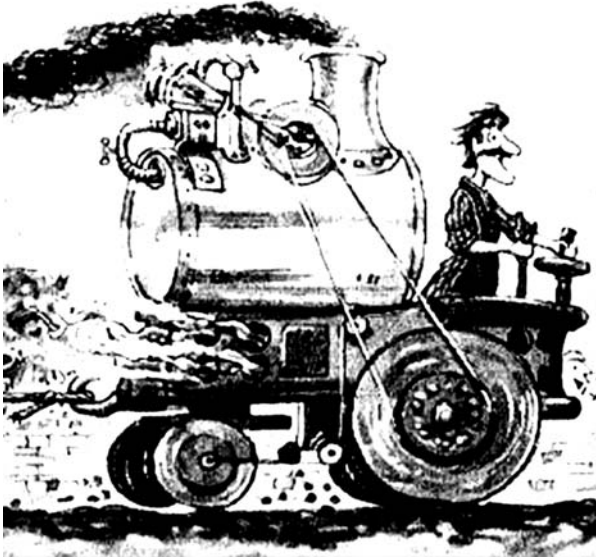


Value struggle or class struggle?

Review article: *The beginning of history: Value struggles and global capital.* Massimo De Angelis, Pluto Press, London, 2007.



Introduction

After the success of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* and *Multitude*, Autonomist Marxism gained popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world outside its predominantly academic circle. The latest Autonomist production on the radical bookshelf is *The beginning of history* by Massimo De Angelis. *The beginning of history* attacks theories that see capital as a totalisation and explains to the reader that, beyond the reified relations of capital, there is 'life' – actually existing alternative social relations. These social relations are experimented with by 'communities' newly created around struggles, but also by any traditional community which has not yet been subsumed by capital or which resists subsumption.

The beginning of history is a book about antagonism and struggle against capital. It tells us that a continual conflict between 'life' and the reifying force of capital defines a war front which separates what is subsumed and commodified by market forces and what these 'communities' still share and control – their 'commons'. Ongoing and irreducible antagonism between capital and a subject is then created around the battle between enclosure and defence of 'commons'.

At a first casual reading, this theoretical book seems to aim at young, anarcho and/or liberal, participants in recent anti-capitalist events such as anti-G8 gatherings and demonstrations. It presents reader-friendly anecdotes, in which De Angelis himself appears as a character. Child De Angelis watches demonstrations from the balcony in Milan. Grown-up De Angelis participates in anti-G8 gatherings armed with cute child. Social being De Angelis negotiates the use of his kitchen with his wife. Etc. These little stories aim to explain basic concepts (such as the social nature of 'risk', space, and perception of time), to readers who are assumed to be politically uneducated and unable to

understand the meanings of their own experiences by themselves.

Yet besides this apparent opening up to the uninitiated, the style of this book betrays the academic and self-referential attitude of current day Autonomist writings. De Angelis dots his book with words of Spinozean or postmodernist flavour that are so fashionable among the Autonomist clique, such as 'telos', 'conatus', 'loops', 'discourse' and 'discursive' – more to mark a cultural allegiance rather than to add anything to his arguments.¹ Obscure words such as 'catallactic' are thrown at our face and only explained many chapters later. Authors who are not known by his ostensible readers such as Leontyev are invoked as authority without a footnote. Last but not least, key concepts such as 'alienation', 'fetishism' or 'necessary labour time' are freely used without explanation. This dismissive attitude towards the inexpert reader is even more irritating as it jars with the patronising anecdotes.²

This style is matched by the content of the book. *The beginning of history* seems to be written mainly as a response to questions opened up by preceding Autonomist authors, especially Hardt and Negri. De Angelis enters into a theoretical debate with them, appealing to their shared Autonomist tradition – a tradition that stresses subjectivity, antagonism, and the refusal to accept capital and its laws as objective constraints. This tradition was paradoxically flipped upside down by Negri's vision of 'Empire' as a totalising power, whose new form of production even involves and defines our own subjectivity.³

As we saw two years ago in our article on *Multitude*, the main shortcomings of Hardt and Negri's recent development come from their adoption and re-elaboration of bourgeois theories that celebrate alleged fundamental changes in 'late' capitalism such as post-Fordism, the 'weightless economy', a shift from a society that tends to

¹ These words are often redundant. For example, throughout the book 'telos' is always followed by an alternative paraphrase, which could be used on its own without altering the meaning of the sentence: 'sense of direction' (p. 30), 'purpose' (p. 56), 'value practice' (p. 61). etc. Similarly, on pp. 67 and 86 'conatus' is followed by 'self preservation', which would have been sufficient on its own.

² Also the amazing diagrams that decorate the book are devised in order to impress the reader rather than to explain much. They display a variety of arrows and lines (zig-zag, fat and thin); boxes (square and oval, round and trapezoidal), etc., but De Angelis often does not bother to explain why he uses the one or the other. Obscurity, it would seem, makes these diagrams more fascinating. They often mean something that can be summarised with a short sentence: for example 'Figure 3' on p. 73 simply means: 'production and reproduction are connected throughout the globe'. We wouldn't have known that, without being flabbergasted by this entanglement of ovals, arrows and mysteriously dotted and non dotted straight lines.

³ See 'Keep on Smiling, Questions on Immaterial labour', *Aufheben* #14, 2006.

despotically command individuals to one where individuals internalise capitalist control, or where capital has accomplished 'the end of history'. Negri reappropriates a wide range of texts from bourgeois academics and managerial gurus to radical academics like Foucault, and proposes his own vision of the present as a postmodern world where production is 'immaterial' and where it is more appropriate to speak about 'Empire' than capitalist imperialism and of 'multitude' than working class.

This view was the culmination of a process. Since the '70s Negri had theorised that capitalism had fundamentally changed and a 'law of command' had replaced the law of value. The step to considering the Marxian categories redundant altogether was very short. Negri quickly declared that value and its source, abstract labour, were not measurable anymore in the new 'immaterial' production system. Autonomist Marxists such as De Angelis, Cleaver and Caffentzis took Negri's 'law of command' onboard but tried to reconcile it with Marx. They accepted that value was intimately connected with command and discipline but maintained that valorisation was still based on abstract labour.

In *The beginning of history* De Angelis then moves on to the offensive against Negri, by showing why human activity, even the most 'immaterial', is still subjected to measure by capital. Part of his book summarises years of work on this issue: De Angelis convincingly argues that immaterial and 'weightless' production defines labour as abstract labour and that immaterial production ultimately depends on the 'material' production of e.g. food or clothing done at a global level. This effort, we think, deserves recognition.

But perhaps more worryingly for De Angelis, Negri uncritically adopted theories that see the present system as a closed system, without an 'outside'. In re-elaborating his favourite bourgeois and post-modernist theories Negri simply inverts them by trying to show why this new world has got a silver lining: capital's production, by virtue of its immateriality, defines the workers as a potentially emancipated subject. Coherently Negri resigns to 'Empire' and its totalising dynamic and insists that we should help push through 'Empire', not resist its development.⁴

Although De Angelis praises Hardt and Negri's stress on the 'positive', he can't accept their positive attitude to 'Empire'. His book is deliberately called *The beginning of history* against the theorists of the end of history with capitalism⁵ and is keen to stress that capital is not a totality, to the exaggerated extreme of refusing to use the word 'capitalism' (because the use of this word may dangerously suggest totalisation). De Angelis theorises our continual antagonism with capital, based on ongoing conflict between 'communities', and capital's attempts to 'enclose' their 'commons'. We cannot, and must not, 'push through' 'Empire', instead life has to prevail, and destroy this reified social relation.

De Angelis borrows the concepts of 'common' and enclosure' from the historical process that established capital

– the dispossession from Medieval peasants of their lands as well as of swamps and woods that were used in common, and the creation of a class of dispossessed, the proletariat. In the years that preceded the publication of *The beginning of history*, De Angelis had been involved in *The commoner*, a magazine that invited political theorists to rethink the traditional Marxist categories in terms, precisely, of the concepts of 'commons' and 'enclosures'. *The beginning of history* sounds as stimulating as his magazine. Re-thinking our usual analysis through different conceptual tools may help us to discover aspects of reality and realise some limits of our analysis which we would not have noticed had we kept on treading the same footpath.

De Angelis sees in the concept of common and enclosure a central explanation of our ongoing antagonism with capital. While the proletariat, following enclosures, was eventually forced to accept its condition of being exploited and dispossessed by the 'silent compulsion of economic relationships', enclosures were 'crystal-clear relations of expropriation' and violent destruction of community life. According to De Angelis, antagonism in this case was clear and uncompromising, as clear as the delimitation between capital and its 'outside'.



Yet enclosures did not stop at the prehistory of capital. For De Angelis, enclosures should be considered as 'fundamental pillars' of capital's power. Capital needs to increasingly commodify areas of life, but also re-enclose 'commons' established through struggle. Since capital's power is the result of a battle with the antagonistic subject, there is always something to re-enclose – squats, free raves, as well as state-run concessions to the working class like free healthcare or education. Also, the environment as well as peasants' land can be 'enclosed' through pollution, or by building a new dam. The cyberspace, and general knowledge, so dear to many Autonomists, are (virtual?) 'spaces' that capital can enclose too. These are all 'commons'.

The idea of enclosures as something that do not only happen extensively towards areas which are not 'capitalist', but intensively, within full-fledged capitalism, is seen by De Angelis as a big theoretical advance.⁶

⁴ And vote 'yes' for the European Constitution in France.

⁵ The title echoes that of *The end of history and the last man* by Francis Fukuyama, which is an apology for liberal democracy and proclaims the end of history in fully developed capitalist relations.

⁶ Many Marxist authors, for example Rosa Luxemburg, had theorised the necessity for capital to expand to new areas. De Angelis's novelty is to redefine 'enclosure' and 'capital' in order to

Interestingly, De Angelis makes clear that ‘enclosure’ is not just about material space or goods, it is about social relations. Any ‘communities’, both traditional communities and groups formed around struggles, even around traditional strikes, ‘experiment’ with direct social relations that are different from, and alternative to, those of exchange. Their enclosure is the re-imposition of market relations. At the same time, the enclosure deprives us of our ‘commons’ – if not means of productions, some broadly defined ‘space’ that makes us somehow ‘less dependent’ on market relations for our reproduction.

This ongoing battle explains why there is always an ‘outside’ of capital for De Angelis: capital needs to continually enclose and continually generate antagonism.

This theory is novel, coherent, and clever. It appears to encompass radical struggles to defend squats; strikes; battles to save public services from privatisations; environmental protests; and, importantly for De Angelis’s grip on his clique, the Autonomists’ concerns about the imposition of intellectual property. But it also includes peasants’ and small traders’ struggles against the effects of global capital – the construction of dams that threaten land, the corporations’ threat to small coffee or banana traders, etc. De Angelis is proud to claim that his concepts of ‘enclosure’ and ‘commons’ are able to summarise the multi-faced attacks by what he calls ‘the neoliberal strategy’ and ‘globalisation’, as well as the recent class struggle at the global level after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. On the top of this inclusiveness, this theory attacks bourgeois theorists on the ‘end of history’, and is healthily founded on a clear stress on subjectivity and antagonism.

So what does Aufheben have to criticise? In many senses there is much that we share with De Angelis. De Angelis’s stress on collective action, and his insistence on trying to understand capital as a social relation strikes a chord with us. We also agree with his insistence that going beyond capital is only possible through the creation and experimentation of social relations alternative to the market. Last, but not least, we share his rejection of Negri and Hardt and of theories of totalisation, an issue that we considered last year in our article on Moishe Postone.⁷

Yet there are problems. First, De Angelis’s idea that the antagonistic class identifies itself ‘outside’ capital, around spaces that capital has not enclosed, is a bit too simplistic. On the one hand, we can see how this view is coherent with the traditional Autonomist theme – the stress on a revolutionary subject that defines itself autonomously (and positively) against capital. However, on the other hand we can see that our collective identification as the revolutionary subject can only be the result of a process, in which ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ interplay and give meaning to each other (Section 1).

But there is a second problem. De Angelis’s theory focuses on ‘enclosures’ as the ‘pillars’ of capital’s dynamic, and abandons the centrality of capitalist production. In Section 2 we will see why the sphere of production in capital and the sphere of circulation, the market, are two aspects of capital that need to be considered in their opposition. We

will also see that only by considering the sphere of production as distinct from the sphere of circulation can we disentangle the secret behind capital as ‘a social relation’ – it is a material relation between a class of individuals who get continually dispossessed, and another class who base their power and wealth on this process. Going back to De Angelis, we will see how this book is a lucid and coherent continuation of a trajectory that has led *Autonomia* to reduce capital to the sphere of circulation. We will also show that this reduction means to substitute a perspective of the proletariat with the more universal perspective of the bourgeois individual.

Finally, in Section 3 we will see that the most important implication of his theory is that it ends up in abstraction and moralism and has nothing to teach those like us who are involved in struggle.

1. Outside and inside

1.1 From worker to commoner

In *The beginning of history* the theorisation of ‘commons’ and ‘enclosure’ is, centrally, the theorisation of the roots of revolutionary subjectivity. For De Angelis, we can identify ourselves as a subject against capital only because there is an ‘outside’, something that is not capital. There is a common that capital has not yet enclosed, and a community based on relations that are not those of the market. This is the basis for our positive identification, autonomous from capital.

With *The beginning of history* De Angelis takes another important step in the broad Autonomist project, the theorisation of the ‘autonomy’ of the revolutionary subject and its positive affirmation against capital.

This project was the child of the historical moment in which *Autonomia* emerged in the ‘70s. That was a revolutionary moment for the Italian working class. The participants in struggles in key industrial workplaces had acquired consciousness of their collective power. The class struggle had dissolved the veil of commodity fetishism, of ‘objective’ economic necessities: there was nothing necessary or objective, it was clearly a matter of direct political confrontation between classes. In the excitement of the times, theories that subordinated the dynamic of class struggle to crises and other objective mechanisms of capital were exposed as insufficient: there was the need for a theory that could clearly see, and declare, the working class as having the power to impose its autonomous will on the bourgeoisie.

In this context Negri’s rejection of the law of value made sense. The class had moved history to a point where the objectification of capital had been shaken and the bourgeoisie was forced to impose its will on an explicitly political level – the law of value was replaced by the ‘law of command’. However, after the defeat of those struggles, the abandonment of the law of value started making less sense. But also the focus on an antagonistic subject to capital became a problem.

Autonomia’s original theory of class ‘autonomy’ saw this autonomy not as the result of a process, but as something absolutely true and always there. This is why, when the class struggle of the ‘70s was defeated, *Autonomia* was left with a big puzzle to solve: how to find where the ‘autonomous’

describe any conflict, including, as we see in the text, struggles against the privatisation of public services, etc.

⁷ See ‘Moishe Postone, Capital Beyond Class Struggle?’ *Aufheben* #15, 2007

subject had gone.⁸ Since then, the history of *Autonomia* has been the history of the search for the latest ‘recomposition’ of the class, for the new (hidden) ‘subject’ that positively identifies itself against capital.



Looking for the autonomous subject

But as potentially revolutionary times were over, the tricky bit was to find the basis for such a positive affirmation. In the general poverty of the concrete experience of struggle and power, Negri seeks to found a positive and antagonistic subject directly on aspects of capital’s production itself: skills or activities connected to aspects of ‘immaterial’ production.⁹ Capitalist production itself is seen as a fetish, holding the secret of our revolutionary subjectivity – Negri fetishises production to the point to explain why activities or skills in immaterial production are inherently anti-capitalist by virtue of their own ‘immateriality’. Utilising the concepts of ‘commons’ and ‘enclosures’ (which seem quite a fashionable thing to do¹⁰) Negri resorts to say that, thanks to the inherent properties of immaterial production, we produce ‘in common’ and outside capital’s control, but then capital comes and ‘encloses’ what we have produced. Yet the sad truth is that immaterial production is defined by capitalist production, and so are both its product as well as the ‘subjective’ aspects of production.

As a faithful disciple of *Autonomia*, De Angelis is involved in this search for a positive definition of the antagonistic subject. But he understands that Negri’s fetishism of immaterial production implies the logical conclusion that capital is a constitutive totality. It is not good enough to say that an activity is ‘done in common’ if it’s still defined within capital’s social relations and an integral part

⁸ On pp. 37-38 in *Aufheben* #13, 2005 we discuss the theoretical importance of Harry Cleaver’s Unbelievable Class Struggle Lens.

⁹ Similarly, Paolo Virno sees the potential for an autonomous subject in what he sees as capital’s reliance on generic cognitive faculties inseparable from the ‘multitude’ as the primary means of production, productive activity he terms ‘virtuosity’. See article in this issue.

¹⁰ Also George Mombiot has recently adopted ‘commons’ and ‘enclosures’...

of capitalist production. De Angelis’s insistence on looking at actual direct social relations, especially relations of struggle, is his answer to Negri, based on a clear understanding of Negri’s impasse – an answer that we share to a large extent.

1.2 Is a common really outside?

Although we agree with De Angelis that antagonism and subjectivity are realised as actual social relations through struggle, we have problems with his concepts of ‘outside’ and ‘commons’.

De Angelis’s insistence in looking to a clear-cut ‘outside’ is an answer to a false problem. The Autonomist stress on the ‘positive’ (our being autonomous from capital) comes out of a reaction to theories that stress the ‘negative’ (our being part of capital): a reaction to a view of capital as an objectified machine with its own dynamic independent from us. Such a view would see the working class and its subjectivity as cogs of this machine.

This is then the dilemma: once the working class is labour for capital, and looks at its class interests in terms of wage earners, how can it possibly develop any revolutionary consciousness which points outside capitalism? In our article on Moishe Postone last year, we argued that such a dilemma starts from a fundamental mistake: in such a closed view the working class is considered as labour already subsumed into capital – this abstraction cuts off *class struggle*: the concrete process of subsumption and our resistance. By retaining the concrete aspects of class struggle, we showed in that article how the subject can actually emerge as an antagonistic subject from within the daily relations of wage-work and exchange. We thus saw that the dilemma of capital as a totality is an unnecessary problem.

The beginning of history aims to give an optimistic and radical answer to this dilemma, but it accepts the basic premise that labour is once and for all subsumed to capital within the wage-work relation, under the ‘silent compulsion of economic relations’. So he must look outside of capital, to what is not ‘enclosed’ yet. However, when we consider that capital must always posit labour as non-capital, and must therefore struggle in order to subsume it, we realise that De Angelis’s stress on enclosures is a solution of a false dilemma, as capital can never totally ‘enclose’ us!

On the converse, De Angelis’s stress on ‘community’ as an ‘outside’ is an unnecessary simplification. When De Angelis gives us examples, he always needs to qualify them. Traditional family relations are subsumed under capital and often their direct relations turn into means of direct and despotic exploitation. Communities in the developing world increasingly base their survival on seasonal wage work and on trade. Organisations in struggle get into all sorts of compromises with the market and the state and turn into co-ops and NGOs. The individuals involved in squats and other urban struggles still need the market to reproduce themselves. De Angelis’s stress on a neat ‘outside’ leads him to admit the existence of a puzzling psychopathic schism: it is true that we are outside when we deal with direct social relations of family, community and comradeship, but we are ‘also’ inside. De Angelis describes a collision of ‘values’ within the individual due to this dual experience.

Similarly, De Angelis’s concept of ‘commons’ as something that capital has not ‘enclosed’ yet is an abstraction that screams for qualifications when he tries to apply it to

real examples. De Angelis ends up in absurdities when he conceptualises commons as something that capital has not 'enclosed'. On the one hand, he calls the national health system a 'common', which campaigners try to defend from the 'enclosure' of privatisation. Yet on the other hand, he agrees with Foucault that state-run hospitals are capital's means to control our bodies and minds – so how can they be 'commons'?¹¹

Of course, there is something true in what De Angelis tells us. It is true that capital's relations of exchange always overlap with direct relations and that these are a necessary human background for building solidarity. Any social setting within capital, including the workplace or the school, contradictorily host both capitalist relations of competition as well as direct relations of friendship – and in fact going to school or to work is for many people a primary way of enjoying some form of direct social relations.¹² Yet capital has coexisted with direct social relations, often subsuming them. No friend or family relations have ever threatened capital simply by virtue of being direct, non-capital relations.¹³

In the next section we will see that this impasse comes from the fact that De Angelis fetishises his abstract idea of 'direct relations', assumes them as already consciously 'outside', and as a result celebrates them as they are.

1.3 The phenomenology of the revolutionary subject

A second abstraction which is intimately connected to the neat separation of 'outside' and 'inside' is that enclosures, unlike wage-work relations, appear as clear-cut relations of expropriation and generate clear-cut antagonism. Again, this abstraction screams for qualifications every time we think to the real thing.

To start, De Angelis's account of the historical enclosures is a simplification of a process that lasted hundreds of years and was uneven and complex. Enclosures in Britain were often initiated by the most powerful members within the 'community' itself, the yeomen. Despite the fact that the 'community' still shared the commons of woods and marshes, this did not stop it undergoing a process of disintegration and polarisation into farmer capitalists and rural waged workers!

If we look at what happened during enclosures without romanticising it, we see that the concept of 'common' doesn't explain what happened. During the process of historical enclosures, the mere fact of having shared commons did not define a 'community' as a unity and did not constitute capital as a clear external enemy. What really counted in the process were the social relations: the material (and class) interests of the individuals involved in the process and how these changed. This is true when we consider the present, too. Like the historical enclosures, the

modern 'commons' presents all the problems and contradictions of the historical commons. As then, no 'common' can be fetishised as holding the secret for solidarity and comradeship in a struggle. The way a struggle is fought, and whether it is likely to be recuperated, depends on the social relations of those involved.

This is Marx's prescription for starting an analysis of reality without falling into idealism: to look at 'the real people and their intercourses', which he gave in *The German Ideology*.¹⁴

Looking at the social relations means to look at the whole way we interact. This includes the aspects of our relations that are 'inside' capital as well. In fact our relations as being 'inside' capital are crucial in defining our solidarity among us and our opposition to capital. Let's consider for example struggles like those of the Diggers, who tried to repossess enclosed commons. The Diggers returned to expropriated lands not as yeomen and peasants defined within pre-capitalist relations outside capital. Rather, and crucially, their identity had been forged through their experience as dispossessed and exploited, as well as through their political and militant participation in the Civil War, their dream of changing the world, and the ensuing betrayal of the revolution by Oliver Cromwell. It was not an old relation to the land but their a new and complex relation to capital that made the Diggers equals and comrades.



People outside Capital

At any time in the history of class struggle in capitalism, it is *our relation to capital* as the alienated and the exploited class that creates the potential to identify capital as our enemy. A free rave or a squat is not merely a

¹¹ He dodges the problem by saying that hospitals are capital's means of control, but they are *also* commons.

¹² As we try to say in this article, only through struggle direct relations become increasingly free of these contradictory aspects, as they become increasingly conscious of their opposition to capital.

¹³ De Angelis gives to this phenomenon of co-existence a good Greek name – 'homeostasis'. It seems that 'homeostasis' takes into account the fact that there is a balance of forces, so it renders the tension between the 'inside' and the 'outside'.

¹⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German ideology*, Ed. C. J. Arthur, London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd.1970.

battle around a common. For the proletarian who is involved in such activities, free events and conquered urban spaces are challenges to the rule that we have to work for a wage in order to afford anything we need. They are challenges to the bourgeois truth that any imaginable form of activity must take the form of a waged activity, and that the use of things must take the 'natural' form of a consumption of commodities. Similarly a struggle to stop the privatisation of the National Health Service is not simply a struggle to defend a 'common' outside capital but a struggle to defend the level of the social wage.¹⁵

It is true that this relation to capital is a negative moment. However, this negative moment needs a positive moment: our potential to identify capital as enemy can become real only if we become conscious of it. How? We can identify capital as our enemy only if we become conscious of ourselves as the antagonistic subject. But this consciousness is not immediately present as soon as a struggle or movement begins: it can only emerge out of the direct relations created through struggle, our experience of solidarity, our conquest of power, and so on.

This is a dialectical process, where the positive and the negative need each other. On the one hand, only because we are the alienated and the exploited class, do we have a chance to identify capital as the enemy. This is the negative moment (of being in capital as labour and reacting against this). On the other hand, we need the positive moment, the experience of struggle, in order to realise our consciousness of antagonism. This is the positive moment (the realisation of being an 'autonomous' subject which is against capital).¹⁶

The problem with De Angelis, as well as the whole of Autonomist thought, is that they don't have very good dialectical skills. They just dive face down into the exciting but one-sided aspect of class struggle as a purely positive moment and fetishise it. But in doing so they don't see that they fetishise an abstract idea of 'direct social relations' as immediately 'outside'. The result is a schizophrenic view of 'communities' and individuals, whose necessary 'inside' and 'outside' aspects coexist side by side as two worlds apart.

In the same way as De Angelis insists on having a clear-cut separation of 'inside' and 'outside', he also logically separates the process of dispossession as 'enclosures' from the process of imposition of discipline through 'the market'. In the next section we will consider this separation.

¹⁵ It is an irony that, after years of expecting a struggle for the social wage, a faithful Autonomist like De Angelis prefers to see the struggle against privatisation of the health system as a struggle to 'defend a common'!

¹⁶ The dad of the dialectic G. W. Friedrich Hegel teaches us that the positive and the negative are two aspects that reflect each other: 'The positive is the identical relation to self in such a way that is not the negative, while the negative is what is distinct on its own account in such a way that it is not the positive. Since each of them is on its own account only in virtue of not being the other one, each *shines* within the other, and it is only insofar as the other is'. *The encyclopedia logic*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991, Paragraph 119. Let's notice, though, that for Hegel the opposing sides of reality are aspects of a unity that is already there within the ideal Spirit. This harmony doesn't exist for us and Marx. The supersession of existing oppositions (positive and negative, inside and outside etc.) has to be concretely achieved through active *class struggle*.

2. Production and circulation

2.1 The two spheres of capital

When De Angelis presents his concepts of 'enclosures' and 'commons' he gives us plenty of quotes from Marx, cut out from various contexts, which serve to suggest that Marx would not disagree with his stress on enclosures as an important 'pillar of the capitalist regime'. In fact Marx disagreed with attempts, made by other economists, to explain how capital works on the basis of the way it established itself historically. For example, in the *Grundrisse*, he wrote:

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, *which is precisely the opposite* of that which seems to be the natural order or which corresponds to historical development. (*Grundrisse*, 'Introduction', p. 107, our emphasis).

Why is it so important not to fall in the trap of re-interpreting capital in terms of its historical development? What do we miss if we do this? We miss the understanding of the peculiar dynamic of capital, a mechanism that reproduces our dispossession in a way that appears the result of a 'silent economic compulsion'. We have seen that De Angelis's book avoids focusing on this process as if it were less interesting. He prefers to stress enclosure as the fundamental mechanism of dispossession in capital – because enclosure, when sufficiently romanticised, appears an obviously antagonistic process.

It is true that capital established itself through dispossession enacted by enclosures and that this dispossession is still real today for the working class – but it persists within established capitalism *in a new form*.¹⁷

After the historical enclosures, capital established itself as a system with two aspects or 'spheres', opposite but necessary to each other. One is the sphere of circulation – the market. In this sphere we are all individuals relating through exchange of commodities. In this sphere we are all absolutely (and abstractedly) free. In exchange there is no direct command imposed from person to person; there is only the impersonal rule by the laws of the market – objective conditions on our freedom, which belong to the commodities themselves. In the sphere of circulation there are no classes, only individuals, nominally all equal, and all equally subject to these impersonal laws. And, importantly,

¹⁷ Werner Bonefeld contributed to *The commoner* n. 2 with an article which stresses that the primitive accumulation established the separation between producers and means of production in capitalism. But, unlike De Angelis, Bonefeld says that this 'historical act' of dispossession persists within established capitalism in the new form of wage relations. As dispossession undergoes this important change of form, this is the form that Bonefeld needs to address in order to analyse capitalism as a class system. Indeed, with exception of his introduction and conclusion, most of his article is *not* about enclosures, but *wage work*, and is very close to what we say in this section. See 'The Permanence of primitive Accumulation', *The commoner*, n. 2, September 2001, <http://www.thecommoner.org>.

there is no dispossession in this sphere, as we exchange equal values.¹⁸

This sphere of freedom and equality is only one aspect of capital. The other aspect is the sphere of production, which is the sphere of despotism and inequality. Capitalist production starts from, and ends in, the dispossession of the proletariat. Not having access to means of production, we can only sell our labour power – that is we can only offer to work for those who own the means of production.

By producing for a wage, what we produce is not ours, but is produced as capital, a force that confronts us as an enemy. Only a production aimed at creating commodities for a wage can then create capital as value that appears to self-expand, based on our exploitation.

By selling our labour power for a wage we are alienated, separated, not only from the things we produce, but also from the reason why we produce them, the ideas on which these products are made, and the way this production



The People: The Commoners enjoy a simple life, with plenty to eat and drink. They like excitement but dislike violence and unreasonable behaviour. They drink rather a lot of home-brewed beer and sing out of tune.

is organised. Thus, within this process of alienation, any human activity, including technical and artistic creativity, eventually becomes part of an alien force. So, in an ontological inversion, we become nothing while capital faces us as the alien result of human creativity and productivity.

The particular way we produce today, which is one with the way we are expropriated day in day out, has important subjective aspects. An aspect is the way we experience the expropriation, or better, the material alienation involved in the process of production of commodities for a wage. This is the aimless, boring, repetitive character of wage work. Aimlessness is one with

¹⁸ The features of market exchange do *not* exclude the existence of practices that breach its fundamental freedom and equality. An easy, but liberal, criticism would be to point at exceptions (forced prostitution, etc.), which would be condemned by the bourgeoisie itself. But Marx did something better: he found out that the freedom and equality of the sphere of circulation (even if it worked without exceptions!) is a *structural* part of a mechanism that enslaves the proletariat. This is more powerful than to pick at exceptions and accuse bourgeois freedom of being 'corrupted'. In *Multitude*, Negri precisely follows this route, abandoning Marx's fundamental attack on the bourgeois system, and ultimately making an apology for ideal bourgeois freedom and democracy.

the fact that what we produce is alien from us, so it is one with the fact that we work for a wage.

There is a second, related, subjective aspect. Despite many of the managerial delusions of Toyotism and other talk about 'participation', the truth for the capitalist is that she cannot rely on the workers' interest in the productivity of her business. Since we are obliged to engage in activities that are useless for us, and don't even constitute exchange value that belongs to us, capitalist production implies the exercise of discipline on the worker. This discipline cannot be fully internalised, as we have nothing to gain from work, except a wage.¹⁹ This is why this discipline must be direct, and this is why compulsion and despotism in production is the other side of the coin of the freedom and equality of the market.

The sphere of production therefore implies the inescapable antagonism between 'capital' and 'labour', which

is an inherent contradiction in capitalism. This antagonism is not an antagonism between 'people' and an abstract enemy, 'capital', and not just a question of individuals reacting to 'discipline', but a concrete antagonism between classes.

The sphere of production shows that society is not made up of equals. One class, the proletariat, is dispossessed and reproduces its dispossession through wage work relations. Another class owns (and/or controls²⁰) the means of production and see their wealth and power reflected by the expansion and power of capital.

Marx's achievement was to show how the spheres of production and circulation, which seem so opposite, are

therefore two aspects of the same system and need each other to exist. In production we create a world of commodities that is alien: it does not belong to us unless we pay for each commodity we need, so it obliges us to earn a wage again and again to reproduce ourselves. This way the two spheres of capital feed each other in a vicious circle.

In producing commodities for a wage we reproduce the material conditions that oblige us to face the market and its laws as 'natural' and objective. On the other hand, by being free to buy and sell, we can only sell our labour power, and feed capital.

The distribution of wealth and privileges in capitalism then is not the result of the random working of the market where some individual is more unlucky than others: capital's power is based on a production that starts and ends with the systematic dispossession of a class. It is a bourgeois ideology that the market opens up opportunities to all individuals on equal grounds, and that the distribution of wealth and

¹⁹ It is true that we internalise our need for a wage, and make efforts towards keeping a job or doing a career. But behind this there is the aimlessness of what we do at work: as Marx said, if the workers could get their wage without actually working, they would.

²⁰ In the USSR the alienation of the proletariat was based on a collective control over the means of production by a class of state bureaucrats who represented capital.

privileges in society is the result of the competition among free and equal individuals on the market.

Now we can see why Marx made a distinction between the spheres of circulation and production: in order to show that capital is not a system of bourgeois individuals but a material social relation between classes and that this systematic dispossession is based on a peculiar mechanism in capital, which is different from any other form of dispossession and class rule in the past – *it is one with the way we produce*.

2.2 From the sphere of production to the sphere of circulation: the trajectory of *Autonomia*

Despite Marx's interest in the sphere of production, Marx's theory does not imply a 'workerist' approach in itself. In this view the proletariat is not only formed by the individuals who actually work! The proletariat is the whole of the dispossessed, including those who for one reason or another are not in work. This theory, also, does not necessarily concentrate itself on what happens in the workplace. Outside the workplace, capital imposes its logic, a logic that says that nothing can be acquired without an equivalent to exchange, and a logic that imposes the form of wage work on many unproductive activities.²¹ For every individual among the dispossessed, not only for those who have a job, the world is an alien world that reflects their powerlessness. The subjective aspect of capital is then an experience shared by the class as a whole.

However, a special focus on the productive worker was given by many political theorists in the '70s. At the end of the '60s, at the peak of the great struggles at FIAT factories in Italy, the founding fathers of *Autonomia* were part of the political current of *operaismo*, which turned Marxism into the celebration of the power of the industrial working class vis-à-vis capital. It was within this celebration that the power of the FIAT workers, which was built through struggle, was fetishised: being workers in a productive workplace was considered, in its own account, as something having special relevance for class struggle.²²

Towards the end of the '70s, with the suppression of industrial unrest in Italy and the shift of class struggle from the factories to the street, it made sense for *Autonomia* to extend the ideology of workerism outside the workplace, to be able to label struggles in the street as 'working class struggle', and the whole society as a factory. But what was the advantage in defining the whole society as a 'social factory'? For the old workerist ideology, whose heart beat

in front of 'factories', calling society a 'factory' was very relevant indeed.²³

Paradoxically, *Autonomia's* efforts to theorise society as a factory led them to dismiss capitalist production. In order to generalise 'production' to the larger society, this had to be reduced to aspects which can be present whether or not commodities are created and whether or not there is a wage relation. These aspects are the subjective aspects of capitalist production – its aimlessness and despotism. By looking at these subjective aspects in isolation from their context, the concept of 'production' could be generalised to the whole of society, as *any* activity forced under 'discipline' and command. This would include the regimes at schools, hospitals, prisons, the patriarchal family, etc. Of course *Autonomia* didn't forget the factory! But the factory was now merely one among many disciplinary settings in the social factory.

Once discipline was considered in such abstract terms, Marx's analysis of production in terms of value and productive labour became a bit problematic; this was to lead to a theoretical divergence within *Autonomia*.



Autonomia at a crossroad

On the one hand, Negri pushed to the fore his claim that there was no point in considering the creation of value, or analysing labour as productive labour. For him the answer was easy: in the social factory any disciplined activity had the same importance for capital and its power, and value was simply the expression of capital's power to control us.

Other Autonomists, De Angelis among them, didn't rebut Negri's 'law of command', but they also didn't want to give up Marx and the law of value. The easiest way of keeping Negri onboard without jeopardising Marx was to use the magic fix-all word 'also':

²¹ In 'The arcane of productive reproduction' *Aufheben* #13, 2005, we show how the housewife's activity acquires the form of productive work through the interplay of the sphere of production and circulation, and show that there is no need whatsoever to theorise that it produces value at every cost.

²² Arguments such as 'productive workers are more effective in a struggle as they produce profit for capital' were part of this ideology. Their ideological nature emerges clearly if we for example imagine the havoc a general strike of *unproductive* bank workers would cause to the economy, or the effectiveness of the anti-Poll Tax movement.

²³ With the extension of the factory to society, the *operaista's* stress on the struggle for the wage within the factory was translated into the expectation of future struggles in the wider society for a 'social wage', or a better 'social wage'. This hope, yet, never concretised in the way they expected.

The ultimate use-value of work... is its role as the fundamental means of capitalist social control... But the use-value of labour power for capital is *also* its ability to produce value and surplus value.²⁴

But 'also' was not sufficient. Theoretical acrobatics that tried to reconcile the law of command and the social factory with Marx then began.



Negri puzzles De Angelis

In the mid '90s De Angelis published work that aimed to prove that value was created in any disciplinary settings in society at large: the aimlessness, pain and boredom of any activity done under compulsion was seen to reveal the nature of this activity as productive of value.²⁵ Subtly, De Angelis stressed that aimlessness, pain and boredom was not only experienced in disciplinary settings (factories, schools etc.), by it was also experienced by the petty bourgeois (the lorry driver), whose aimless work was imposed directly by the market. Playing on the fact that value is not immediately perceptible, this theory was difficult to disprove – so Marx was safe, together with the Autonomist theories.

In *The beginning of history* De Angelis takes this trajectory of *Autonomia* to a logical conclusion. The book makes clear that the unifying mechanism that commands all discipline and work in capitalism is *the market and its laws*. The step here is the shift from discipline and coercion imposed despotically by people (managers, teachers, psychiatrists, etc.) over other people, to the objective and impersonal force of the market now seen, clearly, as the universal mechanism of command. This impersonal command acts through the internalisation of 'discourses' of price-signals by each individual, groups, organisations, etc. in society, so it is the result of a feedback operated by the individuals themselves: by abiding by the law of value, individuals send back and forth 'signals' to each other, and thereby constituting the social 'reality' behind this 'discourse'.

The command experienced in the factory or other disciplinary setting (which De Angelis calls 'nodes'), are only forms in which market discipline is imposed. While the

petty bourgeois is disciplined into working by the direct spur of competition, the worker is disciplined to work indirectly, through the action of a manager ('the cleric of the god of the market'). This gives the final touch of coherence to the Autonomist theory of the social factory. The whole globe, subsumed under the global market, is a giant social factory, where any activity is directly or indirectly functional to capital.

De Angelis devotes a whole section to proving that the direct discipline in any disciplinary institutions (including the factory) has eventually the same nature as that imposed directly by the market. In order to do so he compares the way the market subsumes the bourgeois individual and the imposition of discipline in a model for any disciplinary centres: *The Panopticon*. The *Panopticon* was an old design for a prison, but, according to philosopher Foucault, it represented the quintessential form of any disciplinary setting in capitalism.²⁶

Focusing on the *Panopticon*, and comparing it to the market, De Angelis solves any possible objection to his conflation, perhaps with a bit of a stretch. Is the discipline of the market impersonal, and does it play on internalisation? But the discipline in the *Panopticon* is also impersonal and internalised. One cannot see the person who watches from the tower, and must assume to be controlled at all moments, so control is internalised. Is the market a system of 'price signals'? But the *Panopticon* also plays on signals, as the images of prisoners seen from the tower are... visual signals.²⁷

The beginning of history then presents a theory that subsumes despotism and discipline, including production, to the market – the sphere of exchange, equality and freedom. For us the main problem with this theory is not that it does not account for production in capitalism – on the contrary, *the problem is that it does*. If this theory were concerned with some aspects of capital like enclosure and commodification, or some cultural-discursive aspects of the sphere of circulation in its own account, it would have still the opportunity to be considered side by side with Marx's view, where production is crucial for a class analysis. But, by accounting for production as an ultimate effect of the market, this theory has operated a significant shift of focus.

Autonomia's traditional focus was on the despotic imposition of discipline and command, either within the workplace or at school or other disciplinary settings in society at large. They derived this focus from the workerist interest in the experience of despotism and command in the workplace. For example, Raniero Panzieri theorised the unity of the technical aspects of production with its intrinsic despotic moments. The imposition of market discipline was first seen by De Angelis as an example of this general discipline (the

²⁴ Harry Cleaver, *Reading capital politically*, Leeds: AK, 2000, p. 100.

²⁵ 'Beyond the technological and the social paradigms: A political reading of abstract labour as the substance of value', *Capital and class* 57, Autumn 1995, pp.107-134.

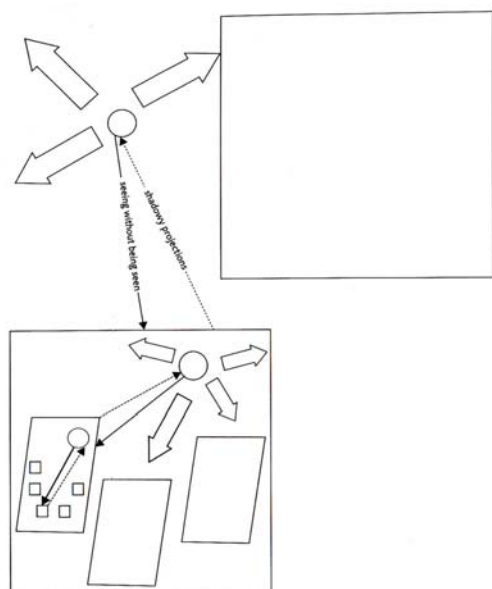
²⁶ At the turn of the eighteenth century, bourgeois philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed a prison fit for the Enlightened Nineteenth Century. It would be a circular building where prisoners in cells could be surveilled by a guard from a central tower. This would reduce the need for direct coercion (and the cost of surveillance) as the prisoners would feel to be surveilled all the time. Bentham designed the *Panopticon* on his own initiative, and, despite his numerous efforts to get finances to build one, he never received a farthing for it.

²⁷ For a full enjoyment of the stretch, we refer the reader to 'Box 1' on p. 207.

market is the boss for the lorry driver). Now the situation is totally reversed: the market is the real, original, boss, all direct command and discipline is a secondary effect of it.

This is where *Autonomia's* trajectory has landed with the full weight of De Angelis, trying to solve a chain of Marxological and, frankly, unnecessary puzzles created by its ideological, workerist, starting point.

In the next section we will see that this paradoxical shift of focus will imply the replacement of a class perspective with the perspective of any individual subjected to the discourse of price-signals: the perspective of the bourgeois individual.²⁸



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2.3 The perspective of the bourgeois individual and the theoretical necessity of the common

We have seen that *The beginning of history* proposes a new understanding of capital, centred on the sphere of circulation. In the new perspective everybody who is subsumed by capital is turned into fragmented individuals relating by exchange. In this view, capital appears an abstract enemy, a force imposing the doom of competition to all through silent economic means, and facing all as 'people'. This is, in a word, the perspective of the bourgeois individual.

Despite trying to use Marx and his old vocabulary, systematically, and deliberately, the book redefined central concepts, substituting a new key to reading this vocabulary – shifting from the point of view of the proletariat to the point of view of the bourgeois individual.

²⁸ In his article 'Marx and Primitive Accumulation: the Continuous Character of Capital's Enclosures' in *The commoner* n. 2, De Angelis starts from Marx and his analysis, and thus appears to speak a class language! This is, however, only the starting point. In the course of the article, De Angelis subtly changes Marx's theory: he claims that enclosures are at the basis of the separation of producers from their means of production in capitalism, thus disposing of the centrality of wage relations. With his new book it is clearer that this means to eventually dispose of the constitutive mechanism of classes itself.

So, for example, when we are taught by De Angelis about the main problem with capitalism, this is not alienation and exploitation, or the rule of one class over another, but the 'competitive form' of our social interactions (p. 85). The problem with the market is that, through competition, 'one can win but can also lose'. When we are taught about alienation, this is not the fundamental alienation of what we produce, but the alienation that fragments us as owners of commodities to exchange.²⁹ When we are taught how capital turns our human creativity and activity into a force that dominates us, this happens because we are forced to compete against each other on the market, so our skills and cleverness will be employed to beat someone else in competition (p. 85). When we are told about antagonism, we are told that there is a fundamental antagonism between individuals on the market, beyond the 'traditional' understanding of antagonism between classes (pp. 8-9).

This shift of focus from the perspective of the class to the perspective of the bourgeois individual is perfectly matched by the style of this book. De Angelis puts a lot of work into choosing the right words in order not to spoil its universality with too much class jargon. He makes substantial efforts to avoid words like 'workplaces', 'workers' and 'classes'.³⁰ He prefers to say that we confront capital as 'people' (or 'protesting others' on p. 101), that those who work are 'doers' and that workplaces are 'nodes'.³¹ The word dispossessed is used, for no obvious reason, in inverted commas (p. 71). When he needs to speak about the bourgeoisie, De Angelis prefers to call them a class of 'investors', and safely puts the word 'class' in inverted commas (p. 44)! He even struggles to re-define the old Autonomist concept of 'class recomposition' as 'community recomposition' since it sounds more... universal (p. 126). When old Marxist concepts and words are used, they are normally sanitised of class implications. On p. 85, De Angelis concedes to the old Marxist reader that market interaction is not only a discourse of price-signals, it is also an expression of 'power relations based on ongoing enclosures and corresponding property rights'. But already the 'also' means that the question of power relations is not a fundamental question. It's additional. De Angelis also sanitises all the concepts of 'power relations' and 'property rights'. He tells us that 'power relations' can be identified in

²⁹ Outrageously, we are also told that Marx said that (p. 197). In fact since the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844* for Marx alienation was crucially a material dispossession, and a class issue: 'So much does the realisation of labour appear as loss of reality that the worker loses his reality to the point of dying of starvation. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects he needs most not only for life but also for work.' Karl Marx, 'Estranged labour', *economic and philosophical manuscripts*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>

also in *Early writing*, London: Penguin Books, 1975.

³⁰ He only uses words like 'working class' when he comments on quotes from Harry Cleaver or Karl Marx that contain those words.

³¹ 'Doers' is borrowed from John Holloway, who in *Change the world without taking power*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, presents a thorough and useful account of Marx's theory, especially commodity fetishism. In this book, Holloway gives new names to old Marxian words like labour, workers, alienation, etc.

the distribution of wealth, privileges and 'entitlements' among individuals, and on p. 84 he stresses that this distribution of wealth and privileges is not the effect of production, but an effect of the competitive market relations themselves. Finally, on p. 197 he explains that 'property rights' are the individual bourgeois property that separate us as individual commodity owners.

We have to say that all this is true, and that looking at the perspective of the individuals in the sphere of circulation can be useful. By showing how individuals are fragmented, pitted against each other, and turned into competitive cogs on the market, De Angelis is for example able to attack Negri and Hardt's over-optimistic concept of 'multitude' and show that this is the uncritical celebration of the inherent fragmentation of capitalist society.

Yet the perspective of the bourgeois individual is a one-sided aspect of capital that misses another crucial aspect – a class perspective. De Angelis still makes a difference between vaguely defined 'doers', and vaguely defined 'investors', and says that the latter have an interest in the discipline exerted on all doers. Yet when we enquire what an investor is and what a doer is, we discover that these are ambiguous concepts. Many workers' pensions depend on investments, and many top managers are incredibly stressed doers. *The truth is that capitalism can only be exposed as a class system by looking at the sphere of production.*

This reduction has a consequence in the theory of antagonism and subjectivity. If we look at ourselves as individuals within the sphere of circulation, we are 'people', which capital 'pits in competition among each other'. There is nothing in this theory that explains any material interest for some of these 'people' to come together and fight some others among those 'people'. In this view capital doesn't constitute any material grounds for class solidarity, while we have seen that there are such grounds – production divides those who have an interest in capital, and those who have an interest in coming and fighting together against capital.

In this light we can see the new spirit of De Angelis's redefinition of 'antagonism'. For Marx antagonism is related to a condition of perennial contradiction between capital and labour, which continually constitutes the good reason for a class to come together and fight another class. For De Angelis 'antagonism' is an expression of the atomising and homogenising effects of the market. While De Angelis insists that his understanding of antagonism is 'related' to the first, this is not true. His concept of 'antagonism' implies the idea that there is nothing 'inside' capital that may constitute a material ground for class struggle.

Now it is clear why enclosures become the missing link in this theory: a society of fragmented individuals, that the market can only pit each other against each other in competition, can never find any material interests in fighting together! We need to envisage something 'outside' capital, the commons, as impurities in an otherwise amorphous chemical solution, in order to coagulate individual atoms into crystal growths of solidarity.

But this coagulation is not based on anything but the individual's choice between competing discourses – it is just up to the individual to react to the shit³² that discipline, competition and command accumulates in his body and

memory, and seek to join or reinforce his 'communities' and their 'values'. Indeed, in the next and last section we will see then that the consequence of this theory leads us straight into its worst problem: its hapless moralism.

3. Discourses or life?

When we considered capital as the interplay of a sphere of production and a sphere of circulation we saw why capital is a social relation. A social relation is not the way we talk to each other, or the 'meanings' of what we say. A social relation is who has power over the other, who gets the wealth, who is dispossessed. This is a material relation, not just a cultural, 'discursive' one. It is true that there is lots of culture and 'discourses' that are the result of, and constitute, the rationalisation of this relation, but no arguments, cultural construction, discourses, would stand on their own feet by virtue of us believing in them!



But De Angelis's view simply misses this out. Having reduced capital to the market, and us to 'individuals pitted against each other', there is nothing that explains why capital has the power it has, why it expands, why the market rules over our lives. Capital is ultimately a system of 'values' and 'discourses' circularly reproduced by our involvement in these 'discourses'. On these grounds the book devotes pages to dissecting the ideological 'discourse' brought forward by the capitalist class in order to justify their power and 'recuperate' movements. It devotes pages to explaining to us the 'discourse' which the market uses to subsume individuals: the individual in capitalism, he explains, gets involved in a 'discourse' made of 'price-signals', and internalises 'norms of behaviour'.³³

Equally, once the focus is shifted from the material relations of classes to their cultural appearances, class struggle is reduced to a struggle of 'discourses', or, better still, 'value systems'. De Angelis devotes pages to explain to us how society is structured by its 'values'. Different 'value practices' are for De Angelis the foundations of the reproduction of different societies and 'communities'. But where do value practices and values come from? The more

³³ Ironically, De Angelis seems to have absorbed our ruling class's ideological discourses like a sponge. In the New Labour talks, concepts such as 'care in the community', 'the Muslim community', etc. imply a definition of 'community' as any relations besides exchange or the state, and are assumed inherently good. Similarly, the idea of prices as signals or information among individuals on the market, adopted by De Angelis, is directly taken out of bourgeois economic textbooks.

³² De Angelis gives this a good Latin name: 'Detritus'.

we read, the more we feel trapped in a strange tautology: on the one hand our actions (so our practices) are based on 'systems of values', which, De Angelis explains, are 'the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves'. On the other hand, our 'systems of values' seems to be founded on our 'value practices'. Eventually, we realise that for De Angelis 'values' and 'value practices' are conflated into each other – one is equivalent to the other. Without a theory that links given 'value practices' to the real individuals and their intercourses, to the social and material relations among us, De Angelis's concepts of value and value practices end up endlessly and vacuously chasing each other.

This is tautological idealism.³⁴ In the same way as the law of the market would not stand on its feet half an hour without social relations of dispossession supporting it, no 'systems of values' can maintain its existence on the basis of its own 'value practices', and no value practices can be only supported by their correspondent 'system of values'.³⁵

Aufheben has not much patience with a theory that gives such relevance to 'values' and 'discourses'. In no real struggle or movement we have ever been involved in would such focus have been in any way useful.

In real struggles and movements we continually deal with people who have different perspectives, brewed through other direct social relations (families, friends, other cultural or political activity, and so on), and through their involvement with capital's 'values' as well. The fragmentation among participants of a struggle is overcome through a process that goes back and forth from the practical experience of solidarity and struggle, to lots of discussions, arguments, decisions taken collectively, and so on.³⁶

Our struggles are living processes, in which collective consciousness and practical realisation continually affect each other, so that in no moment what we do and what we say totally coincide. How useless it would be for someone like De Angelis to step in and study the latest public talk, leaflet or bulletin in the attempt to analyse our 'system of values'!

So what do we want from a theory of class struggle? An analysis that tells us what to look for in order to

³⁴ De Angelis's fetishism of culture is reflected in his concepts of linear, circular and phasic time, which attribute to time what is actually human and social. This is reminiscent of Moishe Postone's fetishism of time, paraphrased on p. 52 of *Aufheben* #15 as: 'How many times must I tell you, it's *not* our movement *in* time, it's the movement *of* time. It has an inherent dynamic... In no way can we give rise to its trajectory'.

³⁵ It can be argued that this stress on value practices as 'material' and their use in place of material social relations can be traced back to Louis Althusser. In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus', Althusser writes: 'It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system...: ideology existing in a *material* ideological apparatus, prescribing *material* practices governed by a *material* ritual, which practices exist in the *material* actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief'. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, Monthly Review Press 1971, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

³⁶ For an account of the role of activity and consciousness in concrete everyday struggles, see 'Theory and Practice, Recent Struggles in Brighton', *Aufheben* 15, 2007.

understand the revolutionary potentials of a struggle, but also to understand its limits. But what to look at is not a 'system of values' or any cultural production, but the living being: the real participants, what they do, what their aims are. And how these relations change, or can potentially change, when victories are achieved, and power is conquered against capital.



Arguing about values

This more material analysis could even help De Angelis himself to tackle his favourite 'dilemma': why and how capital recuperates movements. Instead of analysing the 'discourses' of Paul Wolfowitz, is it not better to consider why these 'discourses' made sense for those who accepted their own recuperation? What social forces were involved? What kind of people were they, what were their aims? What happened while the movement emerged, grew up, and what stopped it going beyond its limits? What the material grounds for the compromises were?

Also, we need to consider material and class relations if we want to understand what to think, and what to do, in front of many 'communities' and struggles which seem to have aims alien from ours. How can we understand communal experiences such as Political Islam's training camps? What can we say about the Muslim 'community' on which Respect tried to found its electorate, only to see the local Muslim landlord becoming councillor with the votes of his tenants and their extended families? And what do we make of the 'communal' experience of white British anti-paedophile 'lynch mobs'?³⁷ These 'communities' experience direct relations alternative to capital, and react to the atomisation imposed by the market, and still we need a theory that allows us to understand how, or whether,³⁸ to 'link up' our struggles with them!

For the reasons above, despite the fact that *The beginning of history* healthily stresses action, class struggle and subjective antagonism, it offers us a rather useless theory. A moment of reflection from practice, theory must be able to feed back into practice. It must develop from the

³⁷ See 'When the mobs are looking for witches to burn, nobody's safe': Talking about the reactionary crowd. J. Drury, *Discourse & Society*, 13, 41-73, 2002.

³⁸ Or, we prefer, why not.

experience of practice the insights that can push practice beyond what it is. It is true that a small book cannot analyse each individual, existing struggle or 'community'. However a theory should for example make clear what questions we may ask, what clues we may look for, in the concrete situation.

The beginning of history offers no such help. Not considering the social relations that support the 'systems of

values' it is only able to waffle about general and very abstract concepts of 'values' and 'value practices', which, like a mass-produced sock, fit any 'community' foot. It gives us a general definition of 'community' based on any form of direct relations among individuals.³⁹ And, coherently, its conclusion is a moralistic and vague call for 'communities' to somehow 'link up'.

In fact, the limits of this book are already apparent from the first casual reading: it is a book written by someone who catches up with the latest G8 gatherings in his 'small van', parks up and looks on in contemplation.⁴⁰



³⁹ 'Community' is simply defined by De Angelis as 'value practices other than capital plus organisational reach', p. 68.

⁴⁰ De Angelis was keen to inform us that, besides having a small van, he lived in a *small* flat in the centre of Milan when he was a child, and that he has now a *small* kitchen at home.