

Logics of Resistance: Autonomist Social Movements in Theory and Practise

Christian Garland

The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital, Massimo De Angelis (Pluto, 2007).

The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life, Georgy Katsiaficas (AK Press, 2006).

After the apparent impasse at the turn of the century, which seemed to be characterised by a dull acceptance of the world to come - that is the triumph of global capitalism - there seems to have at last appeared the tentative recognition that this may yet prove a false victory. The two texts under review here, Massimo De Angelis's *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (Pluto, 2007) and Georgy Katsiaficas's *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (AK Press, 2006) are two of the most crucial interventions yet made in making sense of our current situation. Indeed, both books offer critical interstices destined to be of key theoretical importance in the battle for the future.

De Angelis's book brilliantly inverts Francis Fukuyama's claim first made eighteen years ago, that *The End of History* had arrived, as it invokes Marx's notion of '*prehistory*' foreshadowing the emergence of humanity into the realm of its own historical becoming. Although it is relatively easy to dismiss the celebratory evangelism of Francis Fukuyama's pseudo-Hegelian proclamations, there is the seemingly overlooked fact of the extent to which his conclusions are implicitly shared: that in globalized capitalism we have arrived at the effective endpoint of human history, and all that remains is the circumnavigation of the past. It is as if negotiating our way through the maze of fragmented and fragmenting social relations of postmodern capitalism, we arrive back at the same starting point, albeit in varying degrees of wonder-

ment or despair. *The Beginning of History* sets out to go beyond mere critical analysis of the system's faults but instead, as De Angelis states in his preface, to 'look at power in its "truth", that is, in the fact that it stands for something that we, the critics do not' (pp. xi-xii). As he points out, "To do so would require measuring it with the yardstick of what we value and being reconciled to the fact that the borderline is a line of conflict, a front line"(p. xii). *The Beginning of History* makes for a rich theoretical exploration of the dimensional antagonisms posed by the refusal of neoliberalism across the globe, and the many creatively subversive processes continually embodied and reproduced by it.

In what has previously been called 'the struggle for human dignity' we find the effort to offer alternative values that are 'positively' defined as antagonistic to capital and its imperatives of dispossession, competition and exploitation. As De Angelis argues, the social subject is ever-present both in and against the continuum of capitalism and its domination of human existence, the possibility of potentially *overcoming* it is the task *The Beginning of History*, in this, more than succeeds. From the opening chapter, in which De Angelis begins his interrogative analysis of the concepts under discussion, we are given much to work with through the subsequent discussion, in which covers a remarkable critical field. In 'Value Struggles', De Angelis re-states what cannot be restated enough, that there is nothing 'inevitable' about capitalism or the systemic demands it places on human beings, just as the manifest misery created is not 'unavoidable'. Just as neoliberalism can be seen as the global restructuring of capital accumulation, we feel this in the further imposition of market discipline accompanies it: the privatisation of public services; 'downsizing' and accompanying overnight redundancy; welfare 'reform'; and the 'flexibility' of temporary employment in the 'first world' and inhuman conditions of poverty, disease, and exploitation in the 'third world'.

One of the most successful ideological tricks of late capitalism would seem to be its ability to disarm the critique of it as a *totality*, as such, one of the hardest tasks for those of us resolved to develop theories of autonomous 'overcoming' is to delineate the common dimensional linkages between different struggles and their convergence as a unified struggle of social reproduction. De Angelis offers numerous examples of just such processes, in which 'the outside' can be seen 'to emerge from within'. However, as he makes abundantly clear: 'none of the subjects engaged in conflict has the property of "universal' subject" [...] in a system of feedback mechanisms like

capitalist production, each part is instrumental in the production of the whole no part is therefore *central* yet every part is a site of struggle' (p. 71). It is the experience of the market - not as freedom and choice, but as compulsion and coercion, restriction and enclosure with which the social body struggles and must overcome - that is explored in some depth in the chapters dealing with capital's reproductive cycles and its constant need for disciplinary integration. Just as the W.T.O., I.M.F. and World Bank enforce the disciplinary rules of the world market without regard to the human costs, so these 'inevitable' 'realities' are forever being undermined by antagonistic social forces that, by their very opposition, struggle to create, overcome, and effectively go *beyond* the imperatives of 'value, price, and profit'. As De Angelis shows, despite the repetition of such ideological banalities as the need to maintain 'competitiveness' in the 'global economy' such apparently 'common sense' truths, just as the economic 'science' supporting them, in fact are revealed as a set of rather threadbare justificatory moral prescriptions for the existence of capitalism, which, whilst it may *function* according to such imperatives, *in reality* has no actual *reason* for being.

The Beginning of History develops an incisive critique of both 'economic reason' and so-called 'rational economic man', just as this is informed by the same value struggles under discussion throughout the book. In their dynamic antagonism with capital, social subjectivities set out to disrupt the normal functioning of the machine as a matter of urgency - the vital needs for a life lived outside and against the law of value, and profit. De Angelis's book is unique in its contribution to our understanding of the problematic of our present situation and the critical effort required to overcome it. The practise of resisting the demands of the market, the state, and hierarchical social relations, is a struggle to create and define a new mode of being, antagonistic to the imperatives of capitalism, and the form of life it imposes. Such a practise can be found in the autonomous social movements covered by Georgy Katsiaficas's *The Subversion of Politics*, a new and expanded edition of a book first published a decade ago. Katsiaficas is indeed well qualified to comment on the movements in question, coming as he does from a background which bridges the American and European experiences. A former research student of Herbert Marcuse and with extensive first-hand knowledge of the European autonomous movements, Katsiaficas's book offers an ideal critical starting point for tracing the lines of continuity between the movements of the 1970s and 80s, particularly German *Autonomie* and the most radical elements of the present anti-capitalist movement. As is provocatively stated in

the opening line: 'The now legendary 1960s movements did not die, they never existed – at least not within the temporal confines of a decade' (p. 1). Such an historical perspective will no doubt make for uncomfortable reading for those for whom 1968, and its aftermath, remains forever confined to the past as a generational specificity without precedence or chronicity in the present. In the course of the book, Katsiaficas makes use of the concept of "Eros effect" which he defines as 'a life-affirmative [...] awakening of mass opposition to the powers that be' (p. v). As he further states, 'instances of revolt profoundly resonate among us [...] and continue to animate political change' (Ibid.). This 'Eros effect' can be seen as a joyful breaking of boundaries, the trespassing of enclosures, and the creative vitality of a life lived for its own sake, expressed in a dialectical negativity against the system and its demands.

Beginning by periodizing the movements in question, *The Subversion of Politics* explores, in some detail, the German movement as it emerged in the Federal Republic of the 1970s and 80s, while also giving substantial background on the Italian *Autonomia* movement of 1977, which prefigured many of the (anti)-political practises now used in actual or modified form in quite different settings. Whilst Katsiaficas is careful to distinguish the Italian upsurge of 1977 from the German movement, he also clearly defines their shared universal substance: 'They wanted to live lives [...] of their own collective making, not ones determined by decisions in corporate boardrooms and government ministries' (p. 25). The distinctive character of German autonomist movements is also noted, from their background in squatting and anti-nuclear struggles to the shifting priorities of countering neo-Nazi violence following re-unification. Katsiaficas demonstrates the fluidity of these movements, their refusal to be defined and co-opted by the system, or pacified by the traditional left with its readymade ideological dogmas and shameless opportunism - 'the idle and stale prattle of the living dead' (p. 38).

Similarly, the 'decolonization of everyday life' remains a defining aspect of autonomous social movements, from 1977, through the 80s and 90s and indeed up to the present day. What these movements share, is their implacable challenge to the existing system in its minutest details, starting from the needs of collective and individual subjects, and their refusal to be subsumed under the law of value. In this sense, the squatting movement, which formed such an important part of German autonomism, was far more than a mere 'lifestyle' choice, but rather a practical solution to the mundane but unavoid-

able necessity of finding housing. The hundreds (if not thousands) of communal squats in Germany in the 1980s were, as Katsiaficas shows, both a solution to the problem of housing and a collective experiment in free and egalitarian social relations; from offering an alternative to the nuclear family or monogamic couple, to shared economic resources, such experiments posed (and still do) a concerted opposition to the competitive-acquisitive struggle of life lived as an atomised monad under late capitalism.

Taking the critique of everyday life as his starting point, Katsiaficas also examines in some depth the importance of women in the German autonomist movement, particularly in the way they advanced their own particular needs without defining themselves primarily through an exclusive identity politics. As Katsiaficas later argues, the fragmentation of radical social movements is usually viewed either in predictably celebratory terms by the guardians of micro-political identity politics, or with some displeasure by the established left, but what the 'particularity' of various single-issues have in common is the universality of the goals they aim to achieve, that is an emancipatory 'Eros effect' of benefit to all. As Katsiaficas convincingly shows: 'although the many dimensions of this dynamic are fragmentary, a totality of such requests can eventually become a radically new concrete universal – a reworking of the meaning of human being' (p. 249).

Katsiaficas draws on many personal anecdotes of his experiences with the movement in Germany, and the book is richer for it. On the defence of Hamburg's *Hafenstrasse*, and the repeated efforts of the State to destroy it, we find the autonomists' fearless determination to meet 'material force with material force':

in response to these attacks, the movement unleashed its own counteroffensive, marching more than 10,000 strong around a 'black bloc' of at least 1,500 militants carrying a banner which read 'Build revolutionary dual-power'. At the end of the march, the militants beat back the police in heavy street fighting (p. 125).

It is this effort to create what may be considered a 'dual-power' situation, that is a *material anti-power* capable of existing autonomously and in opposition to hierarchical power, that the German autonomists have maintained so resolutely in face of massive repression, and provocation. This will make for heartening reading for many in the UK, and for those in the United States,

where no comparable movement exists, and where 'radical' or 'revolutionary' politics are all too often seemingly disconnected from life. There is, of course, the criticism that such movements do not originate in or at least significantly encompass the proletariat, but are confined to radicalised youth existing on the margins of society and for whom the decision to live in opposition to it in its present form is merely a passing, if troublesome, phase in their passage to the 'real world' of adult responsibility. As such, European autonomous movements, as for the most radical elements associated with the anti or rather *alter-globalization* movement represent merely a privileged, transitory indulgence for 'Generation X/ Y': a kind of postmodern delayed reaction to the meaninglessness of late capitalism, but one that is in reality completely empty. This argument, in one form or another, has been the favourite stick with which to beat such movements ever since the late 60s - the difference now being that it is primarily ex-radicals, keen to exorcise the memories of their youth, who employ it with the most violence.

While Katsiaficas is careful not to overstate the role played by the autonomist movement in Germany (but also Switzerland, the Netherlands and Scandinavia), he makes a convincing case for the resonating impact they have on wider society. Despite the best efforts of the State and the mass media to isolate and stigmatise such movements, in Germany autonomists fuelled the fires of discontent with American nuclear bases being stationed in the country, and helped ferment a wider opposition that had noticeable political repercussions. Besides critically documenting European movements, *The Subversion of Politics* dedicates its concluding chapters to a theoretical exploration of both 'The (anti) politics of autonomy', and a broader substantive definition of the concept itself; indeed the 'anti-political' nature of autonomous movements is inseparable from defining what is meant by 'autonomy'. Unlike the party politics of the traditional left, autonomist movements do not seek to 'take power', or rather, paraphrasing Marx slightly, "wield it for (their) own ends". Such movements can be seen as *anti-political* in the sense that they reject the traditional forms of politics embodied in parties and the state, not just because of their obvious opposition to hierarchical power, but also in their emphasis that this can only be subverted by the *self-activity* of those it subordinates, become a *constituent power*. Autonomy, then, is not rigidly fixed in ideological terms, but rather can be defined as the power to freely determine the conditions of one's existence. Against hierarchical power, and its embodiment in the forces of market and state, autonomist practice stresses the possibility of alternative modes of being in the here

and now, whilst not losing sight of the need for this to become *total*, both in the sense of encompassing a majority of society and acting against the existing system in its entirety. Indeed, while autonomous social movements may yet remain a minority tendency, the extraordinary speed of events can give cause for hope. Just a decade ago, the triumph of global capitalism seemed so complete, few would have predicted that in the space of a few years its aura of legitimacy would be so forcefully undermined, nor that despite the lethal diversion of the 'War on Terror', there would remain such ongoing and concerted opposition. Besides the notion of the "Eros effect", Katsiaficas develops a theory for what he defines as "a rationality of the heart": a rationality based on human reason dialectically intertwined with both passions and emotion, an existential recognition of what it means to be human, that is prepared to confront everything that prevents us from *being* as De Angelis contends, 'The beginning of history must be *lived*, otherwise it is the end of it' (p. 247).

In '*The Beginning of History*' and '*The Subversion of Politics*' Massimo De Angelis and Georgy Katsiaficas offer two rigorously convincing theoretical explorations of our current historical situation. In De Angelis's critical theory of value, struggles in and against global capitalism and the subsumption of the world to its laws, he successfully helps to define the radically constituted social subject: 'by positing itself as a social force outside dominant values, this subject is a social force that turns these values into their own *object* and lays down the indispensable conditions for change' (p. 33). By way of comparison, in '*The Subversion of Politics*' this relation is explored in the exhilarating first-hand history of the German movement, while Katsiaficas too builds a formidable arsenal of theoretical weapons which it is hoped will be taken up and used elsewhere. Against the false closure of capitalist postmodernity as much as the apparent invulnerability this would maintain, history will always have the last word.

Christian Garland (christiangarland@hotmail.com) BA Philosophy and Politics (UEA), MA Social and Political Thought (Sussex) has research interests that include the Frankfurt School, heterodox Marxism(s) and the autonomist and anarchist movements, on which he has published papers and review essays. He intends to return to PhD studies some time in the future.