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## **The Project of Autonomy in a Time of Fading Empire<sup>1</sup>**

This paper has two main sections with a transitional space that links them. The first presents my forthcoming book, *Looking for the Proletariat: Socialisme ou Barbarie and The Problem of Worker Writing*. The transitional space involves labyrinths. The second main section outlines the prospects for the project of autonomy in the present, a time of fading empires. It is a kind of exhortation.

The project of autonomy is the over-arching theme. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* articulated a version from within a Marxist context: a contemporary project of autonomy that might look to SouB confronts the problem of the closure of the Marxist Imaginary. One of the motifs is an exploration of what this closure entails.

The following is a condensed version of the presentation. It is comprised of elements pulled from the paper that touch on most, but not all, of the main themes. While they are in order, there is often material in the paper that will appear between the elements. The transitional section, on crossroads in labyrinths, is not included.

I hope this will facilitate conversation. I look forward to the workshop.

### ***Looking for the Proletariat***

Castoriadis' seminars on Capital from 1950-51 formalized a historicizing break with Marxian political economy that created space for a sociologically oriented approach to revolutionary theory and politics. This approach was given content with the emergence of a new schema. Rooted in Benno Sternberg's analysis of the 1953 East Berlin June Days, this schema linked worker experience at the point of production to autonomous strike actions to possibilities of a direct-democratic socialism. The group developed this schema through analysis of autonomous actions on the one hand, and of everyday worker experience at the point of production on the other. This second vector is the main thread that holds together the book.

The group saw the military structure of the Leninist vanguard party as repeating the distinction between dirigent and executant characteristic of bureaucratic capitalism in general. For Claude Lefort, this had direct implications for the relation of theory to worker experience. Worker experience should be described by the workers themselves.

Workers who were not also militants did not write. If they did, the outcomes were combinatorial exercises using conventional political language. The explanations have to do with workers' dominated social position and role that literacy played in reproducing that dominated position (operating as an exclusionary mechanism) on the one hand, and the nature of conventionalized political language at Renault's Billancourt factory on the other.

My main objective was to open up questions about how the Marxist Imaginary came undone.

By the mid-50s labor relations at Renault were shaped by collective bargaining.

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<sup>1</sup> Abstract of a contribution to the workshop „Kapitalismus und Befreiung – nach Castoriadis“, 29.03.2014, at Berlin.

Building on older traditions at Billancourt, when work-related problems arose that the unions could not or would not address, workers mobilized autonomously. Typically delimited by shop and shift, workers talked themselves up into mobilization using the language of revolutionary Marxism, transforming themselves into political actors.

By happenstance, most of Mothé's texts were written about the period during and after the Hungarian Revolution. Images of Soviet tanks crushing a worker revolution in the name of worker revolution triggered an abrupt collapse of the political space occupied by the PCF-CGT system. This break in continuity seems to have allowed internal dissonances (Stalinism and destalinization, Poland and Hungary etc) to weigh directly on the language of Marxism. itself. The language of Marxism turned to wood.

At one level, this points to the breakdown of an informal feedback loop that connected union hierarchies to problems on the shop floor. On another level, these workers are canaries in the mineshaft whose withdrawal of investment presage broader problems with Marxism as the language in terms of which aspirations for emancipation might be articulated. If one reads Mothé through SB's framework, the group's revolutionary project might have been in danger.

However SB collectively did not recognize what Mothé documented. They were taken with the Hungarian Revolution as opening new spaces for revolutionary action. If the group did collectively look at what Mothé documented, they saw something else.

The book stops with that, in early 1957.

A language turns to wood through disruptions in the continuities of framing and investment. But the investments themselves entail problems of recognition, particularly when recognition amounts to sawing off the branch one is sitting on. At the same time, the social-imaginary formation is a professional discourse of bureaucratic political organizations, which continue to talk to and about themselves as if nothing had happened. These organizations are linked to top-down, repetition-based media environments. The same formation operates in those contexts as if nothing had happened. Over time, continued repetition would reduce disruption to a momentary signal instability. Then it would vanish altogether.

But something happened.

### **The Project of Autonomy in a Time of Fading Empire**

We live in a context that, by any rational standard, should not be neo-liberal.

The past 3 years have seen large-scale movements shaped by a collective desire for autonomy in one form or another.

You can see the everyday struggles people wage to maintain space for creative interactions with their environments in a context of generalized neo-colonialism as movements toward autonomy. People are moving in the direction of autonomy without waiting for a vision of autonomous society. We know these things are happening at to the extent to which we have looked for or participated in them.

The project of autonomy has yet to be undertaken. Those of us here, now: we could do it. It would require some planning. And ours would not be the only such project. So no-one is waiting for us. There is freedom in not being necessary: freedom to experiment; freedom to fail. But it would be a productive and useful experience, for ourselves as a process of clarification, and, maybe, for others, to the extent that we manage to communicate with them and they with us.

A contemporary project of autonomy would be a progressive elaboration of what autonomy an autonomous society might look like. Because we are readers of CC and find his work to be generative, the elements provided in that work are, for us, good points of departure

Earlier, I spoke about SB. Thinking about the group is interesting for thinking about a contemporary project of autonomy.

SB can be a template or a “germ” as CC would say. It cannot be a model.

A contemporary project of autonomy operates in a space shaped fundamentally by the closure of the Marxist Imaginary. The assumptions that oriented SB no longer obtain a priori, either analytically or procedurally. There is no basis for inherited hierarchies that would privilege traditional forms of theory writing over experimental or hybrid forms. A contemporary project of autonomy cannot assume its audience up front. A contemporary project of autonomy cannot afford to not experiment with media, forms and approaches.

A contemporary project of autonomy would encounter the (open) question of whether writing is the best vehicle for that project. If the idea is to reach people, video and audio formats are very good ideas.

The idea is catalyze people to think differently about what they are doing as much as to report on it. This orientation may address problems that attend turning people into data to enhance your very radical personal brand.

At the same time, I am fond of documentation. I find the boundaries of the documentary interesting spaces to explore. To refer back to SB: much of the work that appeared in the journal were politically oriented forms of ethnography. That work was framed by concerns as to the relation of observer to observed conditioned by the group’s overall position on revolutionary organization. These concerns can shape, but not determine, the outcomes of parallel types of politically motivated ethnography in a contemporary project.

A project of autonomy would be a learning and an unlearning. It would be a collective experiment. It would require each to move off reliance on forms that are comfortable and to open up to what is around you. For a time, the world will become very big, and what you are doing very small. There’s something good in that. One cannot substitute one’s actions for the actions of others. People have to free themselves.

To facilitate that, the project of autonomy should be transposed into pragmatic trajectories that can be picked up/elaborated practically in a wide range of contexts.

The project of autonomy raises questions of political education. At one level, following CC, participation in a contemporary project of autonomy would be a paideia. At another level, the experience of Myles Horton or Paolo Friere in developing forms of democratic education are worth your consideration.

The project of autonomy is a collective improvisation. Improvisation as an activity refers to and impact primarily upon those who carry it out. The outputs may affect people, but that relation is basically different.

The project of autonomy is participatory.

There is no autonomy show.

CC's later work is shaped by the idea of a project of autonomy (and by the experience of SB). But he was not himself pursuing that project.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes I have the sense that not pursuing the political project himself contributed to a tendency to sweeping and excessively negative assessment of the contemporary situation. CC would often extend the characterization of the nullity of an era of generalized conformity to everything, to all contemporary literature and music. He would ask: Where is today's James Joyce? Where is today's Thelonious Monk?

If you had inquired after Joyce in 1922 or Monk in 1945, you would have been hard-pressed to find either of them. Both came to occupy central positions in their respective fields after the fact, as a result of the institution of a subsequent conception of the field of which they were parts, Joyce in the frame of literary modernism, Monk in that of an expanded understanding of be-bop shaped by the work of a later avant-garde.

If one looks around today in writing or music for someone who occupies similar positions, one has to look to various underground scenes. In contemporary writing, folk like Peter Markus are producing lovely and sophisticated work. Is he a new James Joyce? Of course not: he is doing something else.

Similarly, in music there is a considerable range of innovative work being done both on traditional instruments and in the organization of sound environments using recorded materials. With respect to the latter, one can point to any number of younger producers working in UK dance music. Are any of these people the new Monk? Of course not: they're doing something else. That you might not like dance music changes little about what these folk are doing. But what it does mean is that you are unlikely to look for anything new in these areas, because you find the surface features of the form unappealing so decide there's no there there. But to dismiss it as an example of heteronymy (for the rhythms, for the use of samples) is to make heteronymy a synonym for "things you do not like."

This is not to say that a project of autonomy require that we be hipper, better consumers. There's a sense in which that doesn't really matter. Practices that may have implications for a project of autonomy have to do more with the processes of making than with the nature, circulation and interpretation of the outcomes.

Perhaps we have been thinking about creative work in the wrong way.

As Barnett Newman once said: Aesthetic is to artists as ornithology is to birds.

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<sup>2</sup> See CC's statements on the stratified character of the larger project that shaped his later work in "Fait et à faire."