

Tjaša Pureber:
Problems *of* Resistance and
Problems *with* Resistance

For too long people have been hearing ultimatums from governments and neoliberal institutions like the WTO¹ and IMF,² attempts to persuade everyone that they possess the one single Truth, that there is no possible alternative to their Truth.³ Numerous movements across the world are constantly proving that different realities can coexist. In consequence of critical self-evaluations by movements and activists various questions have arisen. It is not within the scope of this essay to offer ultimate answers. Rather, it is my intention to stress some thoughts about the challenges that rebellious movements are facing, which hopefully will generate a broader discussion about the political stakes at present. Besides focusing on the extension of the political, I would also like to talk about the concept of the revolution today – taking the experience of the student movement *Avtonomna tribuna* in Slovenia as a basis.⁴

It seems that after each larger revolutionary episode – the student rebellions of 1968, the fall of the Berlin wall, protests against the war in Iraq or the anti-G8 demonstrations – the time comes when the respective movements somehow lose the energy to set up new projects and make demands. To start off with, the feeling of ‘power-to’, the power to create different realities from the existing capitalist order, becomes much more real ‘in the streets’. Revolution seems to be within hand’s reach, especially when many people are concurrently fighting for a cause across the world. From this perspective it is understandable that activists feel defeated when they see time and again that the movement has been criminalised or its discourse has been incorporated into the dominant discourse, especially when they do not immediately see the results of their rebellion.

It seems that in a system that highly values productivity people want to see immediate results, also when it comes

to resisting the directive in the resistance. Radical politics, however, cannot articulate itself in terms of means and ends (Agamben 2004), just as a fundamentally different society cannot come about overnight. Revolution is a process and should not be seen as a one-time event that makes a clear cut with the previous system and from that point onward builds a society that has abolished former power relations and mutually recognises human dignity. The creation of the new society must be a long-term, constant process (Rocker 1949/1986). Even though many movements and theorists talked about this line of events, the project eventually turned out to be about taking over the power, i.e. the state power. And even though the implementation of such procedures was often seen as only one step in the social transformation,⁵ it often was the most important stage of the revolution. Rather than rebellion having a negative connotation, it became something positive since it was establishing a “different” state (Holloway 2004: 19).

In the past, revolutions have left people unsatisfied because they did not truly offer a real alternative. Rebellions in the 20th century mostly focused on the issues of labour and the avant-garde taking over the power. Therefore, whoever expected that an avant-garde party or common idea of revolution would materialise, finds today’s resistance much less exciting. This resistance does not arise from the centre, but from the margins of society. It is generated by exclusion and non-hierarchic ways of living. Therefore, an alternative is not something that will happen in the future, but is something that is already taking place in everyday rebellion (Zadnikar 2005: 9). Excluded, unwanted and invisible, whoever constitutes the pockets of resistance is therefore fighting against the neoliberal force that is trying to eliminate them (Marcos 2002: 54). Revolutionary resistance to

capitalism has been a typical long-term strategy of revolutionary movements; the daily creation of new realities, then, is seen as a way to a radically different society. This type of revolutionary strategy is therefore the guideline that represents the motive and gives sense to everyday experience and prevents that political decisions are postponed, which could occur without those guidelines.

Ever since the debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein the overall dominant paradigm within 20th century revolutionary circles seems to take two directions only: reform⁶ or revolution.⁷ The problem is that both reform and revolution are focused on the state, which is seen as an autonomous entity, whereas in fact the state has no such autonomy.⁸ In the network of human relations, the state is only one more factor and as long as labour is organised on the basis of capitalist relations,⁹ the state can only do things that sustain a capitalist mode of production. To put it differently, every government that significantly worked against the interests of the capital, would only provoke the capital to move away from its territory (Holloway 2004: 20), since capital, unlike people, has hardly any limits when it comes to moving on an international level. Further, the state cannot organise an ‘autonomous’ mode of production. Governments always depend on ‘private’ production through taxes, for every state needs to demonstrate its power via materialised means (army, police, welfare state, etc.). Therefore, the previous statement can even be radicalised. The state can not only *choose* to work in the interest of the capital, it always *must* work in the interest of the capital, since it is precisely the private accumulation that makes the state and its government exist as such (Offe 1985). Anarcho-syndicalists therefore suggest that governments cannot achieve a socialist order. This socialist order must be created through solidarity

and cooperation among workers in each of the production branches, where factories are taken over by the producers, i.e. the workers themselves. Different production entities are then autonomous and are producing and distributing in the interest of communities, which are constructed on the basis of a voluntary consensus (Chomsky 1972/1986: 612).¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite its support of capital, the state can to some extent regulate the capitalist exploitation and distribution of wealth through the mechanisms of the welfare state. In fact, as Hardt and Negri point out, no economic market can exist without political order and regulation¹¹ (Hardt and Negri 2005: 165). Privatising public goods certainly represents a danger to every aspect of human life; this article, then, does not put forward the argument that the state should not intervene in the economy. The article posits that when the revolution focuses on the state it cannot generate a change in the economic or general social order.

Most revolutionary struggles, having achieved some successful political actions, suspended their own progression once they faced state issues. Struggle is lost once the revolution starts focusing on the state take-over, when the logic of the power-over becomes the logic of the revolution. The struggle for a non-hierarchic anti-capitalist world suddenly changes into a struggle merely for a different regime (Holloway 2004: 23).

The emphasis on the negativity of resistance is important in every political struggle. The question of what we want is far less important than the question of what we do not want. Resistance is legitimate even without a clear vision of the future. By creating community in resistance we are already creating the society we wish to have, namely the society that is fundamentally different from the existing one – a society whose core elements will be brotherhood, solidarity

and non-hierarchic relations.¹² The negation of negating our human existence is at the same time already the basis of the humanity that is yet to come. Bakunin said that a passion for destruction is also a creative passion. Through the negativity of resistance both the subject and the form in which the subject explains the world to himself and others is created (Jeffs 1998: 39). Also, the process of negation is endless. There is no positive dialectics in the resistance, no synthesis that would resolve all the conflicts. Even if we, roughly speaking, succeed in creating a society in which no individuals exercise authoritarianism, we must still fight against the repetition of power-over. In that sense we are talking about the endless process of rebellion. Since we also create ourselves in the struggle against self-denial, the final goal should not be the safe harbour. The “final” aim must be a state of constant becoming and transforming, our liberation from negation, which is also the creation of everything that is human in the sense of fulfilling our creative potential (Holloway 2004).¹³

So the current challenge is not to think of revolution as the taking over of the state power, but to see revolution as a concept that breaks with the logic of the state. However, the concept of revolution seems to be a taboo theme even for the left and for the alterglobalisation movement. Far too frequently theorists talk about social change, reforms of capitalism, but not about the revolution and the abolishment of capitalism as such. However, as goes for the concept of revolution, the concept of the political too is limited to state boundaries. Although some suggestions, such as a universal basic income, may seem “revolutionary” in the given circumstances, they still do not do away with the idea of the state and capitalist order as such.

In these circumstances, the student movement *Avtonomna tribuna*,¹⁴ as many other movements, faced an

interesting dilemma. On the one hand, its core activity has always been to resist general apathy against capitalist exploitations on every level of human existence,¹⁵ using methods that broadly coexist with the anarchist idea and practice¹⁶ without ever truly calling itself anarchist. But on the other hand, it also fought against the privatisation of the welfare state in Slovenia, especially against the reforms of public health services and higher educational systems – which means that it was to a certain extent acknowledging and defending the existence of the welfare state. Nevertheless, activists of AT saw such action as a temporary tactic and not as a long-term strategy.¹⁷

Facing this ambivalent political situation, AT raised a number of questions. How to achieve a fundamentally different society, without rejecting the existing and endangered social rights fought for by generations of workers? How to manoeuvre between formal organisations such as trade unions without getting caught in the web of reformist action?

AT's central motto is: "Rights are not given, but struggled for!" One of the movements' answers to the question of the welfare state was to support and declare one's solidarity¹⁸ with workers and other groups that fought for better wages, public health rights and so on while retaining its critical edge by radically demanding the end of capitalism, state exploitation and militarism and taking on a critical view of the hierarchic organisational principles of the unions. This perhaps became most obvious in demonstrations organised by the unions in November 2007 when all larger unions in Slovenia and many of their international union partners¹⁹ demanded higher wages during street protests in Ljubljana.²⁰ AT supported their struggle from the beginning and the movement reached its peak by forming the Autonomous Bloc (along with other resistant communities) at the demonstra-

tions. However, unions, for their own pragmatic reasons,²¹ made it very clear that they had had enough of capitalism, not of the state and the government. Union leaders tried to persuade the public that the demonstrations were not a "political" event. This brings us to the meaning of the term political. The overall sense, not just referring to the revolution, but to political practice and theory in general is completely saturated with the idea of state and government, so it cannot see beyond its narrow delineations. Would you call tens of thousands people on the streets "apolitical"? As Marx put it, "Do not say that social movement excludes political. Political movement that is not at the same time also a social movement does not exist" (Marx in Ouviaña 2005: 35). If we criticise capital, we must realise that the state is its central supportive agency. The principles of domination, hierarchy and exploitation of the capital and the state are intertwined. As we have already shown, state structures and capital support each other and therefore create extreme poverty of the visible and invisible workers.

Carefully avoiding endangering the composition of the workers' demonstrations, AT decided to radicalise the protests simply by expressing their views of both state and capitalism, and as such opening up space for bigger narratives. AT promoted disagreement as a principle of politics and not of class compromise as was suggested by the Unions. The process at the basis of the outward manifestation of the movements' control of the protests even intensified AT's determination to emphasise the idea of every individual being able to participate in common decision making, which after all was their first goal when they occupied the university halls. The process of creating a common theoretical platform helped to develop the principle that every community can only progress if every single member of that community

develops. The demonstrations and the variety of slogans of the Autonomous Bloc showed a wide range of issues that the people who gathered in it were dealing with. The fact that the Bloc was not able to come up with a single message²² raised some concerns. Yet, this also showed the power of difference within the emerging political form. But it highlighted more than anything that AT never meant to be a group, movement or organisation, but first and foremost a form of political action.

Nevertheless, the question about the relationship between grassroots movements and unions still remains open. During the November 2007 demonstrations Slovene unions, with their demands and rhetoric, proved to be a conservative rather than subversive force. The unions still are in favour of class compromise and negotiations with the capital and the state. However, by taking stage with the versatile group of activists of the Autonomous Bloc, unions showed they understand the need for a more radical approach by opening up space for the articulation of different political and social practices. Another important fact is that different unions were able to cooperate for the sake of a common cause, thereby in a way forming an autonomous movement,²³ which the number of participants and the continuity of their actions testify to.

Grassroots movements, then, have to be cautious not to be entirely affected by the avant-garde mood. Even though it may seem a small victory to earn a few Euros more, such battles, especially if they are radicalised by a general critique of exploitation, are also important parts in the larger resistance against capitalism. All these attempts can be seen as a never-ending fight for self-realisation, as rebellion against repressive authoritarian subjects or institutions that perform power-over on people. As Rucker

points out, freedom in this context is not an absolute concept; it only refers to everyone's possibility to develop their abilities and talents and get rid of the bonds of capitalist exploitation and political and social slavery that derives from it (Rucker in Chomsky 1972/1986: 611). Holloway (2004) emphasises the idea of a voice inside every individual that is crying out ;Ya basta! – against oblivion, alienation, exploitation. Even though it is not articulated in the form of an organised resistance, that scream can belong to everyone, even if it only materialises as a small act of sabotage at work or being late at school. The scream, when articulated, is a form of small-portioned activism. We should bear in mind that revolution does not merely concern a small number of activists. Revolution can only be successful when it becomes a process common to everyone.

AT also tried to get rid of articulated academic snobism, by which we are not trying to make everyone think that theory is not important. It is merely about the conviction that resistance is common to everyone, not just activists and academics who reside in sealed towers, disconnected from the everyday realities the rebellious communities are dealing with. If the revolution suddenly becomes wrapped up in a rhetoric that is difficult to understand, it may lead us away from the idea that everyone can take part in the revolution and towards avant-gardist practices that impose from above the way in which revolution must proceed. Theory must therefore be understood as part of the practice and vice versa. Any political act is impossible without some profound reflection about the world that surrounds us, just as political practice constantly invents new social concepts. As Althusser points out, the distinction between theory and practice is only an artificial ideological myth. "For there is not one side of theory, a pure intellectual vision without body or materi-

ality,” he argues, “and another of completely material practice which ‘gets its hands dirty’” (Althusser 1968/1970: 58).

There is one more issue I would like to address. Activists of the AT have often been faced with the recrimination that their resistance is not as total, all-embracing and turbulent – one may add romantic as well – as the students’ revolts of the 1960s and 1970s. There is some logic in such remarks. Faced by the diversity and vitality of new social movements that are fighting against definitions, many theorists, and especially the corporate media, are still trying to squeeze those movements into the boundaries of existing forms, fully aware – or, if we give people the benefit of the doubt, oblivious of the fact – that such formulations can only be extremely violent to the very being of these movements. Contemporary political subjects are all but unified; they operate in dispersed, discontinued, unpredictable ways. If we understand the political in the realms of the state, we are still searching for a homogenised subject (Kovačič 2002: 133-134). As Marta Gregorčič (2005a) points out, people are trying to put movements into the diametric equation of movement versus neoliberalism. On one side we have the global order, be it called Empire or any other name, and on the other side people seem to have an uncontrollable desire to create a common quotient, a common platform of globally unified pockets of resistance. Contemporary movements, however, are opposing such identification. Despite their differences, the movements have similar demands and continue to ‘walk beyond’ the global order. Exactly these differences inspire movements to look for the specialties of their own. There is no common personalised enemy against whom movements could stand. Disparate sets of struggles, however, are happening in a similar environment of globalising capital and intensified societies of control (Day 2005: 6). Therefore

movements cannot be totalised nor reduced to a single ideology. Even though neoliberal capitalist order creates similar circumstances around the world, there is an ever-present danger that such unification would establish the perception of the movement as something that firmly exists instead of something that is in a constant process of becoming. After all, as Abbie Hoffman once said, “Revolution is not something fixed in ideology, nor is it something fashioned to a particular decade. It is a perpetual process embedded in the human spirit” (Hoffman in Bennett 2004: 128). And even though many have announced the end of the world, the apocalypse, and are now waiting for the revolution to come to their homes as a historical necessity, it is important not to forget that the revolution must be built at every step of the way. The versatile multidimensional variety of different movements is arising against the exploitation, turning peoples’ invisible lives into political subjects. They are impossible to organise, or to predict. Paradoxically, politics demands organisation and a constant invention of new rebellious practices against capitalism. That creation, however, cannot be prescribed by avant-gardist leaders. It can only come from the everyday lives of individuals, spinning in endless joyful rebellion.

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Notes:

1. World Trade Organization.
2. International Monetary Fund.
3. For instance, despite the fact that public opinion greatly opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the agreement was accepted by neoliberal economists and the above-mentioned organizations as a direct way to democratize and improve people's lives. In reality NAFTA caused massive layoffs, a decrease in living conditions, factory closures and prevented any kind of union organization within factories (Chomsky 1999/2005).
4. 'Autonomous Tribune' is a student movement that came into being in Ljubljana (Slovenia) in 2007 as a direct response to both the indifference of the students regarding their lives and to governments' draft of the bill about higher education. This bill would widely privatize higher education and would thus seriously threaten the autonomy of

the university. An autonomous tribune temporarily occupied several university halls, opening up a space for discussion and mobilizing students to start practicing autonomy. This autonomous tribune further demanded the right to occupy public space. During several protests its activists opposed the privatization of the public services. They also made broader demands, e.g. to remove any military subject matter from universities' curriculums, to withdraw Slovenian soldiers from Iraq. Initially, the movement faced criminalization by the police, who in one report even stated that participants at one of the protests displayed anti-governmental slogans and would consequently be prosecuted.

5. Lenin, for instance, talked not only about taking over the state, but also about establishing a state of workers.

6. Gradual transition to socialism through victory in the elections; changes from within the system.

7. A sudden take-over of power and a quick establishment of a different regime from that point onwards.

8. Such external view of the state is common to many theorists, for instance to Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci, Negri and others.

9. In capitalism production is the production of an object that is alienated from the producer (Marx in Holloway 2004: 47).

10. Between 1936 and 1938, revolutionary practices were at work. After the outburst of the revolution, many industrials and big landowners left their premises. Farmers and workers 'spontaneously' started creating communities, taking over control of the production. For further details, see Guérin (1965/1986).

11. This has again become obvious in the financial crisis that hit the world in September/October 2008, as a result of which banks were nationalized.

12. Many alternative forms of both economical and social relations arise as a result of resisting the prevailing capitalist order. Autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico are a practical example. For more details about good government councils see Gregorčič (2005b).

13. By which we do not intend to talk about the black-and-white picture of human nature, nor is this taken in humanist concepts. Human nature is much more complex to simply distinguish between good and bad aspects. We must be aware of the fact that general social conditions can and do affect human behaviour.

14. 'Autonomous Tribune' – abbreviated as AT.

15. In this case, against the feeling of apathy among the students.

16. Direct action, do-it-yourself, direct democracy (especially through open meetings), autonomy, voluntarism, anti-authoritarianism, equality, etc. Also, AT remained independent of any formal organization (political parties, student organization, etc.).

17. The movement's analysis of the capitalist system clearly states that even though they are fighting against the negative effects of capitalism here and now, it is only its complete destruction that will enable people to live in a fundamentally different society.

18. If in the 20th century solidarity, as Durkheim points out, was seen within the context of social hierarchy (Durkheim 1893/1997), today's activists extended the understanding of solidarity between classes to solidarity among everyone subjected to domination (Williams 2008: 112). AT therefore did not express solidarity with the unions' elite, but with the workers themselves.

19. Estimations about the number of demonstrators vary. Unions are claiming that 70,000 people gathered in Ljubljana, while the police insist there were only 50,000 participants. Regardless of the difference in numbers, the demonstrations ranked among the most massive protests in the history of Slovenia.

20. Despite the political elite's boasting about significant economic growth, which many economists claim is mostly the product of favorable global circumstances, inflation in Slovenia has been increasing ever since Slovenia entered the Euro zone in January 2007. According to the Statistical office of Slovenia, inflation reached 5.1 percent on a yearly basis in October 2007. As noted by the National

TV of Slovenia, in only four days, the National association of consumers received 600 reports of prices having gone up after the Euro was put into effect. Despite government claims about the lower rate of unemployment, unions in Slovenia were emphasizing that many, especially young, people are having temporary jobs that offer no safety or contracts. One in every eight inhabitants of Slovenia was in the beginning of the second half of 2008 living in poverty, and the prices in some cases had risen by more than 100 percent in less than a year; wages did not increase sufficiently (or not at all) for people to get by.

21. Fear of endangering upcoming negotiations of collective contract with social partners.

22. They varied from queer, student, workers, animal rights, and other issues to anti-military issues.

23. Their organization, however, remains hierarchical and their status legal.