

OGH/ON AUTONOMY

Autonomy is typically conceptualized as a freedom from external control or influence, a closed, self-perpetuating system operating solely on its own terms. This conception of autonomy invokes images of insular micro-nations and withdrawn Mennonite sects who have established themselves in forgotten Appalachian hollows. This is the autonomy of Hakim Bey, the primary proponent of the temporary autonomous zone (or TAZ). For Bey, the TAZ is a space which exists in uncharted and forgotten territories that lie beyond the control of (sociopolitical) power structures; he points to the pirates who established temporary utopias on Caribbean islands as primary examples of the TAZ, stating: "THE SEA-ROVERS AND CORSAIRS of the 18th century created an 'information network' that spanned the globe: primitive and devoted primarily to grim business, the net nevertheless functioned admirably. Scattered throughout the net were islands, remote hideouts where ships could be watered and provisioned, booty traded for luxuries and necessities. Some of these islands supported 'intentional communities,' whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law and determined to keep it up, even if only for a short but merry life." [1] Further examples of temporary autonomous zones include underground raves and unsanctioned grow-ops hidden deep within national forests and parks.

Autonomy, as it has been framed by Bey and the TAZ, is wholly negative. That is to say, it takes the form of a negative-liberty, a freedom-from. This conception of autonomy proposes that liberation occurs through an evasion from power or as a consequence of its destruction. The pirate utopias, for instance, are considered "free" (or autonomous) only to the extent that they are not ruled by an external governing body. When Bey speaks of standing on land "ruled only by freedom", he means a state in which rule does not exist or condition its inhabitants. It must

be pointed out that although the pirate utopia exists beyond the reach of certain structures of power, it remains entrenched within and affected by countless other (non-human) structures of power (for instance, structures which are meteorological, climactic, or ecological in nature). While they may be beyond the reaches of the law, they are still bound by other-non-legal, perhaps even non-human, non-social-structures of power and influence.

To further problematize this notion of autonomy, it is necessary to introduce a second conception of liberty, that is: positive-liberty or freedom-to. Whereas the negative-liberty of the TAZ establishes and maintains itself in the evasion of power, a positive-liberty emerges from one's capacities and potentialities; one's freedom-to describe all of the possible actions and movements one is capable of making, the ways in which one can make use of their environment. Where negative-liberty is defined through separation, positive-liberty exists only through connection with others. In this way, freedom-to is wholly affective; it is not conceived of as an escape from constraints, but rather, as the embrace of and "creative conversion" of constraint. To illustrate this, Brian Massumi makes reference to the proverbial notion of "walking as controlled falling"; the act of walking/the freedom-to-walk does not require an escape from the conditions which make it difficult (gravity, infantile limbs, an under developed vestibular system, etc.), but rather, it requires that one accepts these conditions and learns to control them by acting with/through them. In this way, a freedom-to is only possible insofar as it is grounded by/in an object. The forest grow-op mentioned previously, for instance, is made possible only through certain soil conditions, adequate rainfall, and a near infinitude of other factors. For this reason, it makes little sense to refer

to the grow-op as autonomous; rather, because its existence is contingent a whole host of factors which are external to the grow-op itself, it is properly heteronomous. It is not sufficient in and of itself, but rather, its existence is only possible because of these limitations.

(It is worth making reference to an observation by the Invisible Committee that “*friend and free* [...] come from the same Indo-European root, which conveys the idea of a shared power that grows. Being free and having ties are one and the same thing. [One] is free *because [one has] ties, because [one is] linked to a greater reality than [oneself]*.”[2] It is in this light that we can make sense of Marx’s comment that “individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association.”)

Because all relation occurs within a set of limitations and affordances, all relation can be said to be structured by rule, or rather, rule is the structure according to which relations take place. As such, freedom from rule/constraint would coincide with an absolute freedom from relation. Thus, absolute autonomy in the Beysian sense would be possible only as a state of pure non-relation. In this hypothetical state of pure autonomy (qua an absolute and total severance from all external influence), the isolated, autonomous being (in its freedom from external constraint) would—somewhat paradoxically—be rendered completely unfree, incapable of action, because it would not have an object at its disposal to act upon, through, amongst, or with. It is for this reason that it makes little sense to think autonomy in the absolute.

To summarize: autonomy, insofar as it describes a state of self-rule (literally: auto = “self”, nomos = “law” or “rule”), cannot merely take the form of either a negative or positive

liberty. The former describes a condition wherein one is free from external rule, which is the necessary condition for self-rule, but not self-rule in and of itself, while the latter describes the actions one is capable of enacting within/afforded by a particular context. Yet insofar as they require an external ground and relational operations which are structured on external rule, they can not engender a state of autonomy.

In contradistinction to the aforementioned forms of autonomy and freedom, we propose that autonomy (self-rule) is only possible through an incorporation of both negative and positive conceptions of liberty (freedom-from and freedom-to). Furthermore, autonomy cannot be thought in the absolute, but only relative to certain structures of power. One's freedom from civil society and law—in the case of the pirate utopia—is predicated on turning towards or subjecting oneself to the limitations of the desert isle. Therefore, autonomy is relativistic; it rejects certain power structures which is only made possible through the embrace of others. In other words, we are proposing that autonomy is always an autonomy-from.

Initially it may appear as though this formulation of autonomy qua autonomy-from is identical to the Beysian formulation of autonomy epitomized by the TAZ, but it differs in that it does not entirely eschew external influence, only particular influences. Moreover, it is only through its openness to certain relational structures that it is able to sever itself from others. This insight is paralleled by Antonio Gramsci's division of revolutionary action into two distinct phases: the war of position and the war of maneuver, also known as the war of movement. Whereas Marx assumed that a series of contradictions within capitalism would eventually be enough to incite a proletarian revolution wherein

the revolutionaries would supplant capitalist structures of power and begin to instate new, socialist/communist relations in their place, Gramsci (writing in his wake) proposed that a "positional war" was required to set the stage for the eventual revolution (which he refers to as the war of maneuver). While the war of maneuver refers to the moment of conflict, the point of militaristic engagement in which the proletariat does away with the condition that renders it as such, the war of position seeks to establish a counter hegemony. In Gramsci's formulation, the counter hegemony is conceived of as an alternative economic/cultural power-structure which could oppose the dominant (hegemonic) culture. The positional war included the development of alternative forms of production, the dissemination of art, music, the instruction of revolutionary theory in an attempt to build class consciousness and solidarity, and so on. The purpose of these actions was to produce an already functioning sociocultural body which could be instated in place of the hegemonic culture which was to be deposed in the war of maneuver. The war of position, according to Gramsci, was the necessary precondition for and grounds upon which a successful war of maneuver could take place; without it, one is faced with the problem of deposing power only to reconstitute it in another form, to create a power vacuum with nothing to fill it.

Similar pre-revolutionary actions were undertaken in the embryonic stages of the American Revolution (long before any military actions were carried out). The initial stage of the revolution was marked by an effort on the part of the colonies to reduce their dependency on England; colonists began to domestically produce goods which were previously supplied by the English; English teas were replaced with foraged teas made from blackberry and raspberry leaves, women began throwing knitting and weaving parties to produce

textiles and clothing locally, and so on. With each domestic good substituted in place of imported goods, the colonies became less dependent on the English. Stated otherwise: their freedom-from(-England) was predicated on the colonies' capacity to find alternative means of subsistence and production. Taken as a whole, these actions, gave rise to a condition which was fertile for the eventual war of maneuver.

There are parallels between these attempts to develop alternative modes of existence/subsistence in the proto-American colonies and ascetic practice (in both the Greco-Roman and the Christian understanding of the term). Where the colonies developed new forms of production in an effort to break their dependency on England, the ascetic—in and through its training—seeks to reconstitute itself, at the level of its body, to liberate itself from the passions.

Asceticism is derived from the Greek word ἄσκησις (askēsis) which translates roughly to “training” or “exercise”. An ascetic then, is someone who undergoes or partakes in training or exercise such that they are able to attain a certain state of being. As such, in its originary usage, asceticism referred not to someone who abstains from worldly pleasures in pursuit of either inner- or other- worldly goals (as in its contemporary connotation), but rather to someone undergoing physical training for athletic events or military service. Many, including Foucault, are quick to differentiate between these two conceptions. In his essay *Technologies of the Self*, he claims that Christian asceticism is rooted in a self-renunciation whereas classical asceticism is founded on/in the drive to take care of oneself (*epimelesthai sautou*). He states that “we inherit the tradition of Christian morality which makes self-renunciation the condition for salvation. To know oneself was paradoxically the way

to self-renunciation.” [3] He then contrasts this with the Greco-Roman notion of the “art of life” wherein one treats one’s existence as it were an artwork, attempting to craft and design it in a desirable fashion. While the two may differ in their method (Christian self-renunciation and Greco-Roman auto-constitution) and telos (Christian rejection of materiality and Greco-Roman rejection of the passions), they are unified in that they are both attempts at self-rule conducted through an *activity* in one’s life.

It is useful to refer to a distinction made by Spinoza between activity/action (the state of being active) and passion (the state of being passive). For Spinoza, a passion is not merely the outburst of an intense emotion, but any instance in which one is affected by an external influence that is beyond one’s control or understanding; for this reason, passions are associated with the state of being passive. Action/activity is precisely the opposite: an action can be considered “active” to the extent that one is in control of a relation. In this way, one is active when one is the cause of a relation, when the relation begins internally. Of course, no action is purely active or passive; all acts exist in a tension between these two extremes.

In this sense, both Christian and Greco-Roman forms of asceticism are unified in their attempts to free themselves the domination of the passions; in both cases, the ascetic attempts to liberate itself from external influence by developing capacities which renders it less reliant on the relational structures it seeks to avoid. In Christian asceticism this takes the form of fasting, a vow of poverty, meditation, and in extreme cases, self-mortification. These techniques—or practices—are intended to train the ascetic-body to be capable of functioning apart from the material world. Christian ascetic

autonomy should not be seen purely as a freedom-from the material world; it must also be seen as an ascent to, or turn towards, the immaterial.

Similarly, in Greco-Roman asceticism, the ascetic attempts to achieve a freedom-from the passions by “becom[ing] the doctor of oneself,” “retiring into the self,” “disclosure to the self” (often in the form of letters to colleagues and journaling), philosophical meditation “composed of memorizing responses and reactivating [...] memories by placing oneself in a situation” called *meletē*, and especially *gymnasia* which involved “sexual abstinence, physical privation, and other rituals of purification” in order “to establish and test the independence of the individual with regard to the external world.” All of these techniques aim at a reconstitution of oneself, a self-mastery with the aim to render oneself free from the ebbs and flows of the “external world.” Again, this should not be seen as a freedom-from the “external world” as such, but rather as a freedom-from the passions. Through its training, the ascetic attempts to develop new capacities which render active what was previously a passion, to reconstitute itself such that it gains control where it was previously passive. Therefore, freedom-from, and thus autonomy, is predicated on a power-to (or freedom-to).

NOTES

1. Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
2. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015).
3. Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

