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IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 01: BODIES AND MEDIA

Minor Apocalypses: Italian Autonomia, Utopia, and Women

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The essay discusses the tactics of the Italian Autonomia movement during the 1960s and 1970s as a form of realized utopia. The Autonomists rejected the reformism of the Left political parties and unions in the name of the refusal of work—work as it had been structured by capital—in order to reappropriate time to experiment with new forms of everyday existence. Women could not do the same. Therefore, when studied together with Autonomist feminism of the time, male Autonomism loses some of its radical edge. The women's demand for wages for housework makes clear that the idea of utopia that male autonomists pursued could not be experienced in the same way by women, who continue to bear the burden of reproductive labor in the home, and whose autonomy is limited by the demands of patriarchal society.

It is reality that sets before us the choice between utopia or barbarism, between a breakdown of the present system and the permanent threat of destruction, ecocatastrophe and psychocatastrophe. [...] The acceleration of pace in urban areas, the modern inhumanity of relations between people, the hallucinatory quality of every form of expression and every form of existence, and the increase in militarization—all these developments combine to set an urgent choice before revolutionaries: breakdown or barbarism. And even if the possibilities for a breakdown were very limited, even if everything were tending in a direction opposed to the possibility of liberating humanity's technical, scientific, creative and inventive energies from the distinctive domination of capitalism and ecocatastrophe, if the idea of liberating this potential were a utopian one—well, even so, the only realistic choice would be revolution. If we are interested in life, then only revolution is a realistic alternative.

Franco Berardi, "Anatomy of Autonomy" (2007: 165).

To have our own money, for us women, is the necessary condition that would enable us to be independent from men and to refuse work. This is for all those who tell us that the "liberation" struggle is not about demands, that what's important is not money, but "to transform the everyday." With empty pockets, and forced into personal dependence, it's very difficult to take back our lives and transform our social relations.

Padua Collective of Feminist Struggle, *Le Operaie della casa*
[*The House Workers*] (1977: 3).

I

What are the possibilities, and the limitations, of the calls for utopia made by the Italian Autonomist movement? What are the lessons to be learned from the constellation of theorist-activists that emerged in what still stands as one of the most distinctive moments in both the history of post-war resistance to capital in Europe, and one of the most apparently effective movements that emerged from the student revolts of

the late sixties? The glaring contrast in the stance, tone, and perspective of the two quotes above, from one of the leading Autonomist polemicists and from the women's collective that was part of *Autonomia*, reflect both the movement's tremendous disruptive force and its blind spots. Franco Berardi's characteristically grandiloquent, almost apocalyptic, words, in an essay that was first published in 1980 ("Anatomy of Autonomy"), clash with the matter-of-factness of the passage from *Le Operaie della casa*, the journal of the Padua Feminist Collective of Lotta Femminista [Feminist Struggle]. For our late-neoliberal and globalist moment, Berardi's cry, available in the English-speaking world because of the resurgence of interest in *Autonomia* following the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's work, brings to the fore the urgent analysis developed in the earlier, late-Fordist moment of western capitalist development. Reading the collectively-written call in *Le Operaie della casa*, however, we are struck by the fact that women's demand for wages for housework, and by implication, a rethinking of the very concept of work itself, have not yet been fulfilled. The fact that feminists are still calling for a new reckoning of the significance of their service and care work four decades later, while men (and of course many women too) feel able to move to the next epochal challenge, is not only revealing about the relation between women and utopia; it poses an insistent challenge to the implied utopian project on which the Autonomist project was built. The feminist critique, in other words, puts the viability of any Autonomist utopia into question.

Acknowledging the clash between the two quotes not only provides us with a special perspective from which to discuss the different utopian strands existing within or inspired by *Autonomia*, but more specifically to examine the implications of its vision of the revolution as already-realized in the transformation of the everyday. The Autonomist vision relied on a retheorization of the 'everyday,' and feminist critique exposes the limits of that retheorization, in order to provide a utopian perspective that would include women and their work of reproduction. While their avowed view of social change did become the engine of praxis in the political, cultural, and life experience of the (male) Autonomists, the feminists' analysis and demands offer a critique of this praxis as only partially revolutionary. For men to make the revolution inside and outside the factory, women need to carry on their reproductive labor. As

the manifesto from *Le operaie della casa* goes on to make clear: “The lack of one’s own money, the draining character of women’s domestic labor [...] represents even today an obstacle that makes feminist militancy all too problematic for women” (1977: 1). Berardi’s polemic addresses the damage produced by capitalist neoliberalism, and speaks of the necessity of utopia at the time when all utopias seem to have failed. The women of the Padua Feminist Collective, instead, point out a fundamental problem with the anticapitalist struggle of Autonomia: that women cannot really afford the same utopia without having first achieved their own, gender specific goals. This has particular relevance given Berardi’s citation of ‘psychocatastrophe,’ and the fact that his own first published book was *Contro il lavoro* [*Against Work*]. The life that, for Berardi, needs to be maintained through “a flight to utopia” turns out to be not quite the same life—quotidian, boring, repetitive, frustrating, fatiguing, self-sacrificial—which is women’s lot. This is another everyday, more difficult to change because normalized and naturalized by patriarchy, and developed in spaces other than those imagined in most Autonomist writing—the factory, the street, the political meeting room. This is the everyday of domesticity, of the kitchen, the bedroom, the grocery store, the hospital, all places where women are called ‘to care,’ unpaid, for others. This second aspect of the everyday, that same everyday that the Autonomist praxis aimed to reappropriate, remains all too often invisible in the ‘heroic’ stance of the *compagni*, the male comrades, and in their analysis of the exploitation of labor in the factory as the *only* labor. Denouncing this invisibility, the feminists of Wages for Housework, their demands still unaddressed, offer a vantage point from which to reconsider the possibilities of Autonomia’s utopian charge.

My source for Autonomist feminist critique is the journal of the Padua Autonomist Feminist Collective of Lotta Femminista, *Le operaie della casa* [*The House Workers*]. The special issue published in 1977, “I mille fiori sbocciano appassiti,” or “The One Thousand Flowers that Bloom Already Withered,” has a title which evokes a failed version of the Chinese “Revolution of the One Thousand Flowers.” When last year I mentioned my work on Italian Autonomia to Silvia Federici, a member of the collective alongside Leopoldina Fortunati and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, she suggested this reading, and provided me with a copy of

the journal. My conversation on the 1970s with Federici was illuminating: it was extraordinary to learn the history of autonomous feminism firsthand from one of its most important figures. Federici's perspective, and the documents from the archive of the Women's Collective, throws new light on the Autonomist movement: the Marxist analysis of *Autonomia* or of *Potere Operaio* [Workers' Power], as well as their praxis, obscured the specific conditions of women workers in and out of the home. *Le operaie delle casa* are, to all effects, workers, and they asked to be recognized and supported as such by the *Autonomi*, but this did not happen. The utopian force of the autonomist project, whether in its own time or in ours, therefore becomes open to question. In this perspective the temporality of utopia, which the men manage to turn into "now", changes into a long-standing and open struggle for a condition yet to be achieved, a struggle that continues today. If the male Autonomist can look back at the 1970s from today's neoliberal era, the era of the end of utopias, and claim to have lived a utopia come true, women cannot make the same claim. No mission accomplished in their case.

My discussion here will follow this gendered dialectic. First, I reflect on the utopian thought and praxis in which the autonomists engaged, then I reconstruct the panorama of the feminist autonomous movement in the context of Italian *Autonomia*, giving particular relevance to the claims of the *Wages for Housework* movement. Although the term "utopia" does not frequently appear in the documents of the time, I read the Autonomists' political strategies and cultural interventions in the 1970s as forms of a utopian pragmatics, a way of engaging with the possibility of different forms of existence, in opposition to those put in place by capitalist social relations. I then revisit *Autonomia's* claims through the feminist viewpoint of the *Wages for Housework* activists, in order to question the Autonomist project's practical effectiveness, and its potential message for our own time.

In the 1970s Italian *Autonomia* was a constellation of many radical movements that had emerged from the workers' and the students' mobilizations of the 1960s. It included marginal social groups that rallied against Italian official left politics, led by the PCI, the Italian Communist Party: workers, feminists, the unemployed, queers, and immigrants from the South. Autonomous Marxism refused political

representation by party and unions, and centered instead on the self-activity and self-valorization of the working class. The Autonomists did not simply want to improve working conditions in the factories and increase the workers' salaries: they wanted to change life and everyday reality. This had already been the utopian program of the 1960s. When in the 1970s *Autonomia* reclaimed the everyday through insurgency, strikes, occupations of public space and buildings, as well as through their work of cultural intervention, I argue in this essay that utopia became, at least temporarily and provisionally, reality.

When Franco Berardi's essay "Anatomy of Autonomy" was newly published in the volume *Autonomia: Post-Politics Politics* early in the new millennium, the political-cultural upheaval of the 1970s had been fully reterritorialized by thirty years of neoliberalism. Berardi's words continue to convey an understandable sense of urgency: the breakdown of the present system must be accomplished now, as there is no time to waste. The idea of a choice between utopia, presented as the possibility to imagine and experience a life in opposition to existing capitalist social relations and forms of subjectivity, and barbarism, that is, the conditions to which capitalism subjects human life through a system of calibrated violence, starting with the exploitation of labor, echoes Rosa Luxemburg's warning, in the early twentieth century, of a choice between "socialism or barbarism" in her 1915 Junius Pamphlet.¹ Warnings of the danger of succumbing to capitalist barbarism resonate throughout the twentieth century and accelerate into the twenty-first century. Utopia, the act of thinking, imagining, and finding ways to realize what-is-not-yet, and what is missing from both history and the present, therefore continues to be crucial, notwithstanding its historical defeat.

The power of *Autonomia*'s utopian project lies in the fact that it was not a matter of constructing a theoretical model, but a project performing a practical experiment. In Italy, the idea of utopia as 'ready-made' had been met with suspicion and often

¹ The phrase, attributed to Friederich Engels, was used by Rosa Luxemburg in the Junius Pamphlet, 1915 (Chapter 1): "Bourgeois society stands at a crossroad: either a transition to socialism or a regression into barbarism." Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/index.htm> [Last accessed 23 June 2020].

rejected throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The Autonomists actively refused an actually realized, ready-made image of a better world in the prescriptive image of the Leninist or Stalinist state. Rather, theirs was an experimental work in progress, focused on everyday practices, that refused to follow an already traced path.

With its interest in the improvisational, through *Autonomia* a new concept and practice of utopia comes into being. This is no longer the orthodox Marxist idea of what utopia as revolution will bring, in which the worker will enjoy a day-to-day liberation through the dignity of her labor. That ideal, propagated in the post-War years by the Italian Communist Party and by Stalinist and post-Stalinist Fordism with its pride in productivity, had waned by the early 1970s, overcome by the refusal of work of the '68 generation and by new experimental life practices put in place by this refusal. Neither working for a living or living for work would now do. Working *at living* instead becomes the only option for the Italian Autonomists who do not want to wait for utopia to become reality in another place and in another time: they wanted, and they managed to live utopia by treating it as praxis.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time when utopia as praxis, rather than as historical necessity, was still possible, or at least conceivable. By now, two decades into the twenty-first century, when, in Mark Fisher's phrase, "Capitalism occupies the horizon of the thinkable," (2009: 8), the time of utopia seems to be over. Yet in the face of this foreclosure of the possible, the idea of utopia stands as a signifier of the imagining of an alternative to what is, its fantasy component the first step towards a different reality. As such, even the fantasy of utopia is, *per se*, a form of political action, of praxis. As Fredric Jameson has constantly affirmed in his work, the utopian in all its forms has invariably to do with the political, and the agency it presupposes may exist not only at the level of consciousness, but also in the spheres of desire, fantasy, and imagination. In the face of the general conditions of neoliberal individualism and isolation for the subject, utopia may also be a call to the collective, a strategy to reappropriate and create new forms of the commons.

Today, utopia, through the very means available to the neoliberal order, has been privatized into and downsized to an individual dimension. The mass utopias of the twentieth century, as Susan Buck-Morss points out (2000: x), have each failed and

turned into catastrophe. Buck-Morss fixes the date of the collapse of mass utopia in the East and West in 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, the utopian faith in technology and its promise of social progress and transformation in Europe and in Italy in particular had begun to disintegrate, or at least start to show cracks, earlier, beginning at least in the 1960s. Between Luxemburg's denunciation in 1915, the demise of dreams of mass utopia, the arrival on the European scene of the full Fordist mode of production in the post WWII period, and today's concern for a psycho-eco catastrophe in what Antonio Negri and others call "the social factory", the 1960s and 1970s represent a break, a moment of counterinsurgency against a repressive economic, political and cultural horizon.

Italian *Autonomia* and its tactics, both on and off the factory floor, illustrate the mutation of the concept and practice of utopia during the second part of the twentieth century. What are the conditions under which utopia becomes conceivable? What forms does utopia assume in Italy, from the time of the "economic boom" of the postwar years to the late 1970s? And, last but not least, how did this idea of utopia measure up to the struggles and demands of women? With the waning of the projected image of the ideal society that will come 'after' the revolution, utopia becomes a fragmentary and improvisational practice, a pragmatics that cannot take shape under the ideological and political program of the Italian Communist Party and the unions. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of global social unrest. In Italy the revolt in the factories, universities, and cities were forms of resistance to the institutions that limited the waged and the unwaged's demand for a life autonomous from the Fordist paradigm of production and consumption, and from forms of reproduction that only confirmed the stability of capitalist hegemony. *Autonomia*, in its heterogeneous manifestations and composition, and through its specific politics of refusal—of work, of the party and the unions which had traditionally represented the workers—brought to the fore a new idea and practice of utopia.

The acceleration of work and life in the early 1970s, and the growth of post-Fordist new economic policies aimed at producing and circulating value in ever smoother and more rapid flows, indicated to the Autonomists that time was running

out, and that utopia could no longer be postponed, or simply hoped for. Thus in the world of capitalist realism, Autonomia responded with the realism of utopia. If the 1960s had been the time of great idealism and hope for a different world-to-come, in the 1970s as the time of a renewed power of capital on the global scene, the idea of an 'outside' or alternative to hegemonic culture and politics fades away, to be replaced by a fragmented here and now concept of spatiality, and an intermittent temporality of utopia. It became clear that utopia would not bring about a social palingenesis, a perfectly just society: such a totality is impossible. Subsequent theorists would go on to elaborate a different notion of utopia beyond an idealist and eschatological view of futurity, one that cannot happen in a separate, often pastoral, enclave. Fredric Jameson, in *Archeologies of the Future*, would describe the utopian enclave as a space of utopian fantasy, realized in the contingent temporality of the secessionist formations that he cites: "the urban space, the garden city [...] the various anarchist cooperatives, for example, and the rural communes that follow them much later in the 1960s, [...] all predicated on the idea of utopian closure" (2000: 10). This vision is not sufficient to define either Italian Autonomia and its complex and unstable panorama, or the tactics used by the Autonomists to bring their utopian vision into being, and is even less the case, as we will see, in the case of feminist struggles. The Autonomists' practice, their never fully accomplished production of the possible, is informed by a post-Spinozian theory of the event, and by a rhizomatic, resolutely non-teleological vision of history and of the social that was informed, rather, by Deleuze and Guattari, as it emerges, for example, in the work of Antonio Negri and Berardi himself. Jameson's account of earlier conceptions of utopian secession, insofar as it implies a withdrawal from the existing social space, does not explain the work—and the play—of the Autonomists: Italian Autonomia's impulse was not withdraw into any ideal or idealized enclave, but rather to question, disturb, and attack the power of state and capital. Hope in the future was replaced by making the present the space and the time of the possible. To achieve this rhizomatic, flexible Deleuzian utopia, the Autonomist needed to think of the present as a world where the aporias and contradictions of capitalism left spaces for the possible, the new, the resistant. Utopia could now manifest itself as Benjamin's messianic time in "Theses on the

Philosophy of History" (1940): for Benjamin the *Jetztzeit* cuts through the continuum of history and its claim to progress in order to open ephemeral vistas of the history of the vanquished. This other history, made invisible by the historical narrative of the victors, could now appear for moments, in flashes, and in fragments. Likewise in this period, after the 1960s but before the full Post-Fordist onslaught, utopia materialized intermittently in the improvisational tactics of the Autonomists. In the face of official historiography's erasure of the memory of the vanquished, Benjamin had set out to make visible the discontinuous appearance of something other. In a later historical period that seems about to close ranks upon any aperture to resistance and to the new, the Autonomists learned to reclaim life not in a utopian futurity, but in the messy reality of the everyday—or at least of a part of the everyday. However, theirs is the realization of a messianic time without messianism: utopia, the time and space of an alternative to what is, is no longer a matter of finding, of recognizing, as it had been for Benjamin and the Surrealists before him, the extraordinary, the *merveilleux*, amid the ordinary. Rather, it was a matter of appropriating and creating new spaces for action and for living that might help reshape the everyday.

This sense of a contemporary, flexible utopia has since been mapped by critics such as Davina Cooper. Insofar as we understand utopia as "everyday utopianism", in Michael E. Gardiner's words, "a theoretical position that imagines utopia not as an ideal society located in some romanticized past, "Golden Age", or in some distant, imagined, and perfected future, understood as a "blueprint" [...] but as a series of forces, tendencies, and possibilities that are immanent in the here and now, in the pragmatic activities of daily existence" (2006: 23), the practices and visions of Autonomia are utopian, striking a balance between the desire for the future (*l'avenir* in Negri's words), and the *hic et nunc* of the quotidian. At the same time we can call these practices, in Tom Moylan's terms, forms of "critical utopia", "a vision shared by a variety of oppositional movements that reject the domination and the emerging subject of transnational corporations and post-industrial production and ideological structures" (1986: 10). Inspired by the work of Ernst Bloch and, later, the cultural analysis of Herbert Marcuse, the concept of critical utopia also helps us understand the impulses of the Autonomists, their practices and their

reclamation, and creation, of new spaces of the everyday as testing grounds for an alternative reality in open opposition to the values of capitalism. The collective, the pirate radio station, the rally, the strike, the *comitati di base* [factory collectives], all point to a generalized desire for the common as an attempt at acting and living collectively that are improvisational, experimental, and utopian. That said, while both male Autonomists and feminists both similarly looked for new possibilities and for new spaces of the everyday where an alternative way of life can be experimented with, the conditions for this search indicate a strong inequality: men's everyday was never quite the same as the everyday experienced by women.

II

Autonomia cast itself in opposition to the way Marxism was interpreted, politically and theoretically, by the PCI and its orthodox *intelligentsia*. The foundations of the movement in all its heterogeneity were developed in the previous decade through workers' strikes, such as those at Porto Marghera, in Venice, and at Mirafiori in Turin, in students' protests, and occupations of factories and schools. Fostered in such contexts, the first meaning of autonomy was not some abstract or idealistic notion of a life entirely independent of capitalism, but rather a rebellion against the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, and against the unions (particularly the left-wing CGIL) and the very idea of their mediation and representation.

Autonomist Marxism in Italy emerged almost simultaneously with the "Italian miracle", the "economic boom" that started around 1949 and ended in 1973, with the oil crisis and a global recession. This was the time of an intense Americanization of European economy and culture, and of growing antagonism between labor and capital. The economic, social, and political history of post-WWII Italy was shaped by the Marshall Plan (1948–1952), itself built upon the Bretton Woods program (1947–1973), a system of international financial support to promote European economic development and at the same time keep such nations such as Italy in the American sphere of influence, and away from the USSR. The industrialization and modernization of Italy brought an epochal change in the life of the country: within approximately twenty years Italy changed from a predominantly agrarian society to

an industrial economy capable of competing with France, England, and Germany. The 'economic miracle' was propelled by a particularly aggressive Fordist production system in the industrial North, which created jobs and attracted a massive exodus of immigrants from the poorer South. This phase of economic development was fraught with contradictions: the 'miracle' did not work in the same way for all social classes, and provoked the workers' protest and resistance to their alienation. This alienation, and the working class' series of strikes from the late 1950s, were reinforced by the workers' refusal to be brought to order by their traditional representatives, the unions and the party. Autonomist Marxism has its origins exactly in this refusal, in this break from the Communist party and the traditional forms of organization of labor, as conceived during the 1920s by Palmiro Togliatti, the most important Communist leader in post-WWII Italy. The refusal of a vanguard of the workers' movement meant that, during the 1950s and 1960s, instead of mediation, workplace sabotage and strikes became the tactics deployed by workers against exploitation and alienation.

The disenchantment with the Communist party and its ideological orthodoxy was also sparked by the publication of Marx's *Grundrisse* in Italian in 1968. From it, the Workerist movement, which originated from the radical Left political group *Potere Operaio* [Workers' Power] in the early 1970s, derived a radically new notion of work: from a means of emancipation to an activity to be contested. Together with the rejection of the party vanguard, the refusal of work became the signature program of Workerism. For Mario Tronti, one of the key theorists of Workerism, labor or work under capitalism, as the exploitative extraction of surplus value from the body of the worker, had to be abolished. The spontaneous emergence of an autonomous way of working and living demanded that capitalist valorization be replaced by the worker's self-valorization, a call to reappropriate time from waged labor and separate life from work in order to collectively invent new forms of existence. Workerism theorized and acknowledged the coming onto the social stage of a new working class, independent of the party and its teleological narrative of the revolution, and capable of upsetting the relations between labor and capital through the refusal of work.

The end of the 1960s marked the high point of a decade of social unrest with the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, an intense period of workers' strikes all over the country,

following the évènements of 1968, which, as in May in Paris that same year, brought the occupations of many Italian universities—from Palermo to Rome, to Florence, Bologna and Milan—and the student's revolts against the state. Tronti regarded 1968 and the students' protest as a dilution of class struggle into cultural politics and ideology critique. However, the students' protest and their alliance with the workers in Paris and in Rome opened the terrain to a new, expanded form of class assemblage, the very class composition that would soon characterize the movements that would converge and constitute *Autonomia*. While *Potere Operaio* focused on the factory worker and the working class as the site of the production of value through labor, and looked at the non-waged as more peripheral subjects, many others fighting for autonomy and recognition became the constituency of *Autonomia*: for instance, gays and lesbians, women, the movement of *Wages for Housework*, students, and immigrants. Notwithstanding the PCI's attempt to discredit this new social formation, that cohered (or not) under the umbrella of *Autonomia*, as *Lumpenproletariat*, that is, as disenfranchised and politically non-self-aware, the autonomous groups, in all their heterogeneity, thought of themselves in very political terms as an exploited "social factory" (Thoburn 2010: 126).

Amid this heterogeneity, and the heterogeneous itself, there emerged the scenario of 1970s Italian feminism. In the post-war period and through the 1950s, the Italian Communist party's organization UDI, *Unione Donne Italiane* [Unified Italian Women], had led women's collective demands regarding labor. UDI fought for equal pay, worked to protect women workers and organized collective bargaining. The new feminist movements of the 1970s first emerged in the North, in Milan, Padua, and Trento, and soon became a national phenomenon. The first wave was constituted by students and middle class women who, through their newly granted access to education during the 1960s, became the first emancipated women in Italy, and also the first generation to live as adults after the process of modernization the country had undergone in the 1950s and 1960s (Beccalli, 1994: 93). Rather than equality and emancipation, the new feminism reclaimed women's difference from men, and a critique of patriarchy as its point of departure.

At the same time, many feminist groups took different approaches to their critique of patriarchal society. While a number of women's bookstores flourished along with feminist collectives, for instance the Women's Bookstore in Milan and the DEMAU collective (Demystification of Authoritarianism), other women organized groups of self-awareness modelled on the work of American feminists. The issues that many groups focused on were the role of women in patriarchy, women's health, women's cultural production, and gendered violence. When feminism became a mass movement in Italy, it generated a new political consciousness, that, in turn, translated into concrete outcomes: thanks to the women's vote in two crucial referendums, divorce became legal in 1974 and abortion in 1978. Many feminist groups shared the Left's commitment to social change and contributed to organizing factory workers and neighborhoods. Their presence in other autonomist groups was not always easy: the women's double militancy, their double commitment to the struggle for women's liberation, and their work with the *compagni* [the male comrades], or, better, the conditions under which they collaborated with male autonomists, was often problematic. An example is the feminists' participation in, and successive separation from, the group *Lotta Continua* [Continuous Struggle]. Here, they found themselves discriminated against as women, just as they were in Italian society at large, hence the women's critique of the sexist division of labor and of the hierarchies that characterized male autonomist groups, and the women's will to carry on their political and social struggles independently. One of the most visible among these independent feminist groups was *Lotta Femminista* [Feminist Struggle] based in Padua. Unlike liberal or socialist feminism, *Lotta Femminista* approached the question of the social condition of women through a Marxist and Workerist lens, and with Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, and Silvia Federici, founded the *Wages for Housework* movement. *Lotta Femminista* brought to the fore a problem that had been barely, if ever, confronted by Marxism: the question of women's work of reproduction in the home. This work has never been compensated for by the state, since it is not recognized as work. As such, the women of the Padua collective focused less on the other feminists' demands for equality in the factories, stressing instead the need to concentrate on women's domestic work: "All this work that the

woman does, an average of 99.6 hours weekly, without possibilities of strikes, nor absenteeism, nor to make any demands" (Dalla Costa, 1973).

As Félix Guattari points out, *Autonomia* was "a proliferation of margins" (Guattari, 2007: 12–13). The factory worker becomes, at this point, only one agent in a constellation of subjects in revolt. The cohorts that participated in *Autonomia* were "ideologically heterogeneous, territorially dispersed, organizationally fluid, politically marginalized," as Steve Wright puts it. (2002: 152). The movement took inspiration from foreign struggles and theorizations of revolutionary praxis that ranged from the work of C.L.R. James to Michel Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France (Thoburn, 2003: 10). As the economist Christian Marazzi has commented: "There is nothing Italian about the class warfare in Italy" (2007: 250).

Franco Berardi sees *Autonomia* and the Movement of 1977 as the culmination of an intense phase of Italian class struggle. As he describes it, "Cultural transformation, mass creativity, and the refusal of work are the dominant forces of 1977 [...]. During those years, the utopia of workers' liberation was a massive driving force, a power for organization and the call for action for the whole society" (2007: 152). The refusal of a way of working that, in Marx's formulation, "transforms life into death on credit"² becomes, in Berardi's view, "a program for the liberation of existing energies" of a working class whose next generation was more educated and provided with an increased level of technical and scientific expertise.

The liberation of the creative energies of the Autonomists, and the rejection of labor as death-in-life, and therefore the channeling of the subject's physical and intellectual energies away from work, was an attempt to invent and experience new forms of existence away from the work ethic as well as from the domesticity (from which women could not escape so easily) and individualism of the model bourgeois family, the idealized social unity being promoted by the media. They experimented with forms of collective action, and cultural production which turned utopia into

² "Work is always already capital; in real subsumption work is not an autonomous activity sold to capital, but human activity called forth and immanently structured by capital" (Marx, 1976: 451, quoted in Thoburn, 2003: 108).

a kind of praxis. The rejection of the wage-earning system did not imply the truly (unmanageable) utopian idea of being 'outside' capital. Autonomia refused capitalist social relations and the process of valorization through work: self-valorization was carried on in experiments in living marginally, outside of capitalist relations—for example, in squatting, or stealing, or through countercultural expressions of all kinds. The idea was not to retrench into an ascetic frugality, but to appropriate and enjoy what a worker or an unemployed person could not afford: hence the tactics of squatting, and of *autoriduzione*, 'auto-reduction,' that is, the self-discounting of tickets to cinemas and on buses, the self-reduction of prices of commodities in general, in making of fake, self-made train tickets, or the refusal to pay bills after eating, *en masse*, in expensive restaurants. In all of these cases, shot through with an energy upheld by joy, utopia was realized as a 'natural' redistribution of wealth, at least until the police arrived. Yet the question of Autonomia and money is important: it shows that the Autonomists did not operate on the principle of the enclosed and self-sufficient utopian totality, for example the sub-cultural totality of the self-supporting commune. Rather than secluding themselves in a separate space where they might recreate the perfect society, the autonomists wanted to be a part of the world while they disturbed it and contested it (Thoburn, 2003: 127). Yet we cannot forget, as Federici demonstrates in her essay "Wages Against Housework" (1975), that this invention of other forms of existence away apart from the family and domesticity are predicated upon women's work of reproduction.

III

"La rivoluzione e' finita. Abbiamo vinto."

["The revolution is over. We won."]

Ironic headline in the zine *Zut*, Bologna,
June 1977 (Berardi, 1997: 50).

"Toward the end of the decade we were
exhausted by that kind of life and
activism. All our margins of reproduction,

notoriously narrower than men's,
comrades included, had been
eroded.”

Mariarosa dalla Costa (2005: 12).

Through the different forms of self-valorization, *Autonomia's* utopianism took shape. Its creative wing in Bologna, in particular, invented a new language, a new way of doing politics, and new forms of media communication to directly intervene in the quotidian. The years 1974–77 were those of the *Indiani Metropolitani* [the Metropolitan Indians], a subculture of *Autonomia* made of unemployed and disenfranchised youth, who identify with the Native Americans' marginalization, of free radio stations,³ of zines and new publications, flyers, and posters through which the desire for an alternative culture took shape. The refusal of work, enacted by factory workers and theorized by Tronti during the 1960s, opened a whole new horizon for life. The Autonomists were impatient: not willing to wait for a mythical time 'after' the revolution, they turned utopia into a process to elaborate new tactics of resistance, and to express the accumulated energy of individuals through *détournement* and guerrilla communication.

The contrast between the ludic quality of the *Indiani Metropolitani's* performances in Bologna and Rome and elsewhere, the maodadaism of the 'zines (Thoburn, 2003: 131) and the pirate radios, most famously Bologna's Radio Alice, and the struggles of the women of *Lotta Femminista* could not have been starker. The women's different articulation of utopia is fully visible in Federici's "Wages Against Housework" (1975). The essay opens with the arresting claim that wages for housework are not simply "a thing", a matter of money, still very important for women's independence, but rather "a political perspective" (n.p.): getting the state to repay women for their work of reproduction would involve a radical transformation of family and social relations, as well as a new vision of femininity. Presented as "an act of love" rather than work,

³ Although *Radio Alice*, in Bologna, is now the most famous and most widely studied free radio of the late 1970s, see also *Radio Sherwood* in Padua and *Radio Onda Rossa* [Red Wave] in Rome.

housework turns all women into “unwaged happy servants” (n.p.). The very ideology of domestic femininity that would fall apart if housework were recognized as labor. Imposed upon women, housework is nonetheless presented as “a natural attitude of the female physique or personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depths of the female character [...] it’s natural and unavoidable (says capitalism) therefore it’s not work” (n.p.). In fact, adds Federici, “housework is the most pervasive manipulation, the most subtle and mystified violence capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class” (n.p.). The ideological subtext (“to sacrifice yourself and even get pleasure from it”) implied in the feminization of housework, contributes to its effectiveness and mystifying character, to what is truly “the enslavement of women” (n.p.).

Women and their work in the home, Federici theorizes, cannot be compared to waged labor in the public sphere: while, on the one hand, housework is calculable like waged labor (“99.6 hours weekly,” n.p.), on the other it is incommensurable. Not only does housework have no established, fixed schedule (women are on call all the time), but it’s also a work that does not allow self-valorization and freedom: striking, and absenteeism are simply not possible, since women’s housework reaches out through multiple spheres—material, emotional, sexual. Because of this multiplicity, the stakes of a possible refusal of housework would be extremely high. Federici quotes Mariarosa Dalla Costa: “We’ve never seen a general strike. We have only seen men, generally men from the big factories, come out onto the streets, while their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, went on cooking in the kitchen” (n.p.). The refusal of housework would imply the refusal of the position capital has created for women: “When we struggle for a wage”, writes Federici, “we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them. We struggle to break capitalism’s plan for women” (n.p.). Federici’s critique here, is already, *per se*, a form of everyday, concrete utopia. In her vision, obtaining wages for housework can be only the initial stage of a process that, successively, will bring a more comprehensive social change: “Wages for housework is not a demand among others, but a political perspective that opens a new ground for the struggle, beginning with women, for the whole working class” (n.p.). The aim of the struggle is truly revolutionary: it wants to overthrow capitalism

and patriarchal oppression, in a denunciatory move that exposes in one stroke the sexism of capitalism as well as that of the Left. In the immediate present of the 1970s, this feminist utopia became real in the women's demand for new and better social services, and in the socialization and collectivization of housework, with the creation of "the services that women want, organized according to their values; [...] of the day care centers we want, which are different from what the state (with its education to its values) proposes [...] We need to organize what we want to eat and ask the state to pay for it, instead of having the state organize what we eat in cafeterias" (n.p.). In all of these demands the immediately material, corporeal dimension of utopia mixes with a more visionary side of feminist consciousness, which characteristically defines the double tempo of women's desire. Before taking place in the future, utopia needs to take place in the everyday. Capitalist oppression, Federici concludes, will end, and the working class will liberate itself, only when women are paid for their work at home and are recognized as political and economic subjects. This liberation is a classed, gendered and generational problem. Political action, for men and women, becomes a pragmatics, to be realized through different gendered modalities, rather than an ethical horizon determined by historical necessity. This is a hands-on utopia, not a teleology. It is a utopia that might happen in the here and now, and for which, as all Autonomists know, they must work hard.

IV

The year 1977 was the *annus mirabilis* and *annus horribilis* for the Autonomists, a year that marked both the climax and the implosion of *Autonomia* under police repression. This is also the moment when the political and economic analysis of various autonomist groups seemed to swerve towards, and end up coinciding with, key positions of the Communist Party. It was also the moment when other groups, unsatisfied with the ongoing tactics of *Autonomia*, turned to armed struggle.

The special issue of *Le operaie della casa* to which I was pointed by Federici addresses this swerve and other important issues, calling to task, quoting and disputing the evolving thinking of the increasingly militant and now even more heterogeneous thinking of the *compagni* as stated in their many publications: from

Senza tregua [Without Respite] to *Per il potere operaio* [For Workers' Power], *Rosso* [Red] to *A/traverso* [Across], *Ombre rosse* [Red Shadows] and *Foglio settimanale in movimento* [Weekly paper in movement]. The women's lucid counter-analysis offers an antidote to more naïve utopian tendencies of some autonomist writing; at the same time, they are also wary of the increasingly militant tendencies, and even more so of some factions' apparent return to PCI orthodoxies. The feminists' critique focuses on a series of important points. First, they find the new warnings by one faction of the Autonomists, about the dangers of economic underdevelopment, deeply problematic. In contrast to the earlier emphasis on 'the refusal of work,' this strand warned that without ever-increased production, Italy risked falling behind the rest of industrialized Europe. Thus, it called on the workers to work and produce more, which was very much in line with the Leninist politics of the Italian Communist Party. For the women whose key demand was to have their domestic work in the home recognized as labor and therefore waged, the ambivalence about work in Autonomist debates was problematic. Next, given that their demand was for an area of human labor previously not recognized as work to be thought of as such, they were bound to meet calls for 'the refusal of work' with skepticism. In brief, they saw 'the refusal of work' as a masculinist illusion, possible only if the comrades who called for it made invisible the actual work of the women who sustained it. Further, they distrusted the renewed calls for an increase in the work of production, as these calls referred only to factory work, and failed to take into account the call for the expansion of the notion of what constituted work and production which they themselves were advocating. The feminists' core demand, that 'work' itself be rethought as a basis for true gender equality, and for rethinking bourgeois ideologies of the relation between family and work, male and female workers' rights, and the division of the public and the private, challenged the fundamentally masculinist assumptions upon which Autonomist utopianism was built.

Particularly indigestible for the feminists in the midst of modern consumer culture, and in the context of the Communist party's call to production, was some Autonomists' call to a Communist asceticism. First, the women point out that this in effect coincides with the state's politics of austerity at the time of the oil

crisis. To avoid the trap of what they characterized as the myth of the value of increased production that was shared both by capitalists and the PCI, and also against the autonomist improvisational and utopian ideology of 'making do,' the feminists explode into "Vogliamo tutto!" ("We want everything!") In other words, after having contributed to produce the value of which the capitalist state is proud, they not only want to have this acknowledged for the first time, but also, through wages paid to them, to partake in the abundance provided by capital, since they are key to its value-making. Thus the women adamantly refuse any overt or covert rhetoric of austerity, especially if it is couched as 'the refusal of work.' The idea, which has again gained traction in the new millennium, that through technological innovation and modernization capital may 'free' not only itself but also the working class, a position embraced by other Autonomists, is another point of contention for the women of the Padua collective. "Exploitation," they warn, "will not disappear because it is organized by a state technocracy." Rather, "What will free the forces of invention and creativity of the working class is not technological advancement *per se*, but [...] the liberation of labor from its forced condition, which is what suffocates all our lives today. As long as we work in order to survive: no creativity, no invention" (*Le Operaie della Casa*, 1977: 3. My translation). Thus their demand is twofold: first, that the state, as well as male theorists and activists recognize their domestic work as labor, and second, that this work be freed "from its forced condition" in order for it to become creative, inventive—in short, for it to be part of the utopian project.

The central issue, for the whole journal, and the main point of antagonism with other Autonomist groups, is the struggle for wages, which the male *compagni*, in theorizing the future factory work (by both men and women), have now given up. Only wages, they recognize, will prove the acknowledgement of their claim that domestic work in the home is in fact labor. Thus the Autonomist call to carry the struggle beyond wage-claims, while appearing radical, is deeply troubling to feminists—and risks lapsing into a dangerous agreement with the attitude of the capitalist bosses. Soon, the women make clear that the charge of being reactionary is based on more fundamental charge: misogyny and sexism. Here, the *compagni autonomi* are directly

accused of sexism: further, the writers make clear that it is not only the regime of capitalist work and production, but the (male-centered and led) struggle to overcome it, that is made possible by the unacknowledged labor of women:

Sexist is your proposal of 'work for all,' that does not acknowledge that women have always worked full time. [...] This is the very labor that allows men to reproduce themselves, both for their work in the factory and for organizing their struggles [...]. How many men could make it to their meetings, rallies, demonstrations [...] if they weren't supported by their mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, the women who keep the children, cook, clean, and so on? (1977: 4).

Here, as the invisibility of the working conditions of women is spelled out with disarming and clear immediacy, the key workers in the 'service economy' assert the value of their hitherto unacknowledged labor. In the decades since this was written, the value of 'service work' in the 'emotional economy' has been newly theorized in various anti-capitalist critiques, from Arlie Hochschild to Silvia Federici. However, this has mostly taken place in the west, as manual factory work has been outsourced to the global south (where it is often performed by women), so that a greater portion of the economies of 'developed' countries are devoted to service work in the public sphere, again often performed by women (from flight attendants to teachers). The fact remains however that the key practical call of the Autonomist women, that domestic work be recognized as part of the economy of labor and therefore waged, remains unfulfilled. They write extensively in the journal of women's 'double shift': after a day in a factory, women return home to another shift in the household. Their critique, therefore, calls for parity with their male counterparts within the existing order, as a necessary precondition for any utopian thinking, if that utopia is to be for everyone. Otherwise, they make clear, utopian thinking—specifically utopian thinking that advocates 'the refusal of work' and the disavowal of further wage claims—risks becoming a reactionary copy of the calls for 'austerity' of the capitalists in time of 'crisis.'

The same compelling immediacy reoccurs at the very end of the journal, after the writers of *Le operaie della casa* refuse, and strongly disassociate themselves from, “the myth of armed struggle.” In the last section, “[...] E non chiedeteci il lutto, (“And don’t ask us to mourn for you”) comes the most incisive article of the journal issue. Here the claims of service work within the family and in the domestic sphere, which up to now have been rendered invisible in materialist critique and analysis of the condition of the proletariat, are not only articulated with directness; the authors make it clear that even the struggle against these conditions is possible only through the unacknowledged service work of the women. Further, this critique expands to explain how, while women’s domestic work in the family goes unrecognized, frustration and alienation will always exist at the very heart of the supposed caring and ‘private’ life of the workers. Finally, there emerges, here, the basis for a Marxist analysis in biopolitical terms, since service work embraces matters of birth and death, of caring for the sick, and of such measures of physical wellbeing as the length of one’s life. Implicitly posed here, therefore, is the following question: what would utopia look like in the age of biopolitics, when the era of manual factory work is replaced by a situation in which most workers are service workers? Biopolitics emerges as the critical horizon of the feminist Autonomists’ demands—and their challenge to conceptions of utopia adequate to the coming neoliberal order. It is as if the psychocatastrophe to which Berardi refers in this essay’s opening quote was foreseen in the late seventies by the Autonomist feminists. This is the moment when the women of the Padua collective spell out how the universal subaltern condition of women gets replicated in the demands that the supposedly progressive and illuminated *compagni* put on women:

When you are hiding from the police we are left with your children on our shoulders [...] and while we raise your children you find that family life is suffocating, that you need to have other relationships outside of the home. For women things are different. If you feel lonely, we have always been lonely and alone. If you feel tired, we have been always tired [...] What is your living in illegality when compared to our living in mass illegality when we have an

abortion, or when we steal in a supermarket to make ends meet at the end of the month? That which you experience as the repression of your struggle, for us is our daily bread [...]. They say we live longer. It's because we cannot afford to die until everything is in order and clean [...] We need to assist the elderly in the hospital, make sure you don't rot during the last months and years of your lives, and feed you, take care of you, comfort you, clean you, spend nights on chairs to watch over you, knowing that nobody will do for us what we have done for you. How can we qualify your indifference towards our lives? [...] We have no time to waste in mourning, we have any interest in negotiating to improve our condition: mourning has never changed one iota of our destiny (Padua Collective of Feminist Struggle, 1977: 26).

This clear, direct account of the condition of women is focused resolutely on the present, the time of the now: in these words there is no space for the future, and even less for utopia, for any improved futurity.

V

How does the experiential, utopian pragmatics theorized and realized by Berardi and other autonomists measure up to the feminists' denunciation? The title of Guy Debord's 1959 film on the Situationists reads, "On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time". Autonomia was this passage, this brief time. It was, for all that, a moment of the possible, a moment that signaled, and demonstrated, that another world is possible, that *there is an alternative* and it's not in a distant future. The futurity ingrained in the present sought by the Autonomists announces itself as a new understanding of utopia and of its temporality, one rooted in improvisation and imagined as a process of engagement with the everyday. Since the 1970s, after the neoliberal recomposition of capital led to a closing of ranks against labor and affirmed the impossibility of the possible, utopia has appeared only intermittently, in sporadic moments of visibility, which earlier I compared to the Benjaminian flashing of the *Jetztzeit*. The closer we come to our time, the further the horizon of freedom, insurgence, and creative commonality put in place by the refusal of work in the 1960s and 1970s recedes. Nonetheless we cannot renounce

this very horizon, and we need to remember that *Autonomia*, with its utopian charge, emerged at a time almost as dark and repressive as the present. We also have to admit that the difference between the 1960s–1970s and today is not simply a quantitative one, a matter of degree. At that time the war of *manoeuvre* between labor and capital made the enemy recognizable, and made clear what one was fighting against. The same cannot be said today, when exploited or underemployed workers have become their own worst enemy, pressed by debt and immobilized by a conjuncture in which (scarce) precarious and underpaid labor has become highly desirable, and in which work and life have become realigned to coincide perfectly. In this moment, when in the west service work is replacing manufacturing, it is time to revisit the feminist Autonomist critique of the male comrades' blind spot about the value of such labor in its original habitus, the home. Nevertheless, despite their theoretical lacunae, the new versions of utopian thinking advanced by the Autonomists still possess a strong radical charge. In our present inertia, at a time when utopias seem to have evaporated for good, it's important to study how *Autonomia's* pragmatics of utopia was achieved, albeit temporarily. Doing so, we need to remember that this version of utopia was achieved at the exclusion and at the expense of those whose work made the Autonomists' political commitment, as well as their play, possible. The "passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time" is for all women still an unfinished project. It's men who can afford to be nostalgic for the utopias that became real approximately fifty years ago, and now appear foreclosed by neoliberal conjuncture. Women, on the other hand, cannot stop hoping and working for what they haven't yet obtained. Theirs remains a minor apocalypse, in the here and now, an unfinished struggle that cannot be abandoned, with or without utopia.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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