

# Autonomy in Conflict

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In the following essay, first published in Woodbine's new print-only journal, *The Reservoir*, Adrian Wohlleben argues that we ought to make room for a third sense of the term "autonomy." Whereas its two traditional meanings refer variously to material independence or self-legislation, what Wohlleben calls "strategic autonomy" is only thinkable from within a dynamic of active and ongoing struggle. As the author puts it, what is in question is "the capacity to break the frame of a conflict while fighting it, to change the problem around which the intelligibility of the clash depends, and thereby to seize the initiative."

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We inherit two principal senses of the word "autonomy" from the Western tradition: as self-legislation, and as self-reproduction.

According to its first sense, the term broadly means free will or free choice, an act of spontaneous self-obedience on the part of a rational subject. The same idea has both negative and positive valences. Negatively, autonomy refers to that domain of experience that is not subject to heteronomous forces beyond my control, either in the form of physical forces dictating my desires (laws of nature), or the arbitrary preferences of other people. At a more "positive" level, the idea is that, since I am most free when I obey only myself, autonomy means *autos-nomos*, the act whereby I discover practical principles of action within myself and follow them, principles that may to this extent be considered "laws of freedom."

According to the second and somewhat older sense, autonomy means material self-reliance or independence. Do we possess the means necessary to fulfill the basic reproduction of our lives without having to sell ourselves to others? This sense of the term extends back to rights of gleaning in the Book of Ruth, as well as to conflicts around the "commons" and subsistence rights, from the Magna Carta to Marx's early articles on the theft of wood. Here autonomy is less about discovering rules of freedom that bind all free and rational beings through a "kingdom of ends" than it is about arriving at a degree of economic and territorial independence that enables us to live without bending the knee or selling ourselves for a wage: what is the material threshold beyond which I don't need to rely on hostile powers to survive?

Of course, these two conceptions are not always easily separated. For example, our models for comprehending social antagonism tend to oscillate between both senses of autonomy. The

“J-Curve,” for instance, a popular tool among crisis theorists, tells us that revolts are triggered by the destabilization or deprivation of either one or the other sense of autonomy at a sufficiently rapid pace: a loss of rights or relative social status, or else, a rapid increase in the price of bread or fuel.

Without casting either of these two canonical interpretations aside, it is perhaps time that we make room for a third sense of autonomy. Whereas the first sense refers to our interior freedom, and the second to our relative material independence, the third is only thinkable from within a dynamic of active and ongoing struggle.

There is a mode of autonomy that belongs specifically to uprisings and situations of political polarization between contending forces. What I propose we call “strategic autonomy” refers to the capacity to break out of the frame of a conflict *while fighting it*, to change the problem around which the intelligibility of the clash depends, and thereby to seize the initiative. It is a question of seizing and retaining agency at the level of meaning as such, of the very framework of partisanship that conjugates and differentiates friend, enemy, and “ally.”

Recall how, within weeks, the Yellow Vest movement had outstripped any reference to the “fuel tax”; or how the viral slogan “*too little, too late*” during the 2019 Hong Kong uprising exposed the rupture and mutation that the antagonism had undergone. In each case, the rapid escalation and lateral drift of the conflict had eclipsed the initial demands of the movement, resulting in a broader and more complex framework with unclear borders. Generally speaking, wherever the virtual coordinates of the antagonism shift, no backtracking is possible.

If it makes sense to speak of such mutation-points or breakaway moments as a form of “autonomy,” this is because they attest to an inherently-collective capacity to maintain the initiative, to play the role of *form-giving force* within an unfolding dynamic. Whoever determines the frame of a conflict compels all neighboring forces to react and follow. Similarly, when an uprising overflows the terms through which it was catalyzed, those who wish to subdue it must first chase down the meaning of the antagonism from its participants. In France and Hong Kong, as the frame of dissensus began to expand and mutate, the state began frantically attempting to identify so-called leaders or representatives, in the hopes of securing mediators with whom new demands could be stabilized, new terms for the expiration of hostilities. The situation became so unruly that Emmanuel Macron had to travel the country holding “town hall” meetings with mayors just to reestablish his presence within the field, a tour that routinely met with embarrassment and failure.

The concept of strategic autonomy points to the inevitability, within any given social polarization, of a conflict over conflict. It is a serious mistake to treat movements merely as ready-made narratives one must either accept or reject. The fact is, whether consciously or not, every actual political rupture involves a virtual confrontation over the very coordinates of dissension, an attempt to force the other side to recognize the very matter of non-recognition, and by doing so, to *occupy the grounds of our divorce*. Whichever side maintains the upper hand in this battle will generally dictate not only which actions, tactical repertoire, and targets fit within the scope of the polarization, but also the horizon of what counts as victory, what “winning” looks like, and even, to an important extent, the idea of happiness that the struggle projects ahead of itself. Whereas “fidelity” to the event is important after its closure (when its memory has become subject to dispute), while the window remains open the priority must be placed on the potentiality for breakaways, widenings, and treason to its origins. Strategic autonomy coincides with moments in which we succeed in producing a new *problem*, which is another way of saying: a new

evaluation of the important and the unimportant, the tolerable and the intolerable, in response to which the boundaries of what falls into dispute shift, enabling the inclusion of new composing elements.

In sum, autonomy in this third sense is related neither to material independence nor self-legislation but to the irreducibly collective capacity to retain the initiative at the highest level of warfare, namely, the capacity to dictate the nature of the conflict itself, and to align this with another set of values, with our idea of power and happiness.

One advantage of this concept is that it allows us to name a key way in which movements die out, lose steam, or wind up co-opted and defanged. The inability to contest and exceed their given frameworks of struggle ensures that, once movements run up against their limits (either through victory or defeat), there is little room to move: they will either be fractured internally, or succumb to recuperative recoding.

For example, the consistency of the ZAD at Notre-dame-des-Landes depended upon the horizon afforded by the construction of the airport. However, in spite of its ferocity, ingenuity, and unprecedented duration, the movement was never truly able to forcibly pivot into a frame of struggle that pointed beyond it. As a result, when the state withdrew the airport from the equation it found itself without a framework allowing it to push through its internal contradictions, leaving it much more vulnerable to external repression.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas the voided horizon following the ZAD's victory opened a wedge for an external attack, the George Floyd revolt encountered a similar limit, only in reverse order. An early yet unrepeatable victory left the movement stillborn, inviting an opportunistic redirection of its frame. The uprising began as a memetic wave of anti-police demolition unified by a single practical aim: to destroy the places from which police violence is organized — precincts, substations, courthouses — as well as the cars and vans that circulate it... and, having done so, to consummate their absence through looting, vandalism, and festivity. However, after the first five days, when the victorious siege in Minneapolis was unable to be repeated elsewhere and the police reconquered the streets, the memetic contagion of the real movement crashed against its ballistic limits, stripping it of its practical orientation, and leaving the framework of conflict indeterminate. It was into this absence of horizon that a *social movement apparatus* was able to intervene and reframe the nature of the conflict from a *demolitionist* wave of attacks into an *abolitionist* dialectic of policy, in which activists speaking in the name of the rebellion sought dialogue with, and made demands upon, ruling institutions to implement so-called “non-reformist reforms.”<sup>2</sup>

The reframing of the conflict restored the rights to political discourse that had been stripped away by the first wave of revolt, forcing revolutionaries to adjust their strategies. Whereas it had previously been possible to swim within the demolitionist wave, it now became necessary to intervene into the ritualized social movement apparatus in order to attempt, wherever possible, to expand or break its frame. As occurred during France's 2016's *Loi travail* movement, an effort was made to transmit a virus across the social movementist platform in the hopes of provoking desertions from the ranks of the Left. In 2020, this virus assumed the form of a *frontliner culture* adapted from Hong Kong, which had deterritorialized black bloc tactics from the anarchist milieu and distilled them into pure techniques that circulated freely within the global tactical toolbox.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mauvaise Troupe, “Victory and its Consequences,” *Liaisons* 2. [thenewinquiry.com/blog/victory-and-its-consequences-part-i](http://thenewinquiry.com/blog/victory-and-its-consequences-part-i)

<sup>2</sup> See Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes without End,” *Ill Will*, May 2021. [illwill.com/memes-without-end](http://illwill.com/memes-without-end)

Of course, memes that do not fold organically but must be *injected* or transmitted across a hostile milieu necessarily encounter a host of familiar obstacles: tactical fetishism, activism, a poverty of ethical and strategic horizons, etc. Sometimes these can be overcome, and the spread of radical actions in the street is able to ward-off or block the way to hostile counter-actualizations — for instance, when the pillaging of capitalist storefronts during the Yellow Vests made it impossible for the far-right to symbolically co-opt the movement for their cause. At other times no amount of escalatory action will suffice to induce a shift in an inauspicious framework of conflict, and our time is best spent doing something else.

Just as we have learned to speak of the molecular production of places of shared life in contemporary uprisings (Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, etc.) as “movement communism,” there is a *movement vitalism* that must be cultivated and expanded alongside it. To do so requires that we never take the *given* framework of a movement or conflict as exhaustive. Instead, we must train our attention on the potentiality for aberrant mutations that break away and burst the coordinates of the fight, unlocking powers unknown at the outset. Such autonomy is something we experience only at the moment we place our positions at risk by engaging in unholy alliances, when we link up and fight with groups of people who may not share our point of view, that pull us out of our comfort zone.

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