(Im)possibilities of Autonomy
Social Movements In and Beyond Capital, the State and Development

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**Abstract**

Recently, we have witnessed the emergence of what appears to be a new set of claims in contemporary social movements based around the idea of autonomy. In this paper we interrogate this demand for autonomy. In order to do this, we first engage with existing literatures, identifying three main conceptions of autonomy: 1) autonomous practices vis-à-vis capital, or, what Negri calls, the 'self-valorization' of labour; 2) self-determination and independence from the state; and 3) alternatives to hegemonic discourses of development. We will then problematize and point out the central potentials, weaknesses and antagonisms at the heart of the concept of autonomy. We argue that social movements' demands for autonomy point to, what Laclau and Mouffe call, the impossibility of society, the idea that society can never be complete. That is, there will always be resistances, such as those expressed by autonomous social movements. However, this also lets us understand the conception of autonomy to be incomplete. Autonomy itself is hence an impossibility. To point to these limits of the discourses of autonomy, we discuss how demands for autonomy are tied up with contemporary re-organizations of: 1) the capitalist workplace, characterized by discourses of autonomy, creativity and self-management; 2) the state, which increasingly outsources public services to independent, autonomous providers, which often have a more radical, social movement history; and 3) regimes of development, which today often emphasize local practices, participation and self-determination. Behind these critical reflections on the conception and practice of autonomy is the idea that autonomy should always be seen as something relational. That is, autonomy can never be fixed; there is no definite ground for demands for autonomy to stand on. Instead, social movements' demands for autonomy are embedded in specific social, economic, political and cultural contexts, giving rise to possibilities as well as impossibilities of autonomous practices.

**Biographical Notes**:

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> Each notion, or concept, arises out of empirical engagements, and however abstract the procedures of its self-interrogation, it must then be brought back into an engagement with the determinate properties of the evidence, and argue its case before vigilant judges in history's "court of appeal". It is, in a most critical sense, a question of dialogue once more. (Thompson, 1995, p. 58)

## Introduction

Recently we have witnessed the emergence of autonomy as a central demand in many social movements across the world. Demands for autonomy usually involve claims for self-determination, organizational self-management and independent social and economic practices vis-à-vis the state and capital. Demands for autonomy are particularly widespread in Latin American social movements (see: Hellman, 1992). Here some well known examples of autonomy movements include: the Caracoles and the Good Government Councils (Juntas del Buen Gobierno) run by the Mexican Zapatistas; the community projects run by the Movement of Unemployed Workers and the occupied factories run by the Movement of Recovered Enterprises, both in Argentina; the Federation of Neighbourhood Councils (Federación de Juntas vecinales) in El Alto, Bolivia; and the settlements run by the Movement of Landless Rural Workers in Brazil. There are also many examples of autonomous movements in Europe (see: Katsiaficas, 2006), including the Disobedienti in Italy, Autonomen in Germany, the Movement of the Unemployed in France, the various manifestations of the alter-globalization movement, such as Des Papiers pour Tous and People's Global Action, as well as attempts to create alternative economies such as Local Economy Trading Schemes (LETS). In North America the principals of autonomy have driven many attempts to create alternatives to corporate domination in the economic sector, including various autonomous media movements, such as Indymedia (e.g. Pickard, 2006), collectives of part-time clerical workers, such as the Processed World Collective, who have tried to celebrate the potential of new work arrangements, and the Open Source movement that has sought to build software in a way which is autonomous of large software companies. In Asia claims for autonomy have been at the heart of many peasant movements, such as the struggle against genetically modified crops in India. In Africa the political autonomy of various ethnic groups from colonial powers and now multinational corporations has been a pressing and consistent theme in social movements. In the Pacific various indigenous people's movements have long been concerning themselves with preserving their autonomy from both intrusive state and corporate influence. For example, many Australian Aboriginal communities have been involved in protracted struggles for autonomy in governing their own communities and deciding how their natural resources are used. Some of these regional autonomy movements have become global in nature. For example, the Italian Social Centre movement has inspired the founding of other social centres throughout the world. Similarly, *Indymedia* rapidly developed from one collective in Seattle to a world-wide network of over 150 collectives today. It is therefore not surprising that we have also witnessed a surge in interest in claims for autonomy amongst movement intellectuals (see: Graeber, 2002; Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007). Two examples are Holloway's rejection of traditional Marxist views of the 'meaning of revolution today' and the idea of 'changing the world without taking power' (Holloway, 2002a), and Hardt and Negri's influential series of books (1994, 2001, 2004), outlining a theoretical and political justification for the autonomy of, what they call, the 'multitude': a self-organized, unlimited subject.

It should come as no surprise to us that claims for autonomy are central to the demands of many social movements. Indeed, Fraser (2005) points out that at the basis of most social movements are claims for the redistribution of resources in order to assuage impoverishment, the recognition of valued identities in order to address disrespect, and the representation of political voice in order to address a perceived lack of influence and autonomy. The former two themes of redistribution and recognition have been well dealt with in studies of social movements. For example, authors have explored how social movements aim to mobilize resources such as funding, people and knowledge in support of their

causes (e.g. McAdam and Zald, 1977). They have also shown how social movements press into service a whole series of mobilizing structures, such as friendship networks and organizational hierarchies, to achieve their aims (Tarrow, 1998). Authors have also explored how social movements seek to create and articulate collective identities (e.g. Melucci, 1989). They have done so through an analysis of signs, symbols and cultural frames, which are articulated by social movements in their quest to revalue, what are often, wounded identities, giving a sense of hope and meaning to people involved in political struggle (Jasper, 1997). In some places, social movement theory has registered the importance of claims for political voice and autonomy. For example, Offe (1987) points out that one of the distinguishing features of 'new social movements' is their focus on 'non-institutional' politics and their attempts to craft a voice that is autonomous of existing bureaucratic structures such as unions, corporations and the state. Similarly, Scott (1990) argues that one of the central aspects of the ideology of new social movements is the 'autonomy of struggle', which involves 'the insistence that the movement and those it represents be allowed to fight their own corner without interference from other movements, and without subordinating their demands to other external priorities' (Scott, 1990, p. 20).

Yet, given the importance of autonomy as both a central claim by, and defining characteristic of, social movements, it is surprising that the theme has not been substantially examined by social movement theorists. In this paper we would like to address this gap in social movement theory by interrogate this demand for autonomy. We do this by working through two arguments. First, we engage with existing literature, asking what exactly is meant by the concept of autonomy. We will argue that autonomy is usually defined as either a process of labour self-valorization, negation of state power, or as alternative to hegemonic forms of development. Second, we will discuss central potentials, weaknesses and contradictions with the concept of autonomy, which point at our understanding of autonomy as *impossibility*. Inspired by the work of Laclau (1990, 1994, 1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we will argue that autonomy of social movements vis-à-vis the state and capital is both possible and impossible. Impossible, because the claim for autonomy is bound up with the 'new spirit of capitalism', emphasizing autonomous and flexible forms of economic organization, including the increasing incorporation of social movement activities into the neo-liberal service provisions of the state. In this way, autonomous movements must be seen as part of the hegemonic system of capital and the state. Yet, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out, any hegemony can only ever be partial and incomplete. That is, within the impossibility of autonomy there are possibilities of autonomous practices that challenge the very hegemony they are part of. Hence, our argument is that autonomy constitutes both a possible and impossible aspiration, as autonomous spaces embody and disclose the contradictory dynamics between the swinging movements between integration and transcendence (Bonefeld, 1994).

**What is Autonomy?**

The notion of autonomy has been used to characterize social movements as varied as global networks of computer programmers, unemployed workers in Argentina and squatters in Italy. The variety of practices described as autonomous make it difficult to clearly define what autonomy actually is. A good starting point to achieve this task is by looking at the etymology of the term. Autonomy is derived from the Greek words *auto* (self) and *nomos* (custom, law), hence meaning 'the custom or law of the self' (but note the difficulties of translating *nomos;* see Ulmen, 1993). The concept of autonomy initially entered modern thought as a way of referring to 'self-legislation', whereby the autonomous individual carries out its will on itself by itself (Schneewind, 1997). Kantian conceptions of autonomy were largely used to refer to the ability of the self to generate – on its own terms, using reason – a set of moral principals, rather than having these morals handed to us from systems of thought and belief, such as religion. Rawls nicely sums up such a conception when he says that 'acting autonomously is acting from principles that we would consent to as free and equal rational beings' (1971, p. 516).

Political thought moved the concept of autonomy from the individual to the collective level by referring to autonomy as self-legislation or creating a group's own custom and law. As Chatterton points out, 'the Oxford dictionary describes it as "the right of self-government, of making its own laws and administering its own affairs"' (2005, p. 546). From there, we can define autonomy as governed by

self-established rules, self-determination, self-organization and self-regulating practices particularly vis-à-vis the state and capitalist social, economic and cultural relations. Autonomy also entails 'mutual aid' and an 'impulse fuelled by present and past hardships such as hunger, poverty and subjugation' (Foran, cited in Chatterton, 2005, p. 545), and 'a demand to be heard and recognized, it is a battle against "nautonomy" [Held 1995: 163], repression and marginality' (Chatterton 2005, p. 546). Finally, the project of autonomy is essentially collective (Katsiaficas, 2006), as it involves a group working together in common to construct alternatives ways of living, rather than simply an individual seeking to assert their subjective autonomy against a dominating group (see also: Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006).

Beyond these minimal points of agreement, the concept of autonomy seems to be infested with many meanings (Thwaites Rey, 2004; Katsiaficas, 2006). Drawing on our own reading of the literature, we argue that there are three broad discourses of autonomous movements. The first discourse involves autonomy from capital, comprising demands for the autonomy of workers from the movements of capital as well as autonomy from the domination of political economy by workplace unions. This is based on the assumption that autonomy primarily involves the creative 'self-valorization of labour' (Negri, 1991). One example of this discourse of autonomy is the Italian Autonomia movement. The second discourse involves autonomy from the state. This comprises movements who seek autonomy from groups who work through attempts to capture state power such as political parties and trade unions. This is based on the assumption that autonomy largely involves 'practical negativity' (Holloway, 2002a), which deconstructs state power. The Mexican Zapatista movement is one example of this mode of autonomy. The final discourse involves demands for autonomy from hegemonic relations resulting in colonial domination and developmental dependency. These are characterized, for example, by a call for 'defensive localization' (Escobar, 2001), focusing on preserving locally specific forms of knowledge, development and ways of being in the face of pressures from apparently all-encompassing domination by colonial powers. One example of this discourse of autonomy is La Via Campesina, the international peasant movement, and their calls for self-determination, local development and preservation of local peasant knowledge. In what follows we discuss these three discourses of autonomy is more detail.

**Beyond Capital**

The first discourse of autonomy we have identified involves autonomy from the capitalist mode of production, which is articulated, for example, by the Italian Autonomia movement. At the centre of this movement is the doctrine of 'working-class self valorization' and 'class composition'. Negri's (1991) notion of 'self-valorization' highlights how value, creativity and innovation in production are always created by workers themselves, rather than by capital. For Negri, 'self-valorization' 'indicates a process of valorization which is autonomous from capitalist valorization – a self-defining, self-determining process which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorization to a positive project of self-constitution' (Cleaver, 1992, p. 129). For Negri, workers are the source of all creativity and value, which means that, for him, 'self-valorization' contributes to a project of liberation from capital, as it facilitates the creation of autonomous spaces disconnected from the capitalist labour process. The idea of workers' 'self-valorization' became embodied in Italian *Operaismo* (Workerism), which transformed into Autonomia in 1973. This movement brought together a group of organizations including Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua, and they published the journal *Quaderni Rossi* (for a historical account see: Ginsborg, 1990; Katsiaficas, 2006). They 'advocated "renunciation of precisely that form of mass struggle which today unifies the movement led by the workers in advanced capitalist countries"' (Tronti, cited in Finn, 2004, p. 108). This amounted to a rejection of labour or communist party run unions who would negotiate dutifully with employers. Instead, proponents of the Autonomia movement relied on a whole range of more informal modes of resistance such as sabotage, wild-cat strikes, and informal action on the picket line. As the movement developed, it sought to define autonomy not just as an attempt to gain some control over the capitalist workplace through union organization. Rather, it involved an assumption that autonomy involved being autonomous of the capitalist work relationship altogether. As Negri says: 'Marx insists on the abolition of work. Work which is liberated is liberation from work. The creativity of communist work has no relation with the capitalist organization of labor' (1991, p. 165). This is a decisive departure from most Marxist union

politics of the past century, which has mainly focused on the battle for 'improvements' in the labour process for workers (see also Wright, 2007).

This desire to escape from the capitalist work relationship is given further force by what Negri and others see as the rapidly changing composition of the working class in the so-called post-industrial society. They argue that in advanced western economies at least, there is a move away from industrial production of things towards post-industrial production of social relations (for a similar argument see: Amin, 1994). This has not just involved a quantitative change in the number of people engaged in service sector as opposed to the industrial sector, but also a qualitative one. Autonomists argue that while 'material' labour may have been hegemonic during the industrial era, 'immaterial' labour has become the hegemonic form of labour during the post-industrial era. This involves labour that produces immaterial goods, such as emotions and affects, knowledge and culture (Lazzarato, 1996). One important implication of the rise of immaterial production is that labour moves outside the walls of the workplace, and begins to take place in all aspects of society. This results in the emergence of what Negri calls the 'social worker' (*operaio sociale*), whereby labouring becomes something which is autonomous of capitalist forms of production. This ushers in the 'emergence of the labouring subjectivity that claims its mass autonomy, its own independent capacity of collective valorization, that is, its self-valorization with respect to capital' (Hardt & Negri, 1994, p. 278, 280). This implies that the most important sites of production are no longer the factory but self-organized networks in society.

Hardt and Negri name some examples of such networks, including social centres in Italian cities, the open source software movement and the global Indymedia movement. The reason these movements are autonomous is because they seek to create social value through producing accommodation and performance space (social centres), software (open source software) and media information (Indymedia) in a way that is not necessarily outside capitalist relations – as, according to Hardt and Negri (2000), there is no outside of the capitalist Empire – but through a process of self-valorization that eventually points to a 'beyond' of capital. That is, the creativity and innovation produced by these self-organized networks is something that capital will want to feed on, in order to reproduce itself, yet it is also a value that precedes capitalist relations and hence points beyond it at the same time. This is the terrain of, what Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) call, the 'multitude', which is the constitutive power of social workers who create value, pointing beyond capital.

**Beyond the State**

A second discourse of autonomy focuses on autonomy from the state. This involves an attempt to escape from state legislation and determination. It even goes as far as a complete rejection of the notion of creating social change through taking over the state. The central slogan underpinning this discourse of autonomy is to 'change the world without taking power' (Holloway, 2002a). According to this conception, autonomy involves a negative movement whereby all forms of state power are not only subjected to ongoing and rigorous questioning and critique but are even simply rejected outright or 'forgotten'. Conceiving of autonomy as a negative opposition to the state is largely associated with an intellectual movement called Open Marxism. This movement developed in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s within the Conference of Socialist Economists, following a tradition of thought that includes Luxemburg, Lukács, Bloch, Adorno, Rubin, Rodolsky, Pashukanis, and Agnoli. This tradition shares a number of important characteristics with the Italian Autonomists. Questioning the dynamics of capitalism is a central plank in their thinking. They also see labour as the only constitutive power: 'it is labour alone which constitutes social reality. There is no external force, our own power is confronted by nothing but our own power, albeit in alienated form' (Holloway, 1993, p. 19). For them, capital is not other than labour existing 'in a mode of being denied' (Bonefeld, 1994, p. 51).

Open Marxist approaches to autonomy part way with Italian autonomists by arguing that it is not enough to just reverse the polarity between capital and labour. Rather, it is necessary to dissolve it (Holloway, in Bonefeld *et al*, 1995, p. 164). A second point of disagreement is that Italian Autonomists, such as Negri, conceive of autonomy as a Spinozian positive movement of self-valorization, which

supposedly moves beyond capital through creativity and innovation. In contrast, Holloway (2002a) argues that autonomy, or the search for it, must be negative. That is, autonomy involves the ability to say 'no' to existing forms of power and domination, which powerful bodies, such as the state, seek to impose on you. Inspired by Adorno's (1973) conception of 'negative dialectics', Holloway *et al.* (2008) conceive of autonomy as a struggle for negation, offering a possibility of understanding identity as non-identity. That is, instead of focusing on the positive assertion of an identity, Holloway (2002a) argues that autonomism lies in practices of subjective 'doing'. By 'doing' he means much more than work and physical action. 'Doing' is the movement of 'practical negativity': 'doing changes, negates an existing state of affairs. Doing goes beyond, transcends' (2002a, p. 23; see also: Dinerstein 2005a; 2005b). For Holloway, this focus on 'practical negativity' means that autonomy involves actions, which try to pull apart existing structures or power.

Perhaps the most important implication of this 'subjective doing' and 'practical negativity' is Holloway's rejection of the idea that radical social change can be delivered by taking control of the state. For Holloway, 'the world cannot be changed through the state. Both theoretical reflection and a whole century of bad experience tell us so…the state is just a node in a web of power relations. But will we not be always caught up in the web of power, no matter where we start? Is rupture really conceivable' (2002a, p. 19) Along similar lines, the Turbulence Collective (2007) argues that the problem with engaging with the state is that it often discounts all the non-institutional spaces in which political struggles actually take place. That is, most social movements seek to 'move' precisely to avoid traditional, institutionalized political spaces, and particularly those that make up the state. Thus, the central aim of such movements is purposefully anti-institutional insofar as it involves attempts to transform 'public discourse, by making legislation unenforceable, or simply through their power of self-management and autonomous self-constitution' (2007, p. 596).

For Holloway, Zapatismo is a clear example of attempts to engage in autonomist action without taking state power. Their resistance does not fit into any pre-conceived categories of how revolution should look like (Holloway & Peláez, 1998). The core of 'the newness of *Zapatismo* is the project of changing the world without taking power…Zapatismo moves us decisively beyond the state illusion' (Holloway, 2002c, pp 156-157). For Holloway, the state illusion 'puts the state at the centre of the concept of radical change.' (Holloway, 2002c, p.157) To him, the state is a political *form* of the capital relation. His point is that the struggle of the Zapatistas is far wider reaching, as it seeks to transform life itself, not just the closed circuits of state power. The driving force behind the project of Zapatista autonomy is the pursue of dignity:

> We saw that not everything had been taken away from us, that we had the most valuable, that which made us live, that which made our step rise above plants and animals, that which made the stone be beneath our feet, and we saw, brothers, that all that we had was DIGNITY, and we saw that great was the shame of having forgotten it, and we saw that DIGNITY was good for men to be men again, and dignity returned to live in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again, to dignity, to struggle. (EZLN, cited in Holloway, 2002c, p. 155)

In these words by the Zapatistas it becomes clear that dignity is not simply an ideal which guides the working class' struggle for social reforms or for a future socialist revolution. Instead, dignity mobilizes a movement that is guided by concrete needs and projects itself on to wider politico-ontological dimensions.

**Beyond Development**

Alongside claims that autonomy involves the creation of forms of life beyond capital (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000) and practices that negate state power (e.g. Holloway, 2002a), there is a third discursive tradition of autonomy that specifically emerges out of a post-colonial context, calling for self-determination and self-organization of nations, people and local communities in the face of a seemingly all-encompassing hegemonic system of development that has produced international inequalities on an unprecedented scale. This tradition divides into two main fields: dependency theory and post-development theory (see: Blaney, 1996). Latin American dependency theorists, such as Dos Santos

(1970), Furtado (1967) and Cardoso and Faletto (1979), argue that, what they see as, the underdevelopment of their countries in the 'periphery', i.e. the South, can be explained by the social, political, cultural and economic domination exercised by hegemonic powers in the rich countries of the North, making the periphery dependent on the centre. Their analysis – which is based on a re-interpretation of Marxist conceptions of imperialism and colonialism – is based on an understanding that what prevents Latin American countries from developing is a lack of autonomy from a world system that is characterized by international divisions of labour dictated by the powerful elites in the so-called 'developed' North (Wallerstein, 1974). Post-development theorists, such as Esteva (1987), Escobar (1989) and Shiva (1989), critique this line of argument for being too much wedded to Eurocentric conceptions of stage-like processes of 'development' and for being too focused on the politics of the state. Specifically, post-development theory identifies a 'development imaginary' that is so wedded to the state and therefore uniform powers that local cultures and differences are overlooked and even overpowered. Escobar (2001, p. 149) therefore calls for, what he calls, a 'defensive localization', which emphasizes local histories, knowledges and experiences – in short, autonomy from universalizing knowledges dominated by the hegemonic imaginary of the North.

While there is a rich debate going on between dependency theorists and post-development theorists, Blaney (1996) identifies manifold links between these fields, showing that both call for self-determining, self-organized and self-realized political communities – albeit at different political levels. That is, they both emphasize autonomy from various forms of political and economic colonization and local forms of economic activity, cultural production, social development and knowledge. Compared to the other discourses of autonomy, identified above, one distinguishing features is that this discourse of autonomy does not only target capital (as Negri does) or the state (as Holloway does), but, instead, trains its focus on hegemonic forms of power and universal modern knowledges of development. A second distinguishing feature is that it does not work through affirmation (Negri) or negation (Holloway), but through a process of preservation. That is, this discourse tries to build autonomy through the preserving of already existing ways of doing and being which are under threat from systems of hegemonic domination.

This strategy of achieving autonomy through preservation works along two competing, yet related, lines: On one hand, dependency theorists want to preserve local modes of development in Southern countries, which have so far been exploited by the imperialist and colonialist powers of the North. This is achieved by a strategic disconnection from world-wide systems of capital accumulation and imperialist state oppression, and by a simultaneous strengthening of national economies, cultures and social development programs (Furtado, 1967; Cardoso and Faletto, 1979). Post-development scholars, on the other hand, seek to preserve local histories, cultures and knowledges beyond the hegemonic discourse of development. In their view, 'development' is connected to a whole complex of hegemonic practices in the economy, state and civil society, geared towards 'developing' a country along the pre-determined path of set economic and human development stages. These stages are enacted by Northern modes of organizing in institutions such as non-profit organizations, corporations, schools, universities, and particular government departments and institutes (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). To appear as a legitimate 'developing' nation state, a Southern country therefore needs to mimic the institutions of the nation states of the North. In this way, it becomes increasingly difficult for those being 'developed' to define their own problems on their own terms (Illich, 1976). Post-development theorists therefore seek to craft an 'alternative to development' (Escobar, 1992). One example for this kind of alternative is La Via Campesina, the international peasant movement. This international network of peasant organizations has been struggling against hegemonic modes of Northern development, which is often imposed on local, Southern communities, particularly peasants and small-hold farmers, who are being displaced from their land by big agro-businesses. La Via Campesina puts an alternative vision of autonomous development forward, highlighting local, community knowledges, self-determination and ecological sustainability based on long-term views, rather than short-term profits.

**Impossibilities of Autonomy**

As we have argued so far, there are three main discourses of autonomy: self-valorizing movements, creating positive spaces that are autonomous from capital (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 1998; 2001; 2004); movements that negate the power of the state in various ways (e.g. Holloway, 2005; 2007); and movements that struggle against colonialism and hegemonic forms of development, emphasizing self-determination and self-organization of nation states (e.g. Furtado, 1967) as well as local communities (e.g. Escobar, 1992). We have noted that these discourses differ in terms of: what people should be autonomous of (capital, the state, development); how people should strive to achieve this autonomy (creation, negation and preservation); their main theoretical axioms (self-valorization, practical negativity, dependency and defensive localization); and paradigmatic examples (Italian Autonomia, Mexican Zapatismo, La Via Campesina). While we have been seeking to differentiate between these different discourses of autonomy, it should be clear that there is a large degree of commonality between them, which is routed in a shared history of resistance against capitalist domination and hegemony.

When using the term 'hegemony', we refer to the work of Laclau (1990, 1994, 1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), for whom society should be understood as impossibility (see also: Böhm, 2005; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). On the one hand, a dominant discourse, hegemony, is possible because of what they call the 'logic of equivalence' (1985, p. 130), which aligns different discursive actors in such a way that a specific identification and subjectification is created. The discursive production of what we discussed above as dominant forms of development is an example of such a hegemonic discourse. On the other hand, however, this seemingly all-compassing hegemony can, according to Laclau and Mouffe, only be partial and incomplete. What they call the 'logic of antagonism' disrupts any apparent stability of the 'logic of equivalence', pointing to the fundamental impossibility of ever achieving a total and perfect arrangement of social actors. A hegemonic regime should thus always be thought of as contingency and impossibility, as it will always be characterized by the existence of manifold resistances and counter-hegemonic forces. The striving of social movements towards autonomy is part of precisely these resistances to hegemony.

This very conceptualization of society as impossibility, however, also necessitates an understanding of autonomy as incompleteness and contingency. That is, applying Laclau and Mouffe's analytical framework to the problematic of this paper, we can see the limits of the above discussed discourses of autonomy. In short, autonomy from capital, the state and discourses of development can only ever be partial and incomplete in the same way as society as such must be understood as impossibility. Given the popularity of the discourses of autonomy amongst contemporary social movements, it is surprising that these limits have not been discussed at greater length in the literature (for exceptions see: Balakrishnan, 2003; Stahler-Sholk, 2007). In the remainder of this paper, therefore, we hope to engage with the limits of the discourses of autonomy, which, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), must be understood as being constitutive, as every concept contains its own limits. In particular, we would like to ask: *how autonomous are autonomy movements?* To put this another way, we would like to examine the relationship between autonomy and new forms of capital (neo-liberalism), new forms of politics (democracy), and new forms of development. We will argue that, despite the discourse of self-determination and self-organization at the heart of autonomous movements, autonomy cannot be seen to be detached from accumulation processes of capital, nor from liberal democracy or development. Rather, it is intimately intertwined with these modes of social life, which autonomous social movements seek autonomy from. By making this argument, we show that autonomy cannot claim to have an essential 'ground', a space which is completely 'beyond' capital, the state or development. In fact, we argue that autonomy should be understood as a permanent and ongoing struggle within each of them.

**In and Beyond Capital**

As we have already argued, one discourse of autonomy involves the active creation of value and innovation by labour that is autonomous of capital. Here, autonomy is conceptualized as a movement of self-valorization (Negri, 1991). However, recent critical work on capitalism and the contemporary workplace suggests that movements of self-valorized labour may not just create a life beyond capital.

Rather, forms of worker self-valorization help to create new regimes of capital accumulation. In his study of New York's Silicon Ally, for example, Ross (1998) traces the ethos of autonomy, liberation and 'cool' in contemporary 'dot.com' workplaces. He shows how this ethos of rejecting the mores of large bureaucratic organizations has lead to a new form of more flexible and expressive working. The result is that the workplace has become a place where one can express and experience freedom. But it has also become a place where this freedom comes at the cost of a lack of the certainties provided by the traditional bureaucratic structures, such as job security and finite job responsibilities. What Ross shows is that employees increasingly engage in, what we might call, 'autonomy work', where they are required to not only do their assigned task but also show how original, autonomous and self-organized they are. They do this, for example, through their humour, dress sense and other inter-personal interactions. Along a similar line, Fleming and Sturdy (2007) argue that recent developments in the workplace have lead to increased, what they call, 'neo-normative control'. This involves an attempt on the part of companies to not deny the different identities of employees, but to actively encourage them to 'just be themselves'. This 'being oneself' hence becomes part of what is expected in the workplace, leading to significant amounts of work to display how individual and indeed autonomous one truly is as employee or worker.

What Ross (1998), Fleming and Sturdy (2007) as well as other critics describe can be perhaps best understood as capitalism's continuous attempt to capture resistances and discourses of autonomy for its own regime of accumulation. This is precisely Boltanski and Chiapello's (2006) argument as they show how the struggle for autonomy is very much present in different phases of accumulation and legitimization of capitalist society. They argue that we have witnessed an appearance of a 'new spirit of capitalism' following the social movements of the late 1960s. Central to these movements was a demand for autonomy, which was subsequently taken up by a new generation of managers in capitalist organizations. The result was a radical flattening of organizations, increasing flexibility, and ultimately the rise of a new 'projective' form of capitalism. Central to this projective form of capital is an attempt to develop and nurture more autonomous work arrangements. What this means in practice is a large scale expansion of sub-contracting, entrepreneurialism, and flexibility in the workplace. What Boltanski and Chiapello therefore conclude is that calls for autonomy associated with post-68 social movements have actually had a profound impact on economic organization. But instead of producing a more just and freer world, as intended, the call for more autonomy has lead to the current climate of insecure work relations.

The central message that we find in each of these studies is that autonomy is not something which simply points beyond contemporary modes of capitalist accumulation. Rather, it appears that demands for autonomy are at the heart of many attempts to reform the workplace and indeed the wider economy. That is, capital reforms and regenerates itself precisely through movements of autonomy. Indeed, one might argue that just as the shift towards large scale union organization mirrored the growth of increasingly bureaucratic corporations, so too does the rise of autonomy movements reflect the increasing flattening and flexibility of contemporary firms. Thus, it is impossible to see autonomy as something that is independent of social relations of capital. That is, autonomy does not simply point beyond capital; it is part and parcel of contemporary efforts to regenerate capitalist accumulation and work organization along more flexible lines.

**In and Beyond the State**

Alongside claims that autonomy involves a degree of independence from capitalist accumulation processes, we have also argued that autonomy is conceptualized as the practical negation of forms of state power (e.g. Holloway, 2002a). However, recent work on changes in the running of states suggests that autonomy has become increasingly incorporated into policy. On many occasions, the community work undertaken by autonomous movements has been used to deliver what were previously state services and ensure the governance of a population. For example, in Latin America the community work of autonomist movements sometimes replaces municipal functions (Dinerstein, 2003, 2008b). Similarly, in Great Britain and North America the restructuring of the neo-liberal state has been

partially achieved by shifting the provision of services from the state to either the private or non-profit sector (Rhodes, 1994; Leys, 2003). One result of this shift has been that what were once radical social movements often become bodies that deliver services for the state, indirectly buying into the neo-liberal ideology of marketization (Ungpakorn, 2004). By delivering state services many of these bodies feel that they are able to both tap into much needed resources that allow them to expand at the same time as they further their mission.

Indeed, getting social movement organizations to deliver state services or fill in institutional voids that are left by the general shrinking of the state has been represented in glowing terms by many governments. For example, New Labour in the UK has celebrated the expansion of social movement organizations providing various services as being a step towards an engaged and active civil society, or what is now often called the 'third sector'. Moreover, it has been a way of providing local communities with a sense of empowerment and also autonomy. Indeed, increasing autonomy of both individuals and communities has become a central plank in much 'third way' policy making in recent years. The mechanisms that are recommended for creating this autonomy range from building a stronger enterprise culture, encouraging leadership, and developing a great sense of participation and community well-being (Böhm & Land, 2009). The result is that the 'practical negativity' (Holloway, 2002a), articulated by some autonomous movements against the state, has actually become embedded into official state-based discourses. Indeed, citizens are now routinely encouraged to stop relying upon the state to deliver services and to autonomously seek to develop and provide services for themselves and their own communities.

This link between claims for autonomy and recent policy making is sharpened by some critics who have pointed out how libertarian social movement discourses of autonomy actually amount to a tacit agreement with neo-liberal politics of slimming down the state. For example, from a traditional Marxist perspective, Ungpakorn (2004) argues that the weakness of civil society and 'new social movement' theory lies in that both assume that there is no alternative to free market capitalism and parliamentary democracy. Likewise, Nineham (2006) sees the emergence of autonomism as a reaction to the weakness of the Left, and by-in-large as a diversion and distraction from the real issues of politics. He provides a Troskyist analysis that emphasizes strategy, leadership and the importance of an enlarging movement that can eventually challenge the power of the state and hence take it over. He acknowledges some of the achievements of autonomist movements, but in the end sees them as distractions or even as counter-productive. While such critiques are often crude and driven by the particular colours of these critics' politics, they remind us how the activities of autonomous groups may in some ways be essential to delivering many of the localized services of the slimmed-down, neo-liberal state.

## In and Beyond Development

In addition to struggling against capital and the state, social movements often call for the autonomy, self-determination and self-organization of nations, people and local communities in the face of a seemingly all-encompassing hegemonic system of development. However, recent changes in development discourses suggest that these calls for autonomy are, in fact, part of how contemporary forms of development ideology are implemented and legitimized. In a recent critique of the buzz-words used by development, Cornwall and Brock (2005) argue that today's development orthodoxies place significant emphasis on local specificity and involvement of those being 'developed'. This ethos is captured in a seductive mix of terms such as 'poverty reduction', 'participation' and 'empowerment', giving contemporary development discourses a sense of local specificity and appeal. They suggest a world where everyone gets a chance to take part in making the decisions that affect their lives, where policies neatly map out a route for implementation (2005, p. iii). The result is that instead of shunning autonomy, contemporary development discourses actually seeks to harness it – at least as a legitimating discourse. But we should note that the experts of development are selective, as they hide certain possible forms of participation and empowerment:

> Poverty reduction, participation and empowerment come together in mainstream development discourse in a chain of equivalence with ownership, accountability, governance and partnership to make the world that the neoliberal

model would have us all inhabit. Dissident meanings are stripped away to ensure coherence. But some of these meanings might be recuperated through a similar strategy of using chains of equivalence that link these terms with other words to reassert the meanings that have gone into abeyance. In configuration with words like social justice, redistribution and solidarity, there is little place for talk about participation as involving users as consumers, nor about poor people being empowered through the marketization of services that were once their basic right. Nor is there a place for development solutions that fail to recognize how embedded richer countries are in the fortunes of others. (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, p. 26)

Hence, autonomy can be linked by development ideologues to a range of neo-liberal concepts, such as governance and enterprise culture. For example, micro-credit schemes link calls for autonomy with more traditional market-based solutions of providing credit to foster entrepreneurial opportunity (Rankin, 2001). In this way it becomes clear that discourses of the autonomy of local communities do not point completely beyond development. In fact, they seem to be intertwined with contemporary attempts to reform, for example, the World Bank's approach, focusing more on 'social development' (Vetterlein, 2007) and emphasizing participation of local communities (Stiglitz, 2002). That is, calls for autonomy, self-determination and self-organization at the level of local communities have been, more or less, fully incorporated into hegemonic discourses of development.

It is through this realization of the dangers of recuperation and incorporation of resistance that the post-development critique of dependency theory – as discussed above – is worth re-evaluating. If it is true that the call for autonomy of local communities is now part of hegemonic development discourses, then is it not worthwhile returning to the 'forgotten' and often dismissed critiques put forward by Latin American and other dependency theorists (e.g. Furtado, 1967), calling for a much wider embrace of the notion of autonomy at the level of the culture, economy and society of entire nation states, if not entire continents? There is not enough space here to fully engage with this question, and we certainly have our reservations about simply 'returning' to dependency theory. However, we think that there should be a space for re-evaluating dependency theory in the light of the apparent failures of post-development theory, opening up the agenda again for questions of emancipation, social and economic justice, not just at the level of local communities but national as well as global levels.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As we have argued, autonomy is often posed either as a positive process of worker self-valorization (Negri, 1991), the negation of state power (Holloway, 2002a), or as the preservation of the autonomy of nations, people and local communities from hegemonic regimes of development (e.g. Furtado, 1967; Escobar, 1992). Each of these approaches to autonomy pictures the project of autonomy as escaping interference. Our discussion above has shown, however, that autonomy can never be completely fulfilled, as capital, the state and discourses of development continuously attempt to capture the idea of autonomy to make it work for their own purposes. This leads us to conceptualize autonomy neither as positivity nor as negativity. Following the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we rather emphasize the antagonistic tension between positivity and negativity, which leads to an understanding of the concept of autonomy as impossibility. This has two implications. First, demands for autonomy are possible precisely because of the impossibility and incompleteness of society. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), society will always be characterized by, what they call, a 'logic of antagonism' and difference. This enables the articulation of demands for autonomy and escapes from interference from capital, the state and regimes of development. However, the second implication of such an understanding is that autonomy itself is impossible, as autonomous social movements are always embedded in specific social, economic, cultural and political relations that one cannot simply escape. Another way of putting this is through the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) who posit the idea that the demands for autonomy, articulated by social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, have actually been taken up by capital, the state and discourses of development to rearrange and reproduce themselves along more productive lines. That is, the resistance of the '68 generation has been recuperated to enable new regimes of accumulation, governance and development to take place.

This historical understanding certainly provides a blow, in our mind, to the idea that autonomy can simply be posited as a positive social force, which will eventually lead to social change from within

(Negri, 1991), or indeed the idea that autonomy is a 'practical negativity' that can refuse an engagement with state power (Holloway, 2002a). Following Laclau (2004), both of these logics can be associated with an anti-political notion of immanence, which, in his mind, cannot explain social struggle and not resolve social antagonism, such as the impossibility of autonomy. That is, the emergence of social change does not just happen out of immanence. Instead, political articulations between antagonistic forms of autonomy have to be sought in order to build, what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call, 'chains of equivalence' that enable the emergence of new forms of life. This, then, is the antagonism at the heart of the concept of autonomy: on one hand, it is opening up frontiers of resistance and change towards a more equal society, more local determination and self-organization; on the other hand, however, there is always a danger of hegemonic regimes to take up the call for autonomy, incorporating it into their own programs of economic, social, cultural and political change.

Cutting through this debate slightly differently, we can also argue (see: Dinerstein, 2008a) that capitalist social relations develop through two antagonistic yet complementary movements: On the one hand, there is the necessary expansion of indifference from capital towards the homogenisation of labour for subordination and exploitation to take place (Cleaver, 2002). On the other hand, there needs to be a process of classification (Holloway, 2002b) which puts order into difference and regulates social relations. Whereas the latter encourages rejection of any identity that might obstruct insubordination, the former forces us to reinvent ourselves in new forms of resistance. Autonomy then contains both the refusal against classification towards universality and the search for recognition against indifference towards particularity. Thus, views of autonomy that *only* account either for the struggle for identity and recognition (territorialization and community work) or against classification (rejection of state power) are incomplete. The moment of the rejection of 'a world that we feel to be wrong, negation of a world we feel to be negative' (Holloway, 2002a, p. 2) cannot be 'the only path to emancipation' (Agnoli, cited in Bonefeld 2004, p. 104). This is because negation is inevitably followed by a positive moment of reinvention and affirmation' (Dinerstein, 2005b; see also: Böhm, 2005).

Hence, autonomy becomes the terrain on which both negation and affirmation coexist and interact. The example of the Piquetero movement in Argentina is enlightening. On the one hand, the Piquetero identity emerged as a rejection of the concept and materiality of unemployment; against 'the unemployed'. Thus, at their roadblocks the Piqueteros called into question unemployment and social exclusion, and created autonomous spaces for the reinvention of social practices. Autonomous practices allow the 'unemployed' to reject state classification and forge both an identity of resistance, i.e. Piqueteros (which was in turn rejected to create a new form i.e. 'unemployed workers'), and the creation of organizations, alliances and social interactions that facilitate the realization of their autonomous project. On the other hand, the Piqueteros' project of autonomy requires reaffirmation as it relies on state resources (social and employment programs). That is, unemployed workers and Piqueteros are subordinated to the logic of the state and reclassified as the unemployed (Dinerstein, 2008b; 2005b; 2003). Our argument has been that autonomous practices are part of the hegemonic (yet incomplete) project of neo-liberal globalization. Our proposal is that the project of autonomy constitutes both a possible-desirable and an impossible-undesirable goal, as it embodies and discloses the contradictory dynamics between the swinging movement of integration and transcendence, negativity and positivity.

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