From sour grapes to vitalism: the life politics of the Left

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From sour grapes to vitalism: the life politics of the Left

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Autonomy: Capitalism, Class and Politics, by David Eden, Farnham, Surrey, Ashgate, 2012, 283 pages (including Bibliography and Index), £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4094-1174-1

After 1968, the history of the Left can be told as a story of sour grapes. Attributed to ancient Greek writer Aesop, in the fable ‘The Fox and the Grapes’, the fox isn’t able to reach the grapes and declares them to be sour:

A famished Fox saw some clusters of ripe black grapes hanging from a trellised vine. She resorted to all her tricks to get at them, but wearied herself in vain, for she could not reach them. At last she turned away, beguiling herself of her disappointment, and saying: ‘The Grapes are sour, and not ripe as I thought’.

David Eden’s powerful study of autonomist Marxism or post-Operaismo, which shot to prominence with the popularity of Hardt and Negri’s Empire in 2000, is one of the best stories of the sour grapes of the Left written thus far. Eden focuses on three contemporary currents in autonomist Marxism – the work of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno, the Midnight Notes Collective and that of John Holloway – and closely examines their work in terms of their analysis of capitalism, understandings of class and approaches to emancipation; highlighting both their strengths and limitations.

He does not spend too much time on drawing the links with Operaismo/Workerism as a post-1956 reaction against the Italian Communist Party (PCI), especially in the theoretical and political work around the time of Quaderni Rossi (‘Red Notebooks’, 1961–65), Classe Operaia (‘Working Class’, 1963–66) and the organization Potere Operaio, or the generalization of anti-party calls for self-activity beyond the mass factory to the ‘social factory’ in the Italian autonomist movements of the 1970s. Some background would have allowed readers to appreciate how the shift from workerism in the 1960s to the autonomia/autonomist movement of the late 1970s, enabled the Italian Left to give 1968 student lifestyle radicalism a Marxist makeover: rather than an individualist, student-centred understanding of the world, workers in everyday life and struggle made the world and provided the life-giving creative vital forces which capitalism sought to be both parasitical upon and to artificially contain. Here sociology was the key discipline of critique: blurring the political/economic divide of Stalinist determinism and rejecting the party’s possession of ‘objective’ understandings of economic bases, structures and contradictions.

There are three fundamental sour grapes at stake here: the liberal or modernist teleology of material progress; state power as capable of leading and directing social change; and the revolutionary party and revolutionary theory as capable of leading and directing political struggle. The ‘Copernican revolution’ of workerist self-activity put the present above the future, self-activity or the movement above the state or any formal institutions and everyday life, struggle and practice above parties and theory. The failures of the old Left would not be repeated, with their calls for

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1 Taken from Harrison Weir’s 1884 English translation, which claims to be ‘from original sources’, http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/sour-grapes.html.

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submission to experts, for sacrifice in the present to ideal futures to come, with their theories, their hierarchical parties, divisive programmes, objective ‘truths’ and illusions in the ability of state power to transform social and economic relations. Autonomist politics, for long in the margins – and in academic studies, until the last decade, put in the shadow by the French intellectual responses to the defeat of the old Left in 1968, in post-structuralism and the intellectual hegemony of Foucault – has increasingly become a leading form of critical understanding.

The weakness and dependencies of the Italian Left led to the workerist and autonomist attempts to change the world through self-activity; through the politics of reclaiming the vitality of everyday life and the possibilities of the self-production of an alternative world. Eden provides a critical exposition of the expressions of this ‘life politics’ today, from the position of general agreement with autonomist aspirations but, just as he provides very little in terms of the historical defeats and marginalizations which led to the rejectionism of workerist and autonomist ‘sour grape’ theorizing, he provides little context in terms of why radical thought is drawn to these autonomy critiques in today’s post-political world. He reflects very little on why the self-activity of ‘life politics’ seems to be central to both radical critique and government practices, articulated in terms of the neoliberal or biopolitical inculcation of communities of resilience, or ‘Big Society’ thinking, or in the non-teleological understandings of development as ‘capacity- or capability-building’. In our globalized, complex and interdependent world, the workerist/autonomist critique of the linear, totalizing and state-based politics of twentieth century modernity, reads more like mainstream thinking than as a radical challenge to power.

To my mind, readers will enjoy and be challenged by this book (once they get past the proofing errors and the ad hominen assertions) as an insight into the importance of autonomous understandings of ‘work on the self’ for dominant understandings of power and the ‘rise of the social’ today. For this reason, it is quite useful that Eden just takes today’s autonomist theorists on their own terms, as a series of academic expositions, all of which are striking and engaging.

In the opening chapters on Hardt, Negri and Virno, especially the wonderfully titled ‘Life Put to Work’, Eden stresses the importance of the link to the theorizing of Operaismo, although he could have equally drawn a link to the radical 1960s sociological constructivism of Berger and Luckmann or to Anthony Giddens’ 1980s structuration theory.2 The world is produced and reproduced by workers in their constitutive power, capital as constituted power is merely an excrescence: a vampiric attempt to exploit, control and mystify the self-production of the world as an ongoing process of social practices, producing the world both materially and immaterially. It is capitalism that mystifies the world, drawing divisions between the public and private, political and economic, paid and unpaid, work and life, production and exchange, structure and agency. In this framing, capitalism does not exist so much as a set of structuring social relations than as an epistemological manipulation, enabling an artificial set of structures and understandings to constrain the creative vitality of life.

Vitally important in terms of the ‘sour grapes’ thesis outlined above is the sociological reduction of the world to the social. This reductionism destroys the modernist binaries that constituted the artificial sphere of politics and law as autonomous or separate to the spontaneous interactions of the social and economic spheres. The social sphere of life is where the real power lies; not in the artifices of capitalist and liberal understandings of formal representation and sovereignty. No political party is needed once the political is understood as an artificial constraint on the social power of workers/the multitude. No calls for democracy or voice are necessary once it is recognized that real democracy already exists in the multitude itself, which rules itself through its active, participatory life of producing and reproducing the world. The alternative

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world exists in the here and now, in the present – this is the political contestation at play in biopolitics, in the politics of life itself. Life is the new Left. All we need to do is to give life full play, to unleash its creative constitutive capacities that are (never fully) constrained by the artificial trappings of capitalist power, to reveal that workers – biopolitical life itself – are the true power. The problem is essentially a therapeutic one – the lack of self-affirmation (or self-valorisation), which blinds us to the fact that we are living in a world where power relations are mystified and captured and inverted.

While Virno and Negri are seen to focus on the constitutive excess of the multitude, always threatening to break beyond and to undermine the artifices of power, the Midnight Notes Collective work analysed here mainly focuses upon the self-production of alternative worlds by those often considered to be marginal and less trapped in the spheres of formal party politics and the telos of liberal modernity. Here, on the margins, autonomous lifestyles, new affinities and non-monetary forms of exchange are experimented with under the duress of both necessity and resistance. Of course, the role model here is the Zapatista struggle for autonomy, creating alternative worlds in the present without the need for parties, revolutions, states or programmes. This is the politics of life as ‘subsistence’, of ‘indigenous communism’, where participating in life outside of capitalist and state power generates its own radical praxis. The immiserated of the world have the knowledges, affinities and lifestyles of our common shared alternative future and we can learn from them that the modernist dreams of progress are merely an illusion and not attractive ripe grapes at all. Here the self-constituting life struggles of the marginal are external to the world of capitalism and power. This external relation to capitalism is exceptional to the rest of the autonomous writing considered, and bears less relation to the Italian workerist tradition and the post-Operaismo understanding that there is no outside to the world understood as a self-constituting social process.

Eden closes the book with a few chapters on the work of John Holloway, focusing on his 2002 book Change the World Without Taking Power.³ Holloway shares a common analytical terrain with Hardt, Negri and Verno in his focus on the constitutive power of social labour and critique of politics as autonomous from economics. Holloway perhaps more clearly articulates the Left politics of social-ism, of life as a critique of the world as it exists. For Holloway, this can be framed in terms of living labour against dead labour or living social meanings against dead or reified meanings, becoming against being, concrete practice against abstract theory or categories, processes against products, excess against enclosure. If this string of binaries is not clear enough in framing autonomous politics as the struggle of becoming/life against being/power, perhaps the constitutive potentia of ‘power to’ against the constituted potestas of ‘power over’ helps to clarify the vitalist leanings at play. Life is the ‘anti-power’ of creative flow; power is an attempt to halt this flow, reifying death over life.

Once life becomes the new Left, the vitalist critique of the rule of capital as dead labour – of agential social construction reified as objective structure – needs no economic determinist theory of crisis and no theoretical injection of ‘truth’ in the form of a political party or political theory and no telos of class struggle and the taking of state power. Critique or ‘anti-power’ is already a material reality; a material reality of our everyday lives. Anti-power is everywhere and rebellion is everywhere. Here, the old materialism of Karl Marx is rewritten as the ‘new materialism’ of Bruno Latour, William Connolly, Jane Bennett and others,⁴ who extend ‘anti-power’ as everyday resistance or ‘recalcitrance’ to non-humans and human/non-human assemblages. Autonomy elides into the auto-poiesis of complex adaptive systems as a theory of the power of life itself,

³ Published in London by Pluto Press, with extended second and third editions in 2005 and 2010.
in its social self-production, inverses the understandings of power: from capital to labour; from the state to society; from theories to practices; from material production to immaterial exchange; and in its most extreme new materialist forms, from humans to non-humans and assemblages, and from subjects to objects. This critical study brings home the fact that today it seems we are all radical materialists, in our rejection of the sour grapes of radical Enlightenment aspirations and their exchange for the immanent vitalist understanding of the constitutive power of socialized life where we only need to transform ourselves and no longer worry about the external world. For this reason alone, it makes for required and sobering reading.

Notes on contributor

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