



Autonomist Marxist Theory and Practice in the Current Crisis

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Abstract

Autonomist Marxism is a political tendency premised on the autonomy of the proletariat. Working class autonomy is manifested in the self-activity of the working class independent of formal organizations and representations, the multiplicity of forms that struggles take, and the role of class composition in shaping the overall balance of power in capitalist societies, not least in the relationship of class struggles to the character of capitalist crises. Class composition analysis is applied here to narrate the recent history of capitalism leading up to the current crisis, giving particular attention to China and the United States. A global wave of struggles in the mid-2000s was constitutive of the kinds of working class responses to the crisis that unfolded in 2008-10. The circulation of those struggles and resultant trends of recomposition and/or decomposition are argued to be important factors in the balance of political forces across the varied geography of the present crisis.

The whirlwind of crises and the autonomist perspective

The whirlwind of crises (Marks, 2010) that swept the world in 2008, financial panic upon food crisis upon energy shock upon inflationary spiral, receded temporarily only to surge forward again, leaving us in a turbulent world, full of possibility and peril. Is this the end of Neoliberalism or its retrenchment? A new



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New Deal or a new Great Depression? The end of American hegemony or the rise of an “imperialism with Chinese characteristics?” Or all of those at once?

This paper brings the political tendency known as autonomist Marxism (H. Cleaver, 2000; Midnight Notes, 1992b) to bear on the present crisis of capitalism. It is intended to speak to radical geography, which has thus far scarcely addressed this body of work (although see Watts, 2009; Radice, 2009; Chatterton, 2010). The paper will proceed by first explaining some of the tenets of autonomist Marxism and, where applicable, indicating how it diverges from other tendencies of radical thought in its conceptions of class, struggle, and crisis. The methodology of class composition analysis is described, as is the political importance of class recomposition and decomposition. Second, the contours of contemporary global capitalism and the working class are narrated from 1980 to the present conjuncture, employing class composition analysis to enlighten the historical-geographical transformations of American and Chinese class structures during this time. Recompositional and decompositional trends are identified in specific fractions of the class in both countries and the interrelated yet divergent character of their working classes’ “deals” with neoliberal globalization are sketched out. Lastly, the coming on and playing out of the current crisis is described in light of autonomist theory and practice, arguing that a global wave of struggles coincided with the peak of the 2000s business cycle, led by young, precariously employed workers in world cities who fought and often won defensive struggles against deepening marginalization and precarity. Where trends of class recomposition rooted in those struggles are pronounced, as in contemporary China where rural-urban migration circulates struggles and blurs class hierarchies, greater working class power is observed; places where class decomposition is more prevalent, as in the contemporary U.S., those divisions have facilitated the imposition of the costs of the crisis on the working class.

Unpacking autonomy

We begin by defining what autonomism means. The terms autonomist, autonomous, *autonomia* or *autonomen* correlate with a spectrum of political projects and trajectories, from earlier Left and Council Communists (James et al., 1986; Castoriadis, 1959/1988) through groupings of the 1960s and 1970s like Italian *operaismo* (Bologna, 2000; Wright, 2002) to more contemporary urban squatter, direct action, and anti-globalization movements (Katsiaficas, 2006; Bonefeld, 2008).

Autonomist Marxism is defined here as a political tendency premised on the autonomy of the proletariat. Working class autonomy can be said to encompass three aspects: the working class’ actions take a multiplicity of forms autonomous from and not determined by capital; working class self-activity can be autonomous from organizations or representations of the class; and different fractions of the class are autonomous from each other, constituting a changing overall class composition (Zerowork, 1992).

Working class autonomy in the reproduction and destruction of capitalism

Autonomists don't define the proletariat solely by its productive capacity or necessity to work given its separation from the means of production, rather they emphasize its potential to refuse work (Tronti, 1980), to deny its value to capital. The working class as 'variable capital,' an indeterminate value from a given amount of labor power, implies equally the capitalist ability to extract surplus through the labor process and the working class ability to disrupt or divert that transformation. Capitalist use of that variability yields profit; proletarian 'variability' brings crisis and looming oblivion to capital (H. Cleaver, 2000). Capital is an antagonistic social relation wherein the living, productive power of humanity is accumulated through the imposition of work. Capitalism reproduces itself insofar as it can capture these working class energies and transform them into labor productivity and is undermined to the extent workers can refuse work and reproduce themselves autonomously.

Working class self-activity and organization

Autonomist Marxism argues neither consciousness nor centralized organization are prerequisites to struggling against capital, nor for success in such struggles. Rather, means of action, theoretical concepts, and forms of organization can arise out of the creativity of the class as its various compositions circulate through and resist the capitalist labor process. This has been seen in cycles of struggle around the transition to capitalism (Linebaugh and Redicker, 2000; Federici, 2004), in industrial offensives like the 1930s and 1960s strike waves that arose amidst labor union conservatism (Glberman, 1975; Brecher, 1984; Piven and Cloward, 1979, 115-53; Gambino, 1976; Georgakas and Surkin, 1998), or in coal wildcats, truckers' strikes and gas riots against the 1970s energy crises (W. Cleaver, 1992; Midnight Notes, 1980, 25-31). In these cases, leadership in the form of representative institutions was absent or hostile to rank-and-file action, nor did such institutions achieve (effective) organization or consciousness-raising of the class – rather, struggles erupted out of quotidian events, took on forms conjured up out of workers' immediate contexts, then spread widely through networks immanent to the organization of production and working class reproduction.

Autonomists have a broad affinity with the Zapatista movement (Midnight Notes, 2001; Notes from Nowhere, 2003), which pioneered an anti-authoritarian, networked form of anti-capitalism that led to the alter-globalization movement of the 1990s and 2000s. While some radical geographers continue to argue "... there is no way an anti-capitalist social order can be constructed without seizing state power, radically transforming it, and re-working the constitutional and institutional framework that currently supports private property, the market system and endless capital accumulation" (Harvey, 2010, 16), autonomists reject such a prioritization of the seizure of state power. They cite the betrayals of working class movements by Left governments who collaborate with capital to impose fiscal austerity and recuperate struggles into a new matrix of capitalist control, or else violently repress

the working class when it refuses state capitalist exploitation disguised as socialism (Red Notes, 1978; *El Libertario*, 2010). Autonomists also note the successes of many movements, like the Zapatistas, that have not seized state power as much as constructed their own social norms and forms of political power outside or parallel to the state (Neill, 2001; Lavaca Collective, 2007). The autonomist line is neither for nor against engagement with state power *per se*, rather it asks the broader (and more geographical!) question of how to “simultaneously reappropriate and hold *places* from capital while opening *spaces* for proletarian movement” (Midnight Notes, 1992a, 331) – how to secure the conditions for working class reproduction and mobility independent of capital, i.e. the creation self-reproducing movements (Federici, 2008) which, whether they articulate with or wage war on a given state apparatus, produce working class autonomy from the state and capital.

Class composition and the circulation of struggles

Class composition refers to diversity among workers related to the organization of production and has two aspects, technical and political. Technical composition addresses the division of labor in terms of wage levels and productivity, the organic composition of capital (the ratio of variable capital, or labor, to constant and fixed capital, or machinery, buildings, raw materials, energy), gendered, racialized, and nationalized differences in the workforce, the length of the work day, and the parceling of working time between unwaged, waged, legal and illegal labor. Political composition concerns the forms that struggles take for different groups in society and the degree to which they are synchronized – meaning if they work at cross ends or tend towards common demands relative to capital, not necessarily a formal unity or solidarity (Zerowork, 1992, 111-12).

The barometer of class society is *class recomposition* and *decomposition*. Recomposition means the increasing concordance of action across a widening diversity of the class, occurring through *the circulation of struggles*, the transmission of forms of action and thought through the geographical and social diversity of the class. *Cycles of struggle* refer to chronological and geographical waves of working class action which may function independently of each other but act to reinforce, not negate, their strengths *vis a vis* capital. Decomposition means the opposite - the increasing division, weakness, and contradiction among sectors of the class, the blocking of the circulation of struggles, and their destruction, negation, or recuperation as new forms of capitalist power.

Autonomists and crisis theory

What do these ideas contribute to an understanding of capitalist crises? Autonomists place class struggle at the center of crisis theory and have brought this hypothesis to their analysis of the capitalist crisis of the 1970s (Red Notes, 1978; Midnight Notes, 1992a; Gambino, 1996). Some prominent crisis theorists (Aglietta, 1978; Dunford, 1990, 310-17; Boyer, 2000, 17; Jessop, 2000, 339; Brenner, 2006, 7; Arrighi, 2009) argue against struggle as the source the 1960s-70s crisis, holding

that the internal workings of capital, specifically its increasingly unplanned and competitive nature and tendency towards over-accumulation, were the driving factors. These ‘objective’ factors are, for autonomists, rooted in the magnitude of struggles coincident with the inflection point of post-war capitalism *circa* 1973, their diversity of forms and their wide circulation.

While radical geography is more germane to the role of class struggle in the geography of capitalism (see Peet, 1983; Harvey, 1989; Harvey, 1995; Smith, 1996; Peck, 2000; Harvey, 2005) including *contra* Regulation theory (Peck and Theodore, 2007), autonomism parallels critiques such as Herod (1997) and Gibson-Graham (2006) who write that radical geography often takes the perspective of capital over working class viewpoints in the production of economic space. World systems theory (Wallerstein, 2002) also acknowledges the importance of struggles in the course of capitalist development and the limitations of state-centered approaches to revolution. However, unlike autonomists, world systems theorists (Wallerstein, 2010, 133-5; although see exceptions like Tomich, 1990) see the source of capitalist crisis not in working class struggles, or even in the contradictions of capitalist production, but in long-wave business cycles resulting from the degree of commercial monopoly exercised by leading global firms and hegemonic states.

Changes in class composition in the U.S. and China since 1980

The post-1980 regime of accumulation in the U.S.

Next, we shall investigate the contours and transformations of class composition in two of the largest and most interconnected capitalist economies, the U.S. and China, from their emergence from the crisis of the 1970s to the peak of the 2000s business cycle. While recognizing the ubiquity and interconnectedness of working class struggles worldwide and their effects on the course of global capitalism, narrating all of those struggles is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, by focusing on class composition in two of the world’s major economies and their transformation through recomposition and decomposition, some of the salient features of contemporary global capitalism can be described and their relative importance to the balance of class power analyzed.

The American working class experienced a long wave of recomposition from the mid-1930s through the mid-1970s driven by several interwoven cycles of struggle (Caffentzis, 2001). Industrial unionism in the manufacturing sector pushed up incomes through the forging of ‘wages/productivity’ deals in which employers traded higher wages for greater labor discipline enforced by the unions (Glberman, 1975). Mass unionization narrowed the wage and organizational differential between skilled and unskilled labor while building up bastions of working class strength in industrial cities. The racial and inter-regional wage hierarchy was attacked by the outmigration of Appalachians and Southern African-Americans into Northern cities from the 1930s and rising international immigration after 1965. Despite being used as a weapon to push down wages and worker unity,

these new recruits to the industrial proletariat brought a greater militancy that not only accelerated the wage push but further undermined working class differentiation on the shop floor and across the nation. Civil Rights struggles circulated from cotton fields into auto assembly plants (Georgakis and Surkin, 1998), wildcat sabotage from Kentucky coal fields to interstate truckers' strikes (W. Cleaver, 1992), anti-colonial resistance translated into grape boycotts and rent strikes – all served to recompose the class by raising labor's share of the social surplus while narrowing gaps of material condition and political activity between its various fractions. In these same years unwaged workers launched struggles against unpaid labor (i.e. the welfare rights movement and a significant part of women's liberation) that, while initially engaged by the state to expand the workforce and increase its reliability and productivity, led to the greater ability of many to refuse work and eroded the division in the class between waged and unwaged workers that served to keep their respective struggles separate and at odds (Carpignano, 1975; Caffentzis, 1992a).

What these different threads of struggle accomplished was a serious crisis of capitalist command and state legitimacy in the U.S. measured crudely in the peaking of average real wages in 1973-4 and a simultaneous surge in strike activity. Yet, twenty years on, average wages were considerably lower, strikes fewer than 1/10th their former frequency, and private sector unionization, at just 12%, half its former rate (Caffentzis, 2001, 226). What had happened?

Successive recessions between 1975-83 did much to slow down the wage push with higher unemployment while inflation watered down real incomes. The capitalist counter-attack of the last 35 years in the U.S. also gained momentum through accelerated capital mobility that unraveled the spatial ties between industrial location and union power (see Peet, 1983). Attacks on labor, heralded by the breaking of the 1981 air traffic control strike through the legalization of scab replacements, accelerated greatly in the following two decades, gutting the private sector unions and shattering the concentrations of working class power they constituted.

Another decisive break with the 1970s crisis in the U.S. was the Carter/Volcker shock of 1979 and subsequent Reaganite cuts to social programs and labor rights in the early 1980s (Harvey, 2005). While these actions did bring down the wage bill significantly, interest rates and imposed recession crippled accumulation by dampening investment and consumption (Caffentzis, 1992a). Monetarist/supply-side plans for an investment-led recovery to boost stagnant labor productivity (H. Cleaver, 1995) gave way, following the failure of the Reagan administration to push through deeper cuts to social spending, to the 'money for nothing' regime of financialization, real estate, and speculation of the past twenty-five years. The U.S. profit rate would eventually recover to a long-term rate of 13.7% from 1980-2007, but profits remained significantly lower than the 16.7% average achieved in 1947-1973 (Bakir and Campbell, 2009, 337).

Consumer spending boosted the end of the 1990s U.S. business cycle and was foundational to the entire 2000s cycle, which in turn fueled global expansion. But growth in U.S. median household income during the 'Bush boom' was actually negative (Leonhardt 2008). So where did the money come from? Financialization and debt. Growing indebtedness sustained living standards despite falling real incomes. The household debt-to-income ratio went from 60% in 1984 to 120% by 2005 (Kotz, 2008). The personal savings rate fell after 1980 from a long-term average of 4% to zero in 2005-07 (Rampell, 2009).

American workers, fleeing south and west from the downsized rust belt towards the new centers of high-tech industry, finance, and construction, sought to compensate for their falling incomes at work by participating in the housing bubble, wresting from their rising equity a part of the surplus wrung from them on the job. In the mid-2000s close to 10% of American disposable income came from extracted equity, (mostly refinanced mortgages), boosting consumption despite falling wages (Weisbrot, 2008; Kotz, 2009, 313). These working class strategies of heightened mobility and seeking income outside of labor markets might have created new power for workers if appropriate forms of organization and/or collective action had been constituted around them (Midnight Notes and Friends, 2009); perhaps the unionization of mortgage holders to collectively bargain with finance capital, or the development of organizations and tactics suited to more unstable working conditions and a more mobile working class. By contrast, the few successful American labor struggles of the 1980s and 1990s generally reinforced class decomposition: The victory at UPS in 1997, for example, represented a brake on the smashing of unions seen in the 1990s in disputes like those in Decatur, Illinois, but this success by UPS' relatively stable and secure workforce, necessarily so given its key role in the circulation of commodities for just-in-time production, was not well poised to circulate more broadly among American workplaces where large concentrations of workers had been dispersed and de-skilling drove turnover and wage reductions.

The share of corporate profits in American GDP rose marginally while the share of wages and salaries declined markedly during the 2000s. Yet even at the peak of the boom in 2006, corporate profits' GDP share only briefly touched the 10% average it achieved consistently for twenty-five years before 1970. While wages have fallen, overall compensation has remained steady (sustained by growing health care costs), meaning that while capital has taken a larger share of worker productivity, it has not been so successful in shedding the cost of reproducing the American working class (Greenhouse and Leonhardt, 2006). Growth in U.S. output per hour has increased since 1980, accelerating with increased investment in the 1990s business cycle. Productivity outpaced real compensation per hour throughout this period, with the gap widening after 2000 (Kotz, 2009, 309). American workers have been losing ground in the day-to-day class war of profits vs. wages.

Highly capital-intensive sectors (mining, transport, utilities and communications), making up 41% of constant capital but just 8% of labor in the U.S. economy, were the only sectors to not experience a marked fall in profit rates at any point from 1947-2000. While these sectors had low but steady profit rates (Dumenil and Levy, 2002, 450), positive change in non-financial profits since 1973 has centered on low organic composition sectors like construction, where a 40% real decline in hourly wages boosted profits after 1980 (Uctum and Viana, 1999, 1643). In these numbers we can see the decomposition and reformation of the American working class, from the hollowing out of the balanced capital/labor composition of Fordist manufacturing workers and their bifurcation into the software engineers and mortgage brokers of the high sectors and the retail cashiers and undocumented roofers of the low (following Caffentzis, 1992b, 234).

China in the dynamic of contemporary global capitalism

The flip side to American insolvency and financialization was globalization, the geographic relocation of production and capital flows – most notably and transformatively to Asia. If Fordism was Atlantic, then Neoliberalism is trans-Pacific, two of its strongest poles being the U.S. and China. This section will thus focus on understanding changes to Chinese class composition since 1978.

The composition of the Chinese working class is divided between the 50% of the population in agriculture, about 12% industry, 6% construction, and 33% in services (Banister, 2005, 82). Different rules governing these sectors of the Chinese economy affect the technical and political composition of the Chinese working class. Wage differentials, uneven labor mobility and access to public services, degrees of political identification with or marginalization from the Party/State, cultural and sectional groupings - all affect the hierarchy and separation of the working class, i.e. its decomposition relative to capital.

Rural farmers, 700 million in all, work individual plots of land and earn the lowest real incomes. Following a brief period of prosperity after 1978, farm incomes stagnated (Jianrong, 2003; Xulin, 2003). Where industrial and commercial expansion is widespread, farm lands are often seized with little or no compensation for projects profiting local governments and their business allies (Lee and Selden, 2007). Farmers in areas bypassed by growth have faced escalating tax burdens to pay for the swelling number of bureaucrats that accompanied fiscal and administrative decentralization (Xulin, 2003; Li and O'Brien, 2008). These factors have led to widening rural/urban inequality and the migration of some 120 to 200 million people from poor, rural provinces to the cities and coastal provinces (World Bank, 2009, 16).

In industry there are really two working classes – the new class of migrants mostly in the export industries, mining and construction, and the old class in current or privatized State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), concentrated in the North and in heavy and raw materials industries constructed from 1950-1975. The latter group's state socialist deal for housing, employment, food, and health care was

progressively dismantled through the 1990s. SOEs were sold, merged, went bankrupt, or were looted by management (often all these in combination) leading to some 25 million layoffs, concentrated in 1995-2000 (Banister, 2005; Lee, 2007; *Aufheben*, 2008). While this decomposition of the state industrial sector proceeded, Town and Village Enterprises (TVE) and foreign-invested urban industries boomed based on migrant labor and light consumer goods production.

In recent years the share of investment in Chinese GDP has been about 35-40%, consumption just 40% - by comparison, 70% of U.S. GDP goes to consumption (Leonhardt, 2009). This investment bought technology and equipment that boosted labor productivity, which coupled with cheap wages allowed capital to achieve a high rate of profit in China: 47% in 1978, falling to 32% by 2002 (O'Hara, 2006, 400-1).

The mobilization of migrant workers by the tens of millions, state enterprises for sale, and land and resources up for grabs drew in huge amounts of capital to China that was invested primarily in the build-out of fixed capital and the expansion of manufacturing. Fixed capital formation is one of the requirements the Chinese state has extracted out of global capital in exchange for accessing Chinese workers and territory. This is unlike many other places where speculative capital inflows have predominated, leading to little meaningful production of space and great vulnerability to financial shocks. The Chinese neoliberal 'class deal' was to exchange low wages, migration, and the uneven development of city and country for the capture of global capital flows and their transformation into real investments, manufacturing employment, infrastructural gains and rising real wages.

China and the U.S. as a circuit of neoliberal accumulation

Linking these processes in the United States and China was a circuit between U.S. finance capital and East Asian manufacturing exports. The ballooning debt that allowed the consumption boom was predicated on an expensive U.S. dollar and low interest rates, factors made possible in part by the reinvestment of account surpluses from Asian exporters into the U.S. mortgage market and Treasury bills, completing the circuit (Landler, 2008; Ferguson, 2008). This deal meant for Americans stagnant wages and deindustrialization in exchange for access to credit and for Chinese rural crisis and sweatshop labor in exchange for spatially fixing global capital flows and achieving higher wages.

In both cases, the deals were in a fundamental sense rotten because they were marked by the *non-reproduction of the working class*. The Chinese working class is in many ways the Doppelgänger of the American, expressing parallel, proportionately opposite manifestations of a common trend. American non-reproduction was manifested in households' growing indebtedness, covered up with debt, which both sustained and posed the limits of the accumulation strategy. In China, non-reproduction meant draining from both ends the reserve of rural labor power that fed industrial production; first, the subsistence wages paid to

migrants did not allow them to reproduce themselves for the long-term in the cities, and second, stagnant or falling farm income, land seizures, and rural disinvestment undermined their reproduction as cheap (because semi-proletarian) labor. There were perverse incentives for the acceleration of this accumulation by dispossession: the more people unable to survive in rural China, the more, and cheaper, the migrant labor pouring into the cities; the faster people ran up credit card debt, the higher went American (and Chinese) economic growth. The two trends had a striking complementarity: Americans dealt with non-reproduction by excessive spending and debt; Chinese, “shorn of the social safety net of the old Communist state, ... squirrel away money to pay for hospital visits, housing or retirement” (Landler, 2008) - i.e. cover their precarity by excessive saving.

Class struggles and the origins of the current crisis

So how did this circuit break down? It's simple enough to say ‘financial panic,’ ‘excessive deregulation,’ even ‘overproduction/underconsumptionist crisis’ (Foster and Magdoff, 2008; Harvey, 2010; Castree, 2010), but there is something missing in all those explanations - class struggles. Immediately prior to the onset of the crisis in 2007-08, a wave of labor actions circled the globe in 2005-06, centered on the booming low organic composition sectors of construction, consumer goods manufacturing, retail and education. The terrain for these struggles was in the major cities at the center of global accumulation like Paris, Los Angeles and Shanghai. Their participants were the unsettled and uprooted, mostly young, mobile proletariat thrown together in those cities. The number of such eruptions in this time period is no mere coincidence, nor a coordinated, consciously organized plan but an incipient recomposition of segments of the global proletariat. What these struggles have in common is that at mid-decade, at the zenith of the financialization boom, the deepening of exploitation through speed-up, greater precarity, or benefit cutbacks was partially blunted through action by the intended victims of these policies. In the United States, such struggles took most dramatic form in the immigrant rights mega-marches, while China saw the explosive growth of wildcat strikes throughout its migrant labor force.

The American immigration mega-marches of 2006

In 2005 the Sensenbrenner immigration bill (HR 4437) sought to deepen the criminalization of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., intensifying the precariousness of immigrant workers filling the lower rungs of the booming high profit, labor-intensive sectors like home building, just-in-time light manufacturing, and service industries from which the finance-led economic expansion derived much of its real surplus value. The huge increase in the number of undocumented workers in the U.S. during the 1980s and ‘90s and their growing presence as militants in labor struggles in the janitorial, agricultural, and garment sectors from the late 1990s, years when U.S. wages ticked upwards for the first time in 25 years and corporate profits stagnated, contributed to an escalating attack on this fraction of American class composition. Escalating border enforcement, the PATRIOT Act

of 2001 and HR 4437 in 2005 all constituted attempts at containing immigrant workers' circulation of their struggles across international borders, between ethnic communities, and over legal divisions of the class, crucial factors in the decomposition of the American working class which have served to sustain capitalist initiative in the U.S. since the mid-1970s (Caffentzis, 2001, 2005).

The decompositional import of HR 4437 was the offer of less competition in the labor market to documented blue-collar workers and the segregation of what remained of the social wage and labor protections in the U.S. to those with papers. Such a movement would have further divided American workers, aligning the more stable, documented segments' desire to retain a living wage with the interests of capital to break up the growing militancy of immigrants and constrain the spread of their struggles to other parts of the class composition.

Immigrant communities stopped HR 4437 and, for a time, the momentum of U.S. class decomposition. In 2006, starting in Chicago and spreading through networks of local organizers, radio stations, and by word of mouth, a 'sleeping giant' appeared on the streets of cities nationwide. The mega-marches drew people from many immigrant communities (and many beyond that) and jumped over into high schools, where thousands of students abandoned classes to join demonstrations. Some workers with a particularly potent situation in the circulation of commodities, independent short-haul truckers at the Port of Los Angeles, shut down the port during national May Day 2006 demonstrations and over their own issues of fuel costs, compensation, and ICE raids (Kutalik, 2006).

The infectious spread of marches and boycotts got the government to back down from HR 4437, but this immigrant-led movement remained isolated from the rest of the class, many of whom saw their falling wages and growing indebtedness as the fault of immigrant workers, not capital. Thus while the wide circulation of this struggle prevented the further decomposition of the American working class by blunting the deepening of the wage and job security hierarchy resting on immigration status, it failed to recompose the U.S. working class around a more general demand for higher wages and job security that could erode such wage differentials (Midnight Notes and Friends, 2006, 2009).

Class composition in the Chinese cycle of struggles

In China through the 1990s and 2000s resistance proliferated against the gutting of the state industrial sector and the squeezing of the agricultural sector (Xulin, 2003; Jianrong, 2003; Gulick, 2004; Shi, 2003; Lee and Selden, 2007). Conflicts grew in number and intensity over time: The Chinese government said in 2003 there were 58,000 'mass incidents' of petitioning, rallies, riots, etc., double the rate in 1999 and six times that of 1993 (*Aufheben*, 2008, 2). The number of mass incidents increased again from 2003 to 2005 by 50% to almost 90,000, declining slightly in 2006 (Chen, 2009, 88).

A fragmented and compartmentalized class composition combined with government repression and selective concessions meant that despite their huge number, such struggles remained largely isolated from each other. Rural and urban residents' deals with the state and capital were disconnected: For example, rural people and migrants had no access to the benefits SOE workers and urban residents sought to hold onto, rights selectively granted through residential registration in particular cities or employment at specific factories. Urban workers fought individual local governments and plant managements over a variety of issues like the payment of unpaid wages or securing housing or pensions after being fired.

Furthermore, these groups organized primarily among their factory's workers. Likewise, farmers fought specific land seizures or grievous fees of the local administration in their district. Yet, while these struggles could seldom form spatially or socially extensive networks, they were so frequent, ubiquitous and intense they nevertheless reinforced and amplified each others' energies *vis a vis* capital and the state. The interaction of this mass of generally isolated struggles created a kind of constructive resonance, in which the gains made in one place by one fraction of the Chinese proletariat produced leverage from which other struggles could amplify their force. In this way, they represent an indirect but potent form of class recomposition.

Despite the tens of millions of layoffs from SOEs in the 1990s, the rate of growth in industrial wages rose. Real earnings of Chinese urban manufacturing workers in 1990-1998 grew about 5%/yr, in 1998-2004 over 10%/yr (Lett and Banister, 2006, 44). This must be qualified by the fact that the surviving industrial SOEs, where wages appeared to rise even faster than in the private and foreign-invested manufacturing sectors, were still paying nine million unemployed workers, who received just 1/7th the average worker salary. Beyond them were many millions of former workers cut off entirely from benefits or who found new jobs at often worse pay than before. Also, workers in the mainly rural TVEs, making up 70% of Chinese industrial employment, earned less than half the average urban manufacturing wage and their earnings grew at a considerably slower rate, just 3.25%/year for 2002-2004. That notwithstanding, the wage growth of the 2000s was not confined to restructured SOEs, nor was it only due to the shedding of old socialist deals, but reflected a real rise in living standards for Chinese industrial workers. Wage increases were smaller than, but proportional to, labor productivity gains at the time (7.3%/year in the 1990s and 13.3% for 2001-03 according to O'Hara, 2006, 400), meaning that workers were gaining a significant share of their growing output as industry was modernized. While manufacturing workers in China still earn just 3% of the U.S. manufacturing wage, the 1990s and 2000s were decades of real income growth after inflation for workers (Banister, 2005).

Wage growth accelerated as the 2000's boom peaked. In the mid-2000s some firms experienced 25 or even 40% hikes in salaries per year (Roberts, 2006; Bradsher, 2008b). Inflation, while higher than in previous years, did not eliminate

these gains as it peaked at just 4% in 2005 before rising to 6% in 2008 (OECD, 2005; Xinhua, 2009a). Rather than an inexhaustible supply of labor, by 2005 factories in the booming export centers faced a shortage. Half the American firms in China reported their profits were reduced by wage growth in 2006 and workers' rapid shifting from one firm to another meant companies had to match pay elsewhere or lose their employees, creating a situation where "... managers can no longer simply provide eight-to-a-room dorms and expect laborers to toil 12 hours a day, seven days a week" (Roberts, 2006). One reason for the shortage was the rapid growth of the national economy itself. The shortage of skilled and educated workers also increased wages, but only marginally: One study found that levels of education and work experience accounted for at most 20% of wage differentials among Chinese firms (Dong, 2005). The shift in technical composition towards higher-skilled jobs was also an aspect in class struggle because it was used by those workers to push pay higher and refuse work discipline, given that they could not be easily replaced. Another factor in the labor shortage was the policy of limiting legal migration to the cities, intended to reduce access to urban services and maintain the rural-urban wage hierarchy (Banister, 2005, 20-22). A policy change in 2004 allowed for more legal migration to smaller cities, but this did not stop the wage push and high turnover in the large cities where export manufacturing and construction was concentrated.

The urban wage drive was articulated with the refusals of farmers to bear the burdens that drive rural outmigration as well as migrant workers' actions against low pay, barracks housing, poor food, and harassment (Prol-Position, 2008). Farmers' struggles led to tax and fee reductions and increased subsidies from the central government (*Aufheben*, 2008, 19). The effect was to improve conditions in the countryside and limit migration to cities. Fewer and less desperate migrants relative to labor demand meant workers had more power to push up wages through collective action or by frequent turnover. Workers used tight labor markets during the boom to refuse low-paying work, meaning employers had to raise salaries to fill positions and keep workers. These pro-worker policy moves by the Chinese Communist Party coincided with shifts within the Party/State (Li, 2005), but were not independent of the growing surge of struggles. There is a clear chronological alignment between the escalation of workers' and farmers' demands across China in the 2000s and the extension of greater benefits and protections to workers and farmers.

These struggles do have leaders, however, if not any identifiable knot of conspirators or specific social fraction or institution giving direction to participants. Take the struggles of Chinese farmers (Li and O'Brien, 2008): The common characteristics of farmer leaders are somewhat higher education than their neighbors and some degree of respect and esteem by fellow villagers. Protest leaders are more likely to be non-Party members than members and while there is some tendency for older leaders to have experience from the Cultural Revolution, they are just as likely to be former demoted 'Rightists' as Red Guards – the

commonality is their being politically banished at one point or another from the local administration and Party, not their normative politics. The autonomist observation is that no organizational structure or ideological framework was necessary for such struggles to occur, to extract concessions from capital, and to circulate throughout the class composition. Rather than splintering struggles into a thousand militant particularisms, this lack of a coherent program, leadership, or centralized organization has made it more difficult for the state and capital to neutralize, mediate, or otherwise recuperate working class energies into labor productivity and political consent.

From commodity boom to market crash

The energy/food crises of 2008

When the present crisis began to manifest in 2007-08, it initially took the form of commodity price spikes, hitting people's real incomes through energy and food costs. At the same time, the vast hoard of finance capital that had grown far in advance of the real expansion of surplus value teetered towards devaluation. Americans could no longer sustain their standard of living as their falling wages, combined with falling home prices, became a flood of foreclosures. Chinese factory workers, 40% of whose wages go to food costs, found themselves unable to afford to live as inflation surged.

While the food/energy crisis was an assault on working class incomes globally, it also produced globally synchronized, if differentially effective, resistance. The international circulation of energy and food prices recomposed global working class struggles around those food and energy cost spikes. Food riots broke out in dozens of countries across the Global South (FAO, 2008). Energy and food costs also hit at the real income of Europeans, Americans and Japanese, but in these countries, where food comprises a relatively small part of the cost of living, struggles against the crisis were concentrated narrowly among the most vulnerable segments of the working class to rising energy prices: Transport workers, like those U.S. truckers who ran blockades and go-slows at ports, state capitols and interstates in early 2008 (Ehrenreich, 2008a, 2008b). In East Asia, a broader swathe of workers was able to significantly offset rapid food price inflation with comparable wage increases. The latter was true especially in China and Vietnam where larger waves of strikes and protests occurred than in any earlier year, an estimated 127,000 mass incidents in China in 2008 (Johnson, 2009; China Labour Bulletin, 2009a; Human Rights Watch, 2009). Industrial workers in those countries were, through large-scale if uncoordinated action, able to partially push the commodity price spike off their backs and onto their employers' through these wage struggles (Bradsher, 2008a).

China, the U.S., and ongoing struggles in the current crisis

The financial devaluation and bailouts of late 2008 in the U.S., the reversal of commodity price trends, deep international recession and rapidly rising

unemployment have all changed the dynamics of class struggles. Competition for jobs has made it harder to wage struggles at all, never mind link them together.

Internationally, since 2009 the U.S. government has run up debt at an even faster pace than the huge dissaving of the 2000s (Goodman, 2009; Bowley and Healy, 2009). After recovery in 2009 in late 2010 the dollar and Treasury securities slid markedly (Bowley, 2010). Long-term American economic goals seem to be to transfer its financial problems onto its major foreign debt holder, Chinese government and financial firms, as the 1980s Plaza Accords did through devaluing the dollar and revaluating the Japanese yen. Behind this strategy of 'global rebalancing' is the idea that the Chinese save too much, while Americans spend too much, so the Chinese ought to consume more, invest less, revalue their currency, and invest domestically rather than exporting currency into American treasuries while importing foreign investment (Landler, 2008; Leonhardt, 2009).

The Chinese government seemed to be taking this advice, however cautiously and at its own pace, with a \$586 billion stimulus package of infrastructure and social spending that helped China rebound out of the recession faster than expected, pulling up other economies with it (Schwartz, 2009). Yet the motivating factor for this decisive spending plan was as much due to fear of escalating struggles from workers and farmers as Mr. Bernanke's arguments. The slowdown in American and worldwide consumption led to falling export orders and layoffs and plant closures in China's coastal cities (Bradsher, 2008a), stopping on a dime the labor shortage and wage push offensives of 2005-08 but threatening to open a new, wider front of contestation. Twenty million or so migrants went home for the 2009 Lunar New Year and didn't return (LaFreniere, 2009), prompting fears of a greatly aggravated social situation in the countryside. Of the fourteen million migrants still at home in February, only two million had found work, while eleven million unemployed migrant workers stayed in the cities (China Labour Bulletin, 2009b). So the Chinese countryside could not absorb those thrown into rural cold storage, plus a near majority would not accept being 'sent down to the countryside.' This new migrant composition is breaking down the urban/rural split by circulating higher wage expectations in the countryside and becoming less willing to flee the cities when jobs decline. Their struggles are circulated through their actual movements from place to place. Their physical circulation from country to city and back again, between myriad worksites and between people from all across China, is not a project of organization or building consciousness but one of people coming into contact with each other and cross-pollinating struggles.

In 2009, while struggles across China were numerous, there was also a loss of bargaining power as unemployment hit millions. Wages fell, and the worst fears of the Chinese state over mass incidents did not transpire (Batson, 2009). Most of the people fired in late 2008 returned to the cities and went back to work (Xinhua, 2009a). Yet in August the moderation in mass incidents escalated again (Johnson, 2009). The level of violence in labor disputes also seemed to increase, but with varying consequences. The riots in Xinjiang in China's northwest in summer 2009

showed that some Chinese workers were turning on each other along ethnic/racial/sectional lines as industrialists brought in fresh labor power from the country's most distant reserves to the export factories. The impetus for the Xinjiang unrest was a riot at a Guangzhou toy factory in the southeast that recently imported 800 Uighur migrants from Xinjiang. Ethnic Han laborers got into a brawl with the new arrivals which led to two killings that in turn provoked the Xinjiang rioting (Wong, 2009; Jacobs, 2009). In July 2009 workers at the state-owned Tonghua Steel plant, informed it would be sold off and most workers fired, occupied the mill, confronted the new general manager, and beat him to death. Days later, the government announced the sale was cancelled (Bradsher, 2009).

China is rebounding from the crisis on the merits of huge counter-cyclical infrastructure investments, a ballooning real estate bubble and resurgent export orders. In 2010, urban residents face rising rents and a surge in land seizures and demolitions, eroding real wages in the context of rebounding inflation and violent resistance to land grabs (Wines and Ansfield, 2010). Housing struggles and a wildcat strike that crippled Honda's supply chain (Bradsher and Barboza, 2010) show the continued bubbling up of autonomous actions and state attempts to contain those explosions through new regulations, a mix of concessions and repression, and nationalist appeals.

The larger lesson of China's transforming class composition is that historical trends shape current realities. The recomposition of the 2000s characterized by the new urban migrant worker circulating struggles heretofore socially and geographically compartmentalized within the Chinese economy, was a source of strength in the fight against the onset of crisis of 2008, shaped a relatively pro-worker state response in 2009, and is continuing to demonstrate vitality and effectiveness in incidents like the Honda strike wave and housing struggles of 2010. Recomposition and the circulation of struggles have led to this outcome in China, whereas class decomposition and limitations on the circulation of struggles in the U.S. are associated with a relatively weaker working class response to the current crisis there.

American class (de)composition in the clash of 'Si se puede' and 'Don't tread on me'

The level of decomposition of the American working class can be seen in the lack of effective response to plummeting real wealth as millions of homes are repossessed and already stagnant wages fall further, the gutting of the public sector and social benefits, further rounds of deindustrialization and disinvestment, all while the government has acted aggressively to secure the investments of the major banks and financial institutions.

Despite this, it is false to say that there are no struggles going on in the U.S. in 2010. The two biggest contemporary movements are the immigrant solidarity movement and the Tea Party. The immigrant rights movement has been reanimated as a campaign against anti-immigrant legislation emanating from Arizona, where

fiscal insolvency is being blamed on illegal immigrants. The movement comes out of the most precarious sectors of American class composition, those who built the houses in the former boom, bought many of the sub-prime loans, and are taking the hardest hit from state government budget cuts. Their program is essentially to refuse their forcible exclusion, physically and socially, from accessing the resources and spaces they need to reproduce themselves and resist their being warehoused as a reserve army of labor living in penury, shorn of rights. This refusal of displacement and dispossession, be it deportation, home foreclosure, or cutting (tenuous) claims to economic benefits, is captured in the slogan “Aquí estamos y no nos vamos!”

Arizona is also inspirational for the Tea Party movement, which draws primarily on the older, whiter, and somewhat wealthier fractions of the American working class, the children of the old blue-collar industrial workers who moved to the Sun Belt to become housing contractors, realtors, small business owners and retirees. Apart from mobilizing to support laws like Arizona’s SB 1070, the Tea Partiers express the era’s chief slogan of resistance to corporate bailouts and public austerity: ‘we won’t pay for your crisis.’ Tea Partiers, despite their racial and nativist overtones, overwhelmingly place public spending and sovereign debt at the top of their concerns (*New York Times* and CBS News, 2010). Yet their primary target has not been the huge subsidies the national government has given to finance capital, nor the monetary, infrastructural and trade policies driving U.S. deindustrialization and trade deficits, but who they conceive of as the ‘irresponsible,’ ‘unworthy’ sectors of the American working class who took on mortgage and credit card debt during the boom and are now ‘underwater.’ The Tea Party is harnessing the nervousness and looming devaluation of the more secure sections of the class composition, turning it against the more precarious.

It may well be necessary to fight these people and prevent them, or the politicians they support, from shoving many of us into an even more precarious existence, but it is also necessary to understand them and try to halt this decompositional trend. Autonomist Marxism does not provide a blueprint for how to achieve a revolution, but it does offer some practical advice as to how to participate and intervene in ongoing struggles. Principally, this involves conducting workers’ inquiries (Marx, 1880; Panzieri, 1965/2006), the production and circulation of knowledge about daily life, work, and how people resist and (re)produce themselves and social movements. In so doing, we should keep in mind several autonomist principles: Struggles are going on all around us, all the time; people can and do act with, without, or against leaders and organizations; our struggles include the conditions in which we live and reproduce ourselves as much as the waged work we do; and however ubiquitous, struggles yield gains for the working class only insofar as they circulate and recompose the class. So while this article is intended to describe the intellectual current of autonomism, enacting these ideas requires us to participate in, and not just write about, the struggles around us.

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