Crisis States: Governance, Resistance &amp; Precarious Capitalism

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The struggles against crisis seek positive alternatives to the current context of oppositional struggles. The challenge as always is to move from refusal to assertion. While the antis (anticapitalism, antiracism, anticolonialism, etc.) are essential in forming bases of resistance, there is a growing need to offer compelling positives toward which resistance strives. This is the desire which is pressing so forcefully on the contemporary movements. A key part of this involves struggles over values, specifically the move to replace capitalist production of values with the social production of those values that sustain us and our communities.

Autonomist Marxist Harry Cleaver has given much attention to an examination of recent works, both within and outside of Marxist and anarchist theories, on what he terms “the positive content of working class struggle” or, more descriptively, “on the various ways in which people have sought to move beyond mere resistance to capitalism toward the self-construction of alternative ways of being” (1992, 106). It should be clear by now that the question of moving beyond resistance and toward the self-construction of alternatives, and indeed the relationships between the two, is the primary preoccupation of contemporary commonists and the concern that motivates much of their activity.
The self-construction of alternative ways of being is, of course, the central focus of the present work.

Auto-Valorization

The cycle of struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s gave rise to perhaps the most serious attempts to conceptualize autonomous creativity as both a source of working class power and a potential movement beyond capitalism. Work by Italian Marxists such as Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti attempted to understand processes by which capitalist power could transform all of society into a “social factory,” while at the same time seeking to analyze the potential for resistance posed by emerging acts of refusal within the working class.

Out of these attempts to theorize the development of working-class autonomy against capitalism, the Italian New Left Marxist Antonio Negri suggested the notion of working class autovalorizzazione, or what has been translated as auto-valorization or, perhaps more commonly, self-valorization (Cleaver 1992, 128–129). Negri’s conceptualization of auto-valorization was an attempt to develop the understanding of the power of refusal to subvert capitalist domination and, significantly, to show how the power of refusal must be complemented by a power of constitution. The refusal of capitalist domination, or subsumption, is very closely related with the affirmative activities of self-valorization. The refusal of work is a necessary contributor to self-valorization in that it allows for the liberation of spaces that might then be filled through alternative, autonomous projects (Cleaver, 1992). As Cleaver suggests:

If capital is successful in converting all of life into work there is no space or time or energy for self-valorisation. The refusal of work with its associated seizure of space (e.g. land, buildings) or time (e.g. weekends, paid vacations, non-work time on the job) or energy (an entropy raising diversion from
work) creates the very possibility of self-valorisation. (1992, 130)

Thus, under Crisis State conditions of austerity and precarity, insecurity of the labor market shapes opportunities for survival but also for resistance. Struggles over precarity more broadly and securing conditions of life and care become crucial. These become struggles over the nature of social value (and accumulation) itself. The structure of the wage, the division of labor, and surplus value are all mechanisms through which exploitation is organized (Cleaver 1992). And Crisis States, through neoliberal austerity, the restructuring of labor markets, the capital mobility of trade deals, and other polices, have facilitated shifts in all of these, benefiting capital while weakening labor. Especially exploitation, the extraction of surplus value, and opposition to exploitation must be returned to as a central focus of struggles against crisis.

From Value to Values

For autonomist Marxists, all aspects of capitalist society, and indeed all theoretical concepts used to explain such societies, bear a dual perspective depending on whether they are approached from the position of surplus value or from the position of surplus value as profit. As Marx of course suggested, capitalists view surplus value primarily as profit, and even more as profit in relation to investment. That is to say that capitalists are interested in surplus value not only as an absolute amount, but more importantly in terms of the amount of investment required to bring it about. Capitalists are, in other words, concerned with the rate of profit. This is one reason that ventures that are hugely profitable, in absolute terms, such as auto manufacturing, are closed down or moved to “more profitable” areas with lower labor or environmental costs, a characteristic feature of globalization. When the rate of profit in one sector becomes too low relative
to investments, or cannot compare satisfactorily with the rate in other sectors or areas, capitalists will generally shift investment, even though absolute profits may have been quite high.

From the perspective of the working class, the key concerns over surplus value are vastly different than they are for capital. As Cleaver remarks:

First, the absolute amount of surplus labour time being extracted from them is of great importance because it measures one part of the life time they give up to capital. Second, for workers the relevant measure of the relative size of surplus-value is not the rate of profit but the rate of exploitation, s/v, where the time given up to capital is compared to the time expended in meeting their own needs. (1992, 109)

Unwaged work, such as housework, has been subordinated to the reproduction of capital. This means that such work is diminished in terms of social recognition, either by states or by capital. The most important social labor is neither recognized nor funded (even at proper labor market value, let alone social value). It also means that the labor of care of the working class, because it is not compensated in a market economy, is often relegated to time left after paid labor is done.

As Cleaver (1992, 109) notes, the concept of surplus value and the concept of surplus value as profit represent different and opposed preoccupations related to specific class interests. Moreover, in the day-to-day affairs of capitalist society, this working-class perspective on surplus-value, where not entirely obliterated, is certainly obscured by the capitalist preoccupation with profit.

Working-class struggles against surplus value have taken, generally speaking, two primary forms. First are struggles to shorten the working day. These struggles include, for example, the historic anarchist and syndicalist battles for the eight-hour day or the five-day week. Such struggles cut absolute surplus value. The second major struggles center around attempts to increase the value of labor power. These involve the more familiar
and ongoing efforts of the, especially mainstream, labor movements to increase wages. Such struggles cut relative surplus value. All of these struggles are geared towards, in some way, lowering the rate of exploitation (Cleaver 1992, 109).

Capitalist efforts to expand surplus value are primarily about increasing the rate of profit, and indeed this is largely what recent “innovations” around flexibilization, batch production and, more broadly, globalization itself, have been about. Battles over the length of the working day exemplify both workers’ efforts to reduce their exploitation and capital’s attempts to expand or maintain their profits (Cleaver 1992, 110). It is a struggle between the efforts of capitalists to dominate and of working-class resistance to that domination.

Marx’s analysis of technological change, and its long-term consequences noted the tendency of capital to replace workers, who are less controllable, with controllable machinery. Italian New Left Marxists during the 1960s, including Panzieri and Tronti, analysed technological changes and the “modernization” of industry in terms of the capitalist use of machinery as means to control and further dominate the working class. This has, of course, amplified with computerization and the social media economies (first noted in the 1980s as so-called Benettonization or just-in-time production facilitated by computerized networks).

Mainstream unions have tended to join capital in trumpeting the supposed benefits of such change, especially the possibility of rising wages associated with increases in productivity, or “efficiency” in contemporary language. The Italian autonomists, however, suggested, what many rank-and-filers knew through experience, that such changes were used to increase exploitation and, even more, to weaken the power of workers (Cleaver 1992, 112). And this gave rise to open opposition among rank-and-file assembly line workers in the last years of the postwar Planner State arrangements. The autonomists simply gave a theoretical expression to an anger felt by rank-and-file workers of the period. This anger regularly expressed itself in the wildcat strikes
and sabotage that marked industrial workplaces during the period of the late-1960s through the early 1970s.

If refusal offered a negative moment in the opposition to capitalist domination, auto-valorization expressed a positive aspect of struggle towards an alternative. This is a valorization that, as expressed in the prefix *auto* or *self*, is autonomous from capitalist valorization and, indeed, attempts to articulate a movement beyond solely resisting capitalist valorization. As Cleaver (1992) suggests, it is a self-defining and self-determining process that seeks to constitute something other than capital. What that “other than” is remains open to a great variety of responses. Indeed, self-valorization can be said to articulate simultaneously, as one recent popular expression puts it, “one no, many yeses.” In Cleaver’s terms:

Alongside the power of refusal or the power to destroy capital’s determination, we find in the midst of working-class recomposition the power of creative affirmation, the power to constitute new practices. In some cases, these autonomous projects are built on old bases, inherited and protected cultural practices from the past that have successfully survived capital’s attempts at disvalorisation and devalorisation. In other cases, these projects are newborn, created fully formed out of appropriated elements which have hitherto been integral parts of capitalist accumulation. In such cases self-valorisation is not only autonomous from and opposed to valorisation but it can also be the converse of disvalorisation. It can include processes akin to what the Situationists used to call “*détournement*” or the diversion of elements of domination into vehicles of liberation. (1992, 130)

This has rather profound implications for rethinking how one might conceptualize communism. It certainly speaks against hegemonic notions of communism. For Cleaver:

An important part of Negri’s elaboration of the concept of self-valorisation is his recognition that, unlike valorisation
and unlike most socialist visualisations of communism, it does not designate the self-construction of a unified social project but rather denotes a “plurality” of instances, a multiplicity of independent undertakings not only in the spaces opened within and against capitalism but also in their full realization. (1992, 130)

Such a conceptualization is actually very close to the vision of communism put forward historically by anarchists. For anarchists, communism is viewed as decentralized, multiple groupings arranged as federations or networks.

Communism, viewed through the lens of self-valorization, then, is “thus not only a self-constituting praxis, but it is also the realisation of ‘multilaterality’ of the proletarian subject, or, better, of a subject which in its self-realisation explodes into multiple autonomous subjects” (Cleaver, 1992: 130). Note that this is a non- or, indeed, an anti-hegemonic politics. It expresses an emphasis on autonomy and solidarity rather than centralization and command. In the term used by anarchist Richard Day (2005), it affirms a politics of affinity. This is open and inclusive, multiplicity rather than singularity, agility rather than rigidity. These are hallmarks of the emergent politics against crisis. In Cleaver’s view:

Against traditional socialist demands to subordinate difference to unity in the struggle against capital and in the construction of a unified post-capitalist order, [they] embrace what Negri calls the “multilaterality” of self-determination, the multiplicity of autonomous projects whose elaboration can constitute a new world whose “pluralism” would be real rather than illusory as is the case today in the world of capital. (1992, 132)

It is also a politics that breaks the bounds of rigid conceptualizations of what is meant by working class or by class struggle. On one hand it expresses an intersectionality of class exploitation and oppression on bases of racialization, patriarchy, sexual ex-
clusion, colonialism, and nationality, among others. It also shifts understandings of production beyond traditionally understood workplaces. This includes a contextualization of the blue-collar working class, but also shifts attention from the factory to the social factory in the re/production of capital. Thus such an approach restores housework and so-called reproductive activities as well as marginalized activities of the lumpenproletariat (sex work, underground and informal economies, survival street work, etc.). As Cleaver notes:

The concept has also proved flexible enough to be useful for understanding and appreciating struggles which have often been considered outside of the working class. These include not only the struggles of so-called urban “marginals” which have often been relegated to the “lumpenproletariat,” but also a wide variety of peasant struggles. (1992, 130–131)

This fact helps, in part, to explain the enthusiasm that some anarchists have shown for the notion of self-valorization. Contemporary anarchists have, as earlier discussions have shown, generally identified with or more closely associated with struggles of the urban “marginals” or with peasant movements. At least as far back as Bakunin, who saw the “lumpenproletariat” rather than the industrial working class of Marxism as the most likely rebellious or revolutionary anti-capitalist class, anarchists have given serious attention and support to organizing among capitalism’s poorest. Marx was himself famously dismissive of the lumpenproletariat, a group he viewed contemptuously as opportunistic mercenaries likely to betray the working class to the highest bidder. Such a view was taken up by generations of Marxists who viewed the poorest classes as, at best, powerless or ineffectual and, at worst, reactionary. As mentioned above, anarchists have long been more interested in the revolutionary potential of peasant struggles than traditional Marxists who have dismissed such struggles as petit bourgeois or “backwards.” The emergent movements against crisis impel a rethinking of such understandings of class (while retaining a class basis, un-
like liberal theories which reject or dismiss class as an outmoded concept).

The concept of auto-valorization offered an important theoretical tool for understanding the growing manifestations of creative alternatives that were becoming increasingly important, especially for younger people in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Cleaver, 1992). Such manifestations included:

the creative use of times, spaces and resources liberated from the control of Italian and multinational capital uses such as the proliferation of “free radio stations” or the widespread development of women’s spaces which, along with many other self-managed projects, helped constitute what many came to call “the counter-culture.” (Cleaver 1992, 129)

The tendency of capitalism to expand its valorization throughout the social factory initiates not only wider refusals, but also encourages a proliferation or growth in the number and diversity of self-valorizing projects to confront capital in the spaces opened by those refusals (Cleaver 1992, 131). This includes, crucially, new forms of social care or socialized (beyond the state) forms of welfare. The emphasis is shifted creatively and energetically from the value sought by capital to the values held by the subjugated.

Where Marx’s concept of valorisation draws our attention to the complex sequence of relationships through which capitalism renews itself as a social system of endlessly imposed work, so the concept of self-valorisation draws our attention through the complexity of our refusal of valorisation to our efforts to elaborate alternative autonomous projects which constitute the only possible source of a self-constituting alternative to capitalism. (Cleaver 1992, 131)

There are striking similarities between autonomist Marxist writings on self-valorization and anarchist writings on mutual aid and affinity. The types of concrete, actually-existing mutual aid
activities initiated or supported by anarchists certainly embody the notion of self-valorization and the self-constitution of alternative modes of living, as discussed by Cleaver (1992). These are autonomous self-valorizing activities which, as discussed again by autonomists, are confronted by capitalist attempts at disvalorization. For anarchists, mutual aid, which makes up most of the survival mechanisms for the subjugated, serves as the basis for alternatives to capitalism. It is the basis of a new commons, a communism (see Shantz 2013). Mutual aid makes up its own transitional program. As Cleaver suggests:

Negri’s critique of traditional Marxist concepts of the “transition” from capitalism to communism, in which he argues that the only meaningful transition can occur through a development of self-valorising activities which negates capitalist command, makes clear that the concept of self-valoration designates the existing ground of an emerging post-capitalism. (1992, 132)

Commonists try to avoid a productivist vision of life, emphasizing the great diversity of ways in which human life might be realized. Commonists again share common ground with anarchists and autonomist Marxists in arguing that the only way that work can be an interesting mode of self-realization for people is “through its subordination to the rest of life, the exact opposite of capitalism” (Cleaver 1992, 143, n. 59). And the socialized character of caring labor is restored as a human priority over and above the collectivized work of producing surplus value for capital.