



The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life

George Katsiaficas

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"A scholarly gem which is indispensable reading for anyone interested in how social change occurs, especially in the advanced industrial countries."—Carl Boggs, National University

"This book is an important corrective to the all-too-common view that global capitalism is triumphant, that there is no basis for opposing the values it promotes."—Barbara Epstein, University of California at Santa Cruz

Since the modern anti-globalization movement kicked off with the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, a new generation has been engaging in anti-capitalist direct action. Its aims, politics, lifestyles, and tactics grow directly out of the autonomous social movements that emerged in Europe from the 1970s through the mid-1990s. In fact, today's infamous "Black Blocs" are the direct descendants of the European "Autonomen." But these important historical connections are rarely noted, and never understood.

The Subversion of Politics sets the record straight, filling in the gaps between the momentous events of 1968 and 1999. Katsiaficas presents the protagonists of social revolt—Italian feminists, squatters, disarmament and anti-nuclear activists, punk rockers, and anti-fascist street fighters—in a compelling and sympathetic light. At the same time, he offers a work of great critical depth, drawing from these political practices a new theory of freedom and autonomy that redefines the parameters of the political itself.

George Katsiaficas—Fulbright fellow, former student of Herbert Marcuse, and long-time activist—is Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, Massachusetts. Author or editor of more than 10 books, he is Managing Editor of the journal *New Political Science*.

The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life Details

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From Reader Review The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life for online ebook

Josh says

It made me feel like we were onto something with the idea of collective autonomy, but far from it in practice... still on the road, contemporary history, yeah.

Kersplebedeb says

This book is available from the Kersplebedeb Literature Rack. You can

Sunfall says

Essential reading. Period.

Shane says

This book touches on an incredible history in Europe's autonomous movements in the 70s and 80s that I knew nothing about before I read this. I'm happy there are radical scholars like Katsiaficas out there preserving these histories. I found myself having opposing responses as I went through the book, feeling inspired at times and at other times feeling like there is very little that can relate to the United States. Whether relevant to the U.S. or not though, it's worth knowing about. My only real criticism of the book is that I could have done without the last two chapters. They seem to have been written separately and I find myself having less and less patience for reading theoretical criticisms of theorists I haven't read.

Tim says

I absolutely loved this book. If you want a pretty good history of the more recent autonomist movements going on in Europe (which is important to know if you're interested in US ones) then this is the book to do it.

There are some points near the end of the book, especially when he starts ranting about Negri, that can be ignored. That's barely a chapter in this book and those arguments were answered by Empire anyway. Point is, you will be angered, shocked, and inspired by the amazing movements that everyday European citizens created and the repressive measures thrown at them by police, local and national government, and corporations.

Daniel says

Delving into movement theory, philosophy, and cultural criticism as well as providing a case study in autonomous politics in post-industrial Europe, Georgy Katsiaficas has written a book very important to emerging movements in the 21st century. This book will be especially helpful to those new activists who seem confused about why leftist activity seemed to disappear after 1968: it didn't. Katsiaficas excoriates the models of Marxist Leninism, criticises the New Left for self-marginalizing into covert guerilla action, and embraces the autonomous movements of Western Europe from the late 70s to today. He doesn't shy away from pointing out the movements' weaknesses, its eccentricities as well as outright alienating factors, but finds their models of resistance to be among the more promising breakthroughs in resistance to capitalism, imperialism, and the state.

Marxist-Leninists are portrayed as stodgy and prudish across Europe, often discouraging the working class from self organization, and making themselves arbiters between classes or between movements and the state. When pressed for opinions on the emerging squatting movements in Italy, they declared “[real:] workers don't break the law.” Essentializing working class students as workers and pushing studies of production and economics, they often directed young working class students away from their interest in culture and feminism. Their stale “revolution” was dowdy and full of antiquated modernist thinking, preaching uniformity and the “new” ideas of a century before. Katsiaficas blames the death of the New Left era in countries like the United States in part on the ill-fitting adoption of Leninist revolutionary forms: Maoism and Guevarism. In contrast, the continuing revolutionary movements in West Germany after the New Left era could be attributed to East Germany, which “provided ample daily evidence of the bankruptcy” (215) of past revolutionary movements.

Katsiaficas offers another interesting criticism of New Left movements: the repression and escalation of violence that distilled mass movements into the armed revolt of the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and others is self defeating. Popular movements that once brought hundreds of thousands into the fold against the state and capitalism are rendered impotent by guerilla actions. Past participants become sidelined into spectators, whose support wanes, enabling the state to crush the movements with impunity. The “bitterness of confrontation” (116) cannot become the primary focus of a popular movement. Secrecy cuts a movement off from its own constituents: as fewer people are intimately involved in the movement's processes, they have less invested in the movement. The guerillas dwindle from hundreds to tens, and then to nothing. Autonomous at their best, in contrast, do not engage in the pissing match of attacking the state where it is strongest, but undermine its legitimacy and popular support while building new structures that would replace it.

Autonomous movements are post-modern: influenced heavily by the revolutionary intercommunalism of the Black Panther Party - a world in which many worlds can exist, beyond the concepts of nation-state - and the feminist tendencies to use personal statements - not “for the workers” - and focus on everyday needs, autonomous movements strive to create asylum from some of the horrors of late stage post-Fordist capitalism. Though they are not wedded to any specific ideology, Katsiaficas attempts to construct a politic from the autonomists' actions. Autonomists work with marginalized communities where they live, and as an international movement, attack local manifestations of international institutions in solidarity with other movements across the globe. Autonomists are integral to the struggles against politically and environmentally disastrous projects in their locale.

But Katsiaficas is especially impressed with the how autonomous movements prefigure their struggles with the decolonization of every day life. Capitalism in this post-modern era turns “love into sex, [...]sex into

pornography. Labor becomes production, production a job; free time [...] into leisure, leisure into vacation; desire [...] morphed into consumerism, fantasy into mediated spectacle." (221) Essentially, in this era, the front line is everywhere. The author finds the autonomous movements fairly exemplary in fostering decolonization of every day life: creating space for people to live and experiment with other ways of living outside of the aforementioned capitalist tendencies. Franz Fanon's post-colonial writing tells us that we will have to decolonize ourselves even as the colonies of empire fall, so as to prefigure the new humanity we want to create.

Autonomous movements are not exempt from Katsiaficas' criticism, however. He is quick to point out the self-marginalization within the autonomous movement that severely detracts from its effectiveness: infantile actions that serve only one's conscience, little care within anti-imperialist politics for the popular support of their own societies, and self-righteous rejection of other forms of resistance that inhibits the successes of both their movement and the Green electoral movement that share a common origin. Katsiaficas seems convinced, however, that the worst of the autonomous movements is not where they have taken their practices too far, but where the vestiges of old social relations and values show themselves.

Katsiaficas uses this case study not to romanticize the experience of the autonomists, but to point out the necessities of moving forwards. We can look to movements of the past to know what works and what to avoid. A successful movement cannot fetishize one human activity over all others (Marxists with production, or punks with culture) but must embrace all facets of human activity. A successful movement cannot fetishize one tactic over all others (nonviolent arrogance in the German Green Party, militant resistance of the autonomists, or armed struggle of guerilla groups) but must embrace all tactics that are effective and encourage mass participation. A successful movement cannot fetishize one oppression over all others (class oppression, patriarchy, white supremacy), but must understand the intersections of oppression and how the struggle against oppression can bring us together as a species. Capitalism of the post-modern era requires a totalist view that embraces the participation of all in order to overthrow it (or outgrow it). Because past movements have attempted to ignore them, the struggle to subvert patriarchy must be integral, as well as the struggle against white supremacy and the struggle against environmental devastation. The freedom of all to create their own lives is paramount. The movement requires feminism, intercommunalism, biocentrism, and, crucially, immediatism. We need tangible institutions that can transform our everyday lives and liberate public space in the here and now. These are the lessons we can take from the autonomous movements.

The popular narrative that social movements began and ended in the 1960s is something we should be actively undermining. Of course there were significant moments in the 1960s. But social movements in the 70s, 80s, and 90s all made significant impacts of their own, and deserve their recognition as well. This book is one of many that can help you fill in the blank spots on your movement history timeline.

Andy says

Good historian, bad theorist. That last chapter dragged on.

Graham says

an overview of various squatter movements in Europe (mostly Germany). Not all that interesting, although towards the end there is a decent critique of Negri so I guess the last few chapters are worth reading.

Kristina Lim says

I'm reading this book with my reading group and finding it very very inspiring. I've never heard of most of these movements in Europe and to learn about them is giving me hope. It's also providing me with great material for this project I'm not currently working on.

Mirza Sultan-Galiev says

This man actually thinks that the capacity of the capitalist state to control and coerce the masses has reduced in recent years.
Enough said.

Dave says

I know i give a lot of books 5 stars, but this one is actually worth the read. Katsiaficas is an intellectual who doesn't slather his work with meaningless jargon, but he also doesn't run away from it either. He confronts confusion and the result is a readable insightful book about the changing nature of social movements in europe and elsewhere.

andrew says

free online: <http://www.eroseffect.com/books/subve...>

Arno says

Loved the historical accounts of Germany and Italy, but theoretical parts towards the end were a bit problematic. Overall, good read, definitely.
