

# AUTONOMIST MARXISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

## Some Problems of Translation

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*Abstract: This text is a reflection on the production and reception of the first-of-its-kind anthology of autonomist Marxist texts in Bulgaria, published in 2013. After a brief examination of the anthology's content, the text focuses on four major "problems of translation" that significantly overdetermined the book's reception and circulation: what the author calls the problems of semantics, history, politics, and ontology. The article concludes that autonomist Marxism might have a unique role to play in radical conversations in the country and identifies the "work of translation" as a key ingredient in expanding the coalitional possibilities of the left in Eastern Europe.*

*Keywords: autonomist Marxism, translation, semantics, post-socialism, anarchism, ontology*

Throughout the year 2013, I was co-editor and translator of an anthology project entitled *Autonomizym i marksizym: Ot Parizhkata komuna do Svetovnia socialen forum* (Autonomism and Marxism: From the Paris Commune to the World Social Forum). Commissioned and supported by New Left Perspectives, a radical interdisciplinary collective of young scholar-activists from Bulgaria, the anthology was meant to both push against the congenital "anti-communism" of the mainstream public sphere in the country and intervene in the context of local anti-governmental and global post-Occupy protests.

The final product, a compendium of nearly 500 tightly-set pages with 37 texts in translation from six different languages, turned out to be a unique intellectual event.<sup>1</sup> Anthologies on autonomist Marxism, certainly in English, tend to highlight the Italian post-workerist tradition of Marxist *Autonomia* as being largely representative, if not exhaustive, of debates in the field.<sup>2</sup> As a result, autonomist Marxism is often (if not solely) associated with concepts such as immaterial labor, the social factory, and general intellect, and with practices such as *autoreduzione*, the “pirate radio stations” in Italian cities like Bologna in the 1970s, and more generally with extra-parliamentary acts of subversion and anti-state activism. While certainly cognizant of the signal contributions of Italian scholars and activists, our anthology took a different route. We took our cues from U.S.-based Marxist autonomist Harry Cleaver, whose broad genealogy of autonomist Marxism includes not only the likes of Tony Negri, Mario Tronti, and Sergio Bologna, but also authors such as C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, Anton Pannekoek and Alexandra Kollontai, Cornelius Castoriadis and Guy Debord, and Georges Caffentzis and Sylvia Federici. Broadly speaking, Cleaver understands autonomist Marxism to be this subterranean, often suppressed tradition of Marxist theory and praxis which develops in the context of concrete political struggles, dispensing with traditional forms of organization of the “transmission-belt” variety. Central for Cleaver is what he calls the “autonomous power of workers—autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (for example, the trade unions and political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (for example, women from men).”<sup>3</sup> Borrowing from Antonio Negri’s work from

<sup>1</sup> See Nikolay Karkov and S. Panayotov, *Autonomizym i marksizym: Ot Parizhkata komuna do Svetovnia socialen forum* (Sofia: Anarres, 2013). The authors included in the anthology are Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter, Otto Rühle, Alexandra Kollontai, V.I. Lenin, C.L.R. James with Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, Martin Glaberman, Cornelius Castoriadis, Daniel Mothé, Guy Debord, Attila Kotanyi, Raoul Vaneigem, Rene Riesel, Situationist International, Franco Berardi – Bifo, Marco Jacquemet and Giancarlo Vitali, Sergio Bologna, Mario Tronti, Paolo Virno, Eddie Cherki and Michel Wievorka, Svetozar Stojanović, Paolo Freire, Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, Midnight Notes, Harry Cleaver, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Michael Hardt, George Caffentzis, Tiqqun, Colectivo Situaciones, Boaventura de Sousa Santos. An online version of the text (in Bulgarian) is available at [http://novilevi.org/media/AM\\_Online\\_Edition.pdf](http://novilevi.org/media/AM_Online_Edition.pdf) (accessed Oct. 5, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt co-edited volume, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), is a case in point. In France, there has been a similar project around the journal *Multitudes*.

<sup>3</sup> See Harry Cleaver, “Kropotkin, Self-Valorization, and the Crisis of Marxism,” *Anarchist Studies* (1993) (online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/harry-cleaver-kropotkin-self-valorization-and-the-crisis-of-marxism> [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]); and Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Oakland: AK Press, 2000).

the 1970s, Cleaver defines this autonomous power as “self-valorization,” that is, the ability of workers to define their own interests and aspirations in a way that is not merely reactive to capitalist oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Following in Cleaver’s footsteps, the anthology similarly sought to provide maximal visibility to various strands within autonomist Marxism, including ones rendered nearly invisible by the Euro- and male-centric bias of much of that tradition. With this in mind, the selection of readings was made on the basis of the following four criteria:

1. *Temporally*, *Autonomizym i marksizym* included texts spanning over a nearly century-and-a-half block of time, starting with Marx at his arguably autonomist best, in his famous text on the Paris Commune (1870–71), and ending up with very recent discussions around the commons, the communist hypothesis, and the World Social Forum. The textual selection also explored the period immediately after the Russian Revolution (Alexandra Kollontai, *Linkskomunismus*) and the heyday of autonomist Marxism theory from the 1960s and 1970s (Socialism or Barbarism, the Situationist International, the Italian post-operaist Marxists, and others).
2. *Spatially*, the anthology sought to provide a widely representative sample of discussions outside the West/global North as well. Included here were major debates among “the Workers’ Opposition” in Russia from the early 1920s, the Praxis group in former Yugoslavia from the late 1960s, and Colectivo Situaciones in Argentina in the 1990s and 2000s, along with authors such as Paolo Freire (Brazil) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Portugal).
3. Attentive to the relative absence of feminist voices in most discussions in the field, the anthology purposefully introduced *thematic* diversity as a central part of the project, most explicit in the demarcation of a separate section on the problem of social reproduction. Severely under-theorized within the more traditional, that is masculine Marxist autonomist scholarship going all the way back to Marx’s own “inability to conceive as value-producing any other work than commodity production,” reproductive labor is central not only to the reproduction of capital but also

<sup>4</sup> See Cleaver, “Kropotkin” (1993); and Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marxism: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991). The definition of “worker” here is as broad as possible, including people from domestics to software engineers and from peasants to fast-food employees. Notably, our anthology stretched Cleaver’s definition even further, in admittedly controversial ways, by including people such as Badiou, Rancière, Svetozar Stojanović, and Boaventura da Sousa Santos. The inclusion of the first three was motivated by their shared suspicion of the State and the Party-form, their commitment to struggles and forms of organizing from below, and important resonances between some of their key concepts (Badiou’s “communist hypothesis,” Rancière’s “communism of intelligence”) and debates among contemporary autonomist Marxists (Hardt and Negri, Colectivo Situaciones, and others); Stojanović also featured as representative of the Praxis circle’s increasingly radical challenge to official Yugoslav socialism. On the reasons behind the inclusion of Santos, see the final section of this text.

to any sustained strategy for challenging its rule.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, this section included substantive selections from autonomist Marxist feminist classics such as Selma James's "A Woman's Place" and Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, along with Silvia Federici's insightful discussion "On Elder Care."

4. And last but not least, the selection of readings followed a specific *methodology* as well: with each one of the different "schools" within the Marxist autonomist tradition, especially where more than one text was included, the anthology sought to offer not only theoretically rigorous selections, but also praxical analyses where those theoretical innovations could be seen at work among organizers and social movements. For instance, our selection from the Johnson-Forest Tendency thus featured not only their critique of Soviet-style "state capitalism" and union bureaucracy, but also Martin Glaberman's discussion of slow-downs, sit-downs, and practices of "mutual aid" among workers in his text "Punching Out"; the Situationists featured discussions of both the continued relevance of worker councils and of experimental practices such as *dérive*, *détournement*, and the construction of situations; and so on.

Notably, our anthology was published in between two other broad selections from the Marxian/Marxist tradition, after a long hiatus of a near absence of any serious texts on the subject in Bulgaria: a collection of texts by mostly sympathetic authors such as Sartre, Althusser, Lefebvre, Debord, Lapin, and Korać, and an anthology of Marx's own economic, political, and journalistic work edited by representatives of three generations of Marxist scholars in the country.<sup>6</sup> Yet the production and reception of our own anthology brought up a number of problems we had not (or had not fully) anticipated. The difficulty of translating radical Marxist theory into an Eastern European context raised not only the specter of the irreducible tension between words and concepts, or the problem of what Barbara Cassin calls "philosophizing in languages."<sup>7</sup> It also posed the (relatively predictable) challenge of (normative readings of) historically existing socialism, along with the (less predictable) one of a competing definition of autonomy from the Left. Last but not least, it also placed in the foreground the necessity of thinking about radical theory itself as a "work of translation," a transversal practice

<sup>5</sup> Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, Brooklyn: PM Press, 2012), p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> The two anthologies were Haralambi Panitsidis, Emilia Mineva, and Stanimir Panayotov (eds.) *Marks: Heterogenni prochiti ot XX vek* (Sofia: Anarres, 2013); and Bernard Muntyam, Petyr-Emil Mitev, and Boris Popivanov (eds.), *Karl Marx: Chovekyt i bydeshteto. Izbrano* (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2013), respectively.

<sup>7</sup> See Emily Apter, "Preface," in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. ix.

of seeking to build a coalitional left whose own Marxist membership is not afraid of self-criticism.<sup>8</sup>

In the text below, I define these problems of translation as problems of *semantics*, *history*, *politics*, and *ontology*, respectively. To my mind, these problems of translation allow us to not only explore both the significant obstacles to and fragile possibilities of radical politics in the region, but also to make at least two broader (*meta-theoretical*) claims. The first one is that autonomist Marxism may be uniquely poised to complicate and expand further radical conversations on the left – not *despite*, but precisely *because of* the above listed problems. Both the unmitigated hostility (on the right) and the tempered resistance (among members of the left) toward autonomist Marxism bear evidence to its capacity to serve as an important element in the radical search for alternatives. The second claim identifies not only (practices of) translation but also the “work of translation” as a key ingredient in the articulation of the (complex, non-linear, pluri-logical) relationship between radical theory/theories and radical politics/practices. It thus invites us to move beyond a mere “circulation of struggles” toward a mutually enriching plurilogue between radical traditions of struggle whose political agendas, organizational protocols, and even underlying social ontologies might not be immediately intelligible to one another.

#### Traduttore Tradditore: The Problem of Semantics

“To translate,” as the editors of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* remind us, is a late French adaptation of the Latin *traducere*, which literally means “to lead across.”<sup>9</sup> Yet this leading across remains split between two equally present possibilities: that the act of translation may constitute the very essence of the thing under consideration, of the tradition itself; or, alternatively, that it may result in betrayal and distortion of the meaning of the original text.<sup>10</sup> Translating into Bulgarian, an Eastern European language of Slavic origins, poses very similar problems. The Bulgarian word for “to translate” (*prevezhdam*) literally means “to lead across” (*vodya prez*), with the translator (*prevodach*) as one’s guide or leader (*vodach*) in the whole process of crossing over into uncharted territory. Yet the prefix “pre” can point not only to an act of accomplishing one’s task in a thorough manner (as in *prerabotvam*, to “re-work” something thoroughly, from start to finish), but also to performing an act to an excessive degree, where the very task at hand risks crushing under its own weight (as in *pretovarvam*, to “put too much weight” on something or someone, or *premnogo*, “too much”).

<sup>8</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “The Future of the World Social Forum: The Work of Translation,” *Development* 48 (2005), no. 2, pp. 15–22.

<sup>9</sup> Cassin, *Dictionary*, p. 1139.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1139, 1150.

The major difficulty faced by our translators was not the broadly “stylistic” one of making Bulgarian sound like German, English, or French (as per Walter Benjamin), but rather that posed by the “untranslatable” terms themselves, the terms “one keeps on (not) translating.”<sup>11</sup> Given especially the novelty of translating autonomist Marxism into Bulgarian, the problem appeared to be twofold, as some of the key concepts in translation had little or no immediate equivalent, either as signifier or as referent, in our part of world; while, on other occasions, such equivalents existed and might have even sounded more familiar to us than their foreign counterparts in the places they came from, yet their meaning retained nothing from the original. Two prime examples of the former included words such as *councilist* (a key term in the SI discussion of the worker councils) and the above-mentioned *autoreduzione* (a crucial practice for the Italian autonomists), for neither one of which Bulgarian audiences had much to draw on, both linguistically and in terms of material practices.<sup>12</sup> A rare example of the latter was C. L. R. James’s favorite concept of (working-class) *self-activity*, a rather awkward English rendering of the Russian *samodeâtelnost*, itself etymologically and homophonically linked to the popular Bulgarian word *samodeynost*. The problem with *samodeynost* was that, just like its Russian equivalent, it had long before been hollowed out of any reference to collective initiative at the grassroots and confined to mostly “cultural” and largely depoliticized practices and activities under state socialism (when not deployed in a strictly pejorative manner, such as in relation to a person or group setting themselves a task they are not prepared to see through, “stepping out of their league,” as it were). But perhaps the following two examples illustrate the clearest the challenges posed by the effort at translating “untranslatables.”

One of the biggest challenges to post-socialist leftist thought is undoubtedly the “bad history” of state socialism, “conventionally understood as a centralized command economy plus a repressive state.”<sup>13</sup> Efforts at circumventing that difficulty have included not only giving up those terms altogether in order to avoid the baggage that they carry, but also attempts at re-signifying the very idea of communism, as decoupled from the “negative experiences of the ‘socialist’ states” foregrounding the commons as an alternative to both the private property of capitalism and the public property of socialism, and even insisting on commonism and commoning as a processual practice rather

<sup>11</sup> Cassin, “Introduction,” p. xvii

<sup>12</sup> Rene Riesel of the Situationist International uses the term “councilist” to refer to the co-optation of the original worker councils by the state after the October Revolution of 1917 in the Soviet Union (2007). Cherki and Wievorka define *autoreduzione* (autoreduction) as the practice of collectively reducing “the price of public services, housing, electricity; or in the factory, the rate of productivity” (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Nick Dyer-Whitefor, “Commonism,” in Turbulence Collective (eds.), *What Would It Mean to Win* (Oakland: PM Press, 2007), pp. 5–112 (also at <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/commonism/>).

than a static set of conditions.<sup>14</sup> It would not be inaccurate to say that, for much of the contemporary left, envisioning a postcapitalist future entails centering one or more of those concepts as a cornerstone for radical praxis.<sup>15</sup> Yet this very triad of words in particular – communism, commons, and commonism/commoning – presented nearly insurmountable problems to both the translators and the editors of our anthology. The Bulgarian word for communism, *komunizym* (“комунизъм”), sounds almost the same as its English equivalent; and, with an acceptable degree of creative license one could speak of *komonizym/komonirane* (“кононизъм/комониране”) as the local counterparts of commonism/commoning, respectively. But it was not possible to do the same with the “commons,” whose Bulgarian equivalent, as per Marx’s famous analysis of the “enclosure of the commons” is *obshtinski zemi* (“общински земи,” literally “communal lands”) or, possibly and more broadly, either *obshti blaga* (“обща блага,” literally “common goods”) or *obshtoto* (“общото,” “the common”).<sup>16</sup> None of these three alternatives retains the shared etymological or homophonic basis with either communism or commoning. The inclusion of the obligatory footnote here might have ameliorated the problem, but it certainly did not eliminate it, especially for readers unfamiliar with the complex and inextricable history of the interaction of these concepts.

An even bigger challenge emerged around some key Situationist International (SI) terms we purposefully included in our selection, namely *dérive* and *détournement*. A central concept in the Situationist lexicon, *dérive* refers to a “technique of transient passage through varied ambiances” in search of situations; whereas *détournement*, a related term and practice, involves a sort of montage of pre-existing elements in an effort to endow them with a new and subversive meaning, typically as part of an artistic-political project. The significance of either term is hard to overestimate for the Situationist project: *dérive*, for instance, could involve “hitchhiking through Paris during

<sup>14</sup> See resp. Harry Cleaver, “Socialism,” in Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge and Power* (New York: Zed Books, 2010 [1992]), pp. 260–278; Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* II (2008), no. 49, pp. 29–42; Michael Hardt, “The Common in Communism,” *Rethinking Marxism* 22 (2010), no. 3, pp. 346–356; Dyer-Whiteford, “Commonism”; Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Charta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); and Massimo de Angelis, “On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo de Angelis and Stavros Stavrides,” *E-flux*, no. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Coming from different quarters, recent debates on the left have also taken up a redefined notion of the people, the (communist) party, and even “populism from the left.” See resp. Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Georges Didi-Huberman, Sadri Khiari, and Jacques Rancière, *What Is a People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London, New York: Verso, 2016), and Chantal Mouffe, *Populism from the Left* (London, New York: Verso, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> See here Karl Marks, *Kapitalyt* (Sofia: Pechatnitsa na Bylgarskata Komunisticheska Partiya, 1948), p. 592.

a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion,<sup>17</sup> while the deployment of *détournement* tactics was central to SI “cultural” artifacts such as photo-comics, pirate radio stations, and even SI films.<sup>18</sup> Resolving the problem of translating these “untranslatable” terms also involved a number of difficult choices. To begin with, in the English translations of SI texts where the two concepts are purposefully kept in their original French, such an interpretative choice is easily facilitated by the existence of a shared alphabet and a common linguistic base (Latin). In the absence of either condition in Bulgarian, a Slavic language with no cognates of this kind, we quickly decided against such a solution. When finally, after a series of extensive back-and-forths between the two editors and the translator, we ended up with the translator’s original suggestions, *otkloniavane* (“отклоняване”) and *izvyrtane* (“извъртане”) respectively,<sup>19</sup> it had become clear that the difficulties were also and to a large extent extra-semantic: stemming from different histories, experiences, political practices, and even social ontologies. It is these non-linguistic difficulties of translation that profoundly mark the reception of our texts in post-socialist Bulgaria today.

### On Structural Homologies, or the Problem of History

The problem of semantics was itself lodged in the larger problem of the history of Marxism in Bulgaria, both as a theoretical and political practice (the two did not always overlap) and as a body of thought invoking a particular set of not always conscious perceptual dispositions. The challenge here was that of translating a necessarily minor tradition with a specific and even unique history, whether in France, the U.S., former Yugoslavia, or other places, into the theoretical idiom of a place whose own very different history made that translation nearly unintelligible. This is of course another way of saying that our translation of autonomist Marxist texts into Bulgarian had to face all the problems of a country with a socialist past still in recent memory, and with a post-socialist present highly overdetermined by a series of often disavowed linkages with that same past. A brief historical and theoretical overview might be helpful at this point.

While the history of the reception of Marxist ideas in Bulgaria is complex and uneven, it can be separated analytically in a few distinct periods. While Marx’s name appeared for the first time in a publication in the early 1870s, real sustained theoret-

<sup>17</sup> Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Boston: MIT Press, 1999), p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> See Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 213–215.

<sup>19</sup> *Otkloniavane* has the connotations of diversion, deflection, deviation, branching off, leading or moving away from a predetermined path; its root is the word *klon* (“клон”), which means branch in Bulgarian. It is this effort to unpredictably branch off the beaten path that motivated its selection as the equivalent to *dérive*. *Izvyrtane* has multiple meanings, including to distort and equivocate, but its root, *vyrtia* (“въртя,” to turn) is very close to the original French *tourner*, which is at the root of *détournement*.



ical and political engagement with the Marxist tradition began in the 1890s with the founding of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party in 1891 and the publication of its founder Dimitar Blagoev's book *What Is Socialism and Does It Have a Foundation in Our Country?* in the same year.<sup>20</sup> The commitment of the numerically small but devoted Marxist militants included early translations of the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*, vol. 1, among others, and earned them the commendation of Engels himself in a famous epistolary exchange from the early 1890s.<sup>21</sup> This first "romantic-educational" phase of the reception of Marxism in the country came to a somewhat abrupt end with the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Some of the immediate and irreversible consequences of the Revolution included not only the rapid Bolshevization of the now renamed Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), but also a shift of emphasis from the theoretical output of Marx toward that of Lenin, under the banner of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>22</sup> The introduction of state socialism in the country in 1944 further intensified this process, as the Marxist debates in the country were heavily streamlined to fit the tenets of Stalinist orthodoxy. Thus the 1950s and 1960s in particular were marked by a reduction of Marxist theory to a *doctrine* rather than a *method*, and a general regression of the quality and independent nature of Marxism.<sup>23</sup> As Boris Popivanov argues, in a broad overview of the vicissitudes of the Marxist tradition in the country:

<sup>20</sup> Dimităr Blagoev, *Shto e socializym i ima li toy pochva u nas?* (Tŭrnovo, 1891).

<sup>21</sup> See Boris Popivanov, "Marks izvŭn vlastta: Roliyata na Karl Marx v ekspertnite i nauchnite diskusii prez bylgarskiya prehod," in Lilian Kaneva, Maksim Mizov, and Evgeniy Kandilarov (eds.) *Izsledvaniya po istoria na socializma v Bylgara: Prehodyt - II* (Sofia: Tsentyr za istoricheski i politologicheski izsledvaniya, 2013), pp. 189–210; Emilia Mineva, "On the Reception of Marxism in Bulgaria," *Studies in East European Thought* 53 (2001), no. 1/2, pp. 61–74; Stanimir Panayotov, "Capital Without Value: The Soviet-Bulgarian Synthesis," *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender, and Culture* 14 (2017), no. 1, pp. 27–61; and Todor Zhivkov, *Bulgaria: Ancient and Socialist* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1975). Marx's *Capital* in fact appeared in two direct-from-German translations in the period 1909–10. The authors of the two translations were Dimitar Blagoev and Georgi Bakalov, leading figures in resp. the more radical ("narrow socialist") and more reformist ("broad socialist") wings of the BSDP. After 1919, Blagoev's "narrow socialists" would adopt the Marxist-Leninist line, while the "broad socialists," also known as "commoners" ("obshtodeltsi"), remained open to a broader coalitional front, including with bourgeois parties. Future translations of *Capital* would rely much more on the Russian translation than on the German original; see Panayotov, "Capital without Value," pp. 33–37.

<sup>22</sup> See Popivanov, "Marks izvŭn vlastta," p. 191. A notable exception is the work of Ivan Hadjiyski, one of Eastern Europe's most invigorating (and least known) heterodox Marxist scholars of the first half of the 20th century (he was killed on the Eastern Front in 1944). Hadjiyski's creatively open, anti-colonial, and non-Eurocentric Marxism led to his work falling into oblivion in socialist Bulgaria up until the mid-1960s. In the current post-socialist context, there has been a concerted effort at interpreting his legacy as "ethno-psychological" rather than Marxist; see for instance Nikolov (2017).

<sup>23</sup> Mineva, "On the Reception of Marxism," p. 69. Notably, this theoretical dependency was closely aligned with a political and economic dependency as well, especially since by the late 1960s

Serbia for instance had its own independent tradition of adopting and rethinking Marxism (the “Praxis circle” being the most conspicuous example, with a global resonance), so that the collapse of Yugo-communism did not radically disrupt Marxist research in the country. In Bulgaria, the attachment to Soviet Marxism continued for too long (70 years!) for independently minded interpreters of Marx to be able to develop their own tradition, on a stable basis and with a strong perspective.<sup>24</sup>

It has become customary to define Bulgarian Marxism as just another mimicry of Soviet dialectical materialism. At a certain level of generality, such an assessment is not inaccurate, given that the local tradition’s biggest claim to fame was Todor Pavlov’s (in) famous theory of reflection, a mainstay of Soviet Marxism throughout the socialist bloc during the 1950s and 1960s. A trend-setting and ambitious effort to rethink questions of being and knowledge on the basis of Lenin’s theory of the identity of logic, epistemology, and dialectics, Pavlov’s *Teoriya na otrazhenieto* (Theory of reflection, 1945) tellingly shied away from investigating social and political questions, placing its bets on ontological-epistemological investigations instead.<sup>25</sup> Yet, just like the “totalitarian paradigm” does not tell the whole story of state socialism, a system that was leaking on all sides, so also the Stalinization of Marxism never managed to completely squash the subaltern heterodoxies in its midst. In the context of post-Stalinist Bulgaria, a few such heterodox “deviations” presented themselves, adding further nuances to Popivanov’s diagnosis above. These heterodoxies spanned the continuum between policy-making and academic discussion, in often ambiguous ways. While their original contributions to Marxist theory may have been limited, their strength lay elsewhere.

A major representative of a policy-oriented heterodoxy was Lyudmila Zhivkova, minister of culture and daughter of premier Todor Zhivkov, whose eclectic bricolage of young Marx’s humanism with “Eastern” spiritual traditions and a millennial understanding of Bulgarian history marked the course of the 1970s. Far more influential as a policy maker than a theorist, Zhivkova was the initiator behind the UNESCO-sponsored international children’s assembly titled “Flag of Peace.” She also oversaw major cultural campaigns such as “1300 Years of Bulgaria” and helped popularize, in both her writing and her policy-making, conceptions of the socialist person as a “holistically

Bulgaria remained the only Balkan country loyal to the USSR, as it followed a Soviet rather its own independent path of development. Evgenia Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, *Bulgarskite prehodi 1939–2010* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2010), p. 147. This trend would not change much for the remainder of the Cold War.

<sup>24</sup> Popivanov, “Marks izvûn vlastta,” p. 193, my translation.

<sup>25</sup> Mineva, “On the Reception of Marxism,” p. 66. According to Bulgarian scholar Dimitar Tsatsov, this was a common trend among Bulgarian Marxists well into the late 1960s; see Panayotov, *Capital Without Value*, p. 40.

developed personality” (*vsestrannorazvita lichnost*). As part of those projects, she also helped facilitate a shift of emphasis from “the historic links between the Bulgarian and Russian peoples” to “the Bulgarian contributions to Slavic culture” and from “socialist internationalism” to “how the Bulgarian state is the culmination of thirteen hundred years of continuity and struggle of the Bulgarian people”; in other words, from Soviet-centric Marxism to a nationalist-inflected humanism.<sup>26</sup> Among other consequences, Zhivkova’s emplacement of the triumph of socialism within the broader history of Bulgarian “anti-systemic” struggles would also prove highly impactful during the ethnonationalist Revival of the late 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a post-Stalinist heterodoxy of a strictly academic nature included a generation of younger scholars with a broad commitment to the tradition of Marxist humanism, from mostly philosophy and sociology university departments. While the transmission of ideas often took place orally, in classroom settings, resulting in scholarship for mostly local consumption, for dozens of university students and future academics this was their first encounter with the “Western Marxism” of Gramsci, Lukács, Korsch, and Horkheimer and Adorno, among others. Central figures in this effort at destabilizing the core tenets of DiaMat (dialectical materialism) also spearheaded a magisterial project of translating 50 volumes of Marx and Engels’s collected volumes, in parallel with similar projects elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> A simultaneous high point and swan song of this project was the so-called “Marxist seminar,” an interdisciplinary effort at rethinking the project and genealogy of Western Modernity drawing heavily on the work of the Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili and on the Moscow school of dialectical logic. The seminar’s concerted effort at retrieving a “more authentic” Marx also included a synthetic engagement with the phenomenological tradition and Michel Foucault’s recently imported work, to explore the newly discovered problematics of everyday life, the relationship between history and the everyday, and the concept of boundary (phenomena), among others.<sup>29</sup> Originally developed out of a

<sup>26</sup> Mark Baskin, “Bulgaria: From Critique to Civil Society,” *The Road to Disillusion: From Critical Marxism to Postcommunism in Eastern Europe* (New York, London: Sharpe, 1992), p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> Zhivka Valiavicharska explored this point in detail in her presentation titled “Marxist Humanism and the Rise of Nationalism in Post-Stalinist Bulgaria” at the Annual Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Convention in Washington, DC (2016).

<sup>28</sup> The main editor of this ambitious translation project was Bernard Muntyan, at the time of the Department of Philosophy at Sofia University. Notably, 49 volumes were published before the collapse of state socialism in 1989; the 50<sup>th</sup> and final volume has yet to see the light of day. Highly influential was also the work of Muntyan’s student, Petar-Emil Mitev (still active to this day). For a discussion of the history of the translations of *Capital*, vol. 2, see Panayotov, “*Capital* without Value.”

<sup>29</sup> Svetla Koleva, *Sociologiyata kato proekt: Nauchni identichnosti i socialni izpitaniya v Bylgaria, 1945–1989* (Sofia: Pensorft. 2015).

philosophy reading group from the mid-1970s, the seminar was officially dissolved in the context of perestroika in 1986, having forged “a new intellectual disposition toward the sociological problematization of the world.”<sup>30</sup>

In between these two poles, a set of hybrid institutional-academic projects sought to bring together the early Marx (of the fully developed “socialist personality”) and the later Marx (of “free disposable time”) to some remarkable success in the reform of socialist society. For instance, the influential Institute for the Scientific Research of Youth and its attendant “dissident” newspaper *Narodna Mladezh* (*People’s Youth*) pursued the development, among other stated goals, of a scientific project of “juventology” as the interdisciplinary study of the global situation of youth. As Svetla Koleva argues, the project included crafting a set of concepts such as “juventization,” “realization,” and “self-realization” which, motivated at least in part by a study of Marx, were proposed as an antidote to the traditional paternalism of the socialist state.<sup>31</sup> Even more consequential were the coordinated struggles around social reproduction and the unpaid labor of women, which marked the turn of the 1970s. Using the widely popular monthly *Zhenata dnes* (*Woman today*) as its ideological platform and forging a unique synthesis of grassroots pressure, high-echelon political negotiations, and rigorous academic research, over the course of the 1970s the struggles resulted in a constitutionally recognized right to leisure for socialist citizens, which also included the creation of a highly sophisticated system of daycare centers, kindergartens, and canteens, an efficient network of medical facilities, and up to three-years of paid and legally-protected maternity leave for Bulgarian women.<sup>32</sup> As Kristen Ghodsee and Mariya Dinkova argue, the protagonists of those struggles not only deployed to strategic effect the language of Marxist humanism (the work of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and others on “the woman question” in particular), but also saw themselves as participants in a worldwide “women’s emancipation” project.<sup>33</sup> The significance of their accomplishments has yet to be given its proper due.

<sup>30</sup> Koleva, *Sociologiyata kato proekt*, p. 164; see also Deyan Deyanov and Alexandar Kiossev, “Seminarite ot 80-te godini: Mezhdru kritichnata publichnost i slovestnata akcija,” *Kritika i humanizym* (2014), no. 43, pp. 145–158; and Miglena Nikolchina, *Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions: Heterotopias of the Seminar* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). Among the members of the seminar were Deyan Deyanov, Deyan Kyuranov, Andrey Bundzhulov, Andrey Raychev, Lilyana Deyanova, Kolyo Koev, and others. Their post-socialist existence would take them in often different directions, including politically.

<sup>31</sup> Koleva, *Sociologiyata kato proekt*, pp. 161–162.

<sup>32</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2015); and Mariya Dinkova, “Strasti po Velikata Zhenska Revolutsiya, Chast Vtora: Speechwriter,” *Vezni* (2008), no. 6, pp. 31–62; and “Strasti po Velikata Zhenska Revolutsiya,” *Vezni* 13 (2003), no. 5, pp. 23–37.

<sup>33</sup> Ghodsee, *The Left Side of History*, pp. 118–119; also Dinkova, “Strasti po velikata zhenska revolutsiya.”

It was the collapse of state socialism in 1989 that, by bringing to an abrupt end this mostly *praxical* engagement with the Marxian legacy, ushered in the third period of the reception of Marxist ideas in Bulgaria. Yet, rather than witness a proliferation of publishing and translation activity absent the political censorship of the past, this period resulted in a nearly complete silence on the topic. Prior to the publication in 2013 of the three volumes discussed above, only two new editions of *The Communist Manifesto* along with two translations of Slavoj Žižek's work had seen the light of day, with the rest bordering on the ideological or the conspiratorial-sensationalist: ranging from a collection of 52 quotes from *Capital*, vol. 1 meant to assist corporate employers in their business transactions to a biography of Jenny Marx under the apocalyptic title *Jenny Marx or The Wife of the Devil*.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, just as Marx was finally “exiting the corridors of power,” and despite superficial expectations to the contrary, no nuanced and sustained engagement with the legacy of his work took place. This was certainly the case not only in Bulgaria, but also everywhere else in post-socialist Eastern Europe. With once very active institutes and faculties for the study of socialism suddenly shut down, former “scholars of communism” and intellectual courtiers hopping on the neoliberal bandwagon literally overnight, and a series of trend-setting right-wing think tanks proliferating throughout “civil society,” the paradigm of the transition as decommunization was firmly set.<sup>35</sup> As any Eastern European intellectual (or aspiring politician) knows full well, to this very day making one's Marxist or communist sympathies public amounts to a form of intellectual (or political) suicide. Yet, while postsocialist intellectuals and publishing houses refuse to come anywhere near the Marxist tradition as articulated in its own voice, they incessantly churn out commentaries, popular opinions, and “expert knowledge” about what was wrong with socialism. What is particularly revealing about this high octane discursive machine, however, is the extent to which it reproduces the forms of one-dimensional thinking typical of state socialism itself, if with a different charge and a different political agenda. Two structural homologies of how both socialism and post-socialism have treated the subject of Marxism (socialism/communism) merit particular attention here.

<sup>34</sup> See Popivanov, “Marks izvùn vlastta,” p. 197; and Francois Giroux, *Zheni Marx ili zhenata na diavola* [orig. *Jenny Marx ou la femme du diable*] (Sofia: Akrus, 1995). The books of Žižek translated by this time included *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London, New York: Verso, 1991) and *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London, New York: Verso, 2001/2012); see resp. *Ponezhe ne znayat kakvo pravyat: Nasladata kato politicheski faktor* (Pernik: Sypernik, 2001), and *Pyrvo kato tradgediya, posle kato fars* (Sofia: Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Dostena Lavern, “Levite tink-tankove v Bylgaria: Shansovete na edna alternativa,” in Lilian Kaneva, Maksim Mizov, and Evgeniy Kandilarov (eds.), *Izsledvaniya po istoria na socializma v Bylgara: Prehodyt – II* (Sofia: Tsentyr za istoricheski i politologicheski izsledvaniya, 2013), pp. 641–670.

The first homology concerns the trope of determinism in relation to a particular set of historical processes. Under state socialism, the arc of history was said to be progressively moving forward in accordance with a set of “iron laws” firmly lodged in the sphere of the economy. According to this logic (which I simplify here for heuristic purposes), early forms of primitive communism and a subsequent slave-owning society were displaced by a feudal order and in turn replaced by the higher stage of capitalism, to be *abolished* by socialism on the path to a future communist society.<sup>36</sup> Important milestones along the way included the names of Marx and Engels (who invented the theory), Lenin (who raised it to a level of political practice), and Stalin (morphing from the “fourth classic” before 1956 to a monstrous embodiment of the “cult of personality” after), along with institutions such as the Comintern and the Communist Party as repositories of theoretical purity and programmatic firmness. In socialist Bulgaria, the local instantiation of this historical invariant included Dimitar Blagoev (founder of the Bulgarian Communist Party), Georgi Dimitrov (first socialist prime minister and former head of the Comintern), and Todor Zhivkov (premier and head of the BCP during “mature socialism”), with the Bulgarian Communist Party as the backbone of socialist society and Big Brother of the communist masses. Partial departures from this parallel, by way of the emplacement of communist struggles within the broader history of the Bulgarian nation for instance, constituted more of a “variation on a theme” than a new melody altogether.<sup>37</sup> Thus it was no coincidence that *Nauchen komunizym* (Scientific communism), the standard textbook in the human and social sciences in the country, was a joint project of Bulgarian and Soviet scholars, and that even as state socialism was crumbling, the latest Soviet edition of *Political Economy* was quickly translated into Bulgarian.<sup>38</sup>

The collapse of state socialism in 1989 may have reversed the direction of this progressive continuity but did not interrupt its underlying logic. Within post-socialist historiography, Marx and Engels still led to Lenin who in turn handed the baton over to Stalin (now restored to full glory), yet the ultimate point of arrival of this teleological progression was not the “bright future” of full communism but rather something altogether different. The argument now pointed to a signficatory closure of the socialist

<sup>36</sup> The complication of this narrative by the existence of the (in)famous “Asiatic mode of production” received much attention by state socialist scholars as well, but that is a topic for another discussion.

<sup>37</sup> For an example of such a departure, see Todor Zhivkov’s important 1968 “Speech Commemorating the Haiduk Exploits at Aglikina Meadow Celebrations,” delivered soon after the events in Prague of the same year. In his speech, Zhivkov points to the struggles of the Bulgarian haiduks and National Revival activists as direct antecedents to the communist movement in Bulgaria; see Zhivkov, *Bulgaria, Ancient and Socialist*, pp. 47–48. As noted above, Zhivkov’s daughter Lyudmila would play an important role in reimagining Bulgarian socialism as part of the broader national narrative throughout the 1970s.

<sup>38</sup> See Baskin, “Bulgaria: From Critique to Civil Society,” p. 153.

experience, along the lines the discursive chain of communism-Soviet Union-Stalinism-collapse.<sup>39</sup> In its Bulgarian instantiation, this popular post-Cold-War trope appeared in two complementary guises. In its vulgarized version (prevalent in the 1990s), the forward march of socialism could only lead to a society of permanent repression, as epitomized by a widely distributed poster map of a Bulgaria-covered-with-skulls, the human remains marking the sites of the various “re-education camps” in the country.<sup>40</sup> In its more sophisticated variation, the analysis acknowledged the transformation of the formerly mobilized society into an administered one, circa 1970, while insisting, in a paradoxical reiteration of Marx’s famous grave-diggers’ metaphor, that state socialism’s inherently repressive nature could only lead to its own demise.<sup>41</sup> For both versions of the story, the *telos* of socialism, a foreign body interfering with the organic evolution of society, could only constitute a reversal and restoration of capitalism itself, or what was widely designated in the 1990s as a “return to normalcy.”

The second structural homology concerns the three major forms of government(ality) in the twentieth century: socialism, fascism, and market capitalism/democracy. The mainstream interpretation of their relationship under state socialism harked back to the official position of the Comintern from the 1930s, which identified fascism as “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”<sup>42</sup> Capitalism and fascism were of the same breed, one an extreme radicalization of the other, and both opposed to the only progressive alternative: socialist society, on the path to full communism. The binary stuck and circulated widely throughout the Soviet bloc after World War Two, again adapted to suit local needs. In Bulgaria, this effort at adaptation produced no small amount of confusion, often bordering on the ludicrous, as mainstream historiography insisted on calling Bulgarian governments from the 1930s “monarcho-fascist,” while identifying the 1923 BCP-led (abortive) uprising as the first “anti-fascist” rebellion in the world, two claims at the very least open to contestation, given both the local and global context of the period.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> The maps, which could be widely seen posted on trees and walls in the 1990s, would often bear the heading: “45 years are enough!” Notably, the same heading was deployed by neo-Nazi formations more recently as well: [https://webcafe.bg/id\\_1938885667](https://webcafe.bg/id_1938885667) (accessed Oct. 5, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Ivaylo Znepolski, *Bylgarskiat komunizym: Sociokulturni cherti i vlastova traektorija* (Sofia: Siela, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> See Georgi Dimitrov, “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class Against Fascism” (1935) (online at [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08\\_02.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm) [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]).

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of the controversy surrounding the historical conditions of fascism in Bulgaria in the 1920s and 1930s, see Roumen Daskalov, *Ot Stambolov do Zhivkov: Golemite sporove za novata bylgarska istoriya* [From Stabolov to Zhivkov: The major disagreements over new Bulgarian history] (Sofia: Gutenberg, 2009), pp. 219–227.

Following the collapse of socialism, this binary was preserved yet again, if with a major reshuffling of the terms. Indeed, what became very popular from the 1990s on, not only in Bulgaria but also throughout Eastern Europe, was to lump together what were identified as the “twin totalitarianisms”: “Western” fascism and “Eastern” communism.<sup>44</sup> Drawing on translations of and conferences around the work of Francois Furet, Ernst Nolte, Stephan Courtois, and Hannah Arendt, fascism quickly lost its association with capitalism, to get permanently attached now to “communism” as its more enduring yet no less violent evil twin.<sup>45</sup> Or, as the VictimsOfCommunism.org website, created for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse of socialism in the country, said it: “The 20<sup>th</sup> century created two monsters: Nazism and communism. While no educated, humane, and democratically minded person today would defend nazism [sic], many still justify communism, a regime responsible for the death of over 100 million people.”<sup>46</sup> Opposed to both stood the only good alternative: democratic capitalism, with its free market economy, rule of law, electoral procedures, and “pre-political” civil society. In fact, from that period on to the present, “expert” talk on the failures of Bulgarian post-socialist capitalism continues to trace its underlying causes to residues from the

<sup>44</sup> Valiavicharska argues that this “two totalitarianisms” trope emerged, in fact, a decade earlier in Bulgaria with the publication of Zhelyu Zhelev’s book *Fascism* (1981), one of whose main (implicit) theses was that of “the full coincidence between the two totalitarian regimes—the fascist one and ours, the communist one”; see Zhivka Valiavicharska, “How the Concept of Totalitarianism Appeared in Late Socialist Bulgaria,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15 (2014), no. 2, pp. 303–334. The book, “the most important political text—and political event—in the history of late socialism in Bulgaria” was officially banned soon after its publication, yet it had a huge impact in introducing the framework of “totalitarianism” as an interpretive lens for understanding the socialist experience; *ibid.*, pp. 303, 329. After the end of the Cold War, Zhelev became Bulgaria’s first post-socialist president and played a pivotal role in the introduction of “shock therapy” and “accelerated privatization” policies in the course of the 1990s.

<sup>45</sup> Furet’s first translation appeared in 1994, Courtois’s in 1999, Arendt’s in 1993, and Nolte’s in 2011, while excerpts or unauthorized copies of their work had circulated in the country even earlier. See here François Furet, *Da mislim Frenskata revoliutsia* [Thinking about the French Revolution], trans. Georgi Zhechev (Sofia: Kritika i Humanizym, 1994); Stephan Courtois et al, *Chernata kniga na komunizma*, trans. Georgi Tsankov (Sofia: Prozorets, 1999); Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarizmyt* [Totalitarianism], trans. Irina Vaseva. (Sofia: Panorama, 1993); and Ernst Nolte, *Evropeyskata grazhdanska vojna* [The European civil war], trans. Donka Ilinova (Sofia: Kama, 2011). A conference dedicated to Furet’s *The Future of an Illusion* took place in Sofia in 1996, shortly before Furet’s death, followed by a publication of the conference proceedings the following year; see Ivaylo Znepolski (ed.) *Fransoa Fiure i prevyplyshteniata na socialnata utopia* [Francois Furet and the reincarnations of social utopia] (Sofia: Dom na naukite za choveka i obshtestvoto, 1997). Furet and Nolte themselves differentiate their own “genealogical” method in the study of fascism and communism from Arendt and Aaron’s “logico-structural method.” See here Furet and Nolte, *Fascism and Communism*, trans. Katherine Golsan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973).

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Ghodsee, *The Left Side of History*, pp. 193–194.



socialist past: from the persistence of egalitarian mentalities among the masses blocking the emergence of a true entrepreneurial spirit to the continued presence of communist functionaries secretly pulling the strings behind closed doors.<sup>47</sup>

It bears noting again that these two homologies refer to mainstream interpretations of the end(s) of History rather than reflecting the far more complex reality of the debates that took place in the public sphere both during and after the Cold War. For instance, when the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of revisionist Marxist humanism all across Eastern and Central Europe, one of that revisionism's basic premises was its challenge to the strong teleology of economic determinism as a staple of post-Stalinist socialism. This, among others, was the purpose in deploying concepts such as "praxis," "species-being," and "alienation," originating from a rigorous engagement with the work of the "young Marx."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, as scholars such as Geyer and Fitzpatrick, Valiavicharska, and Krylova have noted, the (ongoing) uncritical acceptance of the "totalitarian paradigm" among East European intellectuals in the 1990s was at odds with contemporaneous developments among Western theorists and historians who had been questioning its premises as early as the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>49</sup> Thus, one could argue that it is both the purposeful forgetfulness of subaltern Marxist traditions and the selective appropriation of largely discredited authors and ideas that fuels the vigorous anti-communism of the public sphere in Eastern Europe (Bulgaria included) in ways that paradoxically mirror the rigid dogmatism of post-Stalinist socialism.

Yet, bearing in mind these two discursive sequences, the historiography of socialism and its relationship with fascism and capitalism, it should be easy to surmise why autonomist Marxism has been the subject of a *surplus repression* by both the state socialist and the post-socialist ideological machines. As a quick search of the national library's master catalogue demonstrates, only a couple of our translated authors and texts existed in any translation in Bulgarian, while for the vast majority of our

<sup>47</sup> Svetla Koleva, "Old Reflexes and New Illusions in the Mass Consciousness," in Jacques Coenen-Huther (ed.), *Bulgaria at the Crossroads* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), pp. 33–50; Georgy Ganey, "Where Has Marxism Gone? Gauging the Impact of Alternative Ideas in Transition Bulgaria," *East European Politics and Societies* 19 (2005), no. 3, p. 445; and Znepolski, *Bŭlgarskiyat komunizŭm*, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> Their local differences notwithstanding, this wave of Marxist humanism included the Praxis circle in former Yugoslavia, the "Budapest school" in Hungary, the work of the young Kolakowski in Poland, authors such as Karel Kosík and Ivan Sviták in Czechoslovakia, and others. For a broad overview, see James Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> Michael Geyer, with assistance from Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Introduction: After Totalitarianism – Stalinism and Nazism Compared," in *Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–37; Valiavicharska, "How the Concept of Totalitarianism Appeared in Post-Stalinist Bulgaria"; Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1 (2000), no. 1, pp. 119–146.

authors Avtonomizym i marksizym constituted their first (and so far only) platform of access to a Bulgarian readership.<sup>50</sup> In a context where Marxism, communism, and the historical legacies of “actually existing socialism” continue to be seen today as synonymous for all intents and purposes, it is easy to forget, or to perhaps not even know, what a variegated and internally contradictory tradition Marxism is, and that even within that tradition there are sub-currents that many a Marxist (both East and West) knows next to nothing about. It may also be tempting to ignore the fact that the most powerful critical analysis of state socialism came not from the likes of Raymond Aaron or Hannah Arendt, but from within autonomist Marxism itself, from Socialism or Barbarism and the Johnson-Forest Tendency to Italian Autonomia,<sup>51</sup> and that the only so-called socialist state with a Marxist autonomist current in its midst (former Yugoslavia) brought to bear all the power of its state machinery to crush it.<sup>52</sup> It is this particular “epistemology of ignorance” that continues to motivate recurring questions such as: Why bother with Marxism, isn’t it just a naive idea that went horribly wrong?

### Autonomy or Marxism, or the Problem of Politics

The third problem of translation, which I have decided to call here the problem of politics, came from somewhat unexpected quarters. Within a year after the publication of our anthology on autonomist Marxism, Anarres Press, the publishing house of Bulgaria’s major anarchist center Adelante, came out with another anthology of texts by the Greek-French political theorist Cornelius Castoriadis under the title Proektût

<sup>50</sup> The SS. Cyril and Methodius National Library catalogue includes for instance a book by Svetozar Stojanović, under the title *Ot Titonik do srybskata demokratichna revolyutsiya* (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2004), English translation as *Serbia; The Democratic Revolution* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003), along with a few copies of books by Herman Gorter, Otto Rühle, and Alexandra Kollontai and three monographs by Anton Pannekoek on the workers’ movement. A few articles in translation exist by Guy Debord, Michel Wieviorka, Paolo Freire, Alain Badiou, Jacques Ranciere, and Michael Hardt, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, all published after 1989. Apart from the selections in our anthology, no other translations in Bulgarian exist by authors such as C. L. R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, Raya Dunayevskaya, Martin Glaberman, Raoul Vaneigem and Rene Riesel, Bifo Berardi, Sergio Bologna, Mario Tronti, Paolo Virno, Eddy Cherki, Selma James, Mariarosa Dallacosta, Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, Colectivo Situaciones, or Tiqqun. For a discussion of Cornelius Castoriadis see the following section.

<sup>51</sup> See for instance C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986); and Cornelius Castoriadis, “Socialism or Barbarism,” in *Political and Social Writings: Volume 1, 1946–1955* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 76–106. Castoriadis identified the U.S.S.R. and its satellites as “bureaucratic capitalist” societies, while C.L.R. James preferred the term “state capitalism.” A typical gesture for the Italian authors was to refuse the whole problematic of the “transition” (from socialism to communism) as a theoretical and political blackmail. See here Negri (2008).

<sup>52</sup> See here Mihailo Marković’s retrospective account. Mihailo Marković and Robert S. Cohen, *Yugoslavia: The Rise and Fall of Socialist Humanism* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1975).

za avtonomiya (The project of autonomy).<sup>53</sup> Selected mostly from among Castoriadis's work after his break with the Socialism or Barbarism collective and with Marxism more broadly, *Proektût za avtonomiya* proposed to dissociate the task of autonomous self-governance from the history of the Marxist tradition, suggesting that the two are fundamentally incompatible.<sup>54</sup> Given the well documented, historically fraught relationship between Marxism and anarchism, addressing the tense and competing definitions of autonomy as defined by the two books merits special consideration.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the problem of history which came from the right, the political challenge in this case presented itself from the left.

Notably, our own anthology also included two texts by Socialism or Barbarism in an effort to foreground the autonomist Marxist politics of the group as a whole: one by Castoriadis himself, discussing the birth of Soviet bureaucracy and the short-lived Workers' Opposition in 1920s, and another by Daniel Mothé on the relationship between trade unions and workers in the United States. *Proektût za avtonomiya*, by contrast, presented its selection of readings under the motto articulated in the opening chapter (the transcript of a film on Castoriadis for Greek national TV) according to which the dilemma of the present moment was that of being "either a Marxist or a revolutionary" but not both at the same time.<sup>56</sup> Speaking in 1984, Castoriadis saw Marxist theory and revolutionary change as resoundingly incompatible, given that Marxism had become a "corpse of a theory, which had stopped its development both socially and historically, serving only as an ideology" and legitimating both "terrorist and exploitative regimes" in the East and "groups, organizations, and parties which seek to come to power in underdeveloped countries."<sup>57</sup>

Yet it is one of the middle texts in the Castoriadis anthology, titled "Vyzobnovyavayki revolyutsiata" ("Recommencing the revolution"), that most clearly manifests the tensions between the Castoriadis anthology and our own.<sup>58</sup> Written and first circulated

<sup>53</sup> Kornelius Kastoriadis, *Proektût za avtonomiya* (Sofia: Anarres, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> On this point, see David Graeber, "The Sadness of Post-Workerism, or, "Art and Immaterial Labor" Conference: A Sort of Review," *Commoner* (2008), no. 12 (online at [http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/graeber\\_sadness.pdf](http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/graeber_sadness.pdf) [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]); and Heather Gaultney, "Between Anarchism and Autonomist Marxism," *Journal of Labor History* 12 (2009), no. 3, pp. 467–487.

<sup>56</sup> Kastoriadis, *Proektût za avtonomiya*, p. 13, my translation. The film, titled *Kornelius Kastoriadis i avtonomiyata* [Cornelius Castoriadis and autonomy] and subtitled in Bulgarian, is available for viewing online at <https://vimeo.com/81945962> (accessed Oct. 5, 2019).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14, my translation.

<sup>58</sup> The first French publication of "Recommencing the Revolution" was in the January issue of *S. ou B.* (1964). The text was first translated into English by Maurice Brinton, under the title *Redefining Revolution, Solidarity Pamphlet 44* (no date). For citation purposes, I draw in this section

in 1963 prior to being published in *Socialism ou Barbarie* the following year, the text bears striking testimony to what Castoriadis was beginning to identify as the inherent limits of the Marxist tradition. In this text, which precipitated the final and irremediable split of the group (officially terminated in 1965), Castoriadis reflects upon the failure of Marxist theory to capture the specificities of the new “post-classical” and “post-colonial” capitalist world, in which the working-class movement has also been depleted. He also theorizes this new condition under the rubric of what he calls a hierarchical “bureaucratic capitalism” (“a pyramid composed of many pyramids”) and reasserts the importance of revolutionary organization to give direction to working people’s autonomy in moments of capitalist crisis. As he departs further and further from (a certain definition of) Marxism, Castoriadis suggests that the seed of the problem is to be found in Marx himself, who never freed himself from a capitalist vision of the world.

Yet even a relatively quick reading of the remainder of Castoriadis’s text yields far more ambiguous conclusions. While Castoriadis argues against just minor “additions” to or “partial revisions” of the Marxist tradition, calling instead for “an all-around theoretical reconstruction,”<sup>59</sup> it is surprising to see how many of the markers of this new situation proceed from the very same premises as those of autonomist Marxism in particular. For instance, Castoriadis’s claim that the “exchange value” of labor-power is not simply the byproduct of “objective conditions” but rather of working class struggles against capitalist domination<sup>60</sup> is a classical autonomist Marxist hypothesis (whose roots, despite Castoriadis’s claim to the contrary, go back to Marx himself, most visibly in the famous chapter on the “Working Day” in *Capital*, vol. 1). Similarly, his critique of the conceptions of economic determinism and the leading role of the communist party as central to the traditional working-class movement<sup>61</sup> is a staple of any number of heterodox Marxisms, including that of the autonomist Marxist theorists. The proposed shift of focus from the sphere of production to the “totality of people’s lives,” along with the reassertion of the centrality of culture for resistant practices (*ibid.*), is very much in line with conceptions such as the “social factory” of the Italian autonomists or the “society of the spectacle” of the Situationists; as is his critique of the Party and the Union as the (no longer) paradigmatic institutions of the working class.<sup>62</sup> No less importantly, Castoriadis’s insistence on the obsolescence of class analysis in favor of a

on a subsequent and modified English translation titled “Recommencing the Revolution” in *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford, Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 106–138. Apart from the “Introductory Interview” available only in Bulgarian, I use the English language translations of the Castoriadis texts included in *Proektút za avtonomiya* in this article.

<sup>59</sup> Castoriadis, “Recommencing the Revolution,” p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

logic of bureaucratization increasingly organized around the “direction and execution of collective activities”<sup>63</sup> shares much in common with efforts to cross-pollinate Marxist investigations of the accumulation of capital with Foucault’s biopower;<sup>64</sup> and so on.

It is possible to argue therefore that, despite his claims for the growing obsolescence of Marxism, Castoriadis’s own “post-Marxism” has its feet planted on the same soil as (at least some of) the autonomist Marxist tradition, with which it shares a number of key presuppositions. Certainly, readers sympathetic to Castoriadis’s work might claim that his “project of autonomy,” along with his recuperation of the emancipatory origins of “bourgeois democracy,” still offers distinct advantages over even less orthodox versions of Marxism; or, that it is at least a different, and equally valid, form of critique. A more generous response to this claim might rejoin that the issue might well be undecidable: both autonomist Marxism and Castoriadis’s autonomy offer an important outside to the capitalist social imaginary (for instance, Castoriadis’s practice of self-governance, no less than, say, Negri’s constituent power, are severely hampered under a capitalist organization of the social). A less generous reading might zone in on the limits of Castoriadis’s critique of Marxism and Marx himself, showing its partial complicity in replicating Cold War ideologemes of the equivalence of Marx/ism and Stalinism (see Dean above). It is one thing to argue that Marx does not manage to free himself completely from the lure of capital and its system of values (heteropatriarchy, Eurocentrism, and so on); it is quite another to insist that he “participates fully in the capitalist imaginary: for him, as for the dominant ideology of his age, everything depends on increasing the productive forces.”<sup>65</sup>

For the Bulgarian editors of *Proektty za avtonomiya*, the appeal of Castoriadis’s thought lies in it being “outside the ready-made decisions and dogmas of the left and the right,” both of which have lost credibility with the “accumulated bitter experience of totalitarian socialism and the subsequent transition to capitalism.”<sup>66</sup> This claim marks a final, major point of contention with our own project and publication. A “beyond-left-and-right” stance underlies our *post-political* constellation today: from “third way” social democrats to telegenic technocrats, and from champions of “bipartisan consensus across the party aisle” to the new captains of finance. A favorite mantra of neoliberal governmentality, this stance seeks to both stifle the emergence of political alternatives and to dismantle the last holdouts of the welfare state as it pursues its

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>64</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011); Jacques Bidet, *Foucault with Marx* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> See Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Revolutionary Force of Ecology: Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis,” *Kairos* (online at <http://dkantalis.blogspot.com/2011/11/revolutionary-force-of-ecology.html> [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]).

<sup>66</sup> Castoriadis, *Proektty za avtonomiya*, p. 8, my translation.

relentless accumulation of profit. In a context where political decision-making has long been wrested out of the hands of the general public, and where the consensus on what is politically and economically viable continues to be set by the heirs of the Mont Pelerin Society, a “beyond-the-left-and-the-right” position runs the significant risk of placing one on the Right side of the divide. In the editorial preface to the Castoriadis anthology, this “post-political” position harkens to a comment made in an interview with the author from 1996 and included in the anthology, in which Castoriadis asserts that that the “quarrel between Right and Left... has now lost its meaning.”

Yet, importantly, the interview continues to add that the antagonism has lost its meaning “not because there would be nothing to fuel a political quarrel, and even a very great political quarrel, but because both sides are saying the same thing.”<sup>67</sup> In short, rather than argue for the permanent and irrevocable disappearance of the “political quarrel” between the Right and the Left, Castoriadis laments its conjunctural neutralization under the “rising tide of (neoliberal) insignificance.” Arguably, the goal would then be to reverse this process, and to articulate and intensify further the antagonism between these two poles of the political spectrum – not unlike what Socialism or Barbarism had done in its heyday. To be sure, Castoriadis’s “post-Marxist” writings mount important challenges to, especially, more traditional kinds of Marxism, which often display a strong bias against the collective intelligence of ordinary people. Where *Proektût za avtonomiya* and *Avtonomizym i marksizym* part ways is on the topic of the relationship between Marxism and radical change: as our anthology saw it, not all types of Marxism (or all types of Marx) are just an extension of the capitalist social imaginary under a different guise, nor are they necessarily inimical to practices of self-governance in the substantive sense of the term. Attending to, rather than erasing altogether, the intersections between Marxism, autonomy, and revolutionary change is not just about reading the history of past struggles in a more complex light, but also and more importantly about expanding our theoretical and political horizons in the present.

### From Grand Theories to the Work of Translation, or the Problem of Ontology

The final and least obvious problem that emerged as we were completing our project was what I would call the problem of *ontology*. This problem opened us up toward a spatial, rather than just temporal, horizon. Open-ended and horizontal as it may well be, autonomist Marxism’s relationship to the struggles of indigenous peoples, communities of color, and non-Euro-descendent populations at large remains at best ambiguous. As we reflected on this relationship, a number of questions came up. For instance: How useful was it to subsume such social struggles, and the social ontologies that underlie

<sup>67</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, “Neither God, Nor Caeser, Nor Tribune,” in *Postscript on Insignificance* (London, New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 5–21.

them, to the more familiar rubrics of the multitude, the cognitariat, general intellect, or the coming insurrection? How were we to resolve the significant challenges that such struggles (and their underlying ontologies) might pose to both the central tropes of autonomist Marxism and its repertoire of organizational strategies?<sup>68</sup> Even further, how were we to account for the fact that, over against our best intentions and with the notable exception of C. L. R. James and Grace Lee Boggs, all the contributors of our anthology were theorists of European descent? And that, aside from the unquestionable limits of our own knowledge or access to different traditions, we had been so hard pressed to find many others?

As we sought to remedy this deficiency we certainly thought of C. L. R. James's work on "the Negro Question" as a potential resource.<sup>69</sup> Almost uniquely among the (at least male) contributors to our anthology, James insists on what he calls the "vitality and validity" of anti-racist organizing ("the independent Negro struggle") and on the risks of merely subsuming it under a labor-capital axis of analysis.<sup>70</sup> Yet our interest in including only recent texts in this final section, along with the U.S.-centric and/or pan-Africanist focus of James's analysis, made us reluctant to pursue this possibility. At the time of completing our book project we were not familiar either with Sandro Mezzadra's important effort to bring together the insights of post-operaist Marxist and postcolonial analysis, nor with the as of yet unpublished anthology *The Anomie of the Earth: Philosophy, Politics and Autonomy in Europe and the Americas*, seeking to extend the dialogue with decolonial and anti-settler colonial theory.<sup>71</sup> Faced with what

<sup>68</sup> The topic of the commons presents a case in point here. Arguing from a decolonial perspective, Walter D. Mignolo has suggested that indigenous understandings of what he calls "the communal" do not merely replicate the logic of the common but rather have their own consistency and trace a different genealogy; see Mignolo, "The Communal and the Decolonial," *Turbulence* 5 (2009), no. 5, pp. 29–32 (online at <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-5/decolonial/> [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]). From a different if related perspective, Jodi Byrd has recently pointed out that leftist conversations around "the commons" in North America often overlook the history of settler colonialism and the imperatives of decolonization (including of the land); see Jodi Byrd, "Mind the Gap: Indigenous Sovereignty and Antinomies of Empire," in Federico Luisetti, John Pickles, and Wilson Kaiser (eds.), *The Anomie of the Earth: Philosophy, Politics, and Autonomy in Europe and the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 119–136. Mignolo's text, an early consideration for inclusion in our anthology, is available in Bulgarian translation online at <http://www.lifeaftercapitalism.info/critique/242-the-communal-and-the-decolonial-walter-mignolo> (2012; accessed Oct. 5, 2019). Byrd's contribution came out after the publication of our anthology.

<sup>69</sup> See C.L.R. James, *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question"* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Sandro Mezzadra, "The Gaze of Autonomy. Capitalism, Migration, and Social Struggles," in *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 121–142; and Luisetti et al, *Anomie of the Earth*.

we perceived to be both a scarcity of texts and a pressing need to take the conversation further, we settled for an unorthodox and admittedly controversial choice as a final text in our anthology: Boaventura de Sousa Santos's short article titled "The Future of the World Social Forum: The Work of Translation."<sup>72</sup>

The appeal of Santos's essay lay in its proposal to (re)think radical theory and practice under new ("post-socialist" and even "post-Occidental") conditions. Taking up Western Modernity rather than just capitalism as a frame of reference, Santos argues that "modern" theories of social change have historically always presupposed a privileged actor capable of representing the social totality (the proletariat in Marx, the individual/civil society in liberalism, and so on). Yet, what is to be done when both the actors and the basic premises of these theories of global change have been discredited? Santos's answer points to reconceptualizing the world as an inexhaustible totality composed of many totalities, all partial and incomplete, to which no general (Grand) theory could ever do full justice. In a situation where the very search for a new general theory would only lead to dead-ends, or worse, Santos's proposed alternative is what he calls "the work of translation," as "the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible [...] without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without, in order words, reducing them to homogeneous entities."<sup>73</sup>

The goal of this work of translation is the creation of contact zones which render practices, knowledges, and groups porous and permeable to other practices, knowledges, and groups, with an eye to both replacing "fortress difference" with "host difference" and to identifying and reinforcing what is common in the diversity of counter-hegemonic struggles.<sup>74</sup> Since both canceling out the differences and exaggerating them to the point of incommunicability is out of the question, the work of translation has two prongs. It is both a translation of or between knowledges, consisting in interpretative work between two or more cultures to identify similar concerns and aspirations among them and the different responses they provide, and a translation of practices which focuses on mutual intelligibility among forms of organizations and types of struggle. As Santos argues in an important passage:

<sup>72</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The Future of the World Social Forum: The Work of Translation." The selection of Santos's text provoked extensive discussions in our collective, including a series of emails between the translator of the text, at the time a doctoral student in sociology at Sofia University and a local political activist, and myself, upon whose insistence the text had been proposed to begin with. We ultimately reached the conclusion that, Santos's questionable autonomist Marxist credentials notwithstanding, the inclusion of his text would serve well both a more pluralist conception of our own project and what we imagined to be the (intellectual and political) benefits of our target audience.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.



When social transformation has no automatic meaning and neither history nor society or nature can be centrally planned, the movements have to create through translation partial collective meanings that enable them to coalesce on courses of action that they consider most adequate to bring about the kind of social transformation they deem most desirable.<sup>75</sup>

Santos's resistance to grand theorizing is further motivated by a particular propensity of thought in Western Modernity that he calls "abyssal thinking."<sup>76</sup> Abyssal thinking is "a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones," which accords true reality only to what exists on *this* (the "Northern") side of the line, rendering what *is* on the *other* ("Southern") side of the line irrelevant, secondary in importance, even nonexistent.<sup>77</sup> Notably, not only corporate executives or (post)colonial technocrats have been complicit in this type of abyssal thinking, but also and quite often radical intellectuals and activists whenever they have taken up "the Negro question," "the colonial question," "the Southern question," and so on, from the perspective of a more fundamental struggle (labor against capital). Abyssal thinking, for Santos, is at least partially at fault for what he has called elsewhere "the waste of experience," that is, the devaluation, attempted erasure, and rendering invisible of cognitive, political, economic, cultural, and other knowledges and practices outside the West/global North.<sup>78</sup> The critical task to which the work of translation is expected to contribute is the reversal of this process and the recuperation of this wasted experience beyond the abyssal divide between the North and the South in particular.

For the purposes of our project then, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's short intervention was meant as both an "essay in self-criticism" and as a theoretical shortcut to problematics beyond those of Eurocentric Marxist theory. Even as it departs from the rigid theoretical dogma of more orthodox Marxisms, autonomist Marxism often struggles with taking the concerns of, for instance, indigenous peoples and/or people of color seriously enough, or with moving beyond a labor-centric model of analysis and intervention (whether that labor be manual, cognitive, immaterial, or affective). One major reason for this is its embrace of a universalist social ontology (a Grand Theory with a global design) which unwittingly lays waste to other ways of conceiving and organizing

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 30 (2007), no. 1, pp. 45–89.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>78</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "A Critique of Lazy Reason: Against the Waste of Experience," in Immanuel Wallerstein (ed.), *The Modern World-System in the Longue Durée* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), pp. 157–197.

the social (for instance, ones that refuse the compulsory secularism of the Western left). Even in their well-intentioned forays into “epistemologies of the South,” autonomist Marxist theoreticians may still reproduce, in the name of constructing a theoretical common, a Eurocentric intellectual bias with dubious political consequences.<sup>79</sup> While Santos may be unable to resolve all these problems, especially in ten pages of text, and may occasionally fall into a culturalist trap that risks reifying political relations, his proposal for a “work of translation” opens the door to a mutual enrichment of radical emancipatory projects, with a particular attentiveness to ones from the global South.

Finally, Santos’s short intervention allows us to cast a critically retrospective gaze on some of the authors referenced in this text. Taking the notion of an “abyssal divide” seriously, it is not hard to see that the often reductive reading of Marx as a “straw man,” along with his effort to dissociate practices of autonomy from the Marxist tradition, are not the only problems that plague Castoriadis’s work. No less problematic is the exclusive genealogy of “genuinely” autonomous societies that he claims to be able to identify historically: namely, ancient Greece (between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), post-medieval Europe, and no others. Without bothering to provide any serious evidence to support such a momentous claim, Castoriadis argues that all other societies, including those of pre-Columbian America or pre-Conquest Africa (along with Jewish, Muslim, and other such societies) have only been and can only be defined as heteronomous, that is, incapable of critically interrogating the very laws of their existence and their governing institutions.<sup>80</sup> Stated differently, if heteronomy has been the rule in “98% of human history” when “society is alienated from the laws that it has itself created, because it does not realize that they are its own creation,” then the counter-hegemonic task for Castoriadis is to “select precisely this [Greco-Western] tradition [...] in which questioning tradition is a fundamental characteristic.”<sup>81</sup> As he explicitly reaffirms a “West/Europe-against-the-rest” binary, Castoriadis unwittingly falls in the trap of a Eurocentric historiography whose colonial(ist) origins are in plain sight, significantly hampering its radical potential.

To return to de Sousa Santos, his “post-abyssal” project of a “work of translation” invites us to not only “philosophize in languages” or critically interrogate normative social imaginaries, but also to attend to both the plurality and irreducible incomplete-

<sup>79</sup> For a widely circulating critique of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri’s *Commonwealth* as unwittingly reproducing a colonial logic, despite its ostensible claims to the contrary, via a politics of citation that puts premium on radical theorists from the North at the expense of their Southern counterparts, see Mark Driscoll, “Looting the Theory Commons: Hardt and Negri’s *Commonwealth*,” *Postmodern Culture* 21 (2010), no. 1 (online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/454111> [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]).

<sup>80</sup> Castoriadis, *Proektút za avtonomiya*, pp. 18–19, my translation.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 20–21, my translation.

ness of especially radical projects of emancipation. If the goal of the radical left is to give flesh and bone to the slogan that “another world is possible,” then Santos’s implicit suggestion is not only to take (autonomist) Marxism seriously, but also to try and think beyond it as well.

### By Way of a Conclusion

Since its publication, *Avtonomizym i marksizym* has generated a good amount of debate in the public sphere. Following the launch of the book, its editors and members of the collective have participated in televised appearances (on an atypically radical TV program in the provinces) and have also introduced it to various radical collectives in open discussions.<sup>82</sup> While it has mostly been met with a wall of silence by the mainstream intellectuals in the country, the book has received positive reviews by more sympathetic readers and is also currently utilized in university courses.<sup>83</sup> Notably, *Autonomism and Marxism* was followed up by another anthology by New Left Perspectives titled *Kriticheski pogledi kùm choveshkite prava* (A critical look at human rights) problematizing concepts such as “human rights,” “refugees,” and “humanitarian interventions” in a post-socialist context, with a few other pending projects as well.<sup>84</sup> As I conclude this paper, I would like to revisit briefly some of the basic motivations and long-term goals that we set ourselves with the publication of our anthology on autonomist Marxism.

For the handful of leftists in the country (as for many others elsewhere), a critical ideological task entails rupturing the neoliberal consensus that has dominated the public sphere since the collapse of state socialism. A major role in the establishment of this consensus has been not only the demonization of collective alternatives, boosted in the region by ideologically coded references to the “horrors” of historically existing socialism, but also the coordinated promulgation of both discourses and policies that boost up technocratic neoliberalism as “the only game in town.” If, as Milton Friedman has argued in an often cited comment, at a time of crisis the course of future tends to be determined by the “ideas lying around,”<sup>85</sup> then a major task for the left is the multipli-

<sup>82</sup> Apart from the official reception for the launching of the book, I personally participated via Skype in two such events: a TV program titled *Blogyt na Mavrakis* (June 11, 2014, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gpwcaO\\_llk&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gpwcaO_llk&feature=youtu.be) [accessed Oct. 5, 2019]) and an open forum at the “Solidarity Center” in the seaport city of Varna (June 19, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> See here in particular Ognyan Kassabov, “Avtonomiyata kato trud i teoriya,” *Kultura* 18 (May 16, 2014), online at <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/22193> (accessed Oct. 5, 2019). Notably, *Avtonomizym i marksizym* is the one most consistently visited texts from all my uploads on academia.com.

<sup>84</sup> See Georgi Medarov (ed.), *Kriticheski pogledi kym choveshkite prava* (Sofia: KOI, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London, New York: Verso, 2015), p. 61.

cation of such ideas, especially ones that challenge the dominant status quo. In Eastern Europe, autonomist Marxism is uniquely poised to contribute to such a challenge. Its repertoire of theories and practices explodes the ideological “chains of equivalence” of post-socialist historiography, as they seek to fill in the dots between an (allegedly) naive and unrealistic theory (Marxism, socialism, communism) and its monstrous materialization in practice (the Gulag – see Jodi Dean above). More importantly, it also opens a horizon of collective action beyond the traditional avatars of organized political behavior: the Party, the Union, the State, Civil Society, the Nation, and the like, without lapsing into a fetishism of pure spontaneity or an uncritical horizontalism. In short, autonomist Marxism offers a critical perspective from which to rethink both the socialist past and the capitalist present and a praxical framework in which resistance is not simply reactive and autonomy is not just separatism.

Yet, beyond the mere circulation of counter-hegemonic ideas, what our project sought to do was to engage in its own “work of translation” as well. In this sense, Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s final text served not only a theoretical, but also a *meta-theoretical* and even a programmatic function, with its call for a translation of knowledges and practices with an eye to their mutual enrichment. In a country such as Bulgaria the lines of division within the numerically minuscule extraparliamentary left are often blurry at best. This is true practically if not ideologically: for instance, the same publishing house, Anarres, served as the shared platform for both the Castoriadis anthology and our own. Yet even within this entangled web of relations the theoretical references which frame the conversation have often projected a Eurocentric bias. In a context where Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is still the only major translation of writing “from the South,” where the work of Spivak, Bhabha, Hall, or the Subaltern Studies collective continues to have a meager readership (in languages other than Bulgarian), and where the readers of decolonial scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, María Lugones, or Houria Bouteldja are still to be counted on the fingers of one’s hand, expanding (rather than looting) the theoretical commons is a pressing task.<sup>86</sup> With its implicit suggestion that even the most radical instantiations of Marxist theory can only offer an “incomplete and partial totality” as a theoretical practice, Santos’s essay can be read as a point of relay to that broader conversation, an invitation to start looking South, and not only to the West/global North. At the time of this writing, notable makers in this direction include a forthcoming translation of Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* and a projected anthology on radical theory from the global South.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> See Driscoll, “Looting the Theory Commons.”

<sup>87</sup> The anthology of texts from the global South, put together by activists from the dVERSIA collective, foregrounds debates among postcolonial, decolonial, and anti-settler colonial theorists, from Frantz Fanon to the present. Most of these texts are scheduled to appear first online.

In a famous text from his youth, Marx argued that, under certain material conditions, theory itself could become a material force.<sup>88</sup> Eschewing more familiar base-superstructure distinctions, he located that radical potential in the theory's capacity to express and articulate the aspirations of ordinary people. If it is true that between the structural dynamics of material reality (however defined) and the collective needs of the people (however defined) there is a whole ensemble of mediating instances and relays, then in Eastern Europe some of those instances would arguably include translation(s), in the senses discussed in this text. It is to be hoped that the anthology on autonomist Marxism will be able to, in its own very modest way, assist in constructing some of those mediations.

*Acknowledgements: Perhaps even more so than most academic writing, this text would not have been possible without the contributions of its various interlocutors. I would like to thank my co-editor, Stanimir Panayotov, who was the first to draw my attention to both the Castoriadis film and the significant tensions with the Bulgarian anarchists. Georgi Medarov provided insightful comments on Boaventura de Sousa Santos's text, while Kelvin Santiago-Valles suggested looking at the Comintern's official position on fascism. I am especially indebted to Martin Marinos for his close reading of different drafts of this text, along with his nuanced suggestions and an additional list of helpful references. Last but not least, I am grateful to my two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism and helpful recommendations.*

<sup>88</sup> See Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," trans. Tom Bottomore, in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 53–65, here 60.