commodities, not with the products of future nationalized production. Ultimately, just as with any other contemporary enterprise, a cooperative takes care of earnings, of returns on capital. This is how it can meet the needs, which gave rise to it, to eradicate hardship. This conservativeness is everywhere, in every social movement, even in the most revolutionary political struggles. Every law concerning production, every nationalization, that socialists demand, stems from the same primal pursuit to improve the living conditions of the working masses and must adjust to existing social conditions in order to somehow integrate with capitalist mechanisms, since they would otherwise be impossible.

But in addition to this, in every social fact that shows its autogenetic development, an element of novelty arises - without it, there would be nothing to develop. This element is not only the goal to improve life, but also the ways that make this pursuit real. In state policy on workers, this novel element exists in the tendency to place legal limits on exploitation and have the state intervene as the representative of hired workers. In a strike, however, state policy comes down to limiting exploitation through workers' solidarity and extra-state institutions that regulate working conditions and look after workers. In cooperatives, this element of novelty shows up in the same moral form, thus in looking for well-being by *commonality*, through institutions founded on democratic assemblies that take the market and production into their own hands. But how can we recognize new formations that herald social change?

Some new elements have emerged that blend in with the contemporary social system and expand its durability and power, thereby weakening or destroying those moral factors, and fostering the system's disintegration. By way of example, Russian factory legislation truly restricts exploitation to some degree, but is by no means a symptom of a simultaneous process of state democratization and the workers' taking control of the means of production. Compared to the unbridled exploitation of the previous eras, it is a new fact. Yet, it contains no revolutionary tendency, as it does not aim to destroy any fundamental capitalist dynamic. On the contrary, we can easily imagine capitalism in its full development, but restricted to the limit by the humanitarian guardianship of the tsarist police. Whereas any new formation, if it wants to develop, requires the essential destruction of

capitalist elements and heralds social upheaval. *The revolutionary fact can be recognized in that first and foremost it destroys something essential in the contemporary social system.*

So, the development of consumer cooperatives cannot in any way be reconciled with the capitalist market, with its omnipotent monopoly of the business elite. Neither can it be reconciled with the existence of a merchant class and the trade-industrial crises it propels. This is known once we realize that the development of cooperatives inevitably leads to a collectivist production devoid of monopolies. In every context, the movement of cooperatives creates a social dilemma. Either it will develop or capitalism will continue to exist. The development of cooperatives and behavior of capitalism becomes a clear *reductio ad absurdum*, namely capitalism without monopoly or wage labor. That is why the cooperative is “a social fact” with revolutionary tendencies. We find this same revolutionary feature in labor unions, when we consider that their fundamental tendency is to enable workers to seize capitalist enterprises, a tendency that could not develop without reconfiguring the basis of present production and destroying wage labor. We also find it in farming associations that gradually transform agriculture and connected parts of production, including the unplanned, competitive and mercantile individual economy into a type of collective and socially organized economy.

The objection that associations can gather only a specific part of the proletariat, as a kind of workers’ aristocracy, and that associations have their natural, impassable limits of development, fails to consider that the development of associations is not distinct

from social life. The development of associations influences the labor market, the commodity market, the general culture of the country and, ultimately, the whole moral and philosophical atmosphere. Thus this development indirectly reconfigures forces, as well as the conditions of life and struggle, even for groups that have not entered the world of cooperation. The market's dependence on consumer associations, the shortening of the work day by labor unions, a reduction in the competitiveness of wage labor, and when it comes to the countryside by the development of farming associations, are living examples of collective solidarity, economics and resistance. All this goes toward overcoming the lawlessness of exploitation that weighs upon the non-professional proletariat or the helpless masses of house industry workers. We also have to take into account the fact that different types of contemporary workers' associations exist that are yet to gain an awareness of their historical role. They do not use every means at their disposal in order to wage a systematic struggle to improve the living conditions of weakened workers' groups. What is more, it must be understood that, in the cooperative movement, some new forms and figures of associations undoubtedly exist. Such associations are aimed at today's helpless, exploited masses, because this whole movement is not a social formation, which is withdrawn and finite, but is a process of permanent creation resulting in some new methods and bonfires of the hitherto unforeseen revolution.

The objection that "self-help associations tear the proletariat from political struggle" is a charge that one can only ask to be formulated more accurately. What it indeed means is that they tear the proletariat from political struggle insofar as this struggle aims

to *extend the state*. But what emerges from such associations is a new form of *stateless politics*, one more consistent with the spirit of democratic cooperativism. Further, this new form is the only one that truly responds to libertarian and moral ideas, ones that, in their seedbeds, are concealed within the proletariat itself.

**Airi Triisberg and
Tomas Marcinkevičius**

Looking for Autonomist Politics in the Baltic States

**Historical Discontinuity,
Slippery Concepts, and a
Bus Full of Germans**



This article is a creative transcript of a conversation between us. We are two “Baltic” comrades, Airi Triisberg from Estonia and Tomas Marcinkevičius from Lithuania. Airi has been actively involved in organizing against precarious labor conditions in the cultural sector, contributed to the social center Ülasel2 in Tallinn, and participated in the queer feminist counterpublic sphere. Tomas has been active in radical left-wing politics in Lithuania since the early 2010s: from taking part in the LUNI Free University and website anarchija.lt to being on the staff of left wing news portal GPB.lt and the council of the May 1 Labor Union (G1PS). He was also involved with the Emma Social Centre in Kaunas, which is reflected in part of his research on autonomous spaces in Lithuania and Central/Eastern Europe, and in this conversation.

The Baltic states are a weird region located on the margins of Eastern Europe, Northern Europe and Central Europe: not truly any of them, but with traits of all three. Therefore, we chose to have this discussion amongst ourselves, since our contexts are quite similar, or at least, recognizable to one another. The Baltics are also a weird place to be organizing anything “radical” as neither “Western” nor “Eastern” political concepts really seem at home around here. Here is our speculative journey into the newish concept of “Baltic autonomism.”

Airi: Hi Tomas! We want to discuss two questions: how to narrate leftist histories in the Baltic region? How to conceptualize autonomist politics in this post-socialist context? To start things off I can share a story, which in my opinion tells quite a lot about continuities and discontinuities within the left across different regions and times.

A few years ago, I received a message from my friends in Germany: "Three comrades from Berlin are travelling through the Baltics, can you host them?" I said yes and, as usual, invited my guests to give a talk while they were in Tallinn. We arranged this talk at very short notice and assembled as a small and intimate group in the social center Üläse.

It was surprisingly hard to find a common ground. One gap of communication was produced through our age difference: my guests from Berlin were around seventy years old whereas friends from Tallinn were mostly in their mid-twenties. Another gap was produced through different experiences of doing leftist politics. For those young people in Tallinn, activism meant organizing cultural events in the self-organized community center. For my guests, it meant mobilizing mass movements and building alternative solidarity economies. The differences between East and West were also present. I was trying to bridge these gaps and mediate the conversation, but I constantly felt that I was failing. Until there was a moment when my guests - whom I asked to share their experiences in the autonomist movement in Germany and whose storytelling had just landed in the early seventies - said: "We, the 1968 generation, were the first generation of the radical left in Germany since the twenties." I responded to this statement: "Look, here is finally one thing that we have in common: We are the first generation of the radical left in Estonia since the twenties." This was the connection between us. We were both from the first generation of the radical left that had emerged after a rupture.

As far as I know, the first attempt to mobilize an organized leftist movement in post-Soviet Estonia took

place in 2006 when the anarchist movement *Punamust* (RedBlack) was formed. This movement was mobilized through a punk forum on the internet. People who became affiliated with Punamust were very young, many were still high school students. Some of the activists were born around 1991, the year that the Soviet Union was dissolved. I think there is something symbolic in the fact that the first generation of post-Soviet left in Estonia overlaps with the first post-Soviet generation who did not experience the Soviet Union at all, or who remember it only through childhood memories from the eighties.

Discursively this anarchist mobilization in Estonia was very much influenced by the alterglobalization movement. Punamust organized a big number of street protests, typically solidarity actions following the key events of the alterglobalization movement, such as protests against IMF, WTO or G8 summits. Most of those actions did not explicitly relate to the local context, and the number of protestors remained very small. One of the bigger mobilizations was in November 2006 when George W. Bush visited Estonia. This provided an opportunity to organize a demonstration against war in Iraq, which brought together more protestors. In addition to street actions, Punamust focused on the dissemination of knowledge. The journal *Alternatiiv* published translations of anarchist authors, and film screenings organized by Punamust were well attended.

I find it quite interesting to look back at this time from today's perspective. If someone had asked me in 2007 how the alterglobalization movement manifests itself in the Baltic region, I would have answered that there is no such movement here. At the time I felt that the movement was happening elsewhere – in Seattle, Genova, Prague, Rostock, and St Petersburg. People from the Baltic region sometimes went and joined these big mass mobilizations, and then came back home and expressed solidarity with the movement. I think that was how many of us felt, as if we were not really part of it. But meanwhile I have learned that a social movement is something other than a mass mobilization; it has a more complex structure. From today's perspective, I would say that the alterglobalization movement was very present in the Baltic region. It had a variety of manifestations, ranging from movement politics to cultural practices. Ironically, I can say that now with more certainty because when the alterglobalization movement ended and transformed into other struggles, certain forms of organizing also disappeared in Estonia. From this distance in time one can see much more clearly how connected they were. Tomas, how would you narrate the recent history of leftist movement politics in Lithuania?

Tomas: I think it's a bit earlier that "beginnings" can be pinpointed in Lithuania. There was this famous and influential Vilnius squat called *Kablys* (The Hook) in the former Railway Workers' Cultural Palace. The building itself and a punk club in its basement still remain. So, it was already in the nineties, and early two thousands that there was a movement of sorts that was, of course, influenced by punk culture. People would go to the West and bring back some political ideas, or zines from other squats, or touring bands would bring them

... I'd say a lot of influence was from Poland, because they got it first, from Germany, and then it moved to Lithuania, especially Vilnius.

A second, very "open" beginning happened in the mid-two thousands, when the anarchija.lt website was established, as well as a group around it, and a somewhat overlapping group around the LUNI Free University, which would hold its lectures and seminars in various "unexpected" spaces, including cafes, former and current factories, parks, etc. Both of these milieus were clearly anarchist and quite a big deal in terms of publicity and visibility. "Anarchism" was something new in Lithuania and "leftist, but not communist," so to say, not "traditional socialism," and therefore it got a lot of media attention. In the meantime, there was also the New Left '95 (NK95), which was more intellectual, more "traditional Marxist" - not in the "orthodox" sense, but more similar to the "academic Marxists" that one can meet abroad.

All three of these, I'd say, played their part in the beginnings of what we could maybe call "autonomist" politics, but I'm not sure that the name really fits. I think some people really saw it as autonomist, at least several persons who were quite conscious that they wanted to do autonomist politics. On the other hand, I did not really find a clear and unitary definition of autonomism even in books on autonomism. There's Italian autonomism, together with workerism, then South American autonomism, North American, German autonomism. The latter is more related to the squatting movement, urban struggles, antifascism, etc. Many people would not call themselves "autonomist" at all. I was thinking about a name for "this kind of politics." It could be a bit pretentious, but perhaps it

could be called “dialectical left,” or “polylectical left,” in the sense that it’s a bit mixed and merged, a sort of smorgasbord of leftist ideas, interplaying, disagreeing with each other, but at the same time agreeing on the general framework and creating something . . .

Perhaps, we should talk about some sort of “Baltic autonomism,” or “Eastern European autonomism,” or “Eastern European left” . . . I think the naming part is really complicated, and whenever we are trying to put it in the framework of “just autonomism,” it kind of escapes. Like, when I was doing research for my unfinished dissertation, I asked some people: “What does autonomy mean to you?” And they would be like “It means nothing, I would never use that term, it’s a term that you brought to me, it’s never been in my head.”

I think that’s an inherent flaw in the very topic of this book and the topic of our conversation. We’d probably need a huge historical, ethnological, and sociopolitical study, just to put these events and attempts at left politics into some sort of a frame. But now we don’t have tools for that, so maybe we can simply talk about things that happened?

Airi: But let’s take a moment to speak about terminology here. I also feel that my experiences in Estonia don’t fit comfortably into commonplace leftist vocabularies. But intuitively and on the everyday level, things are pretty simple. We are constantly making differentiations between factions within the left. I mostly use three terms when I speak about the radical left in the Baltics: anarchism, autonomism and movement politics. I sometimes use these terms interchangeably even if they are not identical, because there are strong overlaps.

Autonomism is not a common term in Estonia, few people associate with it. In my own political vocabulary, autonomism is quite central because two strands in my political biography are linked to autonomist politics. I was politicized within autonomist contexts in Germany, and I was influenced by the EuroMayDay movement and postoperaist struggles against precarious labor. But similarly to you, when I invite my comrades in Tallinn to conceptualize our common experience, autonomism appears as an abstract term to which most people do not relate. Anarchism is much more relatable. For example, the self-identification of Punamust was with anarchism.

I think that the anarchist self-positioning has something to do with the anticommunist *Denkverbot* (a prohibition on thinking) characteristic to postsocialist societies. Socialism and communism became taboo subjects after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Anarchism was the most neutral term, because it had not been part of the official narrative in the Soviet Union. Anarchism is not even leftist by definition, for example in post-Soviet Belarus, there has been a notable presence of nationalist anarchism, which is more aligned with right wing politics. In Estonia, there was a public imaginary around anarchism that associated it with melancholic punk music and individualist expressions of dissent. I remember that the self-identification as “armchair anarchist” was quite popular among intellectuals in the nineties. From this armchair position, one could express some abstract critique towards statehood. I can only imagine how unwelcome such critique must have been in the newly reestablished nation state. But these armchair anarchists would never get their ideas challenged and their nerves wrecked with some actual collective practice.

Tomas: I was talking with some comrades about why we started as anarchist or autonomist. It's the same idea. First of all, for some people, their socialization kind of eradicated the idea of communism or socialism from their psyche and replaced it with an effigy of something outdated and even evil. I started as an anarchist, but the older I get, the redder I get, and the less I am black.

Still, when we talked about it, we realized that there was no other way for us to get into politics. Back then, if you didn't want to be in some marginal Stalinist group or didn't want to associate with some ugly old men who shouted barely understandable slogans on the street and are possibly spying for Russia, there were few choices. If you wanted to have any legitimacy, you'd go with anarchism. It's actually quite . . . easy (?) being an anarchist in Lithuania or the Baltic states, it does not require a lot of attachment to certain ideas, you can be anything, it's a mix-and-match. You can be individualist, collectivist, whatever you want: "Let's all talk about things." It's not a very strict position.

Airi: I agree with that description. Collective practices are mostly shaped by a mixture of influences and there are always some contradictions inside those groups. I am thinking of the street guerilla group, Prussakov Bicycle Society, that was active in Estonia in the early 2000s. They were using creative forms of protests and tactical media activism in order to address issues around public space and urban traffic. For example, they organized this hilarious action in 2006: a group of people gathered early in the morning and parked flowerpots and bicycles in a parking lot which was located on the central square of the city.

When the car owners arrived, there was no parking space left. The situation escalated into conflict, which was shown in the evening news, just next to images of the city mayor of Tallinn planting a tree on the occasion of the establishment of the European Green Capital Award.

For me, the interventions by the Prussakov Bicycle Society are so evidently linked with the carnivalesque forms of protest that were developed in the context of the alterglobalization movement. But at the same time, I am not even sure whether Prussakov Bicycle Society can or should be included into the leftist narrative. They would never explicitly position themselves on the left. Instead they were using various camouflage tactics, somewhat similar to Pro-Test Lab in Vilnius, which used the concept of “pro-test” instead of “protest.” Pro-Test Lab was a campaign initiated in 2005 against the privatization of the cinema Lietuva, the last remaining Soviet era cinema in Vilnius. This campaign brought together a diverse group of leftist actors, students, cultural workers and neighbors who organized humorous and creative street actions in order to critique the privatization of public space. However, rather than positioning themselves as protestors, the campaign tried to re-signify disobedience and leftist practice in a more playful way and to create a positive meaning around it by emphasizing the aspect of pro-test and pro-experimentation. I believe that these choices had something to do with allergic reactions to leftist vocabulary that were common in postsocialist societies. What is the point of creating turmoil around an identification as leftist? This would only invoke negative reactions and direct attention away from the actual issues that need to be addressed. When the Prussakov Bicycle Society was

trying to attract people into taking collective action, they were mainly appealing to the fun factor. There was a creative spirit around them. Whether they were anarchist or autonomist, it is hard to say. But somehow, it happened that the techniques they were using coincided with the creative forms of direct action that were also widely used by the alterglobalization movement during the same period.

Tomas: The question of the relation between tactics and political identity is very interesting. On our portal, named GPB (*Gyvenimas per brangus*, freely translatable to “Life Is Too Expensive”), there’s this recent article, in English, on how AirBnB is using Saul Alinsky’s methods to organize “grassroots” groups to lobby for its interests. The main question remains: Can tactics be seen as a marker of political identity? Not always, but in a way, at least in our context, they probably can. Ok, let’s say people don’t call themselves “autonomist,” but I see quite a lot of autonomist action in Lithuania. These creative actions are an example of it, as well. Explosive, spectacular, tactical actions are used usually just because we don’t have the numbers. You don’t have the people in their thousands to go to the streets, so you have to do a media spectacle, something “new,” etc.

We just have to remember the 2016 protests against the new (and worse) Labor Code, and how we slept on the stairs of the Government building in Vilnius, illegally occupying one of the main squares. Some people from the trade unions after that said: “What we had been trying to do in our negotiation rooms and with our publicity campaigns for two years, these youngsters came and did in two weeks.” This is, of course, a huge overexaggeration, but I think there is a grain of truth in it.

First of all, we attracted a lot of media attention to a topic that was covered by the media, but rarely presented from the side of the workers or the unions. The discussion around the new Labor Code had been quite peaceful, as if it had already been passed, and all that was needed were some guidelines on how to adapt it to everyday working conditions. We managed to bring back some antagonism to this discourse, and to bring the discussion back to the starting point, ie. whether we need a new Labor Code at all.

Some sources from the then-President Dalia Grybauskaitė's environment said that it was partly because of us that she decided to veto the law. The Parliament, of course, rejected the veto and passed the new Labor Code anyway, but omitted several sensitive articles, including the zero hours contracts.

Another effect was that we contributed to at least partly lifting the topic of workers' rights from the "unsexy" zone. You know, "the old proletarians from the provinces do not want progress to come to Lithuania, all they want is for the Soviet times to come back," and so on and so forth . . . And suddenly these young people with bright faces and educated sensibilities join in, and it all seems a little different.

So, this is a trace of autonomist politics, "how to do more with less," basically, but it's usually more of a necessity than a desire. I would actually rather prefer thousands of people on the streets than constantly trying to come up with the new brilliant idea of how "creative" our protest of thirty individuals has to be. Another trait that is also quite autonomist is that most radical politics are not purely anarchist in Lithuania. It reminds me of the old Italian autonomist

thesis that it's the working class itself that is going to make the revolution, not the party. It's not purely like that here, but the idea that politics have to stem from the desires of the group that is taking an active part in the process is very much present. However, leadership and formalities are somewhat allowed in this quest to create a united, stable, and powerful movement. There's also the idea that we do not force it, if we see that the power is not there, we stop and wait and think how to get more of it, but never set up some sort of an *avant-garde* party that would "push the course of history."

And the last trait is emphasis on space. There has always been some sort of organizing space, either in Vilnius or in Kaunas, or both. It would change and transform, but there would always be a space that creates and maintains a group identity and keeps things going on. By now, I really don't know if that is a good thing or a bad thing. When I was doing my research about autonomous spaces in Kaunas, I got to the point where I started asking people: "But did we really need those spaces?" Because at the beginning, we didn't really consider this question, we were just like "of course we're gonna squat or have a social center."

Airi: I would add grassroots organizing and collective practice as relevant traits within autonomist politics. We are not skilled in collective work, therefore learning and negotiating about collectivity are emancipatory practices. But then again, not every grassroots initiative is autonomist.

In Estonia, liberal civil society has also actively developed in the past decades. For me, this is also a

potential line of differentiation within the left. Some groups choose the movement structure instead of making the pragmatic choice of establishing NGOs and becoming dependent on state or EU funding which shapes and dictates the contents of the work and limits the imagination. Others specialize in single issue politics and become more professionalized in advocacy and lobby work. Yet what is specialization? It is a function of capitalist division of labor in which you become an expert in one field and stop seeing the broad picture. You don't turn up at the actions organized by others anymore, because you're too busy doing your own thing, focusing on single issue politics, losing solidarity.

In this sense, I do not want to idealize grassroots organizing structures. In Estonia, they are usually short-lived campaigns that last for a few weeks or months and then stop. After a while, a slightly different composition of people assembles again to organize another campaign. On the one hand, there is certain continuity because these initiatives are driven more or less by the same people, but on the other hand these structures are extremely fragile. We have not learned to create autonomist structures that are more resilient.

Tomas: I guess the issue of creating resilient structures is quite a lasting one, especially when, as you have mentioned, everyone's "doing their own thing." To me, this also seems like an issue that is related to a certain type of subjectivity, namely the "overeducated" activist: very insightful and sensitive to the circumstances, but at the same time highly individualized and even, to an extent, timid.

I would say that, at least in the sense of wishful thinking, a weak parallel with Italian autonomist politics has surfaced in Lithuania in the relation between struggle and education. You know, how from the 1960s to the 1970s, the Italian autonomist intellectuals would not go and get employed in the factories, but they would have their cadre there. These agents would bring back the news, would tell them what is happening in the factory, what is being done, etc., and the intellectuals would then provide some theoretical or tactical background to the workers. All in all, it would be a relation of intense and productive collaboration, but it would differ from, say, *narodniki*, in that the Italian communist/autonomist intellectuals of the time would not “become” factory workers.¹

I was putting up our photos and a couple of sentences about each member of the GIPS (May 1 Labor Union) council, and noticed that almost everybody has a Masters or even a PhD. On the other hand, it has never become a “reading group” (even though reading groups are arranged from time to time, of course). There’s always a desire to go broader, not necessarily “to the masses,” but just not to get stuck, to get involved, to organize inside and outside of our circles. Still, very important questions remain not fully answered, such as: What do you do when you’re overeducated? How do you do your politics?

Airi: In Estonia, there is occasional self-reflection about who is the activist subject and how these subject positions shape our politics. What does it mean when the antiracist discourse is dominated by

1 *Narodniki* is the plural for a member of the Narodnik movement in nineteenth century Russia. Agrarian socialists, they often lived in peasant communities. The term is meant here in the sense of “going to the people.”

white voices? What kind of feminist politics is done by activists who are extremely well educated but who cannot understand Russian, the biggest local minority language?

When I think about recent developments in Lithuania and the trajectory from GPB to GIPS, I get the impression that the question of material conditions is very present. In Estonia, the situation is a bit different. If you want to initiate something new and get people behind it, it is easiest to reach out to the feminist mobilization base. For example, when the far right came to power in Estonia in 2019, the street protests were mobilized through queer and feminist networks. It was never explicitly manifested to the general public, but inside the group, everyone knew that half of the team were queers, and the majority of the team were feminists. There were only a few people who came from other contexts and perhaps did not recognize that from the start. For me, this example shows the strength of feminist and queer politics in Estonia. The history of feminist organizing has a different trajectory than anarchist or autonomist politics, but there are also some overlaps. Currently, feminism is a very important foothold on which new initiatives can be built. It is pretty easy to activate the feminist mobilization base, but the hard limit comes with class struggle. Organizing around working conditions is somehow not urgent enough, there is no collective energy to do something together.

When I was active in the Üläse social center, there was a strong division along the lines of class, ethnicity and gender. In the early evenings, the predominantly Estonian or English-speaking queer-feminist publics gathered for semi-academic cultural events: film

screenings, talks, discussions, social gatherings. In the later hours, the predominantly Russian-speaking youth assembled for hardcore punk concerts. Üläse is the only leftist space in Tallinn with a strong presence of working class youth, working poor, and Russian speaking youth. However, organizing against exploitative working conditions does not happen there either. It's the loud music that brings people together, the joy of blasting your brains out after finishing the day at the workplace you resent or hate. Üläse is the one space in Estonia that gets no recognition whatsoever from the liberal civil society or from the art and cultural sector. And I think it is because the people who are organized there do not resemble the "good citizen."² They are not attempting to improve or reform liberal democratic society. This is how citizenship politics in Estonia works - not every resident is a citizen, and not every politically active citizen is considered a good citizen.

Tomas: But it doesn't always have to be only about explicit efforts to organize against exploitation. A place to bash your brains out to punk music, to relax, to socialize, to feel, so to say, autonomous, is important by itself. I would even say that we, "the activists," risk becoming a lot like those "good citizens" with their goody-two-shoes desire to "improve society." I've been in situations where people that I once organized with would avoid me, cross the street upon seeing me. As I understood it, I was sort of a "cop" for them: "Ah shit, here he comes again, he'll for sure ask about how I'm doing at work and if I'm organizing," they'd probably think.

2 *Good Citizen* is a publication issued by the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, a central actor in the civil society of Estonia.

The paradigm from which to evaluate our successes and failures is exactly what remains after the movement, after some sort of action or organizing point, what spaces, structures, and institutions are established. Now there's GPB, now there's GIPS, now there's Kaunas Pride – not sure if *autonomist*, but for sure autonomous. So, things, political actions, leave some residues that might turn into institutions. How they are doing after that, is another question, since those institutions are not always successful in what they want to do, sometimes they become things-in-themselves, or not, etc.

But autonomism and autonomous organizing has this aim of becoming self-sustaining. Not necessarily to “create jobs” for ourselves – which is, in my opinion, also a good thing – but more like what needs of ours can be satisfied by the structures that we have created. So, for example, when I was thinking about the Emma social center in Kaunas, I thought about it this way: What can we ourselves get from our social center? It became a cultural space, so OK, we get our cultural needs satisfied, at least partly and sometimes quite to an extent, since there is not much more to do in Kaunas, to be honest. But what else have we got? Did we get cheaper food, or a space for education, did we get social security, healthcare, accommodation, etc.? I think we always need to think about that. If the state or general society does not satisfy some of your needs, what can you build to make sure they are satisfied?

And about Kaunas Pride . . . It would feel a bit unfair if I were to talk about it too much, because I did not take part in organizing it, but the people in Kaunas organized an autonomous Pride! Without corporations,

without support of politicians, without even a legal body – they used our trade union, G1PS, as a legal entity for it. Funnily enough, any liberals who otherwise support LGBTQ+ rights did not even take part in the parade, since: “It was organized by commies, who were using poor LGBT people for their propaganda purposes.” And still, it took place and participation was quite numerous, around three thousand people took part, the day went great. It was a public proof that you can do things without that much of an institutional background, if you have a group of people who really want to do it.

That’s also, in my opinion, one of the differences between autonomism and anarchism: the autonomist idea is that you can and should build up your autonomy in the system, but that you cannot escape the system itself. You still have to play by some of the rules and see how to act from within them. You know, like Omar from *The Wire* would say: “All in the game.” I’d say that autonomists do care about the ethics of what they do, but there is very little of what could be called “morality,” that is the difference.

Airi: We started from the question of how to narrate the recent history of leftist radical politics in the Baltic region. We hesitated whether autonomism is the most accurate frame to conceptualize it, but both of us agreed that anarchism has played an important role. For me, this raises again the question of continuities and discontinuities. The history of anarchism in the Baltic region is much longer than two or three decades. In the early twentieth-century, anarchists were not only very active but also well networked. I have come across stories of how anarchists from Riga were hiding from the authorities in Tartu. I am

speaking here about the Czarist period when both Estonia and Latvia were part of the Russian Empire. It is actually quite astonishing how much state repression contributed to the formation of activist networks. During the revolutionary years 1905-1907, the authorities were displacing revolutionary activists into smaller cities. That was exactly how revolutionary knowledge was transported from the centers into the peripheries. I will provide another example: in 1906, a large number of revolutionaries were deported to Siberia. Among them was feminist social democrat Marta Lepp, who writes in her memoirs how she met comrades from every corner of the empire there, especially from the peripheries. According to these memoirs, she spent an intense summer in Tobolsk, impressed by the beauty of the river Irtysh, arguing about revolutionary politics at the campfire. She then escaped to continue political work.³

These old stories are actually not well-known in the anarchist contexts of Estonia. There is no leftist scholarship that might research the history of anarchism or other movements. There is no collective narrative about what existed before 2006. There is also no discussion of how today's anarchism differs from the past. This leads me to the question of whether the nineties and the two thousands were the beginning of the Western left's reception in the Baltic region. Are we reproducing the narrative of Western left when we discuss whether anarchism in the Baltic region is closer to Italian autonomism or German autonomism? How come we are not debating whether this anarchism still carries influences from Bakunin

3 Marta Lepp aasta romantika, järellained, lõppvaatus. [The Romance of 1905, Aftermath, Last Act] Eesti Päevalehe kirjastus: 2010 [1905].

and Kropotkin? I think that even the reference to the alterglobalization movement is essentially Western, even if that movement started with the Zapatista uprising and aspired to be global.

Tomas: Once, I talked to a good friend and comrade of mine about this, asking the question: Did we just take “Western modes of organizing” and try to apply them in Lithuania? And she said: “Yeah, in a way.” We got some models of organization and we tried them out, to see what suits us and what doesn’t, what works here and what doesn’t.

And then about this historical continuity that is not present here: yes, that is because of the Soviet Union. But it doesn’t have to be this way. For example, one member of G1PS is in his fifties-sixties, and he was an anarcho-syndicalist already in the seventies and eighties, he would write articles on anarcho-syndicalism for national newspapers during the events of the early nineties.

So, it’s not like these people did not exist in the Soviet Union. But if we want to find them, and if we want to revive the continuity, we have to deal with the Soviet Union. And that is a huge task, to make this part of history more nuanced and to extract some things from that period. The late Soviet period is very important: If we want to build something more “authentic,” movements that are more “ours,” and better reflect the feelings of people around us, we need to break with the idea of “the big break of 1990.” I’m not saying it was not a big break, it was huge, but it’s not like time itself stopped and waited for the USSR to collapse. We need to see these things from a *longue-duree* perspective.

That's why I also don't feel that comfortable with the discourse of "the beginning of the left in Baltic states." There's never a beginning to the left! Even when there are no youngsters that organize themselves into organizations and start doing "political stuff," there's always somebody striking, somebody fighting for better life and work conditions for themselves and those around them, somebody that holds dissenting left-wing views to the hegemony . . . There's always that one anarcho-syndicalist guy in the Soviet Union in the seventies.

Airi: I agree. I am always very distrustful when something is claimed to be the first or the only one. My first reaction is to ask what has been forgotten, omitted, or pushed to the margins, knowingly or unknowingly. But yet, here I am claiming that the first post-Soviet generation in Estonia was also the first generation of the radical left after decades of rupture. In Estonia, we do not know those persons who were anarcho-syndicalists in the seventies. They may have existed but we do not know about them, and they are certainly not part of our networks today. So, this remains a question about continuity and discontinuity rather than winning the debate about who invented the left. And of course, I am also aware that completely different continuities exist in Russia, the former Yugoslavia or even Lithuania. Another aspect that I want to clarify is that the two thousands in Estonia were certainly not the beginning of leftist politics. They were not even the (new) beginning of anarchism because anarchist counter-culture already existed in the eighties in connection with punk music. I would say the two thousands were the beginning of autonomist movement politics. The formation of PunaMust signified a shift from cultural

forms of anarchist self-articulation towards political organizing. And it also signified a shift in the forms of political organizing – PunaMust was not a political party, trade union or NGO, but a movement. The period between 2006–2008 was a very intense period of organizing, and it became a springboard for many new initiatives. The recent history of leftist movement politics in Estonia cannot be told without going back to this period.

I am currently interviewing political organizers in the post-Soviet and postsocialist region. I am interested in their political biographies, so I usually start the conversation with the question: “How did you become politicized?” Many answers include a component of living or studying in the West – because leftist politics has a more neutral connotation in the West, it was possible to develop a positive relation to it. In my research I want to bring attention to the connections that leftist initiatives in the post-Soviet and postsocialist space have with each other. I have been looking for examples that would break the narrative of learning from the West. Can you bring such examples from the Lithuanian context?

Tomas: There’s always something from Russia. I remember when we were squatting for a short time in Kaunas, we were screening films about squats in other countries, to gather inspiration and to introduce the concept to local people, etc. And we watched this film about squatting in Russia, which was very DIY, raw, and had interesting stories from Moscow, St Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and other, smaller Russian cities. And then we were like: “Shit, if they can do it in Russia, we can for sure do it here.”

Now in Lithuania many comrades are educated, for example, in the Central European University, CEU. Now it's being moved to Vienna, so that's kind of over, but before they would study in Budapest, which was a very Western-style university in a very Central-Eastern European environment. So, it's always a fusion, and concepts and modes of action or organization get diluted over time. If a Pole got it from Germany, and a Lithuanian got it from a Pole, and a Latvian got it from a Lithuanian, and they all adapted it for their environment, in time, we have at least several modes of the same concept or idea, sometimes very different from the "initial" one.

And also, there's a lot of healthy skepticism towards the West and Western ideas around me. It's not that we'd reject anything that comes from the West outright, but the usual stance is: "Yeah, it all sounds good, but let's see if and how it works here." Which is quite contrary to what I saw in Prague, when I lived there for a year.⁴

Prague was one of the few places I've been to in Eastern Europe, if not the only one, where autonomism was a commonly used term, a conscious self-identification, and also a political faction, "competing" with anarchism, Trotskyism, Stalinism, etc. And then I would go to, say, a protest against, say, some anti-abortion march, and there would be six local people there when I arrived. So, I'd say, "shit, there are so few of us, perhaps we should call it all off," to which a response would follow: "No, no, no, don't worry, there's a bus of activists coming from Dresden right now." A crazy idea,

4 This whole story is probably unfair to the Czechs, since I did not know too many of them, only lived there for a short while, and struggled with the language. So, let's not forget that this is only anecdotal evidence from my own experience.

but if you really have to wait for a bus full of Germans for your protest to happen, perhaps it's not worth doing it at all?

Airi: For me, the most inspiring conversation partners have been organizers of Emma social center in Kaunas, especially during the period when I was active in Ülase social center in Tallinn. At that time, our core team in Tallinn was three to five people whereas Emma's team was bigger. I often felt that we were dealing with similar questions and challenges. Talking to people who were running a social center in Germany or Italy did not feel very useful for me. Many standard things that are self-evident over there, simply don't work in Tallinn at all. When talking to people from Emma, I did not need to explain the social context, we could jump right into the conversation on how to develop strategies that work in the local context. Talking to people from Emma felt like we were holding an Ülase assembly but simply with more people than usual. When Emma would try out something new, this would be useful knowledge for us - if it works out there, it is likely to succeed in Tallinn as well. Meanwhile these two contexts are not so easily comparable anymore, because Emma has developed a strong mobilization base. Nowadays, much more is possible in Kaunas than in Tallinn. I find that aspect also very encouraging because in Estonia there exists a widespread belief that radical politics is not possible due to the specific historical and political - post-Soviet - circumstances. The example of Kaunas proves that creating a movement is very possible. It simply requires organizers who take pleasure in doing politics together.

Lexicon

**Tomas
Marcinkevičius**

**Autonomous
Action**

First of all, this definition of autonomous action is not necessarily very precise. It is based mostly on my personal theoretical knowledge of “Italian,” “German,” and “North American” autonomisms of the twentieth century, as well as practical participation in “Polish” and “Lithuanian” (“Baltic?”) autonomisms of the early twenty-first century.

As the “classic” Italian autonomism goes, represented at first by Tronti et al. and then by the likes of Dalla Costa, Bifo, and Negri, the working class is very much at the center of its own history. How is that different from “orthodox” Marxism? It’s different, because the working class is *very much* at the center of its own and the world’s history.

Italian autonomists urged us all to abandon the notion that we are but pawns in this game of capital, swayed to and fro by its flows and waiting for an opportune chance to resist. No, they said, the working class is exactly what *creates* capital, there can be no capital without workers, hence, it’s in our collective hands to act with it as we see fit. In other, well known words, “you don’t need the boss, the boss needs you.” And, no matter how much capital would desire to get rid of workers as such (as we can see, very intensively, nowadays), it can never succeed.

This, of course, extends, albeit in different and more nuanced ways, to other dialectics of power. As we all know, “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” and the Global North would soon croak under its white man’s burden without the Global South. For purposes of convenience, here, let’s simply call all

these groups and classes, without whose labor their “superiors” would soon wither and die, “workers.” So, when workers feel powerless to resist their oppressors, the feeling is, of course, very real, no doubt about it; however, it should be regarded not as a “normal state of things,” but as a huge anomaly. To paraphrase alien king Lrrr from “Futurama,” “why does not the proletariat, the largest of the classes, simply eat the other ones?” And it’s the task of workers themselves, sometimes even outside of “their” parties, their unions, and, most importantly, the phantom of the “broader society,” to correct this anomaly.

For *action*, this means that protests, strikes, movements, and so on, start and end with those whom they are *about*. Usually, they are also organized by members of the group in question. Not that unions, parties, or the very same “broader society” are forbidden to take part in them, but they must never forget where the actual center of power is and should remain.

Is that such a revolutionary principle; is it even worth talking about it? After all, the principle of “nothing about me without me” is much older than the word “autonomism,” and, in the context of progressive (and, nowadays, sometimes even reactionary) politics, the order of who should speak and who should wait their turn is paid much attention to.

Well, yes, but no. It was a revolutionary idea in the West in the 1960s and 1970s, when stagnant parties and unions, compromised by their compromises with “big politics,” could not reflect the needs and desires of those that they were meant to represent. And nowadays, much of this “order of priority” is just for

show, but not for reality. In my native Lithuania, there is a thing called a “trilateral council,” with members of centralized trade unions, capital, and the government deciding the country’s economic policies. The biggest Pride parades are organized by an organization supported by parties, banks, embassies, etc., and lately it seems like family members of LGBTQ+ people, not the people themselves, are the most “legitimate” advocates for their rights. I’m quite sure that, with some thought, we can see examples like these all around us, in our respective political and economic backgrounds.

So, “autonomous action” is an action that:

Seeks to bring back the *normal* status quo, where those who create have the most say in ruling what is created.

Does not give in to “outsourcing” the power of the people to stagnant and compromising institutions.

Or when it does give in a little, strategically, it remains always conscious of where the *real center* of power is, and always vigilant in reminding this to those holding other illusions.

Simple as that? No, not simple at all. But that is a question for broader texts and for the actual political puzzles that we must solve every time we make a move :)

**Ayreen Anastas,
Rene Gabri,
Arnoldas Stramskas
and Noah Brehmer**

We, the Inheritors, of Worlds

**A Correspondence on
Autonomy, Space, and
Infrastructure**



In 2020, as part of the Paths to Autonomy assemblies, we began a conversation on spaces to/for/of autonomy. Having all been impacted by our experiences of organizing through such spaces – and in moments even sharing a space – it seemed to make sense to take a moment to raise the question of what their exact importance is and how, in turn, this importance may be differently encountered in our respective regions. Departing from our shared experiences in building and maintaining autonomous spaces – which have taken varied forms over the years as social centers, infoshops, squats, etc. – this correspondence ventures broadly into reflections on the problematic of cultivating autonomous worlds: transversal movement formations organized through the infrastructural and infrapolitical standpoints of social reproduction and decolonialization. Agreeing that it's not one world we seek to inhabit but many, another key thread in the correspondence engages with the problematic of inheritance and what it could mean to defend our spaces and movement infrastructures as carriers of manifold worlds, paths, and futures for/of to autonomy.

Noah: In my teen years I had various encounters with what could be called autonomous spaces. Born in a midwestern rustbelt city, Milwaukee, my encounters began in the DIY punk scene, which held communal houses and basement venues. In the margins of this scene appeared a well-organized anarchist collective the Burning Book Mobile, who began by tabling zines at gigs, eventually creating an infoshop (only after I had left town), the Cream City Collective. My late teenage years in NYC also came with a sprinkle of encounters with DIY venues, which, perhaps out of the financial reality of holding space in NYC, took more rigid forms

and depended upon an economy as night venues. From here I began to drift towards the art scene, which offered certain openings in terms of exploring ideas and concepts, while quite fierce closings on the other in terms of how heavily market dependent and competitive these spaces often were. It was during this moment that I encountered 16 Beaver, joining a reading group on Italian *post-operaismo* theory Ayreen and Rene were facilitating, something like 2009. It was the first autonomous space I had any sustained encounter with that avowedly set itself the task of broadly theorizing and enacting autonomy as a revolutionary standpoint: autonomism. I suppose it was also at this moment that some frustrations and critical reflections on autonomous spaces began. In considering autonomy as a revolutionary proposal for an altogether different organization of space at large, these four-walled spaces of autonomy came to at times feel like marginal, containing, enclaves. How to spread autonomy? How to gain territory? How to build movements? And what possible role do spaces themselves hold in answering these questions? Having begun another personal life path toward autonomy in Lithuania from 2012/13, these thoughts have persisted over the years as important questions for me.

Arnoldas: My entrance into what could be called autonomous spaces took a longer and more ephemeral path, although largely through the same (same but different) DIY punk path. The 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, were “wild”: not only in terms of old structures of economy and state collapsing and/or reforming, but also on so many affective and social levels. When I think of those days growing up in a provincial town I cannot dissociate all this ephemeral “prepolitical” search for autonomy in subcultural

circles from a lived experience of being surrounded by criminal autonomies, gangs searching for respect, avoiding wage labor, invoking fear, conquering territories. Although more composed spaces could be found in bigger cities, the ideas, and ideologies came later, whether as anarchism or feminism, etc. In 2000 and 2001 I lived in Berlin, coming back to Lithuania regularly, also trying to “import” a wider variety of broadly autonomous ideas and practices. Some would say these years were a peaking moment of the antiglobalization era, a cycle of optimism perhaps, which after Genoa and 9/11 steadily declined.

In *There Is No Unhappy Revolution* (2017), Marcelo Tari suggests that “we might . . . think of territories entering into a revolutionary becoming as a kind of *outside* internal to the metropolis.” But also, not to forget, multiple outsides, acknowledging that various links between them rarely exist, or how they can be cultivated, or how they are incompatible. Perhaps being critical of who claims proper autonomy and whether those claims correspond with reality? Does space give stability, continuity etc. therefore it is valuable? Is it a territory with its own problematic of policing the border of who is in and who is out? And when, as Tari asks, does this claim to the constitution of an inside enter its own articulation of an outside? Could it be useful to think of spaces as part of infrastructures?

Ayreen & Rene: All conversations can be seen, if they aspire toward it, as paths toward autonomies. So maybe before beginning, we can try to admit that there can be many things said regarding what brings us together in this moment to think autonomy. The biographical is one mode and it is a generous one,

because it situates our bodies in the territories, temporalities and various conditions we inherit and struggle to alter, dismantle or affirm, as it regards the way we want to live with others. In this way, we are now right in the middle of the question, can this conversation be an occasion for that searching? As it concerns the biographical, we could say that we inherit conditions already in our histories which one can either avow or disavow, but there is no doubt we have already inherited them. We find ourselves on these paths long before we arrived as living sentient creatures. Only as an example, in Tehran, as a child, young as we have been in the time of the revolution, there is a tumult and restless air, in the smoke filled urgency of a street and the insurgent living rooms that are imagining fighting to change the conditions of life, against a Shah, a king that has been implanted by the CIA in their preemption of an anticapitalist, anti-imperialist turn in our region and in Iran. The currents of such emancipatory trajectories and those of enclosure and control are old, they predate us as individuals, they are communal winds, yet their directions change and they sweep up bodies in very unpredictable and singular ways. There could be so much more to say in these biographical tangents, but maybe just trying to share this is to acknowledge that we are *déjà* born into such paths and so too the forces of enclosure and blockage, preempting, limiting, channeling, capturing those paths, stalling and foreclosing them.

To pick up another line, for instance, in Palestine, we are university students under a brutal Israeli occupation, living, feeling, witnessing an uprising, an Intifada, a rupture in the colonial order that the occupiers have tried in vain for years to normalize, naturalize through

their repressive and oppressive mechanisms. An anti-autonomy regime one can say, that only affirms the law of the domination of colonial occupation and dispossession. Is Palestine an exception or the rule? How to inherit those histories and be faithful to what they ask of us, without inheriting the weight and burden of what the oppressors and the autonomy-obstacle-designers and practitioners are seeking in those histories?

So on the one hand, there are milieus of autonomy we are born into, historically determined, but also these currents are instigated by bodies who struggle, affirming to inhabit their worlds on their own terms. And then there is a question of the moments and spaces, which bring us closer to the questions you are both placing in the center, the situations where whatever we are, our sense of a we, or an I, comes into contact and crisis with that rupture we perceive, between bodies searching for that autonomy and bodies which seek to restrict or destroy those paths. And what could we call this, is it a choice, a determination, is it individual, is it collective, is it beyond this way of delineating agency between ones and multiplicities? We could speculate or side with the last of these, but let us say, whatever the experience, it cannot be reducible to a will. Maybe we could say that in each instance, there is an exigency, a process already underway, a path that is not itself determined nor can it become a state or a condition that one is in, or ever settles in. And yet, at the same time, these exigencies are maintained, nurtured through practices, spaces, habits which are ongoing and passed down between communities. They are not simply material infrastructures, they can be immaterial, such as customs, even the passing down of languages,

dialects, which can create, or in their destruction, and this also takes many forms, limits the conditions of possibility and states of searching for autonomy. So whatever we could call these zones or spaces where those exigencies are shared, transmitted, amplified, they form one part of this very supple circuitry of events, movements, struggles, inquiries, searches, ideas, experiences, paths toward autonomies. And its infrastructures, we would propose, could be seen as all the means, including, but not limited to, spaces which can disseminate, reopen, multiply those paths.

Arnoldas: Certainly it is important to think about autonomies as not merely material infrastructures. On the one hand, in our part of the world, in a total surveillance structure which was the Soviet Union, maintaining infrastructures that would be explicitly oppositional was out of the question. In a post-Soviet context we can talk about other forms of surveillance, commodification of space etc. but it is quite a different setting with distinct problematics. The wholesale rejection and demonization of the Soviet experience and associations of leftist politics with that experience brought attempts to search for leftist histories but mainly in relation to the pre-WWII period, with the aim of showing that the ideas and practices, whether of socialism, communism or anarchism, had their place in the country before the Soviet era. Perhaps it is a mistake that resistance practices during the Soviet times are dismissed as merely nationalist thus antileft and appropriated by the right. I was reading a compilation from KGB archives (in an unpublished manuscript by E. Balčiūnas) about anti-Soviet activities and what is evident is that there were a variety of subversive actions with wide-ranging motivations behind them: from fascist sympathizers, to strikes and sabotage

in the workplace, from calls to independence, to accusations that the state is bourgeois and not revolutionary enough, from hippies to riots. The key event in 1972 was the self-immolation of Romas Kalanta, which followed demonstrations and riots which were brutally repressed. That set the stage for at least a decade in Kaunas, the second largest city in Lithuania, in terms of hypersurveillance and prohibition of even the softest socially and politically subversive activity. Only in the context of *perestroika* in the mid-1980s, an ecological movement emerged, punks appeared on the scene, economic reforms and increased circulation of prohibited media became signs of the unexpected near future collapse.

While these more recognizable outward expressions of dissent had their place throughout the Soviet period, another source of agency and even autonomy appeared in quite widespread illicit everyday practices and economies, as well as the adjacent realms of reproduction. This includes the simulation of work, theft from the workplace, informal economy of exchange, systems of favors (*blat*), etc. Usually perceived as immoral behavior and a corruption of the character later made responsible for a less-than-smooth transition into democracy and the capitalist system. For those inclined towards autonomy politics, perhaps, should be seen as a source of potential discursive and political resources. Perhaps having less visibility and collective character than let's say Italian practices of autoreduction, nevertheless it can shake the image of passivity of the population and align with anticapitalist practices, no matter how marginal. Sometimes what is marginal is all there is to start off in building something larger.

Running adjacent to such practices and perhaps serving as a kind of enabling infrastructure for their articulation were the semi-autonomous spaces of food production and distribution. From the mythical role of the domestic Soviet kitchen, which served as the only safe space where anecdotes, honest conversations, and doubts could be formulated – a sort of “truth” space – to the later integration of kitchens in autonomous spaces and their importance in fostering bonds. This element perhaps is something that needs to be taken much further (and there are places that take the issue seriously) but it seems a very common denominator across spaces, cultures, etc.

Noah: The question you open about embracing certain resistance practices under state socialism as emancipatory inheritances gets at the core of a lot of issues. Eastern European countries, like Lithuania, have not only been marked by a century of Russian and then Soviet imperial revisionist historiography, but also Western – the German, then US-NATO-EU matrix of geo-powers. The post-independence era welcomed in a liberal discourse of “totalitarian studies” wherein Western experts came to explain to their socialist block neighbors all that they missed over the course of the 20th century as though nothing of any worth took place here. It was very much a process of importing a Western branded history of free cultural and social life – a hegemonic and latently imperialist position that could be said to assume something like a colonial relation of domination. In a book that Lost Property Press will release at the end of this year, *The Commonist Horizon* (2022), there is a very nice essay by our Serbian comrade Ana Vilenica on the specific conditions of coloniality we face here and the respective paths to decolonization or counter-histories that

could respond to this landscape – it is titled “Who has ‘the Right to Common’? Decolonizing Commoning in East Europe.”

The Romas Kalanta example is of course a nice one to share (and worth noting that a social movement in 2015 called *Gyvenimas per Brangus* [Life is Too Expensive], which began as popular protests and boycotts against rising food prices, occupied the park where his monument stands in Kaunas . . . acting as a kind of reference and point of inspiration for the contemporary movement). While actions like Kalanta’s and others hold an unquestionable importance as sparks of revolt, at times mobilizing popular flames, I have come to worry about how a certain fixation on the figure of the socialist era martyr – as a paradigm for the political subject – risks detracting from the rich infrapolitical histories of everyday power you began to point to Arnoldas. In our assembly discussion with Ewa Majewska, we considered to what extent these practices of martyrdom are imbricated in a masculine, heroic notion of agency that played into Western understanding of freedom as liberty and choice. Relying, as they did, on monumental gestures of refusal by an individual – most often male – normative notions of agency were coded into these public theaters of revolt. Such conjurings of Western liberal freedoms were not only problematic in the aftermath of socialism (welcoming in neoliberalism as the new norm of freedom), but also dangerously omitted the practices of “weak resistance” that flourished as a communal, self-organized autonomist movement in, for instance, the Czechoslovakian councilist movement. Responding to such a problematic, Ewa in turn proposed the figure of the tired housewife as the antimonumental and antipatriarchal figure of working

class autonomy under state socialism; opening a discussion on the *Solidarność* movement and the possibility of an antimemorialist politics of the symbolic. By considering autonomy in these terms, we not only gain a new vantage on the rich histories of autonomous politics under state socialism but also a critical lens for the reevaluation of what, in fact, is assumed when we employ the concept of autonomy in our movements. And as Arnoldas asks as per the tradition of the kitchen, what would it mean to center our spaces and relations of reproduction as “political” relations. For instance, a social center or movement space like Luna6 in Vilnius does not physically follow protesting subjects to the street, operating more in the background as a reproductive infrastructure for the “political” – e.g. as a space to gather after a demo for food, discussion, and healing; or before to make banners, conspire, etc.

Speaking to efforts of critical reevaluation, Ayreen and Rene’s conceptualization of autonomy as a politics of inheritance stands in a notable contrast with modernity’s thrust toward the universal or project of the “invention of the new man,” which saw in tradition a conservative force, an impediment to the articulation of autonomy and not, as you have found, a vital source for its deliverance. Here I recall Marx’s opening lines of the *18th Brumaire* ... wherein the revolutionary is found to be haunted by circumstances “transmitted from the past,” while at the same time having to make use of conditions already given, for the articulation of the future:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under

circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. . . . In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue.

Of modernities' "modernists" it is perhaps Benjamin who most strikingly veers from this revolutionary thirst for the new - seeing the commemorative power of the losers' history as a source of strength: the Spartacist of today looking to the Spartacist uprisings of yesterday while gathering strength in the plotting of tomorrow. Paths, then, less as a problematic of making the correct choices than as a matter of how we dispose ourselves to the manifold inheritances that already inform and condition every situation within which a claim to autonomy will be made. Following Spinoza, autonomy is then a matter of the orientation of a form towards that which increases its capacity for movement with other bodies at motion AND rest. A certain subindividuality and subhumanity pervades, saturates the scene.

Ayreen & Rene: If we consider this conversation as part of a search for autonomy, then for us what clearly lays behind what you both have said, is the question: from where, which trajectories, horizons and histories do we draw inspiration or even orientation in such a search? For us, part of holding and nourishing common spaces with friends and friends to come has been this effort to seek also autonomy as a process of thinking through the inheritances, the various paths others have taken and those which may have been suppressed from our view.

So continuing with your thoughts, if we begin in the space of everyday reproduction and consider autonomy from the perspective of feminist critiques for instance, especially those which emerged and branched off from the operaist and autonomist traditions in Italy, then certainly that search is colored very differently than what could be a more patriarchal projection of working class or proletarian autonomy. And any measure of success, efficacy or valorization will be very different in such a horizon. Since the question of everyday reproduction, from that vantage point and inquiry, is not one facet that will have to be transformed, it is the central axis which will allow us to gauge our autonomy from the impositions on the form life takes according to state and capitalist infrastructures, including the nuclear family.

We can't help but ask with you Arnoldas, as you bring up the kitchen as a locus of rethinking or linking spaces of autonomy: could we not also consider this importance of the kitchen and food as part those experiences and trajectories of the communalization of everyday reproduction? In this light, the figure of the "tired housewife," that you bring up Noah,

becomes a kind of limit figure, as much as an antimonumental and antipatriarchal one, of certain dead ends of a masculinist, productivist, even workerist horizon of autonomy?

If autonomy is reimagined from the quotidian spaces of what Félix Guattari refers to as our “existential territories,” and the way we reproduce our lives with one another, at every facet, then clearly we have very different tactics, strategies, and projects to compose and consider together. What happens to autonomy when it is considered through efforts to recover and reclaim the communal in those processes of reimagining our everyday lives?

Another aspect that interests us in what you have said approaches yet another limit of the dominant left traditions as they have been passed down to those who identify with them. Not only has autonomy been relegated often as secondary to say the idea of class struggle, but also, the radical experiences and traditions of autonomy, which have not fitted neatly into Eurocentered, Western, Modern accounts of history, have also been largely unaccounted for. For instance, let’s begin with one of the constituent moments of whatever emerges as a West or as Western Modernity, which is the colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples from Africa. Where do the struggles of the colonized fit into those histories? How, we ask, have those communities maintained themselves and their communal lives without rich and textured experiences and practices of nourishing autonomy? Or let us consider one of the main theses of Cedric Robinson in his seminal book *Black Marxism* (1983), where he tries to resituate the Black radical tradition away from a

Eurocentered account and argues that it actually emerges from the multiplicity of experiences, cosmologies, metaphysics, concepts, notions, customs, habits, communal structures and practices which were brought, held, maintained, reimagined by captives from Africa across the Atlantic. They are what animate the fugitive and maroon communities configured by those who were formerly captive. And these are according to Robinson the forces which animate their paths to autonomy, these are what constitute whatever could be called a Black radical tradition.

This kind of account troubles what even those who have been subject to colonization have to assume as traditions of radicalism, which are not just problematic because they focus on European figures, excluding non-Europeans, but more importantly, because they write off the very sites and practices from which anyone could glimpse potential paths towards autonomy today.

A similar process of thought seems to have affected Sylvia Wynter in her as yet unpublished monograph *Black Metamorphosis* wherein – in the process of writing the book in dialogue with the editorial collective Small Axe – she growingly begins to question her own Marxist terminologies and accounts, arriving slowly at aesthetic experiences, the drum, rhythm, and dance as central elements in reconfiguring existence, common life and, we could potentially add, experiences of autonomy from conditions of captivity.

For us, autonomy implicates a constant search and one is continually looking for friends, companions, comrades who can help open the way. What is important is that our searching is continuous and never

settles on readymade answers. Even our own answers merit rethinking as we confront limits, especially in the political experiences we undergo and in the spaces we try to create. Because, as we see it, sometimes these are also limits in the imaginaries and accounts we inherit which have shaped our understandings of autonomy, its traditions, or potential practices. This brings us back to what you were thinking about the subterranean forms of resistance in the socialist and Soviet states, which could not be seen in their own terms and as potential radical practices of autonomy which we could draw from today, because they have been overcoded as “dissidence,” sometimes seen as straying from the principles of universality, too particular, too esoteric, too identitarian, too much tied up with tradition, nationalist, ultimately to be marked as reactionary, liberal, bourgeois, etc. It seems to us that we are at a conjuncture, where at the same time as we struggle to reclaim traditions which are constantly being effaced, we are also called to look at the dominant radical traditions handed to us as containing within them their own effacements. And maybe a last thought which comes to us from your invocation, Noah, of Spinoza, it would be interesting to consider for a moment what different notions of autonomy can bring into this process of looking for autonomy. What are we seeking when we seek autonomy? What precisely is at stake? And in this way, we agree that Spinoza can offer a glimpse into such an adventure. Autonomy via Spinoza can be considered the thinking and practices that are capable of transforming ethics into politics. Autonomy in contrast to the philosophies of the One would not imply hierarchies of existents, would not submit to the idea that the competent, the professor, the professional,

the vanguard, the leaders should know better and from them all knowledge shall emanate.

Autonomy as countering the institution of political hierarchy. Autonomy as a cosmology of being, in which every being realizes its being without a state or even laws setting any limits. In this light, a radical form of equality emerges into view, we could say a “true equality” in which the categories human, nonhuman, animate, inanimate lose their relevance and meaning. With Spinoza, one could say this “radical equality” is at the base of every notion of autonomy, and a task would be to understand the political implication of such a world, in which all commands are deactivated, all rulers are ruled out. Autonomy at its best can become a notion that helps us clear up the conditions for the realization of such an understanding of a multiple world full of potencies without the One to determine or judge them.

Noah: In the early 20th century the Yiddish Bundist movement – centered in *Vilno* – shared the concept of *doykayt* [hereness] in their effort to enact a “we” as a figure of immanence and multiplicity. As Sai Englert observes in “*Doykayt: Yiddish Land for All*” (2016) “*Doykayt* was the Bundists’ way of describing the importance of fighting where one is, alongside the people [with] whom one lives. It was conceived as a rejection of both Zionism and separatism. The Bund mobilized this slogan to argue with Jews about the importance of changing the world, their current world, together with their Polish, Russian, or Ukrainian neighbors.” The antifascist, internationalist longing captured so well in *doykayt* sits nicely alongside Ayreen and Rene’s thinking with Robinson on the Black radical tradition – namely the urgent question of how

to develop tools for the building of autonomous infrastructures where these manifold traditions – paths of autonomy – may be reclaimed, enabled, and inherited. Here in Lithuania, amidst a situation of border push-backs and the violent detainment of migrants from the Middle East, *doykayt* resonates as a historic banner of insurgent unity against the border regimes, the police and the prisons. To fight together with those with whom you share a space – the etymology of comrade is indeed one with whom you share a common room; a notable contrast with its current connotations of ideological allegiance to the abstract belief in an idea or organization.

Continuing our line of thought on infrastructures of autonomy, the writings of anticapitalist historians, like Robinson, feel vital for cultivating the knowledge, languages, and tools we will need to build these infrastructures in the present. From E.P. Thompson, Dolores Hayden, Silvia Federici, and on to Robinson and C.L.R. James, one always finds a vibrant “infrastructure of dissent” at the core of any sustained rebellion against capital.

And I agree with what you’re saying on the trajectory of workers autonomy, but would also stress that the emergence of “workerism” as an institution within (but not necessarily against the nexus of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy) has had both a previous and persisting life in multimodal, translocal, movement formations, which at their strongest points enable a “compositional” standpoint against capital: bridging the axis of race and gender, agrarian and urban, forms of life – enunciating a violent thrust against the totality of capital’s global domination.

The historic process of the de/resubjectivisation of what could broadly be called the historic socialist movement into the isolated identity of the white male working class was only realized through decades of hybrid warfare - a butchering of the many headed hydra of communism and its Frankensteinian reification as a figure of division, alienation, and domination. In *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2013), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker do well in capturing this radical moment of insurgency; sharing the story of the tavern cultures in the Lower East Side docks of NYC in the 17th century. The taverns were a vital mixing ground, schools of insurrection, where the "wretched of many nations and colors gathered" to tell their tales, lore of insurrection, dance, and feast. Of them, Hughson's Tavern became infamous as the locale for the plotting of an insurrection. The war against these mixing grounds evolved into Americanization programs over the next centuries - peaking over the course of the World Wars. Ford established the American School where migrants would enter for six months learning English and the "American way of life." After passing their exam, the Festival of Unity took place, featuring a ritual where the migrants would enter a mini boat wearing their ethnic clothing and be pushed to a pot. Once in the pot, their teachers would spin them around with giant spoons; disappearing only to reappear moments later with blue factory uniforms, American flags, and singing the national anthem. It was through such processes that radical inheritances were erased and the figure of the working class came to oppose the figure of the "rioter," "women," "communist," "Black," etc.

The historical emergence of *autonomia* in Italy is important then as a response not only to the

shortcomings of Italian *operaismo* but to workerism more generally as a historical subjectivity that has continued to pose questions and problems in the present. And as Federici herself observes looking back at that historic moment in *Revolution at Point Zero* (2012), the relation between these formations was not only conflictual: "From the operaist movement that stressed the centrality of workers' struggles for autonomy in the capital-labor relation, we learned the political importance of the wage as a means of organizing society, and, at the same time, as a lever to undermine the hierarchies within the working class." While autonomist groups like *Lotta Continua* agitated for the multiplication of points of antagonism through rent strikes, squatting, social centers and autoreduction practices, *operaismo's* union formations inside the factories served as essential tools for the scaling up of the uprisings that unfolded across the city. In Turin, the CGIL Union helped coordinate the autoreduction movement by acting as a quasi-officiating body for the mass practice of self-reducing the cost of transport and household utilities. It was through these diverse compositions of struggle for autonomy that class struggle was extended directly over the entirety of society as a revolutionary political force. This is not to look over the clear and well-known shortcomings and even oppressive, misogynist, opportunistic tendencies within *operaismo*. Indeed, it's important to recall the details of *autonomia's* clash. On one hand we have the new southern migrants who do not fit into the values of the northern workers' cultures - namely they disidentify with the spaces of work as essential sites for social belonging. Then we have new compositions of revolt, such as the urban riots or uprisings in the south, which the unions and political parties denounce. This also comes with what

you talked about as the feminist, reproductive labor standpoint, and a lesser discussed decolonial one, in Italy. Finally, there is an experience of the internal shortcoming of the official institutions of the labor movement itself after the Hot Autumn in 1977 where the communist party and its representative unions made deals to end a massive strike wave in return for huge wage increases. Yet, these wages were quickly undermined by inflation in rental and transportation prices . . . it showed, lets say, how integral infrastructure is and what happens when movements are subordinated to a single claim for autonomy - the autonomy granted by the wage.

And essential for our gravitation around the question of autonomous spaces, it is at this moment that we find the birth of what we are now calling social centers. These spaces could be thought of as a living articulation of the movements' decentering of the worker. Social centers, after all, were rooted in the neighborhood and operated as generators for autonomous urban rebellions.

Ayreen & Rene: Yes, indeed, the *doykayt* sounds like an interesting notion. From a Palestinian perspective today, one perceives the historical lines that were more minor, broken, interrupted by more hegemonic structures over the 20th century. Can one think of *doykayt* as a form of life, a mode of thought, that is very different in nature from Zionism and its ideology of a capitalist colonial Jewish state? One may ask wherein lies this difference in nature between the two, that is, what may be of interest to our search here together. Is it the question of political belief combined with desire and the form of their propagation that make the difference here?

And fascism, if it means anything for us, is the name of a counterrevolutionary process which attempts to preempt, capture, destroy movements which stand against capitalism. The tools it uses and has used historically vary, though they do comprise something of a repertoire, which often uses some supremacist ideation and some notion of purity, blood, race, etc. Do we need to invent new concepts today in the way the Bund invented *doykayt* as encapsulating an affirmative desire for a life in common and fighting fascism at the same time. Can we also look into various histories to find and reclaim these ways of conceiving a common life? How can we start thinking further and putting into play those concepts? We, as autonomists, as communists, as anarchists, as whatever we want to call ourselves, as those who are interested in a world-in-common, a world of a here-and-now, a world-in-a-revolutionary becoming. What is it that we need to invent, create, recover and what is the need for it, what moves us to create it. And what is that revolution or even revolutionary organization when it is centered at the level of a form of life?

Italian *autonomia* is still interesting for us today, as it questioned at a given moment both centralization and representation, and if any production was still relevant, then it was the production of a new type of subjectivity. And most interesting was the emphasis of Italian feminists within the movement on the forgotten, naturalized, marginalized work of women in reproducing everyday life. And how that reproduction was the discounted and suppressed force of the production of workers themselves.

These are questions we are still confronted with today: what kind of struggles are we facing, and what

new subjectivities emerge or are forged through these processes? Again, if we think of these struggles as more processes of reshaping the prefigured subjects of neoliberal coloniality, then we can also enter and try to understand what this coloniality is also bringing, imposing, that supersedes a restricted sense of an economic project.

So touching on the decolonial for us, if we think a decolonial path to autonomy, then we would have to say that from our own experiences and communal processes, we see coloniality also passing through many left and labor movements both historical and contemporary.

For instance, the higher wage is not simply a short-coming of official institutions of the labor movement, it is part of a logic which could extend to today's struggles for a social wage or claims for a basic income. A logic that still privileges, universalizes a particular idea of "quality of life" and access to a certain level of goods and wealth produced through a capitalist mode of production, which has been based and continues to be based on the immiseration and colonization of worlds. It is and has historically been a highly objectivized, extractive, destructive process. And any state, even socialist ones have largely taken on similar approaches. They are still based on the imposition of one image of a world that has been constricted and constructed through the elimination of a multiplicity of worlds.

While potentially "winning" important battles against capital in the name of higher wages or provisions by the state - forgetting all the dirty tricks which will render those "victories" into "defeats" - they continue

to tacitly normalize a state of affairs which is held together not only by ongoing wars of counterinsurgency, wars of oblivion, and wars against subsistence, but also by processes leading to the consumption and destruction of the planet itself.

And the weight of these processes has always fallen squarely on the backs of those who have been marked historically as less than human. They are historical processes of colonization which then embedded, hard-coded ideas of life, of knowledge, of truth, of world, of progress, of backwardness, of future, of development, of educated and uneducated, of laziness and productivity, of wealth and poverty, of beauty and ugliness, of race, of gender as universal. All of these contain within them the vestiges of coloniality and these continue to also plague some of the most revolutionary and emancipatory traditions. It is for this that any notion of autonomy, from our vantage point today, has to reappraise, in a longer arch of history, the processes which have led all of earth's creatures to be on the verge of planetary destruction. And for us, it seems quite critical to do this reappraisal acknowledging that colonialism, race and patriarchy are key elements of capitalism. And quite possibly to go as far as to understand that capitalism is just one facet of a colonial matrix of power. Walter Mignolo, following Anibal Quijano, outlines it as control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education); and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity). And as the friends who are exploring this line of thinking say, coloniality is the dark and hidden side of modernity. So all the places

which have been touched by or infused by modernity, whether they chose to or not, also embraced all the ideological apparatus of coloniality through the matrix. In this way, we can see that the feminist critiques are not merely an expansion of anticapitalist struggle but enter fields which touch on other aspects of this matrix of power.

Thus, in a decolonial horizon, autonomy means struggling at the level of all of these spheres of subordination, domination, control, production of subjectivities. And clearly, then, we could see that in the history of socialist and communist states, despite even supporting anticolonial struggles abroad, this colonial matrix has not only not been done away with, it has been largely reproduced.

At the same time, when we do see struggles today we can often see a decolonial dimension to them. But if they are grasped as such, then we stand to see, for instance, efforts of struggling around the rights of migrants as radical chances for inventing decolonial paths rather than merely finding ways to absorb displaced communities into the very machines that have produced their violent evictions.

These are difficult matters, but they seem to us necessary to consider. And clearly, it is not a point of saying this or that is the only path to autonomy. It is just to point out that what the decolonial path to autonomy offers is a more robust account of the multiple domains at which autonomy can be reclaimed and struggle can be waged. A struggle which is then also intrinsically connected to and not at the expense of the most vulnerable communities facing the brunt of the exclusionary and destructive powers of these colonial, racial, patriarchal capitalist processes.

There would be more to say here, especially regarding the question of a microphysics of power and even a micropolitics of desire but maybe we could ask a question, since we initiated our conversations around spaces for autonomy.

Can we not imagine these spaces as perpetual zones not only of insubordination, revolt, but also of revolution, at the level of the subject, even and especially going beyond the subject? And in such processes, given our growing sense of this more complex map where capitalism has only been one face, one dominant manifestation of this colonial matrix of power, can we not take more seriously in these spaces of searching for autonomy or the senses of autonomy, this task of desubjectivation, decolonization from the imprints of coloniality which modernity trafficked into, imposed upon every place and sphere of life?

Arnoldas: Great insights and very important considerations. Whether we call it forms of life, collective autonomy or autonomy on the level of the subject, or simply difference, decoloniality, I think, offers a lot in terms of thinking through both the present and the past. Obviously, the socialist project, especially in its state form, can only be considered different by a degree and not fully of substance. The logic of modernity is inextricably linked to violent ordering and remaking of the world, eliminating – whether through force or integration – all that gets in its way. But also let's be frank that violence is not the only way of ordering. Integration happens through seduction too and the desire for order, comfort, and normality is a powerful ideological tool. If we agree that various movements often are complicit in reproducing the logic on which larger domination is based, where does

it leave autonomous spaces striving for rebellious relation to the existing, and what inner mechanisms can be put in place to safeguard from it? We (and who is we in each instance?) can set the tone, put the right discourse, create rules but the uneasy relationship always remains between careful curating and spontaneous activity based on messy socialities of those involved. Does postapocalyptic urbanity still allow for visible oppositions of something as stable as a space? Lately, spending quite a bit of time in Barcelona, a city priding itself on new municipalism and progressive politics with its ex-activist mayor, squat evictions happen almost daily, increasingly harsh policing of unruly subjectivities, constant discourse of cleaning up and order, a cat and mouse game, where the cat is getting fatter and the mouse can only get some breathing space on the city margins or further. This is a process which has been already implemented decades ago in some cities. Of course squatting is only one feature of infrastructural autonomy, but one that, at least in a European context, has been an important one in terms of larger autonomous politics and the ability to maintain forms of life, albeit with its own sets of contradictions and limitations. On the other hand, doesn't the desire for resolved contradictions indicate the same path of modern domination?

I was talking to a friend recently about the feeling of doom in the city. Their response was that the doom happened already quite some time ago and we live in a postapocalyptic, postdoom world without realizing it. It's only the date when it happened that's still up for discussion: 1500s? 1800s? 1980s?

When the forces of domination and resistance are so uneven, the question arises of whether visible forms

of resistance, even if it is a discursive resistance, are an appropriate form of engagement. I guess a thing or two can be drawn from the history of warfare – guerrilla war, asymmetrical war, insurgency etc. without over-romanticizing it either, at least from the location in which we are speaking. In *The Least of All Possible Evils* (2012), Eyal Weizman talks about Israeli military and Palestinian resistance, where the principle of proportionality (how many get killed) is used as a complex political-affective measurement – he says that the “power is grounded in the very ability to calculate, count, measure, balance and act on these calculations. Inversely, to make oneself ungovernable, one must make oneself incalculable, immeasurable, uncountable.” Can this be applied elsewhere? And what about our increasingly important online selves, where calculation, attention, and circulation fuel the spectacle of integration?

The physical space becomes problematic as a dot on the map, lacking mobility, invested in its own identity. There seems to be a need for a fine balance between overidentifying, overcoding on the one hand and the over-accommodating, over-inclusive idea of an open space, which then can easily turn into a washed out stand in the marketplace of ideas. I was always interested in how these spaces can cultivate politics without falling on charisma, figures, names and faces. Perhaps it is impossible to engineer that fully but from my experience it seems that there is quite a variation in how that happens, what kind of practices are more conducive to such outcomes and that is something I would be interested in exploring more with you. But a more complicated question is perhaps how striving for visibility becomes at the same time a striving for compromise, normalization, respectability

and “pragmatism.” I’m not sure whether that Debordian quote, mentioned already here (“everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear”), is really taken seriously and what would it mean to take it seriously.

Noah: Yes, I agree that seeing the times we live in as a post-apoc era, serves us well in dispelling any illusion of liberty/the entitlements it is necessarily grounded in – as one Italian autonomist feminist said “don’t believe you have rights.” I recently came back to the “young” Agamben’s concept of inclusive exclusions, as a way of thinking how visibility is used by capital to always keep us far way from the real sources of our power e.g., the cryptoheierarchy everywhere alive on social media.

Connecting what Ayreen and Rene have called subterranean forms of resistance to the socialist and Soviet states and from there back to the question of the infrastructural, Tiqqun’s concept of infraspectacular worlds feels relevant. Developed in their first issue of the journal to describe how the crisis of empire, while depending ever more on the spectacular demonstration of its triumph, erodes on a subterranean level, opening fragmentary spaces, zones of intermittent autonomy, where forms of life grow without the mediation of the commodity. The history of real communism under state socialism is very much an infraspectacular history and I think very important knowledges can be transmitted from there for Western comrades who may often be too keen on attaching visibility to political efficacy – all that is visible is good, all that is good is visible. Infraspectacular worlds may be a way of describing publicness without visibility. I’d call it a tactical visibility and a question could be what we

can learn from it for our organizing in and beyond the spaces of autonomy we are connected to? Evident in all this is the need to approach a microphysics of power.

Ayreen & Rene: It is often the case that a conversation has to conclude by the limits of time or some measure that is predetermined. And yet, it is all the elements of that conversation which actually outlive its parts and articulations which allow it to begin or live. It feels for us that indeed now the conversation is beginning fully and we don't know exactly which of the many rich threads to pick up. And maybe we will not be able to respond but only mark or remark on the resonance we feel with the questions you are both asking and bringing to the table. We will try to do it in a form that is fragmentary, notational and possibly musical.

Lexicon

**Ayreen Anastas,
Rene Gabri**

Seduction

Safeguarding Against Complicity

Instability of Spaces of Assembly

Desire for Solved Contradictions

Imbalance of Forces

Spectacle of Integration

Idiorrythmie

Microphysics of Power

Seduction

Seduction is at the heart of societies of control. When the diagram of power is based on control and no longer direct suppression of countering forces, then it will be through instruments of seduction that desire is channeled and captured.

Safeguarding Against Complicity

Safeguarding Against Complicity could be an interesting title for a pamphlet. In its introduction, one would have to write that any measure to safeguard against something risks falling into policing those “messy socialities.” It seems that a potent manner to struggle against complicity is to attempt to always be in contact with those who are most vulnerable by the existing arrangement or distribution of forces. We would then have to say that contact and building relations with other struggles far from where one may be situated is critical to countering the blind spots and occlusions, which are structured, which are at the heart of how power takes shape, and naturalizes the unrecognized complicities it needs to reproduce and generalize itself.

Instability of Spaces of Assembly

Instability of Spaces of Assembly. It seems for us another heading in what you call the postapocalyptic urbanity is the frequency with which different urban

processes displace and evict spaces of struggle or spaces of relative autonomy. There is no clear and easy path to remove that threat of eviction. We have tried to think of exit in some way not simply from the city or metropolitan existence, but from all the habits that this existence requires to survive on its terms. In the context of the virus and its after effects, we don't know what will happen in this regard. But surely, tactically, whether temporary or enduring, these spaces of self-organization, of assembly, of autonomy are still crucial. But it seems if they cannot be sites that incline toward forms of communization or collectively shifting the ways life is lived, then our own experience is that these spaces can easily become sedatives for a kind of blindness and complicity to the immense consumption/destruction cycles and its concomitant productions of waste, which metropolitan existence more and more relies on.

Desire for Solved Contradictions

Desire for Solved Contradictions A friend once said that the contradictions we encounter are the result of specific strategies. Another friend used to say, live the contradictions. It seems to us that the former proposition is closer to how we see this conjuncture. If we see that today, "my survival," "my consumption" depends on processes which require the consumption of earth, war, the death of so much life on the planet. If we see that the reproduction of that life "here," requires as prerequisite the reproduction of the death "elsewhere," it seems hardly possible in the face of planetary ruination to "live the contradictions." Looking for measures to overcome those structures

which make people, in the name of work or livelihood, pimp themselves, their communities, their practices, their lands, their habitats seems to us absolutely critical today. And it seems the urgencies grow faster than the insurgencies precisely because of those structured contradictions. And while there is no roadmap for overcoming them, it seems even the great revolutions will only once again be confronted by them. Clearly, whatever measures we are considering would not have to seek to restore some kind of wholeness, because so much has been broken. And yet, there is still so much that we can heal and recover wherever we are, whether through customs and traditions of care, histories, practices suppressed, or directly with all the life that earth still hosts and gives. Inventing new ways of living together seems also at the heart of struggling against these contradictions. In the context of decolonial thinking, there is also this notion of delinking and it seems to us to resonate with what we have been exploring with friends. Multiplying these practices of life in common, of forms of existence which avow the co-, the with, which are the preconditions of whatever is called life and finding a way to do that, less and less dependent on the infrastructures which require the amplification of the contradictions seems for us a more affirming orientation to any path to autonomy.

Imbalance of Forces

Imbalance of Forces The forces are indeed never in balance but what a microphysics of power allows us to perceive is that it is always from the “micro” that power organizes, consolidates, aggregates, dominates, governs, controls, acts through. It sediments and hardens into forms, of structures, of

infrastructures and of life itself. These become in a way force multipliers, which propagate and contain the power that is invested in them. But if we see that those forces are being produced through us, and in the way we enact and enforce, propagate further the demands placed on us, we are part of reproducing that imbalance. Maybe our struggle or even revolution has to be reconsidered from this microphysics to also then account for what we construct or reconstruct rather than resist, what we conjoin to, put to common use, rather than simply what we exit. It seems that if in what has been theorized as the societies of control, the dominant form power takes is in orienting desire and delimiting the sites in which it can flourish, unfold, be contained; then it is really a very different struggle, around and through desire that those forces acting on and through us can be destituted.

Spectacle of Integration

Spectacle of Integration We have been theorizing something we refer to as *white noise*. *White noise* could be seen as a correlate to the theories of the spectacle. If spectacle ultimately emphasizes a visual dimension to the commodification of language, of life, of relations, of place, and the pageantry, glory, shock, awe, intoxication that is required to fulfill these disintegrations and integrations, then *white noise* is more about what is heard, what we hear, the noise of capital, the white spaces it creates which discolor everything, its forming of a space of relation that is thoroughly white, that is thoroughly tied to the colony, the colonization of the basic forms of communication, the mediums in which they unfold and a sculpting of relations, hierarchies of visibilities, audibilities tied to its antisocial media, platforms and

networks. There would be so much more to write and think here, but we believe the questions raised in this domain are critical since so many believe these networks and Silicon Valley technologies to be mere tools or instruments; but we have seen how they actively model, sculpt, generate subjects and relations that are capitalist. Capital was and remains a social relation above all. And it reproduces through its propagated instruments those forms of relation. It is clear that without building our own spaces which offer other means and modes, we only risk partaking in the reproduction yet another piece of the social infrastructure of white supremacy. We would like to think that this work of thinking further about this *white noise* introduces a dimension of race, white supremacy and coloniality into the discourse of spectacle.

Idiorrythmie

Idiorrythmie A term that occupies a central figure in a friend's teaching course in 1977, *Comment vivre ensemble* [How to live together]. Distinct from the potentially oppressive use of *Rythme*, in which every one would have to be follower of a regular movement of flow, *Idiorrythmie*, in its very naming, allows for a multiplicity of forms of life to flourish, each in its own timing, in its own emphasizing of beats, while still in a horizon of living together. While rhythm can be taken onto the sides of bureaucracy, property, identity, enclosures, the law, spectacles of state and displays of power in the mass coordination of bodies in space, *Idiorrythmie* takes distance from this potential for rhythm to be literally instrumentalized. *Idiorrythmie* always proposes precisely such as it is, a rhythm which is unique to its bodies, to its situations, to its

difference. Our friend explains in fact that the older term of *Rythme, Rhuthmos* has not been understood as oppressive and could have emerged in a use closer to what he names *Idiorrythmie*, fugitive, singular, unstable. Can autonomy be ever achieved without *Idiorrythmie*?

Microphysics of Power

Microphysics of Power If X conceptualized the notion of *der Wille zur Macht* [the will to power] in the 19th century, and that same X collapsed at the sight of someone hitting a horse in Turin and remained ten years folded onto themselves without language, and if Y a hundred years later wrote *La volonté de savoir* [the will to know] and then passed away from health complications due to AIDS. How to understand those two concepts and the interplay between them? If power is different in nature than what has been thought and assumed for a long time, and not only in bourgeois theories of power, but also in Marx, also with us, when we assume that power is possessed, is a property of presidents or leaders or fathers or even classes, yes classes – then understanding the microphysics of power means exploring the implications by Y that power is never possessed, but always exercised, going through the dominated as well as the dominator. If power is a multiplicity of forces, then we can think of notions like strategy and diagram to further understand how these forces are operating.

So if power is exercised, and is diagrammatic, almost like a mathematical equation, then looking at it in this way is like wearing a new pair of glasses, that when

applied, make everything around us more clear and potentially more insidious.

Which are these forces? It depends on which diagram is applied. A friend of Y explains this very well in his seminar on Y in the 1980s. There is the diagram of discipline, the diagram of the sovereign, the diagram in say, ancient Greece, and the mutating diagram we are currently living through.

And then *savoir* is the result of the application of this mathematics of the diagram, the sedimentation, the stratas which form in its recursive uses and applications. The variables in an equation become more concrete, hardened, the student, the prisoner, the citizen, the soldier on the one hand and the school/university, the prison, the state, the military base as correlates. Of course, a state or any other institution can subsume other institutions.

Microphysics in this sense is not a miniaturization of the notion, it is not to say, oh yes there are the big scale apparatuses and then there are the small scale ones. It is more to say that micro physics and macro physics have completely different principles. What applies to atoms, particles, and small elements does not apply to a physics of big objects. Microphysics is a different approach to discerning and analyzing how power operates and is reproduced on, in, through us. But for us concretely how can we benefit in our struggles together from all this analysis, how can we live and be closer to the commune in our midst? Even better, how then to deactivate power in all its exercises, configurations and shapes resulting from those diagrams applied and sedimenting on our bodies, our common spaces, on everything and everyone around us.

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Colophon

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