

WOMEN & THE POLITICS OF AUTONOMY

It is often hard to bring together, both in our heads and in practice, the politics of autonomy as developed from economic analysis* and the struggles in the Italian car factories, and the politics of autonomy as a struggle to change our own lives and personal and sexual relationships. I think our experience in the Women's Movement has shown us that these are not two separate kinds of struggle. Because as women our economic oppression and our personal and sexual oppression have been so clearly one and the same thing, it has been easier for us to see the struggles for the two forms of 'autonomy' as really one and the same struggle.

In the industrial situation, the politics of autonomy means the assertion of our own needs as against the needs of the bosses. We don't need to work, but under capitalism we have to work because we need money to live. So we have rejected collective bargaining procedures and productivity deals which have offered us more money for more work. Our aim is to earn more and work less; it is an aim which directly opposes the need and threatens the survival of capitalism.

Women have often been unaware of the need of capitalism for our labour in the home, but we have been all the more aware of our own needs for more money and less work. Our struggles have reflected these needs - collectivising child care, co-operative food buying, rent strikes, claiming. And in our struggles for birth control and abortion we have asserted the needs of our own lives without a thought for capitalism's needs for a planned labour force. (Sometimes we have been forced to accept productivity deals, too. You take a part-time job on top of the housework if you want to live above the breadline. Or you look after another woman's kids for money while she goes out to work. If you want a council flat, you have to get pregnant.)

Capital doesn't need people, it needs human labour power. In fact people as people often interfere with its smooth running. If you want to stay in bed with someone you love, you'll be late for work. If you get friendly with your workmates, you'll resist being moved about. If you feel under the weather you have a day off. Sometimes you just don't feel like working at all. But to fit in with the needs of capital we have to surrender our identities as people and become just labour power - that's what we get paid for. It's obvious that enjoying your life and working 10 hours a day at Fords are contradictory; but the contradiction is obscured as soon as you identify yourself not as a person but as a worker, as human labour power, because as a worker your needs are not opposed to the needs of capitalism. You need to work, capitalism needs you to work, and together (with the help of the union) you sort something out. Maybe you end up like the man in the Fords ad, with a colour telly, and a fitted carpet stretching from wall to wall, and years of drudgery and boredom stretching out in front of you.

Women also undergo a loss of identity in taking on the functions which capitalist society demands of us. In the course of our lives we may be asked to function not only as living labour power, but as loving wife & mother, unsullied and virtuous madonna, sex object, dumb half-wit, efficient & capable helpmeet, whore, moral educator, psychiatrist, and chambermaid. Sometimes it gets very confusing, and if we manage to function at all, it's only because we started our training very young. The discovery of ourselves as people, the assertion of our needs and wants (which may be material or emotional or sexual or just for more time to be alive) is our expression of political autonomy. For many of us, this process of self-discovery started in the Women's Movement.

People at work challenge the wage-relationship by demanding money not conditional on productivity, by striking, by destroying their products; they stay away from work if they can afford to, they find ways of sciving, they arrange their time so they can talk with their mates or read, sometimes they just fuck up the production line. They refuse to be workers. Women refuse to spend all day with the kids, refuse to keep the home spotless, refuse to be perfect wives & mums, refuse to be pretty, refuse to be patient, refuse to have sex we don't want & kids we don't want. We refuse to be 'Women'.

P.S. And we refuse to carry on doing it even if we get paid for it - No to Wages for Housework.

* i.e. the economic analysis of Tronti, Baldi, Bologna and Neri.