

Werner Bonefeld

Uncertainty and Social Autonomy

I

Amid the resurgence of anti-capitalist movements across the globe, the centenary of Lenin's What is to be Done? in 2002 has largely gone unnoticed. Leninism has fallen on hard times - and rightly so. It leaves a bitter taste of a revolution which heroic struggle turned into a nightmare. The indifference to Leninism is understandable. What, however, is disturbing is the contemporary disinterest in the revolutionary project. What does anti-capitalism in its contemporary form of anti-globalization mean if it is not a practical critique of capitalism and what does it wish to achieve if its anti-capitalism fails to espouse the revolutionary project of human emancipation?

Anti-capitalist indifference to revolution is a contradiction in terms. Rather than freeing the theory and practice of revolution from Leninism, its conception of revolutionary organisation in the form of the party, and its idea of the state whose power is to be seized, as an instrument of revolution, remains uncontested. Revolution seems to mean Leninism, now appearing in moderated form as Trotskyism. It invests great energy in its attempt to incorporate the class struggle into preconceived conceptions of organization, seeking to render it manageable under the direction of the party leadership. The management of class struggle belongs traditionally to the bourgeoisie who 'concentrated in the form of the state' (Marx, Grundrisse), depends on its containment and management in the form of abstract equality. The denial of humanity that is entailed in the subordination of the inequality in property to relations of abstract equality in the form of exchange relations, is mirrored in the Leninist conception of the workers state, where everybody is treated equally as an economic resource.

Contemporary anti-capitalism does well to keep well away from the Leninist conception of revolution. However, its indifference to revolution belies its anti-capitalist stance. What is anti-capitalist in anti-capitalism if it does not pose the question of human emancipation? Anti-capitalist indifference to revolution is a contradiction in terms. Such contradictions seek resolution and history's grotesque and bloody grimace shows what that might mean.

What is to be done? This is Lenin's question. We have to make it our question. We cannot avoid it. If we avoid it, if we reject it because it was Lenin who asked it, then we give in to the Leninist tradition and its conception of revolution. Revolution does not have to mean Leninism. It did not mean Leninism in the past but became to mean Leninism because of the establishment of Marxism-Leninism as the official religion of (the pre-emptive counterrevolutionary) revolution. Anti-capitalism has to rediscover contesting conceptions of revolution, it has to free Marx from orthodox certainties and the ritualisation of Marxism as an enemy of critical thought itself. This freeing of Marx, this reopening of the revolutionary perspective has to rediscover Marx's favourite motto: doubt everything. Doubt is explosive. Why does this content, that is, why do human social relation exist in the form of capital and its state? Why does human social practice produce an increasingly enslaving reality? What, then, is to be done to produce a reality that does not enslave human

social practice but instead, sets it free as a self-determining human social practice? What, then, is to be done to achieve what Marx, in the Communist Manifesto, called the society of the free and equal? What social relations have to be created by active humanity to render abstractions obsolete.

Human values such as dignity, honesty and sincerity have no price and can not be quantified, neither sold nor bought. These values connote individual human distinctiveness, difference, sense and significance, that is, Man (Mensch) in possession of himself as a subject. Human values can however be destroyed through the imposition of abstract identity, that is, through the universal reduction of all specific human social practice to the one, same abstract form of labour, from the factory floor to the cloning studio. Revolution is not fashionable. It is not a commodity. Revolution stands for the espousal of human values. It means to summon the courage to ask, with conviction, sincerity and honesty: 'what is to be done about human emancipation?' It means to wrestle revolution from the dead end of the Leninism and to pose it as a question of human dignity.

The question 'what is to be done?' is impossible to answer. Instead, we have to consider what is not to be done. First, however, the theoretical and practical orientation on the utopia of the society of the free and equal is the only realistic departure from the inhumanity that the world market society of capital posits. Now, what not to do: The idea of the revolutionary party as the organisational form of revolution has to be abandoned. The form of the party contradicts the content of revolution, and that is, human emancipation - an emancipation of the dependent masses can only be achieved by the dependent masses themselves. The notion of the form of the state as an instrument of revolution has to go. The idea of the seizure of power on behalf of the dependent masses has to be exposed for what it is: the denial of the society of the free and equal. Moaning about the 'excesses' of capital has to stop. A lamenting critique merely seeks to create a fairer capitalism, conferring on capital the capacity to adopt a benevolent developmental logic. Capital is with necessity 'excessive' in its exploitation of labour. To lament this is to misunderstand its social constitution. The attempt to define the revolutionary subject has to be abandoned. This subject can neither be derived analytically from the 'logic' of capital, nor can its existence be decreed by the party, as if it were a mere foot-soldier. The revolutionary subject develops through a constant conflict with capital and its state, and the social composition of this subject will depend on those who stand on the side of human emancipation. In theoretical terms, the revolutionary subject can only be determined as human dignity. Its social constitution is a practical and not a theoretical question.

II

Adam Smith was certain in his own mind that capitalism creates the wealth of nations. Hegel concurred but added that the accumulation of wealth renders those who depend on the sale of their labour power for their social reproduction, insecure in deteriorating conditions. He concluded that despite the accumulation of wealth, bourgeois society will find it most difficult to keep the dependent masses pacified, and he saw the form of the state as the means of reconciling the social antagonism, containing the dependent masses. Ricardo formulated the necessity of capitalist social relations to produce 'redundant populations'. Marx developed this insight and showed that the idea of 'equal rights' is in principle a bourgeois right. In its content, it is a right of inequality. Against the bourgeois form of formal equality, he argued that communism rests on the

equality of the individual, that is, the equality of individual human needs. This is the law of formal equality: 'The power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange value, of money. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket' (Marx, Grundrisse). And the condition of communist equality? Each individual receives according to their needs. The equality of individual human needs does indeed offer an alternative to capitalism. In contrast, conception of socialism as a much improved regulation and organisation of the economy of labour do not offer an alternative to capitalism. They merely compete with capitalism on the basis of economic effectiveness. This sort of opposition to capital and its state derives its means and ends from capitalist society itself. It seeks to perfect the machinery of oppression that, ostensibly, it rejects as capitalist.

Only the organised negation to capital and its state is able to transcend capitalism. This organised negative is that of social autonomy. As Marx put it in the Jewish Question, 'every emancipation is a return of the human world and human relationships to humans themselves. Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of bourgeois society, an egoistic and independent individual, on the other hand, to a citizen of the state, a moral person. Not until the real individual man has taken the abstract citizen back into himself and, as an individual man, has become a species-being in his empirical life, in his individual work and individual relationships, not until man recognises and organises his "forces propres" as social forces and thus no longer separates social forces from himself in the form of political forces, not until then will human emancipation be completed'. Some might object because the quotation is from the early Marx; and since Marx is said to have matured with age, a quotation from the mature Marx is called for. The economic 'mastery of capital over man' has to be abolished so that man's social reproduction is 'controlled by him'. And the state? Its purpose is the 'perpetuation of the labourer' - the 'sine qua non of the existence of capital' (Capital, vol. I).

And the party? Marx was adamant that the emancipation of the working class can only be achieved by the working class itself. Communism, for Marx, stands for a classless society. He argued that human history begins when Man has created social relations in which humanity is no longer an exploitable resource but a purpose. His critique of bourgeois society does not merely wish to expose its true character, that is the accumulation of human machines on the pyramids of accumulation for accumulation's sake. He also, and importantly, showed that the constituted forms of bourgeois social relations are forms of human social practice. This is the material basis for his revolutionary demand that all relations which render Man a forsaken being have to be abolished in favour of the society of the free and equal, a society of human dignity where all is returned to Man who, no longer ruled by self-imposed abstraction, controls his own social affairs and is in possession of himself. The idea of the party as the organised vanguard of the working class is premised on the idea of the historical backwardness of the proletariat. It needs to be led into freedom because it exists, within capital, as a mere thing, a mere human resource - it exists merely as a component of capital, as variable capital. The party sees the proletariat in the same way as capital: a nobody, a resource, who deserves to be regulated more effectively. The argument of the historical backwardness of the proletariat does not wash. It presupposes that against the background of existing conditions of misery, the project of emancipation has with necessity to be one of party leadership, a leadership which assumes the directorship of the class struggle both against existing powers and against backward workers, educating them in political consciousness and directing their efforts. It is easy to ridicule the idea of the party as a sort of educational

vanguard - who educates the educators - but much more difficult to contradict it. This is so because, without hypocrisy, it acknowledges those same conditions which prevent human self-determination. The argument, then, rests on the so-called objectivity of existing conditions and, through their acceptance, reinforces their objective character. Marx's idea that the dictatorship of the proletariat teaches the state a lesson, replacing the artificial and no less powerful sovereignty of the state by the true sovereignty of the social individuals organising their own social reproduction, is thus turned on its head. The idea of the 'education of the masses in socialism' not only acknowledges the conditions which prevent social self-determination. It also mirrors these conditions in the revolutionary means and projects them on to the 'new' society, perverting the revolutionary ends. It calls for the seizure of power - not the abolition of power; it seeks power on behalf of the working class - generalising its existence rather than abolishing classes. It pretends that the socialist use of power amounts to its abolition. Marx's argument in Capital (vol. I) that 'to be a productive labourer is...not a piece of luck, but a misfortune', is endorsed in perverted form: the party's directorship over the proletariat is a fortune for the misfortunate.

What then needs to be done? There is no doubt that the organisational means of struggle have to anticipate the end of human emancipation. The circumstance that the ends of revolution have to be constitutive of the means of resistance and struggle entails social autonomy as the organisational form of revolutionary struggle. What does autonomy mean? How can it be conceived? It does not mean the much celebrated atomised market individual who makes 'autonomous' consumer choices, say between butter produced in cubes or rectangles. Autonomy without organisation is a contradiction in terms: it espouses the atomised market individual whose freedom consists in the choice between different products of the same standardised issue. Autonomy, if it takes itself seriously, requires organisational forms of negativity. Here the problems start. Autonomy and organisation appear to contradict each other. Again, the resolution of the contradiction points towards the Party, conceived as an autonomous subject in its own right. What is meant by autonomy? Its meaning is quite different from modern day conceptions associated with Negri for whom human molecules and associated forms of bio-power have already escaped from capitalism's grasp and thus have become autonomous and this without telling capitalism. Is this really an unwarranted caricature of his work? Negri's conception of autonomy as some sort of naturalisation of the human being - biopower - is rather distressing. It seeks to render capitalism's naturalisation of human social practice as a mere resource attractive for anti-capitalist struggles. Rather than being 'valorised' by capital, labour is endorsed as a self-valorising power. What misery.

Autonomy has three distinct meanings: It first projects the aim of human emancipation, and that is, communism as a classless society. It refers thus to the society of the free and equal - this association of the direct producers who, in control of their affairs, organise the realm of necessity by virtue of their sovereignty as human subjects. It means, second, that human emancipation, communism, can only be achieved by the working class itself. Autonomy here means working class self-activity, self-organisation, and thus class autonomy, that is, the autonomy of the working class from pre-existing organisational forms, like the party or trade union, that treat the working class as a mere object of organisation. Autonomy here is associated with Luxemburg's idea of spontaneity. There is of course no theory of spontaneity to be found in Luxemburg. The 'theory of spontaneity' is in fact an invention by the combined forces of Stalinism and social-democracy. For Luxemburg, spontaneity simply meant that the working class creates, in and through its own

struggle, organisational forms of resistance. These forms give substance to the experience of struggle. In short, struggle and the accumulation of experience belong together, give substance to self-determined organisational forms of resistance and, importantly, lead to the creation of what may be called a 'proletarian public'. For Luxemburg, spontaneity focused the dialectics between movement and organisation, between experience and proletarian public sphere. Autonomy, in sum, means autonomy as a means of resistance, anticipating the ends of revolution. It means autonomy from the party form, trade unions, professional politicians seeking election to represent the working class in the palazzo of power, etc. In short, it means the autonomy of social self-determination against forms of organisation that derive their rationale from capitalist society and are thus interested only in their own continued existence.

So far, autonomy has been discussed in terms of the ends/means relationship of revolutionary struggle, and that is, as self-organisation. What however does autonomy mean within capitalism? There is no reality outside capitalism. There are no free, autonomous spaces that, as it were, provide bases for anti-capitalist intervention. Adorno once said that one cannot live an honest life within capitalist society. Adorno was right and wrong. He was right because we all have to sell our labour power. We criticise the state, demand its transfer into the museum of history, and yet we depend on it for all sorts of things and we reject cuts in welfare, and deteriorating welfare provisions. We depend on welfare services, health services, educational services, access to welfare benefits, public transport provision, and employment: we do indeed exist through the state, and we do indeed exist as a wage labouring commodity. Hence, Adorno's claim that we cannot live an honest life in capitalism: we exist in and through and depend upon those same perverted forms of existence which we reject as capitalist forms of exploitation and domination. Still, the circumstance that one depends and exists through the state does not mean that one cannot report about its true constitution. In other words, an honest life already begins in the struggle against capital and its state. Social autonomy starts with the struggle against capital and its state, and associated institutions of social integration. Class struggle exists in and against capital. We all live in bourgeois society. It can however not be left behind by merely living within it. The revolutionary negation of bourgeois society moves in and against its constituted forms. This is the site of class antagonism and class struggle. Only organised negation is able to transform the existence of class struggle in and against bourgeois social relations into the beyond of human history. In short, Adorno's statement that one cannot live an honest life in the falsehood of bourgeois society is only partially correct. An honest and sincere life starts already with the struggle against the falsehood of bourgeois society.

I do not think of revolution as an apocalyptic event: sudden, unexpected, finished. Revolution is a process of negation. There is no certainty. There is to the best of my knowledge no historical law that will lead us automatically to the society of the free and equal. Those with deep scientific insight into historical materialism will tell us a different story, a story of certainty. For those, however, who doubt teleological historical laws, the achievement of the society of the free and equal will depend on the sincere and honest struggle against capital and its state. There is no certainty. To speak about revolution is to embrace uncertainty. Certainty and predictability belongs to capitalism. It depends on making certain, as a resource, and predictable, as a factor of production, our living labour power. Our struggle against capital and its state is the struggle against certainty, a struggle of uncertainty, but a struggle that anticipates in its organisational means a certain goal: human dignity. We have to pose revolution as a question of our time, as a

question of uncertainty. Revolution might not happen. Yet, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Uncertainty, then, is a determining element of social autonomy. Another is doubt. And then there is patience. If we think in categories of doubt, if we accept that the results of our struggles are uncertain, we have to accept patience as a revolutionary endeavour. Impatience seeks quick, certain, predictable results. It gives credence to Leninism and its idea of the autonomy, not of the proletariat, but of the party that always knows best. Embracing revolution means to embrace uncertainty and (revolutionary) patience. The project of social autonomy is one of patience and uncertainty, and doubt. In addition, we cannot do without irony. Irony helps us to overcome setbacks, it defends us against depression, against privatisation - this return to the safety of the living room. Irony, doubt, patience: these are the means which help us to protect ourselves against the dead end of an dishonest life, a life without struggle, a life that feeds on the falsehood of bourgeois society and thus a life that is indifferent to itself and thus accepts without question its capitalist purpose to function as an effective resource.

III

What to do in the misery of our time? Only radical opposition to capital and its state is capable of forcing those same material concessions that reformist opposition aims at but is unable to obtain. Reformist concessions depend on the strength of the 'anti-systemic' opposition. Further, we have to demand conditions, wages, and welfare. Labour is the producer of social wealth and has to demand its enjoyment. Lastly, we have to learn from the experience of our struggles, our defeats and moments of glory. The last century was a lousy century. It was filled with dogmas that one after another have cost us time and suffering. It was, however, also a Century of hope in the alternative entelechy of human dignity, solidarity and human emancipation - from Mexico (1914) to Petrograde (1917) and Kronstadt (1921), from Berlin (1918), Budapest (1919) and Barcelona (1936) to Berlin (1953) and Budapest (1956), from Paris (1968), Gdansk (1980) Chiapas (1994) and the Argentinean piqueteros (2001). These, and many more, have been the intense moments of human emancipation, constituting points of departure towards the society of the free and equal. The struggle for human emancipation is a struggle against abstractions - and 'abstractifications' - be it state, capital, or party. Anti-capitalist indifference to revolution accepts 'abstractions', laments their destructive force, and seeks to regulate them benevolently, that is, in the interest of the bonum commune. Within a capitalistically constituted form of social reproduction, this bonum commune is the commune of abstract wealth through the bonum of capitalist accumulation. It is time to stop lamenting. Revolution has again be posed as a question.