

Revelation Vertigo

Stephen Shukaitis

2007

“Autonomy is both the goal sought after and that whose presence—virtual—let us say, has to be supposed at the outset of an analysis or a political movement. This virtual presence is the will to autonomy, the will to be free.”

– Cornelius Castoriadis

There exists a tendency, shared across different strains of radical political thought, to see the horrors of our present as comprising a false totality, that when torn asunder, will reveal a more liberatory existence hidden beneath. This is to understand revolution as revelation; as the dispelling of the conditions of false consciousness, and a reclamation of an autonomous existence that continues to live on, albeit deformed, within this world we must leave behind.

For the autonomist, this comes in the form of the autonomous activity of the working class whose existence was disrupted, not destroyed, by the violent upheavals that formed the economic basis of capitalism (a process which Marx observes plays the same role in political economy that “original sin” does in theology). In primitivist thought, this becomes a reclaiming of a mythical ancestral past crushed, but never fully destroyed, by the weight of technological development and the machinations of alienation.

As powerful as such lines of argument can be, one danger in the politics of revelation is that every act of revealing not only illuminates the existence of certain processes and phenomena, but also effectively conceals others that do not fit within the structure of the revelation. It is when revelations become dogmatic, when they become “churchly” one might say, that they blind the true believer to all that falls outside the blinkers they have placed on their intellectual vision.

To question the process of questioning is to return to the etymological root of the concept of revolt, one based on a process of returning, discovering, uncovering, and renovating; one that is a state of permanent questioning, of transformation, of change, an endless probing of appearances. For it must be remembered that every act of revelation is not simply a discovery of what is, but also a construction of that which is, through a process of shared perception and understanding. Thus, to speak of an autonomous self-determining capacity that existed before the advent of capitalism providing the seeds and routes going through and beyond it, is not simply to uncover its



– drawing by Peter Welleman

existence, but also to take part in its collective construction. It is the presupposition of this autonomy, based on a perhaps mystical foundation, which enables the struggle for its realization.

The danger, or at least one of them, contained within such a style of argument, is the risk of projecting back into history some sort of prelapsarian subject that only needs to be reclaimed to bring about the end of alienation and the failings of our current existence. Fetishizing this sort of imagined past contains very real risks, as nearly none who proclaim the benefits of such an existence have ever experienced it themselves (except those who have racked up a good bit of frequent time traveler miles).

Perhaps there is a different dynamic at work here—a process that seeks to avoid the pitfalls of creating and projecting forth static utopias of imagined futures with no methods for attaining them in the here and now—although clearly this is not the only meaning of utopianism. Rather, this is a process based on what Antonio Negri calls a “constitutive dystopia.”

In other words, a process based on the constituent power of the dystopic nature of the present. A dream of a different future through the rejection of current constraints, and an implicit understanding of a life lived without those dynamics. After all, what is really so negative about this kind of backwards projection anyway? Yes, there might be pitfalls involved in that kind of mental process—but there are far worse things that could develop. One could argue that this sort of process involves a form of what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism,” or to stipulate an essence in a way that is useful to those engaged in a social struggle, regardless of whether it is necessarily a true statement or not.

The danger of creating totalizing concepts, narrations, and frameworks isn’t necessarily the totalization itself. There is no need to be followed by a *Lost in Space* style robot that obediently intones. “Totality, Will Robinson, totality!” at the first sign of one’s appearance. For all attempts to understand the social world and its transformations, to participate in trying to pull this shaping in a particular direction, necessarily relate to some conception of totality, even if only implicitly stated. The level and scope of this totality, however, varies widely—from the often and unfortunately assumed frames of the nation-state and political revolution premised upon seizing power at this level—to a broader and more encompassing notion of social space that can vary from a very local to a global (or beyond) scale.

The concepts of the temporary autonomous zone and the intergalactic encuentro, associated with Hakim Bey and the Zapatistas, are extremely valuable especially in how they expand the breadth and range of the radical imagination. From fleeting and temporary moments perhaps taking place between only two people (in the midst of a riot or in each other’s arms), to possible relations with beings from other galaxies we are not even aware of yet, are all part of an expanding and open totality of possibilities. The same can be said for the Situationist idea of the society of the spectacle and the autonomist notion of the social factory, except that these operate based upon the rhetorical force of a constituent dystopia to work their expansion of the radical imagination.

These lines of thought employ a visceral argument about the total colonization of the present as a means to ferment a scream against existing conditions, very much in the way that philosopher John Holloway describes “the scream” as a moment of dislocation, critical reflection, and the building of vibrating intensities with the potential to undermine the conditions that cause the scream in the first place.

The difficulty of such an argument is, if all of everyday life has been totally colonized, as Guy Debord and others often argued, then how would there be any grounds for resistance? Who would resist and how could they possibly resist if they had been completely colonized by the logic of capitalism?

Similarly, if the existence of the social factory is totalizing, (where there is a unifying logic of command in which relations of the factory have extended all throughout society in one unifying logic of domination) from where would it be possible to contest this logic?

What exists is a rhetorical strategy where force is given to the screaming calls for resistance to forms of domination by presenting them as contesting totalizing systems of control. That is to say, the argument is not really that everything has been totally colonized. If that were so, it would make putting forth strategies for contesting capitalism stand on rather shaky ground precisely because it is quite difficult to make arguments for forms of resistance based on an analysis that stipulates the existence of total control while at the same time organizing in ways that are based upon existing cracks and spaces where this control is not totalizing. Or, at the very least, not to the degree that the analysis tends to imply.

It is this imaginative move, which might, indeed, sometimes be of the necessary delusions of resistance, which is described by cultural theorist Gavin Grindon as the “breath of the possible,” one which is premised upon making a certain leap of faith whose history one can trace as it evolves through interconnected movements.

The danger of totalities is not that we construct or employ them, but rather that we take them for the world itself, as it actually exists, rather than as conceptual tools to understand the world. The risk is that we, to borrow from Situationist phraseology, take our totalities for reality. Revelations can induce a sense of conceptual vertigo, as we dangle far from the earth, precisely because of the distance introduced and enlarged by taking ideas for the things themselves. The world, after all, is always messier than the concepts we create to understand it. The danger is when such concepts, which are a part of the reality they attempt to describe and take part in shaping, leave us blind to existing dynamics that do not fit into the conceptual scheme; when it constitutes a misstep that forecloses other possibilities that could exist outside of these conceptions.

Concepts are products of the imagination. That is, they result from the body’s interaction with the world around it. Affective traces of these interactions compose the body and what it can do through the imagination. Thus, understanding them is absolutely essential as a basis for any adequate understanding of the world, our place within it, and attempts to increase our collective capacities and forms of self-determination: to spread forth lived joy and abundance of life.

In this way, perhaps the similarities in dynamics of thought between strands of Marxism and Christianity is not so surprising. Both involve the creation of a totalizing scheme useful in making sense of the everyday experiences and affects the bodies of those involved, and explaining them within this conceptual scheme. For the Christian, the suffering of the present, this “veil of tears,” is explained as a result of a fall from grace eventually to be overcome through ascension into heaven.

For Marxism, the transformation of the pre-capitalist world by the bloody expropriation of primitive accumulation is a condition to be overcome by the eventual destruction by proletarian revolution. Both are premised upon what the Christian Marxist Ernst Bloch, a clever synthesizer of the two lines of argument, refers to as the “not-yet,” which indeed operates as a principle of hope for those enmeshed within such a framework, but often does precious little for those alive in the here and now. And, just as it doesn’t take a weatherman to tell you which way the wind is blowing, it doesn’t take a Keynesian to remind you where we all end up in the long run (i.e., dead).

Opposed to these world views that promise a brighter future “someday” to excuse the misery of the present one also finds bursts and outbreaks of demands for the creation and realization of liberated life in the here and now: from the English radical Christian visionaries, the Diggers, Ranters, and the brethren of the ever-renewing free spirit, those clamoring for the creation of heaven on earth now, to those who are working toward creating spaces of insurrection, insurgency, and autonomy in the present. The totality and march of historical time is broken, ripped away to reveal modes of collective experience and joy inscribed on the bodies of those rising up.

And, as one of Flannery O’Connor’s mad, wandering prophet outcasts might correct her (emerging from the warped realm created by her gothic Southern Christian imagination), all that rises up does not necessarily converge, even if the patterns of strange attraction of the gravity of Eros tend to warp time and space around them. A total and unitary frame of reference, time or experience—whether the spectacular time of the commodity or the spectral time of religion—is shattered and begins to be replaced by what Debord describes as the mutual federation of freely reversible forms of time. It is striving towards creating conditions for the realization of autonomy as the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism.

This is the movement of movements, or the movement of movement itself; the constantly shifting and transforming of the radical imagination, social relations, compositions, and affections. And, this is not just the movement of what are usually considered as forms of social movement (which tends to give too much emphasis to the technicians and specialists of political action, the seeds of tomorrow’s bureaucratic class) and their recognized forms of visibility, but social movement as just that: the movement of the social. Transformations occur constantly and in often-imperceptible shifts, minor revolts and mutinies that disguise their importance beneath their seemingly insignificant forms.

This movement of an infinite totality, composed of many elements and machinations of desire that in many ways can be regarded as totalities in their own right (this is the exact point made by Hakim Bey when he argues

that we begin as the sovereigns of our own bodies, but that this is a sovereignty which is socially constituted in a relation between bodies), is described with great skill by none other than Spinoza.

Beneath the veneer of what seems to be an overwhelming religiosity, the framing of his argument that nothing is possible without god, is his heretical view of what that means. For Spinoza, god or nature is this infinite totality of which we are all parts. The foundation of his argument is an understanding of our position within and in relation to this all-encompassing and infinite totality.

From this he proceeds to describe the joyous and happy life, the blessed life of liberation, which is founded upon such an understanding of what is possible for the free individual.

This sort of argument finds great resonance with the ideas of someone like Raoul Vaneigem (as well as Deleuze, Guattari, Negri, Castoriadis, and many others), who, like Spinoza, see desire as the essence of humanity. Whether understood as the living of a happy life or increasing affective capacities through the liberation of desire, the unfolding of the everyday life of revolution, of liberation, is built upon how the everyday connects and relates to, as well as embodies, the totality of social relations and processes.

Whether a statement or conception is in itself true or false does not mean that it cannot be useful to ongoing struggles. There are times where a claim of an argument being false, particularly in relation to core notions, what one might call the myths we live by, is not even necessarily an objection to it. Indeed, for false judgments themselves often are still life-advancing and necessary. As that old German malcontent Nietzsche argued, “To recognize untruth as a condition of life: that is, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion, and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil.”

To live the everyday life of revolution is certainly a dangerous task, one fraught sometimes with very necessary illusions, allusions, and delusions. The presumption of an already existing form of autonomy that Castoriadis describes in the quote that opens this article might indeed not have existed until those acting based upon it already existing by their actions take part in creating it. Whether this autonomy really existed is not necessarily important compared to how this presumption, resting on a virtual and undetermined capacity for autonomy, takes part in the process of its actualization.

Such a process is not necessarily positive or negative, but depends on other processes and dynamics involved, and from whose perspective this judgment is being made. The task then is to work through how these formations occur, and whether they tend to move in directions we want them to go, or whether they come to be objectified and turned against us, where the tools and notions that once were helpful are nothing more than baggage at best, and phantoms and specters that continue to haunt us.

You and I return to the scene of the crime

Let's go out and wash our sins away

Everyone's an actor in this play

Trading lines with broken phantoms

—Mission of Burma, “Fever Moon”

References

- Hakim Bey (2003) *TAZ*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia
- Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) “From Monad to Autonomy,” *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. Ed./Trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Ernst Bloch (1995) *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Guy Debord (1983) *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit MI Black & Red
- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum
- Gavin Grindon (forthcoming) “The Breath of the Possible,” in *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization*. Ed. Stevphen Shukaitis + David Graeber. Oakland: AK Press

John Holloway (2003) "In the Beginning Was the Scream," *Revolutionary Writing: Common Sense Essays in Post-Political Politics*. Ed. Werner Bonefeld. Brooklyn: Autonomedia

Antonio Negri (1999) *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Trans. Maurizio Boscagli. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Benedict de Spinoza (1949) *Ethics*. New York: Hafner Publishers

Gayatri Spivak (1995) *The Spivak Reader*. Oxford: Routledge

Raoul Vaneigem (1994) *The Movement of the Free Spirit*. Trans. Randall Cherry and Ian Patterson. New York: Zone Books

fifth Estate

Stephen Shukaitis
Revelation Vertigo
2007

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/375-spring-2007/revelation-vertigo>
Fifth Estate #375, Spring 2007

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)