



We Are All Communists Now... But What Kind?

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review of:

Massimo De Angelis (2007) *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press. (PB: pp. 320, £22.50, ISBN: 9780745320359)

In a well-known passage, Marx argued that human history could only truly begin when the bonds of capital have been cast aside, an event that is ironically precipitated by its own internal contradictions. It is not history's end that ought to concern us now (since this merely hypostatizes the horrors of late capitalism), but history's beginning, the emergence of an alternative set of social relations that take us beyond the horizon of global capital. Such a beginning already haunts us today as a half-hidden 'outside' residing within the relentlessly inventive machinations of accumulation. According to Massimo De Angelis, in this perceptive and fascinating book, this outside is insinuated in the myriad acts of co-production and co-operation that people struggle to create beyond the pull of market forces and waged labour. Perhaps, then, capitalism is not superseded by a brazen gesture of revolutionary replacement, but through the everyday struggles that amplify the common already among us. The urgent question this book seeks to address is thus: how are we to map the boundaries and frontlines of this *a priori* commons, since capital both fears and parasitically feeds off it in order to maintain its innovative expansion? And could we not add, isn't this especially pressing today when even the most garish management gurus are celebrating anti-managerialism and 68 style radicalism in order to entice suspicious generation-Y employees into the post-industrial workhouse? As De Angelis aptly puts it:

The problem of alternatives therefore becomes a problem of how we disentangle from this dialectic, of how within the social body conflict is not tied back in to capital's *conatus*, but instead becomes a force for the social constitution of value practices that are autonomous and independent from those of capital. (De Angelis, 2007: 42, *emphasis in original*)

In order to understand the limits of capital and co-optation, De Angelis argues we first need to know what exactly we are 'up against'. The book develops a theory of capitalist hegemony that is impressive in scope, detail and inclusiveness. According to the author, capital accumulation enters the political realm when it endeavours to normalize the protocols of profit seeking. Towards this end, measurement is one of the more powerful

instruments of capitalist domination since it moulds the commons into its own likeness. As increasing aspects of social life are subordinated to the forces of disciplinary measurement, De Angelis suggests it is no wonder some critics have represented capital as a boundaryless, almost infinitely smooth plane. While understandable, the notion of totality misses the constitutive importance of the 'outside' that is incessantly forged by struggles around counter-grammars of social life. Again, the question must be posed: how is such an outside possible when the enemy is capable of such extraordinary feats of suppleness, when capital can even package and sell its own critique?

To find an answer, according to De Angelis, we must recognize the crucial importance of *value practices* underlying such struggles. More precisely, measurement involves the brutal normalization of capitalist values (profit, consumption, private property, exploitation, management, surplus, etc.) as well as a method for tallying them up. The ultimate aim is to define the parameters of 'good and bad', 'right and wrong' in a way that privatizes profit and socializes loss. How these values are measured is especially important. This largely consists of linear and loop socio-logarithms, an effective mechanism for sucking the self-determined industry of the social body back into the sphere of wage relations. The timing of the commons is neither linear nor looped, but *phase* oriented. The dreamtime event of the phase determines the outside in a vocabulary that cannot be easily co-opted or absorbed by the pratico-inert rhythms of capital. Echoing the concerns of the Italian autonomist movement, De Angelis maintains that the relationship between normalization and phase-time struggle is not mutually exclusive. The couplet forms a dynamic that propels capitalism in counter-intuitive ways. In a telling introductory passage, he writes:

What might seem a paradox, the contemporary presence of normalization and struggle, is in fact the lifeblood of capitalism, what gives it energy and pulse, the claustrophobic dialectic that needs to be overcome. Phase time is the time of emergence, of 'excess', of tangents, 'exodus' and 'lines of flight', the rupture of linearity and circularity redefining and repositing the goals and telos, as well as norms and values. It is the time of creative acts, the emergence of the new that the subject might experience in terms of what Foucault calls the limit experience, the experience of transformation. (De Angelis, 2007: 3)

This certainly resonates with the arguments of post-workerist (*operaismo*) theorists like Hardt and Negri. An indispensable 'elemental communism' (involving mutual aid, co-operation, gift-giving, etc.) lies at the heart of capitalism: how else can we account for the wealth in society that is qualitatively above and beyond the surplus harnessed by financial markets, wage-labour relations and private property? In this sense, we are all communists to some extent, but cannot fully enjoy the benefits of the common since its value is absorbed by capital. For sure, if the common were taken to the *n*th degree then it would surely spell the demise of its parasitical hegemon. De Angelis is keen, however, to differentiate his analysis from Hardt and Negri's, developing points of distinction that are significant for how we understand 'the outside'. First, he does not buy their argument regarding the multitude and its universalizing nodes of singularity. Rather than being a plane upon which the commons might break through proper, it is today riven with contradictions that corrosively pit producer against producer. Any realized commons must overcome these internal points of antagonism. And second, the frontline of the accumulation process is not the immaterial worker of Western Europe or the United States, but the third world peasant, the Machiladoras wage-slave and other

desperate labourers who confront capitalism as a life and death problem. This proletariat has nothing to lose and is therefore more likely to make manifest the shadow-world of the global common.

At this crucial moment in unpacking the boundary demarcating outer and inner political spheres, De Angelis surprisingly turns on the resources of critique themselves – sometimes with recourse to rather tired post-modern clichés regarding the shortcomings of classical Marxism. In quick-fire succession, Hardt and Negri are criticized for their notion of ‘communism in waiting’ since it does not fully grasp how the multitude is internally divided. Orthodox Marxism is dismissed for its simplistic understanding of revolutionary transformation – party hierarchies, vanguard intellectuals and political programmes breach the phase-time imaginary of the commons. Indeed, the last part of the book avers: “The outside is not an academic category. It is a theoretical construct that is given life, texture and relevance by concrete life practices and struggles at the frontline” (De Angelis, 2007: 226-227). A kind of ‘realism’ regarding what is pragmatically possible and impossible underlies this understanding of the outside. However, the key limitation with the inside/outside dichotomy is that the everyday politics of immanence often becomes co-habitation. To be cheeky for a minute, isn’t the way in which the ‘frontline’ is commonly lived out in Western Europe simply far too tame, almost a matter of participating in G8 protests and other fashionable pastimes of an increasingly marginalized left? The spectre of appropriation must once again concern us since the radical potential of the ‘elemental communist’ is always in danger of becoming what Žižek (2008) recently called the ‘liberal communist’ – those anti-globalist leftist radicals who are championed by Bono and Bill Gates since their diffuse criticism of world poverty is easily translated into a reformist language, no matter how many times the words ‘revolution’ and ‘anarchism’ are spoken. We must remember that today even hard-right management consultancies are recognizing the benefits of liberal communism, through a process Ross (2004) terms the industrialization of bohemia (also see Frank, 1998).

In this sense, then, it could be said the book falls short of articulating exactly how the commons might be decoupled from the ever-parasitical clutch of capital accumulation. The value struggles proposed in *The Beginning of History* can still potentially be lived in London or Berlin in a manner that lends itself to the liberal communist ethic. What some have called the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ is ceaselessly searching for congruencies and connections with critique. One can only conclude that the decoupling event De Angelis is looking for has to be something *radical* if it is not to contribute, however vicariously, to the capital accumulation process. Such radicalism will not be born in any semi-autonomous enclave endeavouring to co-exist within capital, hoping to one-day win the battle. Even if we are not interested in the accumulation process – turning our backs on it – the accumulation process is interested in us. Perhaps Žižek’s ‘school boy’ radicalism harbours a serious message after all. He does not describe transformative change in the parlance of geographical distance. Instead, the figure of the ‘impossible’ is used to map the genuine limits of commodification. What kind of radical gesture would be considered *impossible* in our current milieu, and simply couldn’t be accommodated by the circuits of profit-seeking behaviour? To paraphrase Žižek (who develops the idea in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), perhaps the reason why the problem of global capital has persisted so long is that we all know the only viable

solution. Like a neurotic symptom, “everybody sees the way to get rid of the obstacle, and yet no one wants to remove it, as if there is some kind of pathological libidinal profit gained by persisting in the deadlock” (Žižek, 2008: 104). Thus, the problem cannot be resolved in any ‘realistic’ way. He continues:

what is utopian is the very notion that such a ‘realistic’ approach will work while the only ‘realistic’ solution is the *big* one, to solve the problem at its roots. The old motto from 1968 applies: *Soyons réalistes demandons l'impossible!* Only a radical gesture that appears ‘impossible’ within existing co-ordinates will realistically do the job. (Žižek, 2008: 104, *emphasis original*)

Maybe this radical gesture of impossibility is a better way to understand the problem of boundaries and emergence. The concept of a half-hidden outside of co-production runs the risk of unwittingly playing into the hands of a savvy and increasingly innovative business ideology (much like the term ‘networks’ has). In broaching these very issues, De Angelis’ book is admirable and, it goes without saying, essential reading for anybody interested in the critique of contemporary capitalism. As the autonomists remind us, we are all communists now given the unvalorized labour that yields global wealth today. But what kind of communist do we choose to be? And when it comes to the political grammar that intellectual interventions inspire, perhaps there is still something to be said for taking it all the way?

references

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