We had been working for about a month in the village of San Isidro, in the Zapatista autonomous municipality of Morelia. At the time I was living in Chiapas, the most southerly state of Mexico, doing solidarity work with the Zapatistas through our solidarity group Kiptik (Kiptik means strength in the local Mayan language, Tzeltal). After raising enough money from donations and gigs back in Europe we’d meet with the Zapatista municipal water commission and get instructions about which village needed a water system next. We were laying out a gravity flow system fed from a spring a couple of miles away up the hill, and the head tank lay squarely in the middle of land reclaimed after the landowner fled in the land takes of 1996. The village overlooked Las Cañadas, the deep canyons that lead down to the Lacandon jungle near the Mexico–Guatemala border.

It was winter in the Chiapas highlands and the freezing mornings gave way to clear blue afternoons. One Thursday, we were taking our usual lunchtime break, eating pozol, the ancient Mayan snack of ground maize hydrated with whatever river water was at hand. Packed with nutrients and carbohydrates, it’s amazing how that stuff could get you through the day. We hunkered down under the tarpaulin we had erected to protect the drying cement of the newly plastered water tank from the heat of the sun. “How many Zapatistas are there in your village?”, Manuel, one of the representatives of the water commission, asked me out of the blue. “Not many”, came my reply, resisting the temptation to say that I was from a city not a village. “Why not?” “Well I suppose no one cares enough, or they’re too busy”, I said, and then instantly regretted it.
In the silence that ensued I began to think about the inspiring struggles and people I had met back home in the UK over the last few years. People ripping up genetically modified crops, breaking into warehouses to hold raves or military bases to dismantle jet fighters, blocking road developments or holding parties in the middle of motorways. The silent army of people organising free language classes for migrants or solidarity events against the poll tax, developing open source software, hacklabs and alternative news media. Under the bright inspiring lights of the Zapatista struggle, I had begun to forget just how many people continue to resist neoliberalism, the deadlock of consumer-led market fundamentalism and the patronising deadhand of representative democracy in a wealth of untold ways; often putting their own liberty on the line to struggle for a better, more equal society where everyone has a say in how it is built. The silence was broken by Manuel who seemed to be following my thoughts:

There are more Zapatistas than you think, Pablo. Having guerros [literally “whitey” in Castellano] like you supporting us is great. But at some point you need to go home and find the Zapatistas where you live. You’ll find them. And they’ll find you. You just need to find a language to speak to each other.

My time in Chiapas ended soon after this, mainly as I got a job teaching international development at the University of Leeds in the UK. But it was also because Manuel’s words had a potent effect on me. Living and working in Chiapas gave me my most remarkable and direct experience with autonomy as a struggle for survival, self-management and the common. Since 1 January 1994 when the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has risen up against the North American Free Trade Agreement and 500 years of colonial oppression, and fought a short bloody war against the Mexican military, they have become a global inspiration for those fighting for dignity and against neoliberalism. Thousands of people continue to visit Zapatista communities to support and learn about their efforts to install a genuine process of autonomous development against the state which fuses ancient Mayan customs, magical-realism, continental philosophy and Marxist-Leninism. In health, education, technology and democracy they have set up structures that genuinely try to meet local needs and allow all those affiliated to the Zapatistas to participate and flourish. My time there was not just about supporting the Zapatistas. I realised I went there to learn what autonomy means in practice, how it was being used as an urgent survival strategy for those on the frontline, or breadline, of neoliberal restructuring, how it was teaching us to manage our lives collectively, and how it could rebuild a common from which we could gather strength, establish alternatives, find hope—and each other.

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This special symposium of *Antipode* is a staging post in my reflections and work on autonomous politics and activism over the last decade with many colleagues, activists and friends both inside and outside the academy (see Chatterton 2005, 2006; Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). The starting point is the idea of autonomy (from its Greek origins *auto-nomos*, literally to self-legislate), a deep desire to expand collective capacity for self government (see Castoriadis 1991). Autonomy is always a tendency, a partially fulfilled desire that is fought for and struggled over. The concepts of survival, self management and the common create the wider frame of reference for this symposium. What we see among those struggling for autonomy is an impulse to find creative survival routes out of the capitalist present, through a rejection of hierarchy and authoritarianism, and a belief in collective self-management. As this symposium explores, this impulse is given shape through the political space of the common (a term that I elucidate below).

My work took form through an Economic and Social Research Council research grant called “Activism and everyday life in the city” which I recently completed with Jenny Pickerill from the University of Leicester and Stuart Hodkinson from the University of Leeds. During this grant we explored in some detail the everyday practices of a range of activists who were developing autonomous political activity. We focused specifically on those groups who were self-consciously involved in developing autonomy as a collective social relation and institutional form through specific political place projects and campaigns. This kind of activity has been visibly growing over the last few years, taking its cue from the wider anti-globalisaton “movement of movements”, a vibrant hydra-like disorganisation with no clear centre, defined through the idea of “one no, many yeses”, and which has networked groups across the world and mobilised large international days of action since the 1990s (Kingsnorth 2004; Mertes 2004; Notes from Nowhere 2003). The 1999 World Trade Organisation demonstrations in Seattle became a sacred birthing ground for this movement, and subsequent mobilisations against summits in London, Bonn, Prague, Ottawa, Cancun, Gleneagles, Evian to name a few, helped the movement’s ideas and tactics to develop. Such events reflect a unique combination of being against corporate globalisation and the brutalism of the 1990s neoliberal “Washington Consensus”, while showing a passion for social and ecological justice. It insists on the need to build a new internationalism based on global North–South solidarities taking inspiration from examples such as the 1994 Zapatista uprising, the Argentinean uprising in the wake of the 2001 crisis, and Brazil’s Landless Peasant Movement. Networks such as People’s Global Action, Via Campesina and Climate Justice Now! have emerged to give a voice to this “movement of movements” that has questioned the legitimacy of sovereign nation states and self-appointed
elite international institutions. I have been involved in several of these moments and projects, in particular Dissent!, an anti-capitalist network of resistance in the build up to the G8 meeting in 2005, a popular education collective called Trapese which I co-founded in 2005 (Trapese 2007), and the radical, autonomous social centres movements which has emerged across the UK in the last five years.

Alongside these practices, much recent conceptual work has added greatly to our understanding of autonomy. In Geography and across the social sciences, we have seen a wealth of writing that has explored the meanings and practices of new social movements (Anderson 2003, 2004; Featherstone 2003, 2008; Halfacree 2004; Juris 2008; Leitner, Sheppard and Szürtö 2008; Pulido 2003; Routledge 2003; Routledge and Cumbers 2008; Routledge, Cumbers and Nativel 2007). What has been most interesting for the exploration of autonomy is that over the last few decades, a wealth of writers have pushed the boundaries of orthodox Marxism, developing a rich seam of autonomous-Marxist and more anarchist-inspired thinking and praxis that foregrounds the creative energies of social movements in the constant antagonisms between capital and class.1 These writings have opened up space to reassess the problems and potentials of those struggling for greater political autonomy, but at the same time being wary of more traditional rights-based counter-hegemonic movements for change (Day 2004). Such formulations expound the anti-power thesis, although perhaps more accurately the “anti-totalising power” thesis, which explores organisational practices and tactical repertoires that can radically change the world, but in ways that do not repeat the mistakes of the past such as centralised bureaucracies, authoritarian patterns of domination and party hierarchies. In essence, they endorse the provocation formulated by John Holloway (2002): how do you change the world without taking power?

The intention of pulling together a set of essays on the idea of autonomy is not to regurgitate a roll call of the many ills of our contemporary world, nor is it to undertake a detailed historical analysis of past autonomous practices and movements (these have been covered in depth elsewhere; see Cleaver 1979; Katsiaficas 1997). Rather my intention is to pick up on some of these conceptual and practical threads to deepen our understanding of the kinds of alternatives that are developing from experiments in autonomy. There is an urgent need for familiarising ourselves with, and being honest about, what constitutes successful exit routes from the current neoliberal condition. We need a health check on what these alternatives currently are, where they are at, what works and what doesn’t, and how to strengthen what does. What follows is theory that attempts to be explanatory, reflexive and normative, is informed by radical practice, as well as offering strategic reflections on how to challenge and overcome existing realities.
(Marcuse 2009). Before I outline the contents of the essays, I want to offer some critical reflections on some of key ideas that emerge from these and other recent works on autonomous politics.

The first concerns how an appreciation of spatial practice has deepened our understandings of processes of political autonomy. The common, in particular, has become a striking spatial motif, evoking territories governed by a group of people, the commoners, and a social relationship that underpins governance. The common is a complex social and political ecology. They are bounded, closed rather than open entities, which exist to nurture and sustain particular groups (De Angelis 2007; Linebaugh 2008; Midnight Notes 1991). The common, then, is a verb and a noun, and commoning is a crucial socio-spatial practice in the struggle for a better world. The common has become a key tactical repertoire in the struggle against spatial enclosure. David Harvey joins a long line of other thinkers who have importantly highlighted that capital accumulation has always advanced on the basis of the enclosure, appropriation and dispossession of land, resources and lifeworlds. It is key to see the violent underpinnings of such processes, and how enclosure is a form of violent predation. What we are witnessing in the contemporary moment is a particularly virulent type of primitive accumulation ushering in forms of enclosure akin to those seen in the early nineteenth century, which is expanding into a whole host of new areas such as the internet, plant patents and the carbon cycle (De Angelis 2009; Dyer Witheford 2001; Shiva 1997).

The idea of openness, which Sen introduces in his essay in this symposium, discusses the related idea of open space. Open space actively moves from being a noun to a verb. As he states, “Nothing is open by itself; it is open because we make it so; and also because of how we make it so—what the social relations of the space are” (p 1011). This kind of open politics is the politics of the possible, an emergent politics of becoming (Gibson-Graham 2006; Grosz 1999). The unbounded nature of these spaces gives them their creativity, but it also means they are deeply ambiguous, unwieldy and often dangerous. When such open space gains a community, it does, as Sen suggests, become a common. These kinds of spaces can be considered autopoeitic, in that they become self-creating, self-sustaining entities. One of the key tensions that many of the contributors allude to is that between “inside” and “outside”. On one level there is a constant desire to flee, to find exodus outside the all consuming reach of free market neoliberalism. On the other hand there is a recognition that there is no pure outside to retreat to, and that our political contention uses the resources of everyday life to constantly create struggle within, against and beyond the present condition (Hardt and Negri 2009).

The second idea relates to antagonism. Authors in this symposium, in different ways, foreground antagonism, anger, rage and often hatred
that at some level are used to challenge the status quo. As Holloway controversially began his book: “In the beginning is the scream. We scream . . . a scream of refusal: NO” (2002:xx). The refusal, as starting point, is essential. As the Free Association so vividly state in their article: “it’s difficult to start swimming in open water: it’s much easier to push off against something” (p 1028). The potent aspect is when this refusal becomes a collective force. One of the strengths of the essays collected here is that they embrace energy, play and dissent as creative, productive forces in the every day. The Free Association also explore the potent idea of love in political change as it always involves mutual transformation. Moments of refusal, then, are also always moments of creativity, and resistance is always productive. It is impossible to separate the two as refusal and rage contain intensely productive energies.

A further common thread is that antagonism and violence cannot be ignored or overlooked because they are fused into our experiences of everyday life. War, precarious jobs, debt, workplace bullying, domestic violence, unfathomable bureaucracies all jade our lives with violence, both big and small (Cloke 2002). In this context, building a politics without some kind of antagonism seems both naïve and dangerous. The task at hand is to give some form and direction to our antagonism, especially as it is so difficult to identify the antagonist. Is it neoliberalism, capitalism, liberal democracy, free market economics, the military–industrial complex? And if it is any or all of these, what exactly do they mean as entities to deconstruct, understand and attack? And what does our antagonism mean if we are up against a social relation that we all perpetuate?

Which bring us to our third theme of tactics. Questions of tactics become key in the loose and open ground where the simple aim is not simply to seize the state or build the vanguardist, revolutionary party of the movement. In his article, Holloway points to the cracks that we build as part of our micro resistances. The millions of cracks become a key part of our tactical repertoire rather than one clearly defined huge push. A tactical focus on the micro-political speaks to prefiguration as a driving force of much contemporary political activism, where Marxist-Leninist consequentialism (ends justify the means) is rejected in favour of an approach that situates the means as actively shaping ends; where in fact, means become the ends (Franks 2003). The key issue is how do movements create processes that are flexible and open, that continue to problematise situations, avoid becoming saturated or over-coded with meaning, and fixed to particular ideas and ways of organising?

More broadly, the Free Association have been involved in asking the question what would it mean to win? And more recently they have asked what would it mean to lose? (Adamczak and Dost 2009; Turbulence Collective 2007). For many groups struggling against large systems of oppression, it is tactically difficult to agree on successful
end points. And often energies are so concentrated on resisting that little thought is given to what it would mean to succeed, and then actually be able to call the shots. As they state in their article, “when you’re banging your head against a brick wall, it’s difficult to know what to do when the wall gives way” (p 1023). One of the strengths of the tactical repertoires of many autonomous movements is the way they embrace contradictory, chaotic outcomes. In the largely chaotic space of social change, cause and effect can never be predetermined and some element of the unknowable has to be embraced. Cindi Katz’s (2004) work is useful here, outlining how the work of movements for change simultaneously weaves together caring, survival, reworking and resistance functions, all of which are tactically necessary. Developing this, Carlsson and Manning in this symposium outline the nowtopians as the R&D wing of radical political movements for autonomy. Rather than a simple, goal orientation, political movements win by building capacity and resilience.

Fourth, this exploration into autonomous politics highlights many innovative organisational practices. A deep critique of both hierarchical and bureaucratic organising methods has been a hallmark of recent political movements who have embraced more horizontal and networked, weblike forms of organising (Juris 2008). This reflects a strong belief in self organisation, a Do It Yourself politics which emerged from a deep mistrust of authority embedded in centralised forms of organising. Innovative organisational forms are emerging, drawing on consensus, affinity and direct democracy. And because they are experimental and flexible, they are difficult to interpret through conventional organisational methodologies.

Fifth, all of the articles in different ways address the issue of labour and work. Many are grounded in a deep recognition of how work has become increasingly instrumental and the labourer more precarious. Precarity has become a key motif for the experience of the majority in the contemporary global economy (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). But what the articles raise is not how to improve the lot of the world’s working poor, but how we can envision a society beyond waged work, a question that becomes increasingly significant given that the economy is beginning to slam up against the limits of the global biosphere (see Jackson 2009). John Holloway states it clearly by differentiating between the struggle for labour and the struggle against labour—the former based in a framework of demands for better conditions by trade unions, and the latter encouraging a more profound critique of why we work and the social and ecological damage it is doing. These are longstanding arguments, expressing the classic Marxist tension between use and exchange value and expressed in Bertrand Russell’s classic dichotomy of useful doing and useless toil (Vernon 1983). Profound questions emerge such as how can labour’s potential for creating be
activated in ways other than for exchange value production? Again, Carlsson and Manning give us some concrete examples through the useful doing of the nowtopians, who have self-excluded themselves from the world of waged work. The common, if it is to mean anything, embraces labour which reproduces the wellbeing and ensures the survival of the common and its commoners.

Finally, we come to ideas of becoming, emergence and (im)possibility. Given what we are up against, dreaming a world beyond neoliberalism seems to be a task relegated to academics, political hacks, the insane or the naive. But against the thesis of the impossibility of change, what the essays refer to is the urgent need for new political imaginaries (Bonefeld 2008; Swyngedouw 2009). As Hardt and Negri (2009:ix) point out, the political project of instituting the common “cuts diagonally across these false solutions—neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist—and opens a new space for politics”. Drawing on the work of Badiou and Zizek, Swyngedouw (2009) suggests that the political act is not the art of the possible, but the art of the impossible, and creates interventions that cannot be understood in terms of established symbolic framings. What we need are reflexive change agents and organisations that can experiment and dream, create momentum and point to seemingly impossible new directions. There will always be tensions between fluidity and fixity, between movement and stasis. Sometimes one will serve better than the other. The point is to be aware and present to conditions and opportunities for change as they arise.

The Authors and Articles
The authors contributing to this Antipode symposium come from a range of backgrounds and are directly involved in a wealth of political struggles and groups. This is one of the reasons that they were selected and which gives this special symposium its energy. The essays contribute to our understandings on the meanings and practices of autonomy, and how these can help with the urgent political tasks of promoting self management and building practices and spaces embedded in commoning as survival routes out of the capitalist present.

The special feature begins with an essay by John Holloway. He lives in Mexico and is author of several landmark books on autonomous Marxism including most recently Crack Capitalism (2010) and is one of the leading commentators on the Zapatista insurrection (see Holloway and Pelaez 1998). He lives, writes and works in Mexico where among other things he is involved in the Magazine Bajo el volca (under the volcano). Holloway’s essay in this symposium outlines his thinking on the concept of cracks. In essence, Holloway expands on the Marxist thesis of the dual character of labour, regarding autonomy as a revolt of
useful doing against abstract labour. This revolt of doing against labour creates cracks in the fabric of everyday capitalism. These cracks are a central antagonism within and against the capitalist system which can sow the seeds of its demise.

Chris Carlsson and Francesca Manning continue the theme introduced by Holloway. Chris Carlsson has been an activist and writer in San Francisco for a number of decades and was involved in setting up the magazine *Processed World* in the 1980s. He is a dedicated nowtopian, developing this idea in a recent book (Carlsson 2008). Francesca Manning is pursuing these ideas at the CUNY Graduate Centre. Their essay outlines the nowtopian drop-outs involved in a strategic exodus through work that is done for social and ecological reasons and not the proliferation of capital. They point to a new basis for a shared experience of class and attempt to create post-petroleum, post-capitalist futures. They describe two inspirational examples involved in the autonomous reproduction that constitutes nowtopia: vacant lot and urban guerrilla gardeners, and the outlaw cyclists from the critical mass movement.

Massimo de Angelis continues with an essay that explores class and commoning. De Angelis is Professor of Political Economy at the University of East London and is author of one of the key books on commoning and value struggles (De Angelis 2007). He is also editor of the website and online publication *The Commoner: a web journal of other values* (www.thecommoner.org.uk), one of the leading resources in exploring the common in practice. In his essay, De Angelis interrogates the idea of the common, offering a new perspective that suggests that production in common can never be based on middle-class values, as middle-class values are always production in common with the system. What he seeks instead is an explosion of the middle class resulting in new forms of value production and new commoning beyond capital.

Gustavo Esteva continues the theme of the common through an exploration of the events in Oaxaca City in Mexico in 2006, what is described here as the “Oaxaca Commune”. Esteva is currently involved in many grassroots struggles in Oaxaca, including the Oaxacan Popular Peoples Assembly (APPO) and “La Universidad de La Tierra” (“The University of the Land”). In his paper, Esteva outlines the significance of the Oaxaca commune, highlighting how it has opened up a space to rethink democracy, and how APPO continues to push forward momentum for autonomous organising, resistance and insurrectional activity in the face of growing oppression and the growing fear of civil war.

Jai Sen, writer and activist from India who has been involved in the World Social Forum Movement since its inception, continues this theme with an article on open space. Sen is Director of the “India Institute for Critical Action: Centre In Movement”. In his essay Sen gives further
depth to the discussion of the commons, through an exploration of the concept of open space, principally through his direct engagement with the World Social Forum. He explores three key organising principles of open space: self organisation, autonomy and emergence, which together define a powerful new kind of politics.

The symposium ends with a piece by the Free Association who are a writing collective based in several locations some of whom are involved in publishing the magazine *Turbulence: Ideas for Movement* and write at www.freelyassociating.org. Their article extends their recent thinking on the (anti)global movement of movements through an interrogation of the concepts of antagonism and love. The point for them is that we need to be alive to antagonism all around us while also focusing on what we can collectively become. Grosz’s work has been informative here, as she states: “What, for example, would politics be like if it were not directed to the attainment of certain goals, the coming to fruition of ideals or plans, but rather required a certain abandonment of goals?” (Grosz 1999:11). Here we enter unfamiliar, but exciting, terrain that requires constant renegotiation and reaffirmation.

These essays are all concerned, albeit in different ways, with the central preoccupation of how do we get out of this capitalist mess? They are framed by a backdrop of the need for change, but also a sense that real change seems at times within, and other times outside of, our grasp. Their concepts, case studies and provocations invite us to dwell further on this preoccupation and to force solutions into existence. This is not merely an academic pursuit, nor is it one confined to the university. The most creative ideas will come from unexpected and difficult encounters between those who transgress identities, institutions and classes. The hope is that the essays presented here will stimulate much needed further writing, research and action on the desire for autonomy which can point to survival routes out of this capitalist present through building capacity for self management and the development of the common.

**Endnotes**

1 This tradition of autonomous Marxism is reflected in a number of diverse writings including Harry Cleaver (1979), John Holloway (2003), Antonio Negri (1989) and has also been developed by groups such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Calude Lefort in Europe who published the review “Socialism or Barbarism”, and the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the USA led by C L R James and Raya Dunayevskaya.

2 The term prefigurative politics has been used frequently by anarchist, anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements in recent decades, and especially since the Battle of Seattle during the 1999 World Trade Organisation talks. It alludes to politics that builds on the Ghandian idea of “be the change you want to see”. It aims to build the future hoped for world right here in the present, where the values, tactics and organisational forms try to prefigure the future that activists and campaigners seek.
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