k-punk

The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)

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Foreword by Simon Reynolds

the future is still ours: autonomy and postcapitalism[1]

Adam Curtis' recent documentary series *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* argued that discourses of self-organisation, which had formerly been associated with the counterculture, were now absorbed into dominant ideology. Hierarchy was bad; networks were good. Organisation itself — held to be synonymous with "top-down control" — was both oppressive and inefficient. There is clearly something in Curtis' arguments. Practically all mainstream political discourse is suspicious of, and sceptical towards, the state, planning and the possibilities of organised political change. This feeds into the ideological framework that I have called capitalist realism: if systemic change can never happen, all we can do is make the best of capitalism.

There's no doubt that the right has been able to profit from identifying the left with an allegedly superseded "top-down" version of politics. Neoliberalism imposed a model of historical time which places bureaucratic centralisation in the past, by contrast with a "modernisation" that is held to be synonymous with "flexibility" and "individual choice". More recently, the much derided idea of the Big Society is, in effect, a right-wing version of autonomism. The work of Phillip Blond, one of the architects of the "Big Society" concept, is saturated with the rhetoric of self-organisation. In the report "The Ownership State", which he wrote for the *ResPublica* thinktank,[2] Blond writes of "open systems" which "recognise that uncertainty and change render traditional command-and-control ineffective". While Blond's ideas have been seen by many as obfuscatory justifications for the neoliberal privatisation agenda, Blond himself positions them as critical of neoliberalism. Blond notes a paradox that I also discuss in *Capitalist Realism*: rather than eliminating

bureaucracy, as it promised to, neoliberalism has led to its proliferation. Since public services can never function as "proper" markets, the imposition of the "market solution" in healthcare and education "generates a huge and costly bureaucracy of accountants, examiners, inspectors, assessors and auditors, all concerned with assuring quality and asserting control that hinder innovation and experiment and lock in high cost." Such systems, Blond writes, are

> organic rather than mechanistic, and require a completely different management mindset to run them. Strategy and feedback from action are more significant than detailed planning ('Fire — ready — aim!' as Tom Peters wrote); hierarchies give way to networks; the periphery is as important as the centre; self-interest and competition are balanced by trust and cooperation; initiative and inventiveness are required rather than compliance; smartening up rather than dumbing down.

Since the right is now prepared to talk in these terms, it is clear that networks and open systems are not enough in themselves to save us. Rather, as Gilles Deleuze argued in his crucial essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control",[3] networks are simply the mode in which power operates in the "control" societies that have superseded the old "disciplinary" structures.

Does all this then mean that ideas of autonomy and self-organisation would inevitably be co-opted by the right, and that there is no further political potential in them for the left? Definitely not — far from indicating any deficiency in autonomist ideas, the co-option of these ideas by the right shows that they have continuing potency. Seeing what is wrong with Blond and his ilk's appropriation of autonomism will also tell us something about what the difference between right and left might be in the future.

Curtis is right that the principal way in which autonomist ideas have been neutralised is by using them *against* the very idea of political organisation. Yet autonomist theories continue to be crucial because they give us some resources for constructing a model of what leftist political organisation could look like in the post-Fordist conditions of mandatory flexibility, globalisation and just-in-time production. We can no longer be

in any doubt that the conditions which gave rise to the "old left" have collapsed in the global North, but we must have the courage not to be nostalgic for this lost Fordist world of boring factory work and a labour movement dominated by male industrial workers. As Antonio Negri so powerfully put it in one of the letters collected in the recently published *Art And Multitude*, "We have to live and suffer the defeat of truth, of our truth. We have to destroy its representation, its continuity, its memory, its trace. All subterfuges for avoiding the recognition that reality has changed, and with it truth, have to be rejected. […] The very blood in our veins had been replaced."[4] Even though the shift into so-called "cognitive" labour has been overstated — just because work involves talking doesn't make it "cognitive"; the labour of a call centre worker mechanically repeating the same rote phrases all day is no more "cognitive" than that of someone on a production line — Antonio Negri is right that the liberation from repetitive industrial labour remains a victory. Yet, as Christian Marazzi has argued, workers have been like the Old Testament Jews: led out of the bondage of the Fordist factory, they are now marooned in the desert. As Franco Berardi has shown, precarious work brings with it new kinds of misery: the always-on pressure made possible by mobile telecommunications technology means that there is no longer any end to the working day. An always-on population lives in a state of insomniac depression, unable to ever switch off.

But what has to differentiate the left from the right is a commitment to the idea that liberation lies in the future, not the past. We have to believe that the currently collapsing neoliberal reality system is not the only possible modernity; that, on the contrary, it is a cybergothic form of barbarism, which uses the latest technology to reinforce the power of the oldest elites. It is possible for technology and work to be arranged in completely different ways to how they are configured now. This belief in the future is our advantage over the right. Phillip Blond's networked institutions may have a cybernetic sheen, but he argues that they must be situated in a social setting which is re-dedicated to "traditional values" coming from religion and the family. By strong contrast, we must celebrate the disintegration of these "values", as the necessary precondition for new kinds of solidarity. This solidarity won't emerge automatically. It will need the invention of new kinds of institutions, as

well as the transformation of older bodies, such as trade unions. “One of the most important questions”, Deleuze wrote in the “Control” essay,

> will concern the ineptitude of the unions: tied to the whole of their history of struggle against the disciplines or within the spaces of enclosure, will they be able to adapt themselves or will they give way to new forms of resistance against the societies of control? Can we already grasp the rough outlines of the coming forms, capable of threatening the joys of marketing?

Perhaps the lineaments of that future can be seen in Latin America, where left wing governments facilitate worker-run collectives. The issue is not any more of abandoning the state, government or planning, but making them part of new systems of feedback that will draw upon — and constitute — collective intelligence. A movement that can replace global capitalism does not need centralisation, but it will require co-ordination. What form will this co-ordination take? How can different autonomous struggles work together? These are the crucial questions we must ask as we begin to build the post-capitalist world.