

THINKING AUTONOMY

In the early 70s, influenced by the women's movement and sexual politics but also learning from the experience and practice of student and worker movements in Italy and Germany, there were different strands that came together in our thinking autonomy. Drawing from a liberal tradition that framed autonomy as a matter of thinking for yourself and so separating yourself from authorities, including parents, teachers and organisations that seek to define what is good for you we also recognised the limits of a liberalism that did not engage with class, gender, 'race' and ethnic relations of power and subordination.

The women's movement recognised the need to organise autonomously around their own needs and political demands, so refusing the Leninist assumption that women's liberation would have to wait till after the revolution against capitalism had been achieved. As there could be no revolution without women's liberation, so we would also say something similar about racism, homophobia and disabilities. People had to organise around their own needs in the present and this would involve disengaging themselves from the ways that a dominant capitalist patriarchy sought to define their needs for them.

We worked in tension with movements like Solidarity which insisted that workers had to find their own means of organisation as they separated their needs and desires from ways they had been defined within capitalism. But in East London Big Flame we believed that we could work *with* people and so shape forms of intervention that were non-authoritarian. We had also learnt from Italian Marxist traditions and ideas of the refusal to work, that there was *more to life than work*, however important work was in people's lives, and that this involved a process of *disengaging* with the terms in which capitalism defined the value and meaning of human life. As the women's movement learnt, it would take time and attention – a reflective and emotional space of your own – to disconnect from the ways that different authorities had *set the terms* through which you defined your life. Autonomy as a process of self-discovery also involved a recognition of the significance of the *quality of relations* we had with others and the ways that fully human relationships were always equal relations. Sometimes therapy could be a vital resource in people gaining an awareness of how they had lived out the dreams of others and never really had the chance to shape their own dreams and visions.

But additionally autonomy related to the ways we were developing prefigurative forms also through the communal and collective relationships that we were living in the East End. We wanted to live the relationships that we believed in, and so were consciously involved in shaping *experimental* ways of living and relating. It could also be difficult to find a balance as we recognised the needs of the struggle and the demand, as the language of the time went, 'to struggle in every area of our lives'. There was always so much to do that it was easy to get drained and it was in the turn towards therapy that we sought to engage with our own family histories in order to shape a vision of autonomy that was not still framed through a Protestant ethics of

self-denial. As we learnt to value our own needs so we challenged the values of a capitalist society which have only intensified with neo-liberalism, so that money has become the value of all life and if activities cannot be quantified they cannot be deemed to have value.

The need to disengage from neo-liberal values and to recognise *how* they have come to shape the self-conception of a younger generation has been a concern of Occupy. The housing spaces that were available to us through squatting and the time that could be achieved through the benefits system have closed down since the 70s, and young people can feel more regulated and controlled by the demands of new technology and the fear of not being *up with things*. But this only makes concerns with autonomy more vital as people learn to ask more fundamental philosophical questions about what they value in life and what kind of relationships they want to have both with themselves and with others. In a world threatened by global climate change and the global financial crisis of 2008, these questions become more pressing as people realise that they are living in more, not less unequal societies. Recent movements in Turkey and Brazil, following the examples of the Arab Spring, show political movements which are not narrowly defined through self-interest but a wider democratic concern for a more equal and just world.

Vic.