

This article was downloaded by: [George Mason University]
On: 22 December 2014, At: 05:07
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:
1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,
London W1T 3JH, UK



New Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cnps20>

The Necessity of Autonomy

George Katsiaficas

Published online: 18 Aug 2010.

To cite this article: George Katsiaficas (2010) The Necessity of Autonomy, *New Political Science*, 23:4, 547-555, DOI: [10.1080/07393140120099633](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393140120099633)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393140120099633>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access

and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

COMMENTARY

The Necessity of Autonomy*

George Katsiaficas
Chonnam National University

Western philosophy since Kant has used the term autonomy to refer to the independence of individual subjectivity, but as I use the term, autonomy refers first to collective relationships, not individual ones. As it is normally used in political discourse today, autonomy refers to movements for regional or national independence. National and regional autonomy has long been a central issue for movements in peripheral areas of the world system. In the current period, the demand for autonomy is present most prominently within movements in Kurdistan, the Basque country of Spain, and many parts of the former Soviet Union. Subcommandante Marcos of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, has continually presented the major demands of the peasants as food, health, education, autonomy and peace. In Brazil, the United Black Movement, founded in 1978 when blacks gathered to protest the murder by the police of a black man accused of stealing an apple, considers political autonomy for blacks to be one of its main goals. Aspirations for greater regional autonomy for Native Americans in Chiapas or Afro-Brazilians in Bahia, although not precisely the same type of autonomy as was present in European movements, nonetheless demonstrate the formal similarity of these emergent movements. They all call for power to the people and decentralization of decision-making now concentrated in nation-states and corporations.

Within the practice of European autonomous social movements from 1968 to 1995, several different meanings of autonomy emerged: most saliently, the independence of social movements from established political parties and trade unions. In Italy in the 1970s, thousands of factory workers participated in what became known as *Autonomia*, and the meaning of autonomy extracted from their experiences was commonly defined in workerist terms. Worker autonomy in northern Italy had two dimensions: class struggle made itself autonomous of the circulation of capital; and the class struggle was not led by traditional organizations of the Left (Communists and their trade unions). Although widely propagated, workerist definitions of autonomy are but one of its many forms, even in reference to the movement in Italy. As I portray in my case studies of Italian and German social movements in *The Subversion of Politics*,¹ the autonomous women's movement in each country was vital to subsequent formations because

* Speech given at Cheju National University, Cheju Island, South Korea at the Fifth World Island Conference, April 2, 2001. I would like to thank the World Association of Island Studies for inviting me, particularly Professor Ko Chang-hoon.

of feminists' innovative internal procedures as well as their capacity to act separately from men in accordance with their own autonomously defined needs and aspirations. Autonomous feminist movements set an example of "politics of the first person," as opposed to traditional notions of revolutionaries leading the nation, the people or the working class. Within these movements, moreover, individuals did not take orders from higher-ups but voluntarily acted according to their own will (thereby preserving the original Kantian kernel of autonomy within an enlarged meaning and collective context). Many feminist groups operated according to self-managed consensus, making decisions independently of central leaders and implementing them according to their own self-discipline. This organizational model remains vitally important to the definition of autonomous movements.

A final meaning of autonomy emerged in the course of prolonged popular struggles beginning with the movement against nuclear power in Germany beginning in the mid-1970s. Activist groups within the antinuclear movement began referring to themselves as autonomous to establish distance from party-oriented Marxist-Leninist groups that denied the value of spontaneous forms of militant resistance. As autonomous clusters of activists also appeared within the peace movement, feminism, the counterculture and among squatters, they merged into a multifaceted formation that eventually became known as the *Autonomen* from the 1970s to the end of the 1990s. By creatively synthesizing direct-democratic forms of decision-making and militant popular resistance, the *Autonomen* embody what I call "conscious spontaneity."

The *Autonomen* did not subscribe to the belief that there is one overriding truth or one true form of autonomy. There are, nonetheless, a number of principles that provided them coherence: they saw their ideas as a revolutionary alternative to both authoritarian socialism (Soviet-style societies) and "pseudodemocratic capitalism." Unlike Communists, they did not believe in the need for one true revolutionary party or revolutionary sector of society. They believed in diversity and continuing differentiation. Nowhere written down, this principle emerged in the actions of thousands of people in their everyday lives. They believed in self-management and the need for individuals and groups to take responsibility for their own actions. The *Autonomen* sought to change governments as well as everyday life, to overthrow capitalism and patriarchy.

Before exploring the *Autonomen* and their notion of autonomy, I turn to the feminist movement since it is there that autonomy as a collective political concept first developed.

Feminism and Autonomy

Italian and German feminists were compelled by self-righteous sexism within the movement to assert their autonomy from the Left. The significance of feminism to the subsequent workers and youth movements in Italy and Germany is noteworthy. Feminists spoke in the "I" mode, not on behalf of others

¹ *The Subversion of Politics: European Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997). Korean translation published by E-Who in 2000.

(the “workers” or the “people”), and their ability to return continually to the reality of their own needs became an essential feature of autonomous movements. Feminism was exemplary in Italy, where as early as 1966, women articulated their need for autonomy.

The concept of autonomy had several meanings for feminists. On an individual level, women were concerned with their personal autonomy. As the German feminist Alice Schwarzer put it: “A woman has no existence as an autonomous being—only in relation to a man.” But individual autonomy, the most common way the term is understood in Western societies, because it refers to individual distance-taking, is often linked to male behavior. For the women’s movement, autonomy referred to the need for female collective autonomy—for women to have shelter from male violence and male dynamics, for spaces of women’s own making and design. Within the movement, local groups used the term in yet another sense: to refer to their independence within a nonhierarchical framework that did not create a division between leaders and followers. Finally, and most importantly, the meaning of the term autonomy was political and referred to the feminist movement’s independence from established political parties. As Ann Anders summarized: “The first principle of autonomy is the lack of any hierarchy and alignment with state, party or any other rigid political–social structures.” Another activist summarized the many meanings of autonomy:

Above all, autonomy of the women’s movement means its self-organization, separation from the male-dominated Left and men generally. Moreover it refers to the relationship of the movement to the government and its institutions, which because they are recognized as patriarchal and system stabilizing, are rejected, resulting in a complete detachment from state an institutional connections. Within the movement, autonomy means primarily decentralization, autonomy of every single group. In existing groups, it means the self-determination of working structures and content, within which hoped for antihierarchical structures allow individuals the widest possible space for their autonomous development.²

These two dimensions, opposition to the domination of the existing system and construction of liberated spaces within it, define the universe of discourse of autonomous movements.

In comparison to its counterpart in the United States, the German women’s movement emphasized autonomy rather than equality. After the US movement was able to win abortion rights, its energies became focused within the established political arena. One result was that liberal feminists led thousands of activists into pouring millions of hours into an unsuccessful campaign for the equal rights amendment. Despite *de jure* equal rights in Germany, the failure of German feminists to obtain commensurate abortion rights preconditioned their greater emphasis on autonomy. No central organization exists there, and liberal feminists have little influence. Identified primarily with radical feminists, the autonomous women’s movement refers to local projects, a network of bookstores and presses, women’s centers, and publications.

² Marie-Therese Knapper, *Feminismus, Autonomie, Subjektivität: Tendenzen und Widersprüche in der neuen Frauenbewegung* (Bochum: Germinal Verlag, 1984).

The German Autonomen

During the same time that the Common Market unified European planning and production, autonomous movements resisted world economic developments that impacted cities and regions without taking local needs into account. Opposition to gentrification and capital-intensive building projects, exemplified in the struggles against Startbahn West (the expansion of the Frankfurt airport) and the Wackersdorf nuclear reprocessing facility, was part of the defense of localized life-worlds being destroyed by the giant governments and global corporations.

Despite conservative interpretations of autonomy as meaning isolation from the rest of the world—or worse, autonomy at the expense of others, as in the case of Serbia—the type of autonomy practiced by the transnational Autonomen was in harmony with the downtrodden. In solidarity with the “wretched of the earth,” they acted according to ethical and moral imperatives of international solidarity. At their best, autonomous movements posed a species solidarity that transcended ethnic exclusivity and embodied a new species universality. When immigrants were violently attacked by neo-Nazi gangs, the Autonomen came to their defense much more rapidly and effectively than did the German police.

The Autonomen had no unified ideology and there has never been an Autonomen manifesto. Their statements made clear that they fight “not for ideologies, not for the proletariat, not for the people,” but in much the same sense as Italian feminists had expressed it, for a “politics of the first person.” They wanted self-determination and “the abolition of politics,” not leadership by a party. They wanted to destroy the existing social system because they saw it as the cause of “inhumanity, exploitation and daily monotony.”

No doubt the Autonomen are difficult to define. Neither a party nor a movement, their diffuse status frustrates those who seek a quick and easy definition for them. They appeared as the “black block” at demonstrations, in “autonomous assemblies” that were regionally organized or oriented around specific campaigns, but they had no fixed organizations or spokespersons. In an age of sound bites and instant coffee consciousness, the propensity for quick fixes on fragmentary factoids often led the media to use (erroneously) the term “anarchist” to refer to them. Their political terrain lies somewhere between that of the Greens and the armed guerrilla groups like the Red Army Fraction, somewhere between parliamentary participation and armed struggle. For the daily leftist newspaper, *Die Tageszeitung*, they were the “residue of radicalism” in the early 1980s. In 1986, Hamburg’s police chief described the Autonomen as that part of the post-1968 New Left that refused to accept the discipline of Marxist-Leninist cadre parties: “Their development was accelerated by the new strength of the ecology movement... They stand up for spontaneity, self-organization and autonomy.” He also discussed their refusal to accept leaders and their lack of coherent theory. At the beginning of the 1990s, a sociologist referred to them as “a mixed product of divergent movements, like spontis and Metropolitan Indians, neighborhood and prison solidarity initiatives, squatters, the anti-nuclear movement and continually appearing, marginalized and strongly apolitical youth.” Another definition focused on their tactics: “Autonomen is not more than a catch-all category; it stands for small, well-organized circles of goal-oriented political activists as well as for the highly

diffuse ideological spectrum of militant protests, that refers above all to the forms of the protests (including youthful subcultures). Autonomes propagated—with and against non-violent activists—the free choice of their forms of resistance, under the difficult to guarantee condition, that endangering human life must be excluded.”

The Autonomes themselves were none too eager to define precisely who they are. For *Radikal*, itself one of their more important magazines, “autonomy was a notion that overnight gave our revolt a name ... Previously we understood ourselves as anarchists, spontis, communists or had diffuse, individual conceptions of living freely. Then we were all Autonomes.” Apparently the indeterminacy of the Autonomes is one of their defining features, a facet of their mysterious anonymity that permits a wide range of fact and opinion to coexist alongside a diversity of action. Are they a determinate negation of consumer society or its militant outsiders? Are they the long-term form of anti-systemic movements? Or is their civil Luddism due to become an obscure historical footnote like the original machine-breakers of England?

Resistance to centralized leadership and to uniform theory is often regarded as a weakness. Many people in the autonomous scene thought of the movement’s decentralization as a blessing, however, that made it both more difficult for police to infiltrate and easier for grassroots initiatives to develop. As the magazine *Radikal* put it: “The Autonomes movement is not a party and it consists of a minimum of organization if we make an historical comparison. This fact can be an advantage as the jailers search for structures and leaders which are not to be found.” The magazine had asked local groups to send in brief descriptions of activism in their areas, and the magazine prefaced the responses from 23 German cities by stating that its goal in reprinting the material was not only to inform one another but also to help people think about organization at the regional and national levels. (Evidently, a dose of German pride prevented such discussions from considering international dimensions of the movement.)

Many collectives communicated with one another through magazines, newspapers, and brochures distributed in more than 50 cities by a network of informally linked information shops. Most “info-shops” had archives dealing with local struggles, and on various days of the week, they were reserved solely for women or gays. Collectives working on single issues often held their meetings at these shops, providing connections between groups that might otherwise not have met each other. Many shops had copy machines, making the purchase of expensive books or magazines superfluous when only a few pages were needed. Information was not treated as a commodity to be bought and sold, nor was it passively scanned by spectators looking in from the outside. On the contrary, hundreds of pamphlets, position papers, articles, magazines, and newspapers were created by the users of these shops, making them less consumers in a store than part of a network within a movement. In this context, the info-shops organically connected ideas and action. A variety of other forms of alternative media also functioned to integrate the movement’s diverse and disconnected base. The Autofocus video collective in Berlin helped overcome the fragmentation of the movement by collecting videos about insurgencies in Germany and around the world. The relatively low cost of home video production allowed grassroots groups to produce their own videos. Autofocus’s collection could be rented for a night, copied, or reserved for public events.

International associations have linked info-shops in Germany, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland, and communication at the grassroots was also facilitated through a variety of conferences such as those in Venice in June, 1992, when hundreds of people gathered to “build a Europe of social movements, not elites”; *Class War’s* (a British anarchist organization) international congresses; those at the Hafenstrasse In Hamburg; or the Easter 1995 gathering in Berlin. In many cities, formerly squatted and legally purchased movement centers still exist.

Social Movements and Autonomy

In my view, social movements are creative action representing our species’ urgent need to go beyond inherited social structures. They exist interactively with categories of production, not simply as passive molds stamped into existence by production according to determinist theory. To give one example, “autonomous” work groups were instituted in Volvo’s production plant in Kamar, Sweden, as part of an attempt to devise alternatives to the alienation and heteronomy of the assembly line blamed for high rates of absenteeism and poor product quality. Clearly the concept of autonomous work groups (or “self-managed teams”) appeared in response to new needs that arose among the population—best demonstrated by the New Left’s impetus to self-management and group autonomy.

The historical experience of autonomous social movements in the 20th century began with the spontaneous creation of Soviets in 1905, then with the industrial working class expressing its autonomy in general strikes at the end of World War 1, and finally with the nascent new working class contesting control of entire cities (including factories) in 1968. In the latter case, both from within and outside the system, an assault was mounted that spontaneously generated new strata of supporters. For example, during the massive strike in the United States in 1970, Federal Employees for a Democratic Society (FEDS) appeared in Washington, DC, modeled on Students for a Democratic Society, but not created by any revolutionary control center. Although FEDS was spontaneously formed, government officials credited it with the capacity to operate as a shadow government.

I understand autonomy as the phenomenological form of revolution. Whereas liberty refers to the freedom to choose among available options, autonomy is an internally generated aspiration that has spontaneously appeared within a diversity of movements. Liberty is more a function of the situatedness of the subject and the tolerance of power, while autonomy demands self-activity. Autonomy as an organizing principle of collective life does not insist upon the invasive evaluation imposed by the liberal monocentric notion of public space subject to democratic norms of discourse and interaction. Rather, a diversity of perspectives is encouraged by true autonomy. As examples, in the midst of his tenure as chairperson of the Chicago Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton insisted that alongside black power belonging to black people and red power to red people, white power should belong to white people. Similarly, Nelson Mandela expressed support for limited autonomy for white homelands for those who insist that that is what they need. A similar respect for diversity exists within European autonomous movements at their best. During the planning for

demonstrations at Wackersdorf, for example, the Autonomen used consensus (communicative ethics) to make decisions and encouraged a range of tactics (not simply militant ones) from which individuals could choose depending on their own consciences and consciousness. Pacifists and others protested nonviolently, while elsewhere, more militant groups acted according to what they deemed most effective.

Although the escalating spiral of repression and resistance often leads to armed resistance, subversive movements can reorder this hierarchy of resistance by keeping clear the goal of increasing popular participation in determining the form and content of public space. Rather than conceiving the goal of autonomy as attacking the heart of the state, the objective of revolutionary autonomous movements is to subvert even the forces of order, to win over the police and the army to the idea that they should act (and be treated) like erotic human beings.

The Theory of Autonomy

What Habermas refers to as the “colonization of the life-world” and the systematic destruction of the conditions of life, the accelerating destruction of nature, intensifying degradation of minority rights, attacks on women’s autonomy and gay rights, and the marginalization of youth have generated opposition movements rooted in dimensions of social relations outside the site of production. Habermas described these movements in new terms:

In the last ten to twenty years, conflicts have developed in advanced western societies that, in many respects, deviate from the welfare-state pattern of institutionalized conflict over distribution. These new conflicts no longer arise in areas of material reproduction; they are no longer channeled through Parties and organizations; and they can longer be alleviated by compensations that conform to the system. Rather the new conflicts arise in areas of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. They are manifested in sub-institutional, extra-parliamentary forms of protest ... In short, the new conflicts are not sparked by problems of distribution, but concern the grammar of the forms of life.³

Habermas refers to the new movements as defending the life-world against the system’s increasing assaults on the organic foundations of life, as in “the destruction of the countryside by bad residential planning, industrialization and pollution, health impairments due to the side effects of civilization-destruction ... military destruction, nuclear power plants, atomic waste, gene manipulation, storage and central utilization of private data.”

As a self-expanding value, capital permeates the private sphere, colonizing everyday life and turning it into an arena of profitable activity. The economy has expanded to include within it many aspects of life not previously part of the system of commodity production. The extension of commodity relations into everyday life and the rapid integration of millions of women into the workforce are two sides of the same coin, each of which feeds capital’s insatiable needs. Declining real wages compelled women to take jobs, but the new double shift (at home and at work) has effectively given women economic independence and brought them out of the isolation of the family, thereby undermining previous

³ J. Habermas, “New Social Movements,” *Telos* 49 (1981), p. 33.

forms of patriarchal control. Increasing opportunities for women lead to financial independence from men, a material basis of feminist autonomy. Simultaneously, old social relations remain in force. Sexism in everyday life, political impotence, male control of medicine and the bodies of women, and patriarchal hierarchies at work all demand a feminist response—one that is facilitated by women's increasing economic participation.

The trend today is for increasing government regulation of previously autonomous areas of life: child-rearing practices, family relations, reproduction, divorce, and individual consumption of everything from food to drugs. What Habermas calls the "refeudalization" of society (i.e. the increasing intervention of governments in private life, a dynamic like that of medieval Europe) dramatically affects young people. Runaways, underage drinking, sexual repression, and all kinds of abuse are indications of the breakdown of the social regulatory mechanisms and, at least for some, the concomitant need for family life to be managed by the system. Yet the more the government intervenes in everyday life, the more resistance it encounters.

The systematic assault on the family is undeniable. Increasingly, two adult incomes are needed to meet the household expenses of a typical family. The effects of work on family life are ruinous. Children grow up without parents and, especially in the United States, senior citizens are segregated into nursing homes and retirement communities. Seniors and children would each benefit from more contact with the other, yet segregation by age proceeds along with the continuing deterioration of family relations. As segregation by age-group is enforced by all major institutions, teenagers are especially impacted, tracked into peer groups by age and denied full adult status (money and independence) even though they are more than intelligent enough to be treated as adults and are physically capable of autonomy. The system's assault on autonomous time and space of the life-world intensifies. Most targeted: the young. Proposals to expand the school year in the United States from 180 to 195 (as in Germany) or 225 days (as in Japan) are gathering momentum in the US.

Since the imperative of capital is to grow incessantly, pressure on corporations continually to expand profits means that mundane activities revolving around basic needs (food, clothing, and shelter) are severed from primary group contexts, increasingly mechanized, and made into arenas for financial gain. The logic of postmodern capitalism demands that the life-world in which humans participate as members of families further breaks down under the pressures (and allure) of consumer society. As a result, human relations are increasingly instrumentalized.

Representative democracy, which once freed humans from aristocratic/military absolutism, is increasingly incapable of fulfilling its historic promise to expand freedom for all and provide effective means for popular participation. If the term "postmodern" has an uplifting aspect, it is precisely in its potential to re-create a human scale. Whether in architecture or politics, the promise of reinvigorated collective interaction and a better quality of life is increasingly denied by such modern forms as representative democracy and international-style architecture. Although postmodern architecture is a product of capital, it seeks to blend into its surroundings more harmoniously than structures designed by modernists ranging from Louis Sullivan to Corbusier. Much like the kind of democracy envisioned by autonomists, it returns to notions of human scale derived from the Renaissance or ancient Greece.

Despite promises of the good life made in exchange for the penetration of our private lives by new products and services, the existing system increasingly delivers economic insecurity and ecological disaster hand in hand with the production of political apathy. The state confronts us as an alien being. Recent polls show a historically low and rapidly declining faith in government in the United States and in Europe. The immense resources and international mobility of transnational corporations often make nation-states peripheral to critical economic decisions affecting entire regions. We see this dynamic in the IMF crisis in Korea. As the power of cities and regions to attract investments has grown, the role of the nation-state in negotiating the terms for capital's impact within its territory has diminished. Like the ability of governments to use force domestically, the unilateral power of nation-states to intervene internationally through force has declined.

Although banks and corporations downsized in the 1990s (to accommodate their profit needs, not because of any ecological or moral concerns), national militaries and bureaucracies have yet to be similarly reshaped. How long can the public sector scandalously squander a preponderant share of social resources on the military and transfer payments to the wealthy in the form of interest on debt? In this context, three examples from recent history provide entirely different outcomes. The deconstruction of Czechoslovakia was an exemplary action: one nation-state peacefully devolved into two according to the expressed desires of Slovaks. The demise of the Soviet Union, although generally free of violence, is a mixed example of national deconstruction, involving a laudable end to the Cold War and the system that produced Chernobyl, but also an uncertain future. Yugoslavia's unleashing of ethnic cleansing tragically points to the dangers involved in this new historical process. (Clearly, all forms of autonomy cannot be understood as producing good things.) Although greater freedom and prosperity are both necessary and possible, their realization seems remote. Instead of real autonomy in which regions could plan their future as part of humanity's creative powers, we have false autonomy offered us in choices among various consumer products, politicians and individual careers.

As suggested by this talk's title, the goal of autonomous social movements is the subversion of politics: the decolonization of everyday life and civil society, not the conquest of state power. Based on a politics of the first person and a desire to create direct democracy, these movements oppose the false universality of the control center under whose guise behemoth governments and corporations seek to impose their wills. The subversion of politics would mean more democracy—more than citizens of Athens or Florence ever imagined, more than envisioned and enshrined by the American Revolution and qualitatively more than ever before possible. If Immanuel Wallerstein is once again right (as he was with respect to the existence of one world system encompassing the Soviet Union), and "as the present world system crashes down amidst us in the next 50 years, we must have a substantive alternative to offer that is a collective creation." In my view, autonomy is that collective creation, and we should study its already existent forms and seek to apply them to our own situations.

In the preceding remarks, I explored the meanings of autonomy as the concept developed in the practice of European social movements from 1968 to 1995. Whether or not these practical insights are applicable to Cheju Island's continuing struggle for dignity and freedom is not for me to say. I hope in the discussion that follows to hear your views.