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Conceptualizing autonomy, localizing instituting?

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Cornelius Castoriadis has already noted that, in his examination of the artistic tradition of institutional criticism, Helmut Draxler writes: (2006: 158): "that the critique of social institutions itself had always had the effect of creating institutions an instituting effect."1 From this, Draxler infers that institution and the instituting process exist as opposites, but remain in relation to each another "as a social space that will always have to be designed and formed, a space that is never just posited but has to find its way between criticism and the given." (Draxler 2006: 158) It is as yet unclear what outcome the social constructivist basic assumption of a social space that is constantly in formation has for emancipatory political action. For Castoriadis, the instituting effects of criticism ultimately merited more than a simple declaration. Initially by describing the process, he too establishes that political changes and social change occur when "instituting society irrupts within instituted society, each time society as instituted is self-destructed by society as instituting, that is to say each time another instituted society is self-created. [...]". (Castoriadis 1998: 188) However, we are left in no doubt that, for him, 'another' in fact means a

capitalist society because, in the end, that is what politics is for. First created and applied in the Greek *polis,* politics is, to quote Castoriadis, "(reflexive and deliberate) collective activity that is carried out [...], and the object of which is the institution of society as such." (Castoriadis 1988: 468f) For him, politics emerges there and then, when or where "the established institution of society is put into question as such and in its various aspects and dimensions " (Castoriadis 1988: 469). Following Jürgen Habermas, Castoriadis then develops "the normal case of the political from the limit case of the act of founding of an institution; and he interprets this in turn from a horizon of aesthetic experience, as the ecstatic moment erupting from the continuum of time when something absolutely new is founded." (Habermas 1987: 329) Habermas criticizes Castoriadis's understanding of the institution of any world as a creation *ex nihilo* (1987: 332). But Castoriadis stresses that all instituting activity *(alles Instituierende)* has a reference to the instituted *(Instituiertes)*. All instituting activity, like the most radical revolution, would always take place within a history "already given." (Castoriadis 1988: 478)

With the creation of politics, the preliminary draft of an individual as well as a collective autonomy also appears for the first time in history: *auto-nomos* or 'giving oneself a law'. Differentiating his position from Kant's concept of "autonomy", Castoriadis emphasizes that autonomy "does not consist in acting according to a law discovered in an immutable reason and given once for all. It is the unlimited questioning of oneself about the law and its foundations, and the capacity, in the light of this interrogation, *to make*, *to do* and *to institute* (therefore also, *to say*)."(Castoriadis 1988: 472f.) However, for Habermas, given his basic ontological assumptions, Castoriadis "can no longer *localize* the political struggle for an autonomous way of life – the very emancipatory,

creative-projective praxis with which Castoriadis is ultimately concerned." (Habermas 1987: 332 f.)

Taking this supposed *lack of localization** literally, I propose in the following discussion a brief survey of various preliminary versions of autonomy from the last twenty years. There is, however, no guarantee that I will be able or even inclined to proceed in the Habermasian sense. This historico-current course of events could provide information about when, where and in which circumstances a "politics of autonomy", as proposed by Castoriadis, can succeed in an emancipatory sense. Since collective forms of autonomy must always be placed in relation to the national state, at least one or other of the criteria for such success should emerge during this stroll through the *Autonomias* and from the discussion of these connections.2

Barcelona, September 2000 (Autonomy *as* Nation)

6.8 million Catalans are officially entitled to feel part of an independent "nation" and have been since June 2006. Just under three-quarters of those eligible to vote chose the new "statute of autonomy". Passed beforehand by the Spanish parliament in Madrid, this law guarantees the Spanish state's wealthiest region even more political and financial independence vis-à-vis the central government than the constitutionally established autonomous status of 1979, which was granted after Franco's death. An achievement that is still disputed but also celebrated. The 11 September is not just the date of the military coup in Chile in 1973 and of the attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in 2001; it is also the Catalans' National Day. On that day in 1714, after a siege lasting fourteen months, Philip V's troops invaded Barcelona, captured it and made their symbolic contribution to the

building and maintenance of a Catalan identity. Outside, the Spanish welded together; the increasingly threatening and repressive central state caused the oppressed people to unite behind their flag. But why were they oppressed in the first place? Catalonia and the Basque country are the wealthiest regions within the Spanish state. Clearly, the will for autonomy is formed independently of economic structures. But there's more to it: the economic drain on a region is quite often accompanied by the symbolic exclusion and political oppression of its inhabitants. As a rule, one of these mechanisms is enough to stir up, provoke or trigger the call for autonomy. So the ban under Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) on speaking the Catalan language was one of the clearest indications of cultural exclusion. The fight against that is also a struggle for collective self-determination – for autonomy. In the Catalan and/or the Basque model of 'autonomy as a nation (distinct from the other nation)', the idea of a unified speech community is scarcely conceivable without that of a 'separate culture'. Language is perceived to be the particular component and expression of this separateness. It is therefore essential to protect, foster and preserve this cultural peculiarity. (At the preparatory meetings for the anti-globalization protests in Prague two weeks after the Catalan national day – regardless of the presence of foreigners speaking only Castilian Spanish – people spoke Catalan.) In principle, however, this conception of culture is just as open to racism as the concept of a national state founded on a national culture. Autonomy, when it is understood to mean national independence, presupposes for the most part that 'culture' is the sum of values, mechanisms and norms of a group that is perceived to be relatively homogeneous. Here too, any disruption must be excluded; there must be a closing of ranks.

On the eve of the national holiday, the hardcore punk band KOP appeared in concert to unambivalent chants of "Gora ETA, Gora!" ("Long live ETA!") The left-wing audience occupying the concert hall chanted as if with one voice. For Castoriadis (2006:162) " the possibility of opening up, of declaring oneself to the instituting imaginary as far as it goes, is also integral to a successful 'politics of autonomy' ". A few days earlier, a detachment of Basque separatists had gunned down another social democratic regional politician on his own doorstep. As a means of bringing pressure to bear in the struggle for negotiations on autonomy, this was surely anything but an emancipatory action; and yet, Catalan punks applauded it. During the day, another district in Barcelona, bedecked with signs of national pride and the will for independence – all signals from people, for whom Catalonia's autonomous status, anchored in the constitution of the Spanish state, doesn't go far enough. Radical left-wing and nationalist symbols are very often one and the same here. This is true too of the group *Endavant. Organització Socialista d´Alliberament Nacional*, who had organized the previous evening's concert. The posters put up by *Endevant* in Gracia reproduce a motif from the Spanish Civil War – the woodcut of a worker in front of the flag of the anarchist federation, F.A.I. But the banner here is not black and red as in the original; instead, it displays five stripes each of red and yellow and is called 'Sengera'. The Catalan flag conceals history by being transferred to a historical context. What it conceals is the historical struggle – by no means restricted to Catalonia – for revolution and against fascism in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Catalonia instead of anarchy. *Endevant* merchandise also includes stickers with Subcomandante Marcos and Fidel Castro against the backdrop of the Catalan national colours. The activist behind the desk won't have the slightest hesitation in rejecting the criticism that utterly contradictory approaches are being placed on the same level here

under the Catalan flag, in a fairly simplistic or even historically misrepresentative way. The day after the concert, at the National Day demo attended by around 15,000 people, many Catalan and Basque flags fluttered among those of feminist and other left-wing groups. Subculture and establishment, ascetic punks and corrupt regional politicians converge in this conception of autonomy on the same side of the imaginary barricades, and they can hardly be said to oppose each other as class or lifestyle enemies. Nationalism draws people together. But an instituting "politics of autonomy", according to Castoriadis, is successful only when, alongside the manifestation mentioned earlier, it is considered "equally important to introduce the greatest possible reflexivity into the explicit instituting activity as well as into the exercise of explicit power.." (Castoriadis 1988: 480) Clearly, the model of 'autonomy as a nation distinct from the nation' is doomed to failure because of this fact.

Chiapas/Mexico, Autumn 2004 (Autonomy *within* the Nation)

The Mexican national holiday also falls in September. Independence from Spain was achieved here, beginning with the call or '*grito*' by the liberal preacher Hidalgo on 16 September 1810, which was also a call to armed struggle against the colonial power. The *EZLN*, the Zapatista liberation movement, which declared war on the Mexican state in 1994, also refers to the event. It does this so that each mayor, regardless of his/her party allegiance, repeats the call in the same way from the balcony of his/her official residence on the eve of the national holiday, jazzing it up with a patriotically unifying 'Viva México'. The original event managed fine without this. (In those days, people shouted 'Long live the Americas!', 'The Americas forever!' and 'Down with bad government!') In one of the five new Zapatista official residences in existence since 2003, in the Oventic *caracol*, the Zapatistas also call

to mind the oppression of the *Indígenas*, the necessity of armed rebellion and the Zapatistas themselves enfolded in the arms of the Mexican nation. The 'Councils of Good Government', which also appeared in 2003, were not only formed in opposition to the team of President Fox (2000-2006) of the conservative Party of National Action (PAN), but also took up Hidalgo's call for Mexican independence. Pro-Zapatista intellectuals too, not least Subcomandante Marcos himself, have for years been at great pains to prove that the autonomy demanded by the Zapatistas, and already implemented in some places, does not harm the integrity of the national state. Nevertheless, Zapatista practice often functions without an unambiguous, collective identity. While the demand for autonomy, aimed at national independence, urgently needs a collective identity as its basis, a less secessionist conception – known as 'autonomy *within* the nation' – is not so dependent on it. Here too, history is called upon as a conglomeration of symbolic and cultural exclusion, and of economic exploitation. The subject of the struggle is for the most part indigenous, it is true, but the indigenous population speaks several languages (Tzotzil, Tzeltal and many others) and allows for yet others, at least potentially. The Zapatistas are fighting for 'a world with room for many worlds'; room too, perhaps, for the small world of Catalan nationalists or Berlin squatters in their tour of revolutions around the globe.

Since the beginning of the uprising, there are 38 autonomous administrative districts with countless Zapatista communities, who regard their autonomy quite pragmatically as ethnically indigenous. The collective land rights they demand on these grounds don't just run counter to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); they are also regarded as a threat both by the employers' association and by local landowners. The institution of the 'Councils of Good Government' was, among other things, a

consequence of the central government's unwillingness to negotiate. It reclaimed the influence of the guerillas for the communities themselves. Education, health, business and agriculture are now organized autonomously, independently of the government. Strongly influenced by universalistic demands such as justice, democracy, freedom and dignity, the Zapatistas have not just subjected their own structures to continuous democratizing processes in this way. Through international meetings and national consultation processes (*consultas*), and far beyond the areas under their control, they have triggered effects, challenged institutions and exposed their practices to criticism, and they have engaged in reflection. According to Castoriadis (1988: 472) "[t]he moment of birth of democracy, and of politics, is not the reign of law or of right, neither of the 'rights of man' nor even of the equality of citizens as such, but the emergence of the questioning of the law in and through the actual activity of the community." One of the bases of the Zapatistas' understanding of politics is "*Preguntando caminamos*" or "Asking we walk".

The Zapatista discourse is productive in various ways beyond specialist ethnological circles. It is no accident that, among the many international enthusiasts of autonomy who gather in Chiapas, a lot of Basques and Catalans too have been meeting for more than ten years. The attempt made by intellectuals like the former deputy of the social democratic Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD), Gilberto López y Rivas (2004), among others, to declare Zapatista autonomy compatible with Mexican law is, however, only one possibility. There is always the risk that it will effectively seal off a type of ethnic space and establish 'the indigenous population' in 'their culture'. Another possibility would be to formulate autonomy as a transnational undertaking, relatively independent of the current national political, social and legal

system, and seen in relation to social movements all over the world rather than to the Mexican national flag.3 Indeed, the many forms of activism in which movements worldwide are engaging after the model of Zapatism, among them those theorized as "urban Zapatism", suggest that this option is more than mere fantasy.

Berlin, Easter 1995 (Autonomy *from the* Nation)

For historical reasons, any positive relation to the national surroundings in the German-speaking region was ruled out in radical left-wing circles from the very outset. Discussion followed on undogmatically from the events of 1968 in particular – which in Germany brought about the break with the generation of one's parents, rather than unity across the generations as was the case in Mexico, for example – and settled on Herbert Marcuse's "rebellious subjectivity" against the one-dimensional rest.4 Indeed, since the rise of the autonomous movement in the early 1980s, it had been obvious that there is no independence within the prevailing conditions. At the conference on autonomy in Berlin, autonomists young and old assembled under the slogan "Autonomy is Self-determined Dependence" at the "meeting of the generations" for new momentum, which turned out however to be more of a final summary. The 2,500-odd struggling subjects in the Berlin Technical University and the surrounding neighbourhood had in the meantime admitted techno-aesthetics alongside punk and added 'postmodern' to anarchist and neo-Marxist theoretical approaches. The movement, estimated by state security to number between 5,000 and 10,000 people over the years, had occupied houses, public spaces and social niches, and had engaged in social debates on topics like the politics of nuclear energy and 'immigration'. A model that might still be most closely described as 'autonomy *in* the nation' would apply, because a positioning

within Germany with a clear, negative reference to the history of this nation occurs.

Five years before the conference, the "Nie wieder Deutschland!" *(Never again Germany!)* demonstration against so-called reunification, which had attracted 20,000 visitors, had been organized in Frankfurt/Main with considerably autonomous participation. The autonomous scene, far more strongly committed at that time to the Basque or Kurdish liberation struggles, had articulated the link with its own nation quite unequivocally. Nevertheless, the autonomists' concept of autonomy, manoeuvring on militant practice somewhere between niche and movement politics, is vulnerable to national or other unintentional appropriations. The autonomists' autonomy was determined by a subculture to a greater degree than in the other two conceptions outlined here. The production of symbols was also very popular here, even if the unity conveyed by dreadlocks, life in communes and concert visits is hardly on a par with the unity created by national flags. In this form of autonomy, culture is less a specific canon and more a mixture of rituals, symbols and practices, which run off and develop from other movements, currents and schools, and are oriented transnationally rather than within the framework of 'one' nation. Nonetheless, there was and still is as much to criticize in the autonomists' autonomy as there is in the autonomy of independence or in the Zapatistas' version: from the bashing of others, e.g. non-violent tactics, right through to the opacity of their own structures, which admission into the club of like-minded people doesn't often make easy (let alone democratic). What is more, the autonomy of the post-'68 autonomists is also suspected of renewing the spirit of capitalism rather than destroying it as planned. Luc Boltanski und Ève Chiapello (2003) characterize the demand for autonomy as part of an 'artistic critique', directed

against the standardization and loss of individuality of the Fordist era. Instead of acknowledging them as anti-capitalist effects, Boltanski and Chiapello (2003:389) detect "a similarity of form between the new protest movements and the structures of capitalism", based on indicators like networked organizations, mobility and flexibility. In contrast to the 'social critique', which is aimed at security and stability, the 'artistic critique' has, according to them, failed in the struggle against capitalism. For it does not take account of the extent to which "freedom is part of the regime of capital, and how closely linked this capitalist system is to desire, on which a major part of its dynamics is based." (Boltanski/ Chiapello 2003: 506)5

While the model of "autonomy *as* nation" appears problematic since it doesn't challenge the institution(s) of the nation, the concept of "autonomy *from* the nation" – if one is to believe Boltanski and Chiapello – seems very much to be its undoing; to permanently "*do* and *institute*" (Castoriadis) and so losing sight of its own "alternative" processes of institutionalization. The zeal against mergings of state and nation is turned back, therefore, on the zealots. The secure, albeit monotonous, conditions of work become precarious; the grey, uniform daily routine of the factory becomes a colourful "social factory" (Antonio Negri) with optimized conditions of valorization. But even when the critique of institutions is not immune to exercising an instituting effect in the wrong sense of the term – and in this respect there is certainly some overlap between the protest movements mentioned by Boltanski/Chiapello and those artists, critical of institutions, of whom Helmut Draxler speaks –, there is no alternative to it. Indeed, "the denial and the covering up of the instituting dimension of society " (Castoriadis 1988:462) has always been one of the central supports of the status quo for as long as anyone can

remember.6 For it transposes both the bases and origins of institutions into a 'before' or an 'outside', as demonstrated almost paradigmatically by the naturalizing ideology of neoliberal capitalism with its 'material constraints', "location requirements" and "investment opportunities".

Instituting practices in the sense of a "blueprint for autonomy" would therefore have to target this process of rendering [society's instituting dimension] unrecognizable, according to Castoriadis, but without becoming fixed in such a critical pose. For the forms of autonomy are themselves relational and ambivalent; they threaten either to operate as if they were national, thereby closing themselves off and/or else they adapt to neoliberal imperatives such as that of 'personal responsibility'. There is therefore a need for highly self-reflexive practices, but without falling victim in the process to collective self-hypnosis.

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1 Draxler (2006: 158) stresses that the concept of institutional critique itself “includes a lack of clarity as to which understanding of the institution refers to”. It is not entirely clear in many cases whether the institutional critique applies to actual museums or galleries, to the artistic field as a whole or mostly to social institutions.

* English in the original.

2 The examination of one of the most important autonomous projects of recent history – Operaism in Italy – would force apart the framework of this document and thus falls outside the historical survey too. Cf on this topic Birkner/Foltin 2006.

3 For the various theoretical conceptions of autonomy modelled on the discussion of Zapatism, cf also Kastner 2006.

4 The German nationalist continuity evoked by those veterans of ’68, people like the former SDS chairman, Bernd Rabehl – today an ultra-conservative – or Horst Mahler, the ex-Red Army Faction lawyer, who represent fascist positions, is hardly tenable for the greater part of the transnational movements of 1968 or for their ideological content. That Rabehl’s and Mahler’s argument draws support from the so-called ‘anti-German’ side, in order to discredit these and with them the radical ‘movement Left’, renders it no more plausible.

5 Even though it was of course the veterans of ’68 in France, not the autonomist movement in the German-speaking regions, who were the subject of Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s analysis, the autonomists too are ultimately one of the post-’68 movements, whose rhetoric of freedom was quite often carried over into the “flat hierarchies” of new operational structures.

6 Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s polarizing approach completely overlooks the fact that one of the central concepts of the 1968 demand for autonomy was, in imitation of Marx, to emphasize that history is man-made and therefore “capable of being made” *(„machbar“)* (Dutschke). The mutually exclusive dichotomy implicit in the confrontation of “good” social critique and “bad” artistic critique must also be rejected, since it fails to discern such essential concepts.