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George Katsiaficas. *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonialization of Everyday Life.* New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997. xxii + 289 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-391-04045-8; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-04013-7.



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George Katsiaficas breaks new ground in his study of autonomous groups and their various campaigns in Europe since 1968. From defining a form of popular political participation and examining its ideological, economic, and social origins and agendas, Katsiaficas tries to explain to readers the meaning and usefulness of a new alliance between ignored and discontented populations within contemporary European society. Autonomous movements, he argues, are the emerging social movements which reject the leadership of all political parties and trade unions and seek to minimize institutional and structural control of everyday life from the outside and create democratic, cooperative and independent space for greater freedom for its participants. They are portrayed as heroic, if not a little foolhardy, in their unwavering commitment to truth, justice, and simple human decency.

Katsiaficas begins his study with an analysis of the lost promise of 1968 and the co-optation the New Left into the traditional political world. "At best," he assesses, "the existing system offers a facade of popular input into state agencies or allows space for cooperative groups to function within a larger context of obedience to the state and market profitability" (p. 5). To counter this, new popular political "systems" emerged, beginning in Italy in the mid 1970s with feminists, laborers, and youth movements merging into the Metropolitan Indians and taking

on political parties of the far left as well as the politicians, government bureaucracy, police, trade unions, and the press. Street fighting and a sophisticated underground network of communications linking neighborhoods in cities as well as more distant communities resulted in such an organized defiance of government authority that new levels of police and judicial repression were instituted to restore peace and the established social order. The Autonomen was born and rapidly spread throughout central and western Europe.

But what exactly were the Autonomen and what were they trying to do? Katsiaficas defines them as "organic structures" with diverse views, "unencumbered with rigid ideologies" (p. 196). They are not a party, or a movement, but what participants would call "politics of the first person" (p. 197). They consist of activists who use peaceful protest as well as violent activities to resist established political and legal edicts and who insist that resistance is freedom, though they cannot (or choose not) to ascribe their positions to an ideological or intellectual construct. Indeed, the author argues, it is the Autonomen's indeterminacy which is its most defining feature. Instead, the Autonomen define themselves by action—even as they themselves are divided as to the merits of violence in political resistance undertaken to protect squatted buildings or to prevent nuclear expansion. Sub-groups have emerged and further fragmented

the groups. Yet, Katsiaficas insists that this does nothing to undermine the argument that indeed all these popular political actions are part of the Autonomi, and that their social revolution against the “centrifugal force of corporate capitalism” has emerged as more significant than any international political party ties or cultural ties within nations (p. 101).

Katsiaficas then examines a wide-range of Autonomi. He links as part of a single popular movement the activities subverting the development of bomb-grade plutonium in Wackersdorf, Bavaria, the sit-ins of kraakers (or squatters) seeking affordable housing in Amsterdam, and the Children’s Liberation Front fighting for sanctuary for victims of domestic abuse in Copenhagen. Katsiaficas clearly demonstrates that the presence of autonomous groups has been an important one in the last two decades. They are partially responsible for human rights movements in Europe, civil rights protections for women, gays and lesbians, foreigners, young people, the unemployed, etc. They helped contribute to the legitimization of the Green Party as a left-leaning voice within established political circles (though not intentionally and somewhat unhappily). They have helped shift European popular politics away from “identity politics,” both before and after the collapse of European communism. So committed to the cause of justice, Katsiaficas contends, that these decentralized groups which rejected mass political organization or use of media or technology were (and are) more united than residents of different cities in the same nation.

For the important contributions to our knowledge of European popular politics in recent decades, Katsiaficas’s book must be highly praised. But I have many questions about the autonomous movements’ real contributions to, and significance in, contemporary European society. From the outset of the book, Katsiaficas refers to the Autonomi as “postpolitical” because they do not consider elections or political organizations to have validity. He

praises their rejection of patriarchy, commercialism and what he refers to as “the centralized decisions and hierarchical authority structures of modern institutions” (p. 6). In rejecting association with established left-wing political parties such as the Greens, the Autonomi are portrayed as purists who are uncorrupted by anything which might restrict freedom. They are Rousseau’s “noble savages” as they squat in abandoned buildings, take on corrupt politicians and police forces, march for reproductive freedom, and create a human barrier against the expansion of nuclear power facilities and protect foreigners by street-fighting with skinhead and neo-Nazis in a unified Germany. But as noble as some of these actions are and as organized as participation in such campaigns might have been, does standing up for foreign workers in Berlin or living in an abandoned building in London’s East End automatically make one an Autonomi? Were they (are they yet) the only true democrats left in Europe? I doubt it. And I doubt all who participated in local actions recognized their activities as anything more than self-interest and self-preservation. My experiences while living in London during the height of the Autonomi movement suggest that many young people were far more interested in escaping bleak home situations, experimenting with music and drugs, and rejecting society through their appearance and behavior than righting the wrongs of a political and social structure gone corrupt. Nonetheless, at a time when nationalism and single-issue politics get the lion’s share of media and scholarly attention, George Katsiaficas’s research on the “hidden” work of social autonomous groups in Europe is a welcome addition to our understanding of popular politics. It is important for us to recognize that injustice and corruption are alive and thriving in European society and that some individuals are noble and brave enough to fight back.

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