



The spectre of anarchism

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review of

Eden, D. (2012) *Autonomy: Capitalism, class and politics*. Ashgate: Surrey. (HB, pp.283, £54.00, ISBN 9781409411741)

David Eden's *Autonomy: Capitalism, class and politics* is the first book-length general study of autonomist Marxism, or what he calls 'the perspective of autonomy' (11). A large and detailed analysis, Eden's book covers the work of three sub-traditions within autonomist thought, which he organizes geographically (across Italy, the US and the UK). He begins by discussing the ideas of Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri, before moving onto the authors grouped within the Midnight Notes Collective (MNC) and finishing with an appraisal of the work of John Holloway. Each section is divided into three chapters: two outlining the theories of the respective authors and a third offering several points of critique. Before moving on to discuss Eden's project as a whole and to comment on it, it should be noted that these three sections, in so far as they hone in on specific lacunae or theoretical and practical problems Eden has with the authors he discusses, offers valuable critique of, and insights into, autonomist thought. As such, his book is an invaluable and timely intervention in debates around autonomist Marxism. One thing that stands out about the book, however, is that these three sections at times read like three unconnected studies. While the conclusion and the themes Eden focuses on do bring them together, there is a sense, and I'll return to this below, that the three sections don't engage with one another as much as they perhaps could; i.e. the themes and discussions Eden talks about and critiques in one section don't always link up with or comment on

similar themes or discussions in the other sections. I want to proceed here by partially reviewing the critical approaches he takes towards each author or set of authors. Before doing so, it is worth noting the issues that link the authors under discussion in Eden's book. In his conclusion he identifies four common principles held by Negri and Virno, the MNC and Holloway: 1) anti-statism, 2) heterogeneous ideas of class and multiplicity, 3) unifying aspects bringing different struggles together, and 4) prefiguration (258-9). The last of these I will return to below. To begin with, I will provide a partial summary of each of Eden's three sections, discussing in turn his accounts and critiques of Negri and Virno, the MNC and finally Holloway. Following this, I will comment on the potential relationship between autonomist Marxism and anarchism, focussing in particular on the ideas of negation and prefiguration.

Eden's critique of Negri and Virno focuses on the lack of an appreciation of the role of exchange in capitalism. 'This leads', he writes, to 'an absence of the commodity, and thus fetishism, as serious categories in their work. Thus their topography of capitalism contains large dark and obscure zones' (95). This is perhaps the most theoretically technical section of the book. Eden's argument is that a lack of appreciation of exchange and commodity fetishism results in a failure to include alienation within their theories, and that following from this, neither Negri nor Virno understand the importance of the struggle against being labour by labour; in other words, they fail to recognise that part of the struggle of workers is a negation of the role or identity of being a worker, an identity defined by capitalist relations. Eden argues that a fundamental challenge for the multitude is, therefore, to fight against its own role in these capitalist social relations. Rather than simply wrestle labour from capitalist control, given labour's role as a product of capitalist relations, it too must be overcome for a struggle to be truly emancipatory. Fundamentally, he argues, the importance Negri and Virno place on labour and production, and in particular immaterial labour (a concept that also comes under criticism), only represents half of the story of capitalism. A recognition of exchange, the other half, allows one to take into account not only the creation of new alternatives to capitalism (reclaiming labour from capitalist relations) but also that which needs to be abolished: 'This means the negation of those parts of us and our life-world which *cannot* be freed from capital, parts that we ourselves have built' (113).

Turning to the MNC, Eden highlights their work on the notion of the commons, but is critical of the extent to which their definition thereof becomes over-stretched and, importantly, fails to 'adequately and convincingly identify the commons in the [global] North' (257). Taking the example of a strike in the town of Jay, Maine in the US, used by MNC participant David Riker, Eden shows that the idea of the commons as 'the ensemble of relations of the life of the people in

the town' (175) is problematic. Crucially, this commons is something that is described as arising out of struggle and not something that precedes capitalism and that is then enclosed by it (one of the key theoretical positions of the MNC being about enclosure and the development of capitalism, a position Eden is generally very supportive of). Eden contends that this is symptomatic of an attempt to create the commons as a 'theory of everything', which inevitably reduces the distinctions and diversity within class struggle. He is sceptical that such a reduction can bring under one conceptualisation the struggles in the global North and global South, suggesting that there are fundamental differences between the struggle of those in Jay, Maine and the Zapatistas (another favourite example of the MNC), especially when these are viewed through the lens of the commons. One result of this, Eden argues, is that the MNC 'begin to slide into defences of previous reforms of capitalism and sometimes put forwards reformist and social-democratic positions' (257). This is evidenced by their support of populist social-democratic governments in Latin America, something that doesn't exactly cohere with the general autonomist rejection of the state (184-6).

Of his critique of Holloway, the most pertinent and developed line is perhaps that which deals with identity. According to Eden, Holloway's work involves a complete rejection of identity as a product of capitalist relations: 'capitalism affects daily life and creates certain forms of subjectivity, consciousness and intimate patterns of existence' (203). As a result, the struggle against capitalism is a struggle against all fixed identities (this is related to his conception of negation which I will discuss below). This position, Eden argues, means that Holloway is unable to see the politically radical potential for some forms of identity. As Eden notes, 'so many struggles of the last 40 years have taken the shape of struggles *of* and *for* identity: anti-racisms, national liberation, feminism, struggles around sexuality, etc.' (244, italics in original). Interestingly, the critique of Holloway's position on identity presented in the book makes use of the very same example that Holloway does: the Zapatistas. While Holloway asserts that the balaclavas and masks of the Zapatistas represent the non- or anti- identity of the movement, Eden is quick to point out that covering the face in that manner stands in fact for a common humanity, and also that the specific types of masks worn actually help to identify the movement as indigenous, as they reference Mayan culture and religion (247-8). Based on this, and other criticisms of Holloway, Eden concludes that Holloway is unable to '*really suggest an effective, emancipatory communist politics*' (249, italics in original). Instead, he proposes to take the Zapatista example further than Holloway has taken it, both on the question of identity and on a radical political praxis in general.

What struck me most reading Eden's book, as someone with an academic background more in anarchist than Marxist theory, was the strong parallels between autonomism and anarchism, especially in terms of political action. Indeed, Eden writes in his introduction that 'in the English speaking (sic) global North outside of the university it is most often only among anarchist circles that you will find any ongoing discussion of the perspective of autonomy' (9). He moves on from this discussion in the space of two paragraphs, which is rather unfair given the connections, but of course his is not a study of the relationship between autonomism and other left-wing currents. Beyond his brief tangent, one can identify a number of links between autonomist and anarchist thought, the starkest of which is the idea of prefiguration: 'the creation of the future in the present... of alternative social relations todayn (sic)' (259). In the cases of Virno and Holloway, for example, Eden notes how they rearticulate the temporality of anti-capitalist struggle: 'rather than exercising our counter-power only in the future, we bring it into being now'. He also compares Negri's approach with the Industrial Workers of the World's idea of building a new world in the shell of the old. Similarly, for members of the MNC and Holloway, the Zapatistas stand out as a prime example of anti-capitalist activity as they 'directly create alternative post-capitalist social relations *as a fundamental part* of their resistance to capitalism' (158, italics in original). While anarchists can't claim to have coined the notion of prefiguration, it is a central part of contemporary anarchist theory, informing activist as well as academic discussions.

In the field of ethics, for example, Benjamin Franks' recent work has drawn on prefiguration as a core anarchist principle and on this foundation he develops an anarchist virtue ethics. This is in fact very similar in form to Virno's performative ethics outlined in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. There, Virno (2004: 52) draws on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, the latter being defined as an activity which has its end within the doing of the activity and not in an external product. *Praxis*, for Virno, is the foundation for autonomist ethics (to the extent that there is such a thing). Compare this to Franks' practical anarchism, which builds on Alasdair MacIntyre's (1985) virtue ethics (Franks, 2008: 147): '(practical anarchism) identifies goods as being inherent to social practices.... It stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue'. In so far as prefiguration has to do with the bringing together of means and ends within action, anarchists and autonomists accord with one another. A related linkage between autonomism and anarchism on the question of political action concerns the rejection of the temporality of traditional communist ideology: that the revolution will come at a point in the future, after which there will be either communism or socialism as a transitional phase. While of course every anarchist in history hasn't rejected the idea of the revolution to come, in

general a more prefigurative approach, which calls for revolution in the here and now as an on-going practice, or *praxis*, has been dominant. Discussions on prefiguration within autonomist thought would perhaps do well to take anarchism more seriously. This is particularly true when it comes to the concept of negation, an aspect of prefigurative politics that is common to both autonomism and anarchism.

As noted above, negation comes up in Eden's discussions of Holloway and the MNC and he is especially critical of the way in which Holloway focuses too much on a politics of negation (at least in his earlier work), of destroying capitalist social relations, and not enough on the positive building of alternatives. While Holloway is described as shifting from a purely negative position to one in which negation is defined as 'the direct appearance of an alternative' (241), the relationship between his latter conceptualisation and the MNC's idea of 'substruction' is not explored. 'Substruction' is defined by p.m. such that '[c]onstruction has to be combined with subversion into one process' (p.m., quoted at 165), uniting similar trajectories as appear in Holloway's later and earlier work respectively. In a similar fashion, Eden's critique of Negri and Virno, in which, as I mentioned above, he argues that they ought to take into account not only creating new alternatives but also abolishing or negating that which ties labour to capitalist relations, also stands alone and is not brought into conversation with the MNC or Holloway on this theme. Since all three sub-traditions discussed in the book clearly have something to say about negation and prefiguration, it is a shame that their respective thought on the issue is not compared and/or contrasted. This is the first major criticism I have of Eden's study: the three sections are just that, three distinct parts that while making up the whole aren't made to explicitly relate or refer to one another.

The general autonomist position on negation presented across the three sections, however, chimes very well with nineteenth-century anarchist author and activist Mikhail Bakunin's notion of creative destruction. He famously wrote, at the end of 'The Reaction in Germany' (1842), a text which applies his version of Hegelian dialectics to politics, 'Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!' The use of the term 'Spirit' here has to be understood in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Hegelian thought and shouldn't be taken to refer necessarily to anything supernatural or God-like. This is perhaps another aspect lacking in Eden's study: an appreciation of or reference to Hegel when examining the theory and practice of autonomist Marxism. While autonomists would no doubt reject any idea of an objective dynamic in history, such as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model of orthodox Marxism or the thesis-antithesis alternative of Bakunin's idea of negation, given

that negation seems to figure heavily in the work of many autonomist authors, a discussion of Hegelian logic would be appropriate and might help to better understand the theories at hand. This, it must be noted, is perhaps symptomatic of a tendency within autonomist thought towards a kind of theoretical incest: a lack of engagement with sources coming from outside the tradition. Eden's book functions well as an internal critique of the validity of much of what Negri and Virno, the MNC and Holloway say, but it doesn't engage these authors in wider political debates or bring in lines of criticism from elsewhere.

As a relative newcomer to autonomist Marxism, I may not be particularly well-placed to comment on much of Eden's text, and of course I cannot in any way vouch for the soundness or otherwise of his exposition of the ideas of his three subjects. However, as the first general study of autonomism to be published in English that deals with more than one author, I would suggest that his book is essential reading for those engaged in academic debates around autonomism or indeed those using particular autonomist ideas or authors in their work. While it is not intended as one, the book does work very well as a partial introduction to the tradition and to the ideas of Negri and Virno, the MNC and Holloway in particular. A proper introduction would perhaps do better to work along thematic lines rather than advancing from author to author. Autonomism is of course a much larger field than that which Eden is able to include in his study, but despite the criticisms I've mentioned here, that the three sections don't engage with one another well enough and that an appreciation of discussions and ideas from outside autonomist thought is lacking, his is a valuable account that is perhaps indispensable for academics interested in gaining more knowledge about autonomism as well as those already engaged in its debates.

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