

Praxis: The Everyday NOT as Usual

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Abstract: In the context of 'The Idea of the Avant Garde - And What It Means Today' of the edited volume, this essay considers the role that professionals play or could play to a polycentric rearrangement of values and power positions. To these ends, it discusses the question of autonomy understood in political and professional terms and elaborates the open interventional network of professionals of exigency and forums of commonality as framework in which probable change of energies can occur, along with the nuances and limitations pertaining to it.

Keywords: Cultural Activism; Political Theory; Cultural Studies; Avant-Garde Studies

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Empire is everywhere nothing is happening.
Everywhere things are working.
Wherever the normal situation prevails.
– The Invisible Committee¹

The global crisis runs deep. It is manifested as an economic crisis, an environmental crisis, a social and geopolitical crisis. Within the neoliberal global matrix and the new mode of immaterial production, the sites of opposition spread year by year: anti-globalization movements, urban riots, anti-systemic social movements, struggles for the “right to the city” and initiatives of communization.² Accelerating revolts in all parts of the world and alternative forms of economic and social interaction are hopefully producing and contributing to value transmission and system change. Yet, despite these struggles, capital accumulation increases without pause. Given the context of late capitalism and the intensity of its discourse, one has to consider the role that professionals play in a now global division of labour. In the following I will briefly discuss the question of autonomy in political and professional terms, and the related AAO project, which I initiated in light of the above-mentioned crisis as the possibility of a constructive form of (self-)governance.³

For Marxist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, autonomy defines the site of struggle for relative power, which, along with heteronomy, identifies the cultural field’s social function and its relation to the broader field of power.⁴ While autonomy tends to be consonant with a degree of independence from the economy, and completely fulfils the field’s internal rules and logic, heteronomy favours those who dominate the field economically and politically. Autonomy adheres to the disinterested values that constitute the specific internal logic of the field. The state of the power relations in this conflict depends on the total degree of autonomy of the field and the extent to which it manages to impose its own norms and rules on producers, including those who comply more fully with external demands.

While this fragile state of equilibrium between the internal and the external conditions of a field was theorized by Bourdieu in the 1980s, this topology of struggle originates more or less at the turn of the twentieth century, the period when Max Weber analyzed those aspects of modern rationalization that encompass the economic, political and cultural fields, which were already at that time aspects of the chain of production. It is around this period that the modern professions were established through their official institutions, which later gave rise to the sociology of the professions.⁵ Bourdieu’s definition, however, illuminates the function of autonomy as a barometer of the struggle between external and internal conditions, not only for the literary and artistic fields but for any other profession, including architecture.

It is widely acknowledged that the ideal of professional autonomy is the antithesis of proletarianization: the practitioners determine for themselves what work to do and how to do it. Professional autonomy allows them to emphasize discretion in their work, to assert their own judgement and responsibility as arbiters of their activity. An ideal of professional autonomy, which is one of the main traits of the genuine professions, together with specialization and the emphasis on credentials, means that professionals have control over those personal, social, economic and cultural affairs that their knowledge and skills address. Professional autonomy ideally means to make one’s own laws.

Autonomy is therefore associated with the boundaries of a profession; it is a place of conflict, transient or permanent, and a border that delineates a territory.⁶ Autonomy often emerges as a gesture of negation or as a site of negotiation between professional groups, or, to put it differently, between professionally established social players

and between each professional group that comprises the economic, social and political reality. This site is manifested as the autonomous moments of a profession, as those moments when it employs all of its knowledge and skills to respond to this complex condition, and in relation to which it will pursue its autonomy. Autonomy functions on an intermediate level between external conditions and the profession's established cognitive, normative and evaluative grounds.⁷ Imbued with the elements of reaction, refusal, resistance and consensus, autonomy manages to bring about, to a greater or lesser extent, action. The moments of action mark a line of tension, the point of transition from internal rules, and knowledge, to the social, economic and political reality that prevails outside of it. It is at these moments of tension, for instance, on the point of transition, that new possibilities arise. It is this approach to autonomy that I believe needs to be stressed in the present context as it provides an occasion to become a mechanism for change towards constructive forms of (self-)governance.

According to Cornelius Castoriadis, "*autonomy* comes from *autos-nomos*: (to give to) oneself one's laws."⁸ This view of autonomy as an ongoing political project sheds light on how we perceive modes of (self-)governance. Autonomy, for Castoriadis, is no mere "self-institution" and bears little relation to Kantian definitions of autonomy. It does not consist in acting according to some a priori law set in stone by an immutable Reason, which is given once and for all. It is rather a constant self-questioning about the law and its foundations, as well as the capacity to make and to institute. Castoriadis describes autonomy as a political activity that questions our own representations and transforms our institutions. The autonomous effort aims not at a complete, finalized system that will accept no further change, but rather at initiating and constantly renewing a decisive and thoughtful effort to reshape institutions to meet our recognized needs and desires. Autonomy for Castoriadis differs from heteronomy, which occurs everywhere in society as a way of concealing this self-instituting process and attributes it wrongly to some extra-social and supra-natural source. Autonomy therefore indicates a constant battle between autonomy and heteronomy, between the assertion of autonomy and that which erodes its closely connected elements. Autonomy and heteronomy have a reciprocal relation to one another and work to alter themselves and the other.⁹

Italian Operaists brought forward in the 1960s another understanding of autonomy. In their 2007 text on *autonomia*, Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi revisit this concept.¹⁰ For Operaists, autonomy consists in the rejection of party politics, refusing readymade classifications

and doctrines, such as labour discipline, and seeking new autonomous avenues for bringing about a new social order rather than any sort of prescribed programme.¹¹ Gathering around the journal *Querdermi Rossi*, Operaists advocated workers' autonomy from their representatives, stressing their independent view beyond party organizations and official unions, and for new forms of struggle against the diffuse spectacle of consumer capitalism. With a forward looking vision, their efforts aimed beyond the factory to encompass all producers of material and immaterial goods and who receive wages for their service. Experimenting with new modes of living, students and new class subjects, along with the industrialized working class and supportive cadres demanded that autonomy and political power be granted them, emphasizing power rather than political representation.

On this point, Ulrich Beck's advocacy of the concept of the "emergence of sub-politics" is enlightening.¹² Beck argued that in the "risk society" in which we live, one should not look for the political in traditional arenas such as parliaments, political parties and trade unions. For him, it is necessary to cancel the equation between politics and state power. The political erupts today in very different places. A series of new resistances emerge that are grassroots oriented, extra-parliamentary and no longer linked to political parties. Their demands concern issues that are not and possibly cannot be expressed through traditional political ideologies. Such politics take place in a variety of sub-systems where demands shape sub-politics in a process of political conflict over power-sharing and power-positions.

Sub-politics, Beck declares, are distinguished from politics in the sense that agents who are normally outside the political system are allowed also to appear on the stage of social design. This includes professional groups, research institutions, citizens' initiatives, and so on. Second, social and collective agents but also individuals compete with each other for the emerging power to shape politics. For Beck, sub-politics means "shaping society from below" around issues that are not addressed by the official political system.¹³ To understand Beck's point of view one simply needs to remember that ecological urgencies began as sub-political claims, which later entered the official agenda of the political system. Thus, what would be required for the transformation of groups from the status of alien outsider into political subjects, and into political sub-systems, is the creation of forums.¹⁴ Forums, where all possible forms of co-operation are built among, for instance, professionals, citizens, politicians or industrialists, shape a political sub-system.



Various instances of the AAO project, mobilizing bodies, institutions and corporations, c.2011. All photos by Dimitris Giannoulakis, except the final image, by Maurice Benayoun. Courtesy of Lina Stergiou and AAO project 'Ethics/Aesthetics.' Details at www.aaoproject.org.

Within the above framework, I would like to refer to Against All Odds (AAO), an interdisciplinary architecture project conceived as a political sub-system and a praxis of (self-) governance.¹⁵ While asking how architecture and other disciplines can contribute to the broader debates on social and environmental crisis, and against the existing reality, AAO redirects values towards commitment, ecological conscience and environmental protection. It intervenes in the capitalist ways that public space is produced by “squatting the city from below.”¹⁶ These aims are fulfilled through the mobilization of international artists, designers, architects, intellectuals, scholars, activists, institutions, corporations (through supportive and not restrictive sponsorship), and Greek state institutions, rearranging the existing value system and order of crisis.

From a professional perspective, AAO identifies, delineates or creates a field as a battle zone of transition from the external conditions to an internal generation of constructive and promising thoughts and actions. The notion of “external” here pertains to social, political and economic realities as a structured given, and “internal” denotes a

profession’s rules and norms. It is at that boundary of tension, of negotiation between the internal and external, that its position emerges. The multidisciplinary of a project like AAO is manifested when it acts for the benefit of society as a whole, merging its different and often conflicting professional value systems. It acts in order to discover how professionals can proceed through either clashes, negotiation or indifference in order to advance social aims and society as such; to produce thoughts, ideas and actions, opposing individualistic conscience and each profession’s status quo; to rearrange the social order and power structures; to keep global issues in mind but with local insight and application; to disseminate ideas and to build a collective conscience.¹⁷ In other words, to raise awareness about how reformed professions can together resolve issues.

From a political perspective, AAO’s inherent opposition to the prevailing neoliberal order does not provoke micro-structural resistances but moves towards reorganizing and redistributing real and symbolic power within the local structures of the capitalist mode of production,

mobilizing bits and pieces of institutional and political organization, and rearranging positions. In AAO, antagonism takes the constructive stance of “changing the rules.” More than simply an alternative solution emerging from the margins, AAO places itself at the centre, mobilizing actors from the widest possible range of social, institutional and political contexts in order to support, contribute to, and implement solutions to contemporary social, ecological and cultural problems. AAO distributes energies and resets ethics in the spatial, social and cultural domain. It acts as a political sub-system (emerging from the cultural domain, a space of relative freedom) as a paradigm of (self-) governance, collective action and catalyst of change.

Aiming for (self-)governance marks the goal of autonomy. Attaining it presupposes an unlimited, according to Castoriadis, self-questioning about its laws. Yet reaching this stage requires a revolutionary self-understanding, thinking about and coming to know the truth about the effects of capitalism. This implies action.¹⁸ Thought happens through action and acting is a locus of freedom. Freedom does not exist if people do not have the intense desire to do what they are doing. Freedom necessitates transcending the routines of everyday institutions and its demands to uphold social roles within the increasingly narrow range of choices that are available.

Revisiting radical avant-garde instances for theoretical justifications of contemporary action leads to a retreat into “radical” clichés. Theoretical deliberation precedes us and indicates a contemplative standpoint, even as it gestures anxiously towards action. Its object becomes external and transcendent while its subject is reduced to a fragile, thinly-veiled self-affirmation. The nature of those instances resists being transformed into a weak object.

Moments of action succeed while not exactly coalescing with theoretical inquiries, evaluations and ideologies. They have their own verve and inherent logic, born at their best from out of an almost unavoidable necessity. As they are neither a professional project nor a form of alternative profession, they

cannot be entirely predicted.¹⁹ Action falls outside the regular flow of the everyday. It occurs when it needs to, superseding and transcending the daily stream of prioritizations.

In fact, theory is exceeded by moments of praxis. The most insightful theories are challenged by radical praxis, which extends, enriches or redirects them. Such praxis gathers around immediate urgencies, at a specific time and within a precise context. It is a transformation of our ways of feeling and thinking, the construction of a new intellect and sensorium. Praxis cannot be repeated by remaining the same. If retroactively regarded as emergent avant gardes, previous actions will be ascribed to their generalizing force and nature, due to their appeal to a more universal than particular socio-spatial context and magnitude. Past actions will thus be regarded for their usefulness as paradigms and resonate across time and space, spreading from place to place after their initial spark. This is what the Invisible Committee calls “revolutionary movement”:

An insurrection is not like a plague or a forest fire—a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark. It rather takes the shape of a music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythms of their own vibrations, always taking on more density. To the point that any return to normal is no longer desirable or even imaginable.²⁰

Born out of real questions seeking self-expression and solutions, with its basic ingredient being dynamism, radical praxis forms a hard inner core, almost inaccessible in its original sense. It acts unpredictably in relation to the preconceived limits of ideologies, ideas and principles born within them. Radicalism is performed instantly. It has an expiration date. It bursts and is gone. Its effects shift to other domains that do the rest of the work, prompting a chain of actions and contributing to the emergence of a new order. If it were to continue, it would evolve into a new hegemonic structure. If it ceased, it would shift into the field of discourse, in relation to which the emergence of a new “music” could occur.²¹

Notes

1. The Invisible Committee, *The Call* (2004), available at <http://bloom0101.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ENGcall2.pdf>.
2. See Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012). For the role of urban space in social mobilization, see David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012). See also Benjamin Noys, ed. *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique,*

and Contemporary Struggles (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2011).

3. The professional dimension refers to the sociological definition of “profession” as an occupation that controls its own work, organized by a special set of institutions sustained by a particular ideology of expertise and service. See Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism Reborn: Theory, Prophecy and Policy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) 10, 16–17.

4. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) 29-73.
5. In England, from 1880 to 1917, the collective organization of the professions grew significantly. To the seven qualifying associations of 1800 (four for barristers, two for Royal Colleges, one for medical doctors), the years between 1800-1880 added 20 more (architects, solicitors, builders, pharmacists, veterinary surgeons, actuaries, surveyors, chemists, librarians, bankers, accountants, and eight types of engineer). From 1880 to 1917 there appeared no less than 39 (estate agents, town planners, etc). See Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989) 85-6. The most widely known and earliest thinker to address the professions in theoretical terms is the American Talcott Parsons in 1939.
6. For the characteristics of this boundary, see Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 42-3.
7. The three dimensions of the ideal type of profession are cognitive, normative and evaluative. See Sarfatti Larson Magali, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) x.
8. Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1988] 1991) 164. See also his 1989 lecture text "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," in *The World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 32-43.
9. Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," 159.
10. Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds. *Autonomia: Post-political Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).
11. Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, "The Return of Politics," in *Autonomia*, 8.
12. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).
13. Beck, Giddens and Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*, 22.
14. Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 168-9.
15. AAO is a series of debates, exhibitions, events, collective experiments and public actions that took place in Athens from January 2011 to June 2012. It was conceived and 'curated' by Lina Stergiou, succeeding two years of research. See Lina Stergiou, ed. *Against All Odds Project: Ethics/Aesthetics* (Athens: Papatotiriou, 2011), available at https://issuu.com/linastergiou/docs/ao_book-catalogue and <http://aaoproject.org>.
16. About *Athens Here and Now*, see Lina Stergiou, "Athens, a City for its Citizens. Can We?" *Architects* #3 Period C (June 2013) 7-8, and "Athens Here and Now," *Architects* #16 Period C (October 2015) 8-9.
17. AAO has local insight and application in Greece. On the post-2008 Greek context and communization initiatives, see Nicholas Anastasopoulos, "The Crisis and the Emergence of Communal Experiments in Greece," in *ICSA2013: Communal Pathways to Sustainable Living*, Conference Proceedings, 2013, 349-59.
18. Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Precarious Communism: Manifest Mutations, Manifesto Detoured* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2014).
19. On the notion of the avant garde as an alternative profession, see David Cottingham, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 38-44.
20. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009) 6.
21. On the notion of the different phases of the avant garde, from emergence and formation to institutionalization, see Cottingham, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*.

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