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Autonomy, Work, and Refusal

**An Interview
With
Harry Cleaver**

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A prominent American autonomist, Harry Cleaver lives in Austin, Texas, where he is active in Accion Zapatista. This interview was recorded in London during July 1993 by Massimo De Angelis. It first appeared in Italian in the autonomist journal *vis-a-vis* 1 (Autumn 1993).

Section I: Autonomist Marxism

You have been the first to talk about an Autonomist Marxist tradition which includes a variety of national "schools"--in Italy, France, the U.S. and so on. What are the main elements which differentiate this tradition from other strands of Marxism such as Marxism-Leninism or the Frankfurt school?

What gives meaning to the concept of "autonomist Marxism" as a particular tradition is the fact that we can identify, within the larger Marxist tradition, a variety of movements, politics and thinkers who have emphasized the autonomous power of workers--autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (e.g. the trade unions, the political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g. women from men). By "autonomy" I mean the ability of workers to define their own interests and to struggle for them--to go beyond mere reaction to exploitation, or to self-defined "leadership" and to take the offensive in ways that shape the class struggle and define the future.

Marxism-Leninism and the Frankfurt School have shared a bias toward focusing on the power of capital and have seen workers as essentially reactive to oppression and dependent on some kind of outside leadership to mobilize them for revolution. The Marxist-Leninists, as is well known, have privileged the political party of professional revolutionary intellectuals capable of grasping the general class interest and teaching it to workers who are seen as locked in merely "economic" demands. The critical theorists, who largely accepted the orthodox Marxist analysis of capitalist hegemony within the factory and extended this vision to culture and society as a whole, have also privileged the role of professional intellectuals who alone are capable of grasping the nuances of instrumentalist domination and of finding a path through the thicket to the light. In both cases, not only the bulk of empirical and historical analysis but also of theory has concerned understanding the mechanisms of domination and the myriad ways in which workers have been victimized. What both approaches have failed to do is to study the power of workers to rupture those mechanisms, to throw

The general answer to your general question "organized by whom?" is "organized by themselves", internal organisation by any self-defined group of people in struggle. Yet, at the same time, because of the the diversity involved, any "internal" organization, however managed, must also involve the collective organization of the relationships with other groups, other sectors of the class, the organization of the circulation of struggle. The question "How can we build our own power--to refuse work or to self-valorize in our own way?" becomes "How can be link up with others so that our efforts are mutually reinforcing?" All kinds of internally rigid formulae have survived within small enough groups, but the story of much of the Left has been that such groups have, in part by their own rigidity, cut themselves off, and remained isolated from other. As a result they have stagnated and remained irrelevant to larger social movements where more flexible and adapted forms of organization have facilitated the circulation of struggle among diverse groups.

All this is true at every level. Everywhere that organization fails to achieve the circulation of struggle, it fails, whether in a tiny groupscule in a single city or in a region or nation. The strength of relatively small groups such as the Palestinians, or the black freedom movements in Southern Africa, or the revolutionaries in Nicaragua or El Salvador, etc., has always been, in large part, due to their ability to build networks of alliance to circulate their struggles beyond their specific locales to other groups in other parts of the world. Which is precisely why in every case capital's strategy has been to cut them off, with trade and financial boycotts or travel restrictions, to isolate them--so that they can be destroyed. We cannot overemphasize the importance of this experience and must not fail to draw the necessary lesson: it is only through the ever wider circulation of struggle that we can ever hope to achieve the power necessary to destroy the manifold sinews of capitalist domination and to replace them with new social relationships more to our liking. Today, when the class confrontation is global, our circulation of our own struggles must be organized throughout the world, through every linkage possible. If we understand what is required, we have only to find the means. It is a process which is already underway; it always is. The political problems are: first, the assessment of what is working and what is not; which forms of organization are facilitating the circulation of struggle and which are hindering it and second, building on those which are working and abandoning or changing those which are not.

such a politics must pass through antagonisms to get rid of them; they will not just instantaneously disappear because we will them to. This is unavoidable even as we develop approaches to diversity based minimally on live and let live and preferably on mutual enrichment across differences. For example, as women have struggled to elaborate new more satisfying kinds of gender relationships, they have had to pass through many kinds of antagonistic relationships with men (and with each other). Not only has the construction of such new relationships involved the destruction of old ones--a destruction often perceived by men (with some elements of truth) as being at their expense--but the creative moments in this process have been experimental and often productive of new, unexpected kinds of antagonisms. Where women have elaborated lesbian relationships among themselves exclusive of men, it has obviously been a difficult and on-going process to develop complementary and non-antagonistic forms of struggle between those women and heterosexual men. It has obviously been somewhat easier, but by no means simple, to work out complementary struggles between lesbian women and homosexual men. The complex dynamics of these relationships are evolving before our eyes in the struggles around AIDS, against discrimination and for the freedom to develop new kinds of sexual, gender and family relations. What such experience teaches, I think, is that the forms of organization which work best are those which facilitate the circulation of struggle among groups, i.e., which enhance the complementarity of their efforts, and those forms must change and adapt to the changing patterns of struggle.

You seem here to be going beyond the old dichotomy between "organization" and "spontaneity".

The old dichotomy between organization and spontaneity is a false one. Even when some collective event occurs "spontaneously", i.e., not planned by anyone in advance, the people making the event happen organize themselves to accomplish it. Capital with its essence in command, authority and domination can only conceive of organization from the top down, by some kind of "leadership" and can see only chaos in any other kind of order. We, on the other hand, need to be able to perceive and appreciate a wide variety of kinds of organization while always evaluating their appropriateness critically. Much of the best of the "bottom-up" history developed over the last thirty years has involved the discovery and making visible of the such organization in popular movements.

So, circulation of struggles as organization-form. But organised by whom?

the system into crisis and to recompose social structures. Unable to develop a theory of workers' power, even their understanding of domination has been limited by their inability to see the contingency of capitalist power and how it has had to adapt repeatedly, often desperately, to an autonomously developing working class subjectivity to maintain its control, i.e., to survive. As a result even their theoretical understanding has remained one-sided, and more of a paean to capitalist power than a useful tool for us in our struggles.

That brings us to my next question. What is the political importance of such a distinction between "Autonomist Marxism" and other marxist traditions?

The political importance of placing *our* power at the center of our thinking about the class conflicts of capitalism, about the dynamics of the development of those conflicts, lies in the simple truth that it is only on an accurate appraisal of our own power that we can usefully debate how to proceed in building that power. If we spend all our time talking about the power of capital to do this, and to do that, to limit us in this way, or to force us to do that, we have no tools for talking about what to do next and we are often led into desperate and inappropriate action. When, on the other hand, we begin from an assessment of the power we do have, and an understanding of how what capital is doing amounts to a response to that power, then we are better placed to think about how to proceed in our struggles.

For example?

We might take the current moves in Europe and North America toward the creation of free trade zones. Traditional orthodox Marxist analyses tend to attempt to understand such moves in terms of the internal laws of capitalist development, as a response to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, or as a response to the exhaustion of a regime of regulation, or as another clever move in intercapitalist competition on a world scale. None of these considerations contains much, if anything, in the way of an analysis of worker power, and therefore little sense of where we are and how we might deal with the situation. An autonomist Marxist analysis, by contrast, which began with an assessment of the current crisis of capitalism in terms of the failure of previous capitalist strategies to contain and instrumentalize workers' power would provide such a point of departure. For example, the increased mobility of fixed capital associated with free trade (e.g. production facilities are moved from country A to country B because the products can now be shipped back to country A) can be seen as a response to the mobility and power of workers (e.g. the autonomous movement of

immigrants and the rigidifications and costs imposed by workers in countries of heavy fixed capital investment). Not only does such an analysis link the "free trade" issue to others, such as "racism" and "ethnic cleansing" but it suggests a political strategy of the circulation of struggle between groups whose power has been responsible for the crisis. And as fixed capital moves, it also suggests a parallel strategy of accelerating the circulation of struggle through the changing material. Thus, when we find that in North America coalitions of hundreds of groups of those in struggle in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico are linking up in new forms of continental scale organization--but not through the traditional means of trade unions or parties--we should be neither surprised nor attempt to push such organization into old molds. On the contrary, a new continental class composition calls for new forms of organization and we are prepared to participate in its construction.

In the introduction to your book Reading 'Capital' Politically, you discuss explicitly the historiographical evolution of Autonomist Marxism with respect to social struggles. Do you see any particular complementarity/difference between Italian and American Autonomist Marxism? Can you give hints of the historical roots of their respective evolution?

As to complementarities and differences between Italian and American autonomist Marxism, we should note at the outset that they have related and linked origins. Traces of both can be located in early revulsion against the consolidation of bolshevik power into state capitalism and subsequent critique of Soviet power and its Western apologists. In the post-World War II period, the birth of workers autonomy in Italy was rooted, in part, in the international circulation of a new bottom-up Marxist politics against that of the parties. Danilo Montaldi translated and circulated *The American Worker*, a study by ex-Trotskyists in the U.S. which had been previously translated and published in France (by another band of ex-Trots). Both the American Johnson-Forest tendency which produced the study and Socialisme ou Barbarie which had translated it were critical of both Soviet and Trotskyist Marxism-Leninism and returned to the workers themselves to rethink Marxism and the politics of struggle. Montaldi's efforts in turn led to the fundamental studies of Italian "operaismo"--those of Alquati, Panzieri and others around *Quaderni Rossi*. We can see in all this a renewal of Marxism which put the autonomous power of workers at the center of both the theoretical and political agenda, and in the process brought Marxism and the working class back together again.

made up of a myriad separate struggles moving in many directions with only one element necessarily in common: the rejection of capitalist domination. Capital knows this; *its* political strategy is to manage this diversity in such a manner that the irrepressible turmoil doesn't get out of hand and is harnessed to fuel its own development. *Our* political strategy must be the reverse: that intra-class antagonisms fuel inter-class antagonism in such a manner as to become unmanageable and that diverse projects of self-valorization find ways to avoid being constrained and harnessed within capital by becoming complementary or at least mutually supportive. Between us and capital the maximization of antagonism, among ourselves the elaboration of a politics of difference that minimizes or eliminates antagonism.

The difficulty is that there is no short-cut, no magic formula, no simple "unite and fight", not through a particular organizational form, not through an ideology, not even through Marxism (because Marxism provides an antagonistic understanding of capitalist domination but no formula for post-capitalist ways of being). What we want is for our different struggles, against capital, and for alternative forms of self-valorization, to be complementary and mutually reinforcing. The problem is in finding ways of achieving this.

Assuming the accuracy of the kind of Marxist analysis I have presented above, the struggle against the capitalist reduction of life to work provides one point of commonality to all sectors of the class and thus one basis for mutual understanding. Of course, because the class is diverse and hierarchical and the imposition of work is experienced differently by different groups of workers this does not mean that there is anything simple about organizing around the refusal of work. The history of working class struggle has made this quite clear. But it has also made it clear that despite all the differences, workers have been able to link up their struggles and make collective gains. Studying how that has been done in the past is a useful exercise in stimulating ideas about how it can be done in the present--as long as one is not looking for formulae but to get a feel for the way in which particular solutions emerge from particular class compositions. Recognizing the variation in the ways work is imposed and the consequent variation in the forms of refusal--throughout society--is also useful in order to be able to recognize the parallels among various kinds of struggle in the present.

When we turn from the struggle against capital to the struggles for a diversity of projects of self-valorization we have a more difficult problem: how to develop a politics of difference without antagonism. Clearly, given that antagonisms already exist, the development of

must also be considered as autonomy vis-a-vis the party and the autonomy of each section of the working class vis-a-vis each other, you tend to hint at the question of organization in terms of the circulation of struggle. What do you mean by this? To what extent do you think this circulation can or must be organized circulation?

I think the concept of the circulation of struggle does provide a key to the unavoidable and fundamental issue of organization. We all know that the old Leninist and social-democratic formulae for organization (e.g. the party) are worse than useless, they freeze working class self-activity in manageable forms. Even the most flexible advocates of such approaches, e.g. Rosa Luxemburg who wanted to somehow gear the party to the self-activity of the class, remained imprisoned by such formulae. As Sergio Bologna argued years ago, in what should be a famous article (on "Class Composition and the Theory of the Party", translated in *Telos* 13, Fall 1972), the appropriate form of working class organization must change with the change in class composition. No formula is ever useful across the whole class composition at a point in time, or through time as the composition changes. In other words, we have to stop thinking about the organization of struggle in terms of the creation of particular organizations, e.g. institutions which always become bureaucratized and resist needed changes. Instead, we need to think about the issue of working class organization in its most basic sense: the elaboration of cooperation among people in struggle.

We know that the working class is, and always has been, diverse. The class composition is complex. Capital rules by division and conquest so there is always a wage/income hierarchy and a pattern of power relationships among sectors of the class. Some workers have more resources than others; some have more space, or more time, for struggle; some dominate others, and so on. "Division" means the capitalist management of intra-class antagonisms among sectors of the class as a means to minimize the dangers of inter-class antagonism exploding. Moreover, the diversity of the class also takes the form of diversity in self-valorization. In the language of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the "lines of flight" of self-valorization take off in many different directions.

Once we reject the notion that those "lines of flight" can or should be harmonized into a unified project of socialism and once we reject the notion that various sectors of the class should subordinate their struggles to meet their own needs and desires to the struggles of others (e.g. as women have often been told to do), then we are both recognizing and accepting that "the" class struggle is, inevitably,

How these things developed in Italy and the U.S. differed, of course, because of different circumstances, different class compositions. In Italy the initial emphasis was on the big northern manufacturing plants, among which FIAT figured prominently. In the U.S. there was also, in the 1950s, a focus on the big auto plants of the Detroit area. But where the analysis and politics in Italy was drawn toward the class politics of development and technological change in the factory (increasingly operated by young workers from the South) in the U.S. it was drawn to race--first by the growth of the civil rights movement, then by the central city insurgencies of the mid 1960s and then by the fact that the militant workers in the factories were increasingly young and black. The dynamics of subsequent class struggles in both countries being different, not surprisingly the development of the theory differed as well.

At the theoretical level, while autonomist theory in Italy developed to some degree within, but certainly against, the dominant and well developed theories of Italian communism with its roots in Gramsci, in the U.S. (and in France for that matter) autonomist theory developed against a considerably less sophisticated Trotskyist background. While in both countries the general lines of development were similar, the more sophisticated debates in Italy led to a more thorough rethinking of Marxist theory and the more systematic creation of new theoretical paradigms, e.g. the theory of class composition. It is also true that in the U.S. the *Marxist* theorists of autonomous struggles were few in number and marginal to their rapid development by blacks, chicanos, students and women. Thus, historically, while we can study the impact of such theory on those struggles, or the way those struggles shaped the development of that theory, the Marxists developing it were never at the heart of the struggles themselves. When we speak of the American New Left we are speaking of something much, much broader and more nebulous than "autonomist Marxism". Most of those deeply involved in the mass movements of the 1960s that continued in the 1970s and 1980s did not consider themselves Marxists of any sort--regardless of how much they might be influenced by Marxist ideas or involved in struggles which made sense in Marxist theory. In fact, one aspect that *defined* the *New Left* in the U.S. was its rejection not only of the party politics of the *Old Left*, but also the bulk of its Marxist theory.

In Italy, the omnipresence of the Left and its ideological and organizational influence meant that the development and influence of autonomist theory was much more integral to the development of the class struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and many more activists who thought of themselves and conceptualized their struggles in explicitly Marxist terms. Thus in the Italian "New Left" there emerged

the political space of "autonomia" wherein militants developed a range of explicitly Marxist voices to articulate the varieties of struggles which did not fit either the organization or ideas of the Old Left, e.g. the socialists and communists. So, while it does make sense to use the same term "New Left" in both the U.S. and in Italy, the term "autonomist Marxism" sounds much more natural in the context of the latter.

Section II: The Nature of Capital's Rule--Work

What is the political importance of your formulation of capitalism as a system based on the boundless imposition of work?

Most traditional Marxisms have defined capitalism more in terms of form than of substance. That is to say they have almost all focused on what they have seen as the specific form through which capital exploits workers: the wage form. Thus the familiar definition of the working class as the waged proletariat. Thus the central focus on exploitation. Thus the political goal: abolition of the wages system. This focus on the wage form derived from the associated theoretical understanding that labor, or work, was not only a natural given in all human society, and the most fundamental defining characteristic of human beings, but that the overthrow of capitalism would involve the generalization of the work relationship: socialism and communism would be one-class societies where everyone worked--without exploitation and with personal and collective fulfillment.

What I have been arguing for some time now, is that we get a totally different vision, a different reading of Marxist theory and a different politics of the overthrow and replacement of capitalism, when we focus in on the substance of the social relationships of capitalism: work. Capitalism is not just a social system which exploits people through work, such that we can think about ending the exploitation and keeping the work, it is a social system which tendentially subordinates all of life to work and by so doing alienates those it forces to work and prevents them from developing their own paths of self-realization. The subordination of life to work means not only are we forced to work long hours--such long hours that we have little energy left over for other activities--but that those other activities tend to be reduced to the mere recreation of life as labor power, i.e., the willingness and ability to work.

For example, for those who are *waged* during each day of our usual working week (Monday through Friday for many) we not only find most of our waking hours taken up by working directly for capital on

This perspective allows us to recognize and to understand within a Marxist theoretical and political framework the creativity and imagination at work within the so-called "new social movements" that many traditional Marxists and many post-Marxist, post-modernists, have seen or claimed as beyond the purview of Marxist theory. But such new social movements have always been movements against the constraints of the capitalist social factory--whether they have articulated their ideas as such or not--and are new primarily in their strength and their imagination. For example, the women's and gay movements have not merely refused the subordination of life to work but have initiated a wide variety of experiments in developing new kinds of gender and family relationships, new kinds of personal and social relations among men and women, among men and among women. The Green movement, in a parallel fashion, has not only attacked the capitalist exploitation of all of nature but has also explored a wide variety of alternative kinds of relationships between humans and the rest of the earth. In their development these movements have overlapped and influenced each other just as they have also sought inspiration in a wide variety of alternative cultural practices, e.g. those of indigenous peoples or those of pre-capitalist European history. Please note, I am not saying that just because we can grasp the character of these movements in Marxist terms, that they are not subject to analysis and political critique. Just as more familiar moments of working struggle, such as trade union activity, can, must and has been subjected to the most intense scrutiny and critique, so too with these movements. Not only creativity is fruitful, not all innovation automatically undermines capital and helps free us for more interesting ways of being. There is much that is destructive in the political spaces of these movements--not least of which is the rejection by some of the Marxist analysis of capitalism and their blindness to the nature of the enemy arrayed against them. So too with some forms of "identity politics" which through a dogmatic overinsistence on difference cut off any possibility of political dialog and political action. Post-structuralist linguistic theory has provided some with a convenient excuse to avoid the difficulties of organization. But, as a rule, it comes naturally to Marxists to see such limits and carry out such critique. What interests me more, at this point in history, is the other side: the importance of being able to discern the positive content of such struggles in such a way as to be able to think about how the social forces they embody may contribute to building communism.

Section V: Organization

So the bottom line, the question of organization. By putting working class autonomy at the center of Marxist theory, which as you say

How has the idea of self-valorization influenced the development of a political agenda?

One result of this refocusing of attention on what I would call the positive content of workers struggles, was a shift in political agenda for many of us. Along with our attempts to understand how working class power had created and sustained the crisis for capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, we also began to explore the historical processes of self-valorization that had also been an integral part of the the crisis for capital and that might provide the point of departure for the elaboration of communism in the present. Whereas Negri's work has remained primarily theoretical and his limited empirical work restricted to a few cutting edge industries, others have pursued the exploration of self-valorization from the re-examination of the urban cultural revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s in the North to the study of the rural/urban communal struggles of peasants and indigenous peoples in the South. Whereas Negri's focus has increasingly been on self-valorization in labor, other explorations and studies of both work and non-work activities have borne rich fruit and have provided a wealth of understanding about the diverse experiences of creative struggles that have persisted through the crisis, uncaptured or unharnessed and undestroyed by capitalist repression or cooptation.

How do you see the relationship between the refusal of work and self-valorization?

Earlier I said that the only reasonable point of departure for the elaboration of working class political strategy is an understanding of our own power. What the concept of self-valorization does is to draw our attention not only to our power to limit and constrain capital's domination over us, but also to our abilities and creativity in elaborating alternatives. Just as the concept of the "refusal of work" helps us to understand how a wide variety of social struggles undermined capitalist accumulation and threw it into crisis, so too does the concept of self-valorization help us to understand how our ability to elaborate and defend new ways of being not only against but beyond capital is the other side of the crisis.

The power of refusal is the power to carve out times and spaces relatively free of the capitalist imposition of work. (I say "relatively free" because such times and spaces are always limited and scarred by capitalist power.) The power of self-valorization is the power to fill those spaces with alternative activities and new forms of sociality--to elaborate the communist future in the present.

the job, but we also find that much of our supposedly "free" time, or "leisure" time is taken up preparing for work, getting to work, getting home from work, recuperating from work, doing what is necessary so that we can go to work the next day, and so on. For those who are not waged, e.g. the *unwaged* in the home (usually housewives but often children and sometimes men), "leisure" time turns out to be mostly dedicated to house "work", which in turn is not just the crafting and reproduction of domestic life but involves the work of turning children into workers and reproducing workers as workers. In other words, women have children but then they (along with husbands sometimes) must rear them to take orders, to curb their desires and spontaneity and to learn to do as they are told (the same work that teachers undertake in schools). Children, thus, are not left free to discover life on their own but are put to work, the work of turning themselves into workers as well as that of reproducing their parents as such. Similarly, women qua housewives do not merely work for/with their husbands, their work reproduces their husbands as labor power on a daily and weekly basis through feeding them, cleaning their clothes, maintaining their environment, providing sexual and psychological services that make it possible for them to return to work each day without shooting the boss, or themselves. Parallel analyses can be made of the "free" time on weekends and vacations. In short, what I'm arguing is not merely that capital has extended its mechanisms of domination beyond the factory (as the critical theorists have long argued) but that what those mechanisms involve is the imposition of work, including the imposition of the work of reproducing life as work.

Now these are arguments which were originally developed by women in the feminist movement and which came to have a Marxist articulation in the work of those like Mariarosa Della Costa in Italy and Selma James in the United States (both of whom I would include among "autonomist Marxists"). These arguments were subsequently elaborated vis-a-vis other forms of unwaged work such as schoolwork and the work of peasants in such a way as to generalize the understanding of how capital seeks to turn all of life into work for its own reproduction, how it seeks to convert all of society into one big "social factory" or social workhouse.

What is the role here of class autonomy?

The recognition of how capital has sought to impose work outside waged work must be accompanied by the same working class understanding of its rule in waged work: namely that imposition always involves struggle. Just as workers resist the imposition of work inside the factory or office, via slowdowns, strikes, sabotage

and detournement, so too do the unwaged resist the reduction of their lives to work. It is at this point that autonomist theory gets beyond the dead end of critical theory. Instead of becoming fixated with capitalist hegemony, with the thoroughness and completeness of capitalist domination, we must recognize and then articulate the power of people to struggle against their reduction to mere worker. Precisely because capital seeks to intervene and shape all of life, all of life rebels, each nook and cranny of life becomes a site of insurgency against this subordination. Housewives go on strike in the home or march out of it collectively into the streets. Students take over classes and schools or create "free universities" of liberated learning opportunities outside the institutions. Peasants refuse to subordinate their production (and thus their work) to the market and collaborate to build networks of mutual aid. The "unemployed" refuse to look for waged jobs. "Culture" becomes a terrain of the most fierce class struggle between liberation and recuperation/instrumentalization. And so on.

What the recognition of all this means, is not only that the class struggle is omnipresent but that *the struggles of the waged and the unwaged are inherently related through the common refusal of work, i.e., the refusal of the reduction of life to work, and the struggle for alternative ways of being*. Thus the Old Left definition of the working class as the waged proletariat is obsolete not only because capital has integrated the unwaged into its self-reproduction, but because the struggles of the unwaged complement those of the waged.

Yet at the same time, the struggles for alternative ways of being that escape the reduction of life to work are diverse. Unlike the older Marxist notions of replacing capitalism with some kind of homogenous socialism, we must recognize communism as a diversity of alternatives. Revolution involves explosion, the escape from reductionism, rather than the substitution of one unified plan for another. Here is the importance of the autonomy of the struggles of different sectors of the class.

There is a fundamental divergence here with the traditional interpretation of Marxist theory.

Certainly, because what most interpretations of Marxist theory, especially of the labor theory of value, have failed to recognize is how Marx's theory was a *labor* theory not because he worshiped labor as the only source of value in society, but because the universal conversion of life into labor was, and is, the capitalist means of domination. Other class societies involved some people forcing others to work--serfs were forced to work in feudalism, slaves

struggles today, and an essential element in such struggles is the fight to avoid capital's efforts to shift the struggle *against* work to a struggle *for* work.

Section IV: Self-valorization

The refusal of work leads us necessarily to talk about the constitutive practices beyond capital. In your work you use the category of self-valorization first introduced by Negri some years ago. What do you mean by self-valorization?

Toni Negri took a relatively obscure term which had been used by Marx (but by few of his followers) to talk about the self-reproduction of capital and gave it a new meaning: the self-development of the working class. There are problems with this term--the self-valorization of the working class is *not* homologous with that of capital--and he might have chosen some other but this one serves well enough. The point was to focus attention on the existence of autonomy in the self-development of workers vis-a-vis capital. For too long the development of the working class had been seen by Marxists as derivative of the development of capital. Earlier autonomist Marxists, especially Mario Tronti, had reminded us that for Marx capital (dead labor) was essentially a constraint on the working class (living labor), not the other way around. The living, inventive force in labor is the imagination and self-activity of workers, not capital. Yet, as the struggles of the mass workers took the form of the refusal of work, there developed a tendency to overlook this essentially creative self-activity. At the same time, in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s that creative self-activity exploded throughout the social factory in a myriad of social, cultural and political innovations. Negri's term of "self-valorization" gave a name to the positive content of that explosion and refocused our attention on the ways in which workers not only struggle *against* capital but *for* a diverse variety of new ways of being. It provided a point of departure for rethinking not only the content of working class struggle but also some fundamental issues such as the nature of revolution and of the "transition" to post capitalist society. As Negri pointed out so well in his lectures on the *Grundrisse* published as *Marx beyond Marx*, the creation of communism is not something that comes later but is something which is repeatedly launched by current developments of new forms of working class self-activity. Marx had said this before of course and so had some other, earlier, autonomist Marxists (e.g. C.L.R. James and his comrades in the 1950s) but Negri's theoretical work brought the idea back into the light in a thoroughly grounded theoretical fashion.

needs. Resituated within a more thoroughgoing critique of all forms of work, waged and unwaged, i.e., of capitalism and its subordination of desire and need to the structuring of life around work, such demands tend to undermine rather than reinforce capital.

Second, in terms of working class strategy, the struggle against work must find forms appropriate to the class composition, as I said above. The outrage of the Crotona workers must derive, in part, from the plant closing being one more step in the long standing refusal of capital to *locate* jobs where people live. For Southern Italians this has been one of the most obvious and onerous aspects of the subordination of desire to work/capital--the way in which generation after generation have been forced to leave their homes, their communities and their families to find jobs in the North, even in other countries. The relocation of jobs to people, instead of people to jobs is a sensible and understandable demand. It echoes through the "rust belt" of the American midwest just as it does amongst the hills of Calabria. It is also, obviously, a struggle that *cannot* be won locally. At best the state will concede a few make-work jobs that meet no-one's needs, as in past, patchwork public works programs. But today, the issue is *not* a purely local one. In this period of global restructuring, it has become a demand felt by workers in many, many areas of many countries. Yet, "keep the jobs home" or "create new jobs here where we need them" are not satisfactory demands in isolation from associated critiques of the nature of the jobs, their duration, their pay, their role in the global division of labor, etc. Therefore, we can see at least one kind of organizational work that needs to be done: the elaboration and circulation of understanding of *all* the issues at stake in such situation in this period. It is clear that we know a lot about all of these things. The problem is the circulation of knowledge and understanding as a moment in the acceleration of the circulation of struggle.

In North America, at this point, the process of plant/job/wage relocation and the threat of its speed-up under the North American Free Trade Agreement has accelerated just such circulation of information, discussion and opposition. Workers who lose their jobs and participate in rising unemployment have been learning, very rapidly, that the problem cannot be solved locally. So they are linking up with workers in the plants and communities to which the jobs are being moved to support their struggles. Increasingly the working class response to capital's efforts to hammer better off workers down to the level of the poorest is to support the struggles of the poorest as the best way to support those of the better off--an upward "leveling" of the class as a whole. Such intra-national and international circulation of struggle is vital, as I have argued, to our

in ancient mediterranean society, etc--but never had the world seen a society wherein life was redefined as work. Many have accurately read Marx's analysis of alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts* as a critique of the capitalist perversion of work and concluded that socialism and communism involved the freeing of work from that perversion. Where they have gone wrong, in my opinion, is when they have interpreted Marx's focus on work as the result of a belief by him that unalienated work is the be-all and end-all of human existence, that work *defines* humanity. We should instead see that it made sense for Marx to focus his analysis on work because of its centrality to capitalist domination. We should remember that in Capital and in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere he recognizes that people struggle against work, not merely because it is capitalist work (through which they are exploited) but because *there is more to life than work*.

The qualitative transformation of work under capitalism--as alienation--comes not merely from its organization but from its *quantitative extension*. As Marx points out in his discussion of absolute surplus value and the struggle over the working day, it is through the extension of work that capital achieves domination--via surplus labor and surplus value. In the chapter on the labor process, the central issue in the shift of the discussion from work in general to work in capitalism is its quantitative extension. The central issue in the chapter on the working day is the working class struggle against that extension and later for its reduction. In the *Grundrisse*, the central issue in the discussion of the transcendence of labor value toward value as disposable time is the reduction of labor time. Time and again Marx's evocation of post-capitalist society involves the image of the individual (and collectivity) doing many things, not just working. The transcendence of alienation can only come with such a quantitative reduction of work that work becomes one, among other, integral aspects of a richly diverse human existence. The liberation *of* work can only come with the liberation *from* work, that is to say from the capitalist reduction of life to work. Once we see these things, we are freed from the productivism of all the old socialist illusions; we are free to think about struggle, revolution and freedom in terms of the simultaneous demotion of work from the center of life and its restoration as one means, among others, of fulfilling human development.

How does the boundless imposition of capitalist work mean on a global scale? What spaces of 'autonomy' exist within the dynamic between North and South?

All of this only takes on its fullest meaning on a global scale, when we grasp the situation in the South along with that of the North. Capitalism has always been a global system. From its beginnings in the period of primitive accumulation it was global. The enslavement of Africa and the seizure of land (through genocide) in America were integral to the development of British and other Northern European capitalism. The African had to be enslaved and put to work on the stolen land of the Cherokee to produce the cotton necessary to sustain the imposition of work on English workers in the textile mills of Manchester. The story of imperialism is only very partially the story of the ripoff of wealth, of the opening of markets and of the acquisitions of outlets for capital. All of these are but moments in the global process of turning the world's peoples into workers and then dividing and redividing them with the aim of controlling them all. In the 19th Century Indian weavers had their thumbs cut off to maintain jobs in British mills; a century later Asian and Latin American workers would be put to work in relocated mills while North American and Northern European textile workers were laid off. These are not just different stages in capitalist development; these are changes in the global class composition in response to changing patterns of workers' struggles.

We cannot understand imperialism in Leninist terms of countries exploiting other countries, but must instead understand the policies of nation states in terms of the changing balances of class power. The story of the "transformation of values into prices" is the story of capital reallocating itself across differentials in the degree of its control of the working class in order to maximize that control over all. Why have some parts of the world been "developed" while others remained "undeveloped"? In part because an international wage/income hierarchy is necessary for the control of the class globally. In large part because in the developed areas people could be put to work profitably and in others they could not. What Marxists have repeatedly failed to recognize is how workers in "underdeveloped" areas have *refused* to work for capital on its terms, i.e., on profitable terms. Their "backwardness" was their refusal to enter the working class. Underdevelopment is a measure of their strength, not just of their weakness (e.g. inability to command a high wage). The international counterpart of seeing workers at home as victims is looking at workers elsewhere, those at the bottom of the international wage/income hierarchy, as simply exploited and oppressed. Indeed, the terms development and underdevelopment are misleading terms, not only because they designate processes as well as states-of-being, but because they also designate strategies. Today, once rapidly developing American and Northern European industrial areas are being underdeveloped (e.g. being de-

their waged jobs they are shifted from the active to the reserve army of labor. But the reserve army still *works*--it is supposed to go on doing the work of reproducing labor power *and* to make the labor market function by looking for waged jobs. This is an old and all too familiar phenomenon in Calabria and we know that "making the labor market function" has often involved out migration as workers have been forced to move North in the pursuit of wages. The rebellion in Crotona when, according to reports in the U.S., workers seized their soon-to-be-closed chemical factory, was rebellion against a degradation in the conditions of work, and thus of life for the workers laid off. Unemployment is a weapon designed to get workers to fight *for* work instead of *against* it, i.e. *for* waged jobs. Part of *our* work is to make clear the dynamics of this situation so that workers can struggle for what they really want, which is secure income and less work. In a way they are going to do it anyway because if they get waged jobs they will return to the struggle against work, albeit perhaps less intensely because they now have greater fear of losing the wage again. As I say, this is an old game; we know the rules; they are pitted against us; but they are not impossible to fight.

When we examine the history of the struggle against work, we discover various ways in which that fight has proceeded. The Luddites smashed the machines which they saw as responsible for their loss of the wage. It didn't work very well, though it wasn't as crazy as some have claimed. Later workers explicitly linked the struggle against work with the issue of unemployment by demanding that whatever work/wages were to be had, be spread over the entire labor force. A reduction in the working day (or week etc) could be the means to increase/spread wages so that they were shared by all. Such arguments are being made today in Western Europe, pushed by people like Andre Gorz. I recently saw a series of articles in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on this approach which suggests that it is an argument being taken seriously in some capitalist quarters. Gorz's argument, which is probably derived from Italian readings of the *Grundrisse* and of the current situation which suggest that capital has reached the point anticipated in the "Fragment on Machines" where it has so substituted machinery for labor that it simply can not create enough "full time" jobs to employ everyone, has the virtue, whatever its limitations, of refusing to fall back into traditional Left demand for "full employment" which just reiterate the fundamentals of capitalism. The arguments about the need to "spread the work" played an important role in 19th Century struggles as well as in the 1930s and helped mobilize support for the reduction of work. Their limits are to be found in their continuing acceptance of the legitimacy of work itself within capitalism, i.e. of work which plays the role of domination rather than being geared to the meeting of people's

how scientists pursue their own interests using corporate or state research money which had other aims, how TV writers or actors inject subversive material into sit-coms plots or scripts, how teachers promulgate the refusal of discipline rather than obeisance, how university professors and graduate students detour computer networks into the circulation of struggle instead of the circulation of counter-insurgency and so on. The refusal of work does not disappear, it merely changes form, along with the changing form of the capitalist imposition of work. What we need to study, and organize, is not merely the constitutive power of labor, but the constitutive power that we exercise in all fields of human endeavor. Only in this manner can we rethink the reconstitution of work in ways which reintegrate it as one meaningful activity among others in human experience.

While I can understand the argument for the importance of the struggle against work in the abstract, what sense does it make to talk about struggling against work in a period in which capital is depriving people of work? I'm talking about the fact that Western Europe, and even the U.S. to some degree, are experiencing the highest rates of unemployment since the recovery after World War II. In Italy we are facing 40% unemployment in the South; in Germany overall unemployment is 7.5%, the highest since 1949 and in East Germany it is over 30%. How can we talk about "refusing work" under these circumstances?

Good question! First, let's just look at the situation analytically. We know that the high rate of unemployment is an integral part of capital's response to the crisis imposed on it by the working class--in which the struggle against work has played a critical role. This is nothing new, it was a familiar strategy throughout the 19th Century, indeed right up to the 1930s when an enormous cycle of workers' struggles achieved the power to eliminate it for a time. Their struggles forced the generalized adoption of Keynesianism in which unemployment was demoted to secondary tactic, at least in the North. This lasted until the current crisis exploded in the late 1960s--a crisis of Keynesianism, among other things. Unfortunately, the pattern of the development of the crisis has been such that the working class has *not* had the power to prevent the use of unemployment as a weapon. But what kind of weapon is it?

It is *not* a lack of work! When workers in Crotona say "All we want is the possibility to work, for ourselves and our children", they are responding to the fact that their income is reduced as they shift from wages to unemployment compensation and their risks of future income reductions have suddenly multiplied. When workers lose

industrialized) while sectors of what used to be called the Third World are being developed (e.g. being industrialized). The pattern can only be understood in terms of the changing rhythms of class struggle, shifting balances of power within a whole as the integrity of that whole is repeatedly threatened by assaults at all levels of the hierarchy. No analysis of the current crisis in class power can be useful that does not grasp the specificities of local variations within the broader context. Capital operates at a global level, working class struggle occurs everywhere, therefore anti-capitalist strategy, like capitalist strategies, must be formulated and implemented globally. Multinational capital organizes itself through the multinational corporation, inter-state relations and supranational state forms (e.g. the IMF). None of these are appropriate for us, but we must organize the international circulation of our struggles on a global level. Think globally and act locally is not enough; our local actions must be complementary and that does not necessarily happen automatically.

Section III: The Refusal of Work

After the 1970s, in Italy the explicit theoretical argumentation for the refusal of work appears to have been suspended. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that the mass worker--whose practice of refusal inspired that analysis--has been weakened, fragmented territorially, and that a new class composition has been emerging. Some even talk about the "constitutive power of labor" without explicitly theorizing the relations between this constitutive power and the struggle against work. You, on the contrary, seem to think that the refusal of work cannot be discarded either at the level of concrete struggles or at the level of political/theoretical conceptualization. Could you elaborate on this?

The emergence of the "refusal of work" as an explicit demand in Italy was an important reminder that the working class has always struggled against work, from the time of primitive accumulation right on through to the present. Sometimes the reduction of work, the liberation of life from work, has been an explicit demand, as in that for the 10-hour or 8-hour day that Marx wrote about in *Capital*. Between 1880 and 1940 workers' struggles in the U.S. chopped the working week in half and created the weekend. At other times, especially when the official labor movement has had the power, the demand has been suppressed and remained hidden from view, observable only in the passive resistance and sabotage of workers in everyday life.

As a result of the emergence of such an explicit, well-articulated demand, Marxist *theory* was rejuvenated in an important way. During

the 1950s, for example, even autonomist Marxists who recognized and theorized the autonomy of workers struggles and appreciated the autonomy of sectors of the class (e.g. blacks, women) were still held back by the idea that the point of revolution was to liberate work by appropriating it. The massive refusal of the mass workers in Italy was a vivid reminder of the fundamental truth that as long as work is the means of domination, workers will struggle against work (and thus against being mere workers).

In retrospect, we can see that a great deal of the social conflict of the late 1960s and 1970s can be understood in terms of the struggle against work, even when the protagonists did not articulate their demands in those terms. Much of the student revolt amounted to a refusal of the work of creating labor power accompanied by a demand for the time and opportunity to study things which met student needs rather than the needs of capital. Much of the revolt of women can be seen as a refusal of their traditional roles in the social factory: as procreators and recreators of labor power accompanied by demands for new kinds of gender and other social relations. The revolt of blacks in the streets of American cities was not just a cry of desperation but a rebellion against the roles assigned to them within accumulation: on the margins, as part of the reserve army that made the labor market function, moving in and out of the lowest wage jobs, living under subsistence conditions, excluded from political participation, and so on. Theirs was a rejection of particular kinds of work, just like that of students and women, but a rejection of work all the same.

Unfortunately, with their traditional focus on unalienated work as the meaning of human-ness, a great many Marxists have been all too quick to forget this fundamental antagonism within capitalism and to fall back again and again into the ideology of turn-of-the-century revolutionaries who wanted to "take over the means of production", "take over the factory" (or in the social factory of the post war period to "take over the city") with the object of becoming managers as well as workers.

The fact of the transformation of the class composition, of the diffusion of parts of the factory, of the partial fragmentation of the organization associated with the mass worker into a more flexible, or fluid, organization of "socialized workers" (operaio sociale), does not change this fundamental antagonism; it only changes the forms of struggle. I was in Milano in 1978 at a conference in the School of Architecture on the "Fabbrica Diffusa" where there was much discussion of the degree to which the diffusion of the factory was a clever capitalist reponse to the struggles of the mass worker versus

the degree to which it was a capitalist adaptation to the emergence of a "socialized worker" who had left the factory voluntarily. Since then there has been considerable research on this issue with evidence of both phenomena--as we should suspect. But whether we are talking about the emergence of the hollow corporation which coordinates the imposition of work indirectly through the manipulation of supply and demand (of finance, of markets, of inputs) or about the nebulous, interconnected world of high-tech which interlinks networks of researchers around the world, the fact that individuals and small groups of individuals directly control part of their means of production doesn't change the fact that they are still forced to work for capital. There have always been some workers who had direct control over their means of production, e.g. independent truckers and artisans, small farmers and peasants. The fact that those means of production may now include computers and design software or manufacturing equipment doesn't change the fact that they are still forced to work for capital. The imposition of "immaterial labor" is just as much a form of domination as that of "material" labor. To be forced to work with your head--which has always been an integral part of work and long been the specialized activities of some while others were limited to working with other parts of their body--changes the conditions of exploitation but not its reality. It only changes the conditions under which the compulsion operates and the nature of the opportunities for refusal and insubordination.

To the degree that contemporary Marxist theorists talk about the "constitutive power of labor" without locating the antagonisms of that labor and situating them amongst a wider set of social antagonisms, they are slipping back into the old, traditional socialist glorification of work. The fact that capital seeks to convert all of life into work does not mean that it succeeds and that therefore the only thing we need to speak about is labor and its "constitutive power". The struggle against work spreads with its imposition so that it is possible to explore both the variety of refusal and the variety of activities that are substituted for work, and thus the changing relationship between work and non-work. As a result of considerable research, and practical experience, we know a lot about what it means to refuse work on an assembly line--how workers strike, how they sabotage the line so as not to have to work, and so on. Research has also revealed what it meant to refuse to work in the social factory--how women refuse to procreate, how students refuse to study, how the unemployed refuse to look for jobs and so on. Such research has begun to reveal what it means to refuse "immaterial labor"--how workers at computers play games instead of processing data, how hackers sabotage the conversion of information into private property,