“Imagining Alternative Modernities: Interventions from the Balkans and South Asia”
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Name: Nikolay Karkov
Institution: SUNY College at Cortland
Title: Autonomist Marxism in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe: Some Problems of Translation

Abstract: Throughout 2013, I was co-editor and translator of an anthology project entitled Autonomism and Marxism: From the Paris Commune to the World Social Forum. The project was commissioned and supported by New Left Perspectives, a radical collective of scholars and activists in Bulgaria, Eastern Europe, of which I am a member. Published in December 2013 and including texts from 37 radical theorists from diverse theoretical and political traditions, the anthology not only met with significant critical acclaim, but also exposed a number of tensions around the problem of translation. In this presentation, I focus on several such distinct if interrelated problems of translating autonomist Marxism into Bulgarian, including the translation of ideas into a context where they run the significant risk of distortion and misappropriation.

I start my presentation with a brief discussion of the history and motivation of our project, including the purposefully broad operative definition of autonomist Marxism which informed our selection of readings. I then move to a detailed discussion of the problems of translation, from the most immediate one – those of rendering context-specific terms into a language where they bear no equivalent – to the most politically salient one – that of the recent appropriation of the idea and practice of “autonomy” among anarchist circles, which severs any possible (historical) intersections between autonomism and Marxism and reads autonomist politics in an explicitly post-ideological and even post-leftist vein. Along the way, I explore the continued hostility to any Marxist/ leftist theorizing, including that coming from an open-ended tradition such as autonomist Marxism, under the current neoliberal “common sense” in Bulgaria (and Eastern Europe more generally), along with the significant tensions within our own collective around the inclusion of texts that challenged the Eurocentric bias of much of autonomist Marxism itself.

My presentation addresses the theme of “Postsocialist and Postcolonial Perspectives on Neoliberalism” of the conference, as I argue that the problems of translating autonomist Marxist theory into a Bulgarian context offer significant insights into the perils and promises of the post-socialist condition in Eastern Europe today.