AUTONOMY

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Autonomy is always contested, because it can only be conceived of as the result or effect of battles—or at least of conflict-fraught developments. In fact, autonomy, from the Greek *autonomía* (αυτονομία), or "self-ruling," can take on quite different meanings in different disciplines and

discourses. To begin with, though, we can distinguish between two fundamental levels of autonomy that continue to be the subject of debate in such diverse fields as education, politics and art: on the one hand there is the question of the genesis of individual and/or collective self-determination and self-rule ("How has autonomy come about as a way of dissociating oneself from the 'other'/or 'others'?"). And on the other hand, there is the question as to the functional logic of specific autonomous laws ("How and under what conditions does self-rule work in practice?").

In the field of education, the autonomy of the individual—meaning the power to act in a way that defies or mediates social demands—constitutes an unquestioned normative ideal for personal development. As such, it has also been transferred to the realm of collective identities, practices, and/or struggles.

Marxist theorist Cornelius Castoriadis articulated it in this sense of an "autonomy politics" as the goal and means of emancipatory, collective practice. In Castoriadis' argument, however, the concept of the political arena is brought to bear primarily with respect to its process-oriented nature—autonomy is thus to be understood not as an institution but rather as an instituting factor. In comparison, the overall societal orientation of "autonomy politics" plays quite a minor role: it is usually a matter of particular (rather than universal) collective rights which are to be fought for under the banner of autonomy. Three forms of autonomy can roughly be differentiated here, all of which (must) place themselves in relation to the modern nation-state (as what is still the most powerful unit of collective legislation).

What is perhaps the most popular model of political autonomy today does not necessarily stand in opposition to the nation-state: it can thus be referred to as *autonomy in the nation*. With the uprising of the Zapatistas in the south Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994, this model of collective, and yet not separatist, self-administration exerted a great fascination on many people. It is based on democratic grass-roots decision-making and in this way integrates libertarian ideas despite its existence within the State. In some cases drawing strongly on indigenous traditions, the Zapatist concept of autonomy nevertheless espouses a relatively open concept of collectivization: not only are certain indigenous population groups involved in the project of autonomy; there is also a tendency to bring in political kindred spirits from all over the world. This explains Zapatism's impact and appeal on the way toward becoming a globalization-critical movement.

Less open is the concept of *autonomy as nation*, as represented for example by the Basque region or Catalonia. Like the Zapatistas, the activists here also invoke a divided history of exclusion and suppression. But those who share this history/histories base their efforts on a relatively sharply outlined collective identity. Autonomist-separatist nationalism requires the idea of a "common culture," which usually includes speaking a common language, and relies on certain standard-bearers of this culture. Because it is concerned with preserving, safeguarding and maintaining these shared cultural traits, while distinguishing those who do so from others not predestined for this task, the model of autonomy as nation often shows the same propensity for essentialization and homogenization as the nation-state against which it is directed. Autonomy, understood as national independence, is usually predicated on "culture" as the sum of the values, works, and norms of what is conceived of as a relatively homogenous group.

A third model, which rejects this understanding of culture and yet still takes its cues from it, is *autonomy against the nation*. The independents who have been active in many European countries since the 1980s as left-wing radical groupings with a strongly subcultural approach represent this model, as do the autonomous workers'

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movements that emerged in 1960s Italy (Operaismo). The Workerism movement undertook labor struggles independent of the Communist Party and the trade unions and indeed in open opposition to them. At the center of their politics, based on the subjectivity of the workers, was the battle against work and thus against the conditions of production. The independents by contrast, although they implicitly drew on the Italian tradition, instead took up the social battle for so-called "autonomous spaces" such as squatters' housing, etc.

While talk of autonomy in art seldom refers to the kind of targeted collective action characteristic of political autonomy projects, the aspect of struggle nonetheless unites both realms. The autonomization of the artistic field, as described for example by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—in conjunction with many art historians—is after all the result of social and discursive battles. In the latter half of the 19th century, artists did not merely begin producing works that flouted the dictates of their former backers (nobility and the Church)—they took things even further and, in what amounted to a paradoxical departure from their own class background, the bourgeoisie, fought to assert their own standards for artistic production. The autonomy of art Bourdieu refers to describes above all the symbolic creation of value by all those occupied in the arts (artists, collectors, museums, galleries, etc.). What makes an artist an artist and an artwork an artwork unfolds in relative independence from criteria and processes (political, moral, financial) external to art. These autonomous laws of the "artistic field" (Bourdieu) are however not to be confused with the autonomy of the artwork, which Modernist art critics like Clement Greenberg have described and promoted. According to the Modernist doctrine, the artwork is distinguished from all other objects, acquiring its meaning beyond the intention of its creator, and can thus be deciphered only by delving into the internal logic of its forms. This position is diametrically opposed to Bourdieu's field theory with its assumption of the social genesis of artistic works.

Politically active artists have both fought against and defended the autonomy of artistic production: it has been regarded by some as an obstacle to the spread of art into everyday life, thus becoming a target of attack by the avant-gardes, while by others it has been (and still is) defended as a bulwark against fascist, Stalinist, or neoliberal infiltration into all areas of production and life.

The debates on how autonomy comes about and what must be done to maintain it have thus themselves become part of the struggles for autonomy in education, politics, and art.

Baladrán, Zbynek/Havránek, Vit (Hg.): *Atlas of Transformation*. Published by tranzit as part of the Monument of Transformation Project. Zürich: jrp|ringier: 2010.