

baedan

Identity In Crisis

summer 2012

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The following lecture was presented at an anarchist conference held in Milwaukee in May of 2011. In the wake of the defeated anti-austerity struggle months earlier in Wisconsin, the Crisis Conference was organized as a space for anarchists to theorize intervention into the unfolding crisis and the nascent resistance to austerity.

Identity In Crisis

Contention One: A Crisis of Reproduction

i

While economists, politicians and technocrats of all varieties endlessly speak of this or that detail of *the crisis*, they remain caught up in diagnosing what they perceive as a periodic crisis of the capitalist mode of production. What goes unspoken is that all the various crises of production, consumption and accumulation are simply minor breakdowns within a systematic process that confronts us as the domination of our very lives. This latter is itself a great crisis, one born from the moment we were dispossessed of our ways of being and accumulated as workers, and which in our view constitutes the fundamental crisis of alienation and production within industrial civilization.

The same process which removes us from the world and makes us into workers also renders us irrelevant as workers. Through generations of violence, our ancestors were destroyed as living beings and recreated as a pool of labor-power. The products of the labor of each successive generation form the structures that affirm capital and render future labor-power redundant. And thus, the so-called industrial reserve army becomes a Lazarus layer of surplus population, irrelevant to yet hopelessly reliant on the means of production for survival.

To put this yet another way, the current crisis cannot be viewed as a result of the actions of a class of greedy bankers, unscrupulous lenders or even a result of the concentration of fortune in the hands of a ruling class. Rather, we have to view our current situation as the inevitable outcome of alienated labor — the process by which our activity and ability to reproduce ourselves is taken from us and used to dominate our lives. All of the energy that is routed into production that is not our own congeals to form a system of apparatuses that become the only — and increasingly alienated — means by which reproduction is possible, alienating us from any possibilities to live outside the capitalist system. The continued existence of the capitalist mode of production is contingent upon the

reproduction of the alienated self. While the analysis of reproduction by Marx (and by many Marxists) focuses on this as taking place in the sphere outside of work where the various activities necessary to sustain the workforce's lifeforce are carried out, we will argue that the relative disappearance of labor from the industrial sphere coincides with the appearance of work's logic in every aspect of life. The reproduction of the self, then, becomes a primary productive operation rather than a mere secondary support to the productive process.

We'll quote Marx in writing:

“Proletarian” must be understood to mean, economically speaking, nothing other than “wage-labourer,” the man who produces and valorises “capital,” and is thrown onto the street as soon as he becomes superfluous to the need for valorisation.

The primacy of this throwing-on-the-street exposes the fundamental crisis of subjectivity under capital: the collapse of the worker's identity. It is from this position — that of the street — that we will begin our analysis.

ii

Though we are continually further removed from the means to provide for ourselves, we cannot view this situation as simply a crisis of this particular mode of production, when it is the very crisis of living within class society. Our irrelevance in the process of production and the misery of self-reproduction is not an abstraction, but a reality that haunts and animates our daily experience.

In Wisconsin's anti-austerity struggle of early 2011, we can witness a particularly apparent aspect of the process of expulsion and immiseration that has been unfolding across the globe for decades. Politicians are quite honest when they claim that the system can no longer afford to care for the growing surplus populations without the means to care for themselves. Union contracts are dissolved so as to more easily cast out irrelevant or unnecessary workers. Funding for services, education, housing, food, and health are devastated. Teachers vote for their own pay cuts in order to preserve a dying system. Union bureaucrats offer to concede every possible aspect of their constituencies' livelihoods in a desperate attempt to cling to their own positions in the bureaucracy. “Representatives” flee their positions because they can do nothing else.

Policing is expanded and prison terms are dramatically lengthened in order to quarantine surplus populations. At all levels, the state is reduced to and exposed as its primary function — the management and discipline of the growing population of bodies who are entirely unnecessary to the continuation of the economy. In

order to prevent the chaotic revolt of these bodies, more diffuse and sinister forms of policing are deployed. Through a whole series of mystifications, police-logics are internalized within the protest body. The ideals of democracy, non-violence, and civil disobedience serve to re-route popular rage as a desperate plea for the continuation of a system that first exploits us and then, when we are no longer necessary, leaves us to die.

To this deeper crisis, there is no reformist or progressive answer. Progress itself has only meant an intensification of the alienation and the division of labor at the heart of the fundamental crisis of class society. A renewal of the workers' movement would be meaningless for those who might never be able to even be traditional workers — a status quickly becoming the norm. An expansion of the welfare state can only act as a band-aid fix, a ploy for social peace. Even if the solutions offered by the Left were tenable, they'd be entirely undesirable all the same. When protesters say "this is what democracy looks like" they are entirely correct — this situation is exactly what democracy looks like: a shit sandwich, without the bread. For those who constitute the ever-growing and intrinsic outside to the economy, there is no integrated operation or mode of protest that can save us. Our choices are obvious — austerity and the continued immiseration of our daily lives, or the immediate destruction of the means of production and the class society they produce.

iii

We will quote at length a communique that circulated during an earlier struggle against this system of universal and deepening austerity, "Communique from an Absent Future" by Research and Destroy. This communique elaborated a theory of the crisis with regard to the university system in the state of California. It is relevant to our discussion because it poses the crisis in terms of a crisis of subjectivity:

For those whose adolescence was poisoned by the nationalist hysteria following September 11th, public speech is nothing but a series of lies and public space a place where things might explode (though they never do). Afflicted by the vague desire for something to happen — without ever imagining we could make it happen ourselves — we were rescued by the bland homogeneity of the internet, finding refuge among friends we never see, whose entire existence is a series of exclamations and silly pictures, whose only discourse is the gossip of commodities. Safety, then, and comfort have been our watchwords. We slide through the flesh world without being touched or moved. We shepherd our emptiness from place to place.

But we can be grateful for our destitution: demystification is now a condition, not a project. University life finally appears as just what it has always been: a machine for producing compliant producers and consumers. Even leisure is a form of job training. The idiot crew of the frat houses drink themselves into a stupor with all the dedication of lawyers working late at the office. Kids who smoked weed and cut class in high-school now pop Adderall and get to work. We power the diploma factory on the treadmills in the gym. We run tirelessly in elliptical circles.

It makes little sense, then, to think of the university as an ivory tower in Arcadia, as either idyllic or idle. “Work hard, play hard” has been the over-eager motto of a generation in training for . . . what? — drawing hearts in cappuccino foam or plugging names and numbers into databases. The gleaming techno-future of American capitalism was long ago packed up and sold to China for a few more years of borrowed junk. A university diploma is now worth no more than a share in General Motors.

We work and we borrow in order to work and to borrow. And the jobs we work toward are the jobs we already have. Close to three quarters of students work while in school, many full-time; for most, the level of employment we obtain while students is the same that awaits after graduation. Meanwhile, what we acquire isn’t education; it’s debt. We work to make money we have already spent, and our future labor has already been sold on the worst market around. Average student loan debt rose 20 percent in the first five years of the twenty-first century — 80–100 percent for students of color. Student loan volume — a figure inversely proportional to state funding for education — rose by nearly 800 percent from 1977 to 2003. What our borrowed tuition buys is the privilege of making monthly payments for the rest of our lives. What we learn is the choreography of credit: you can’t walk to class without being offered another piece of plastic charging 20 percent interest. Yesterday’s finance majors buy their summer homes with the bleak futures of today’s humanities majors.

If the university teaches us primarily how to be in debt, how to waste our labor power, how to fall prey to petty anxieties, it thereby teaches us how to be consumers. Education is a commodity like everything else that we want without caring for. It is a thing, and it makes its purchasers into things. One’s future position in the system, one’s relation to others, is purchased first with money and then with the demonstration of obedience. First we pay, then we “work hard.” And there is the split: one is both the commander and the commanded, consumer and consumed. It is the system itself which

one obeys, the cold buildings that enforce subservience. Those who teach are treated with all the respect of an automated messaging system. Only the logic of customer satisfaction obtains here: was the course easy? Was the teacher hot? Could any stupid asshole get an A? What's the point of acquiring knowledge when it can be called up with a few keystrokes? Who needs memory when we have the internet? A training in thought? You can't be serious. A moral preparation? There are anti-depressants for that.

The collapse of the global economy is here and now.

iv

The disintegration of the guiding narratives of futurity and social expectation marks a real crisis in our own reproduction as subjects. One was told that on the trajectory of the locomotive of life would be suburban homes on mortgage, white picket fences, marriage, 1.5 children, comfortable unionized jobs, two automobiles, a big television. One was told to view his family, his home, his very life as the future product of his own "hard work." But none of this will exist for us. For many of us, it never did and we would never have desired it. And yet, the period marked by the industrial revolution of daily life and the real subsumption of daily activity through machines (dishwashers, automobiles, microwave ovens) has come to an end. Forget the suburbs. This is a crisis of the individual atomized reproduction of the capitalist family unit. People are being forced out of their homes and their union jobs in droves. What is a family, even? The regime of hostile privatism is in crisis. We are seeing all its hallmarks disappear as the ideology of whiteness is thrown into crisis. The middle class, and with it, middle class subjectivity are disappearing from the face of the earth.

The construction of the middle class had as its foundation the home mortgage. Home ownership on mortgage effects several things at once: a shift from working-class identity to middle-class identity, a change in the alignment of actual class interests (insofar as one's interests come to involve the value of one's home), and the weight of life-long debt (necessitating more and more work in order to pay it off). Additional markers of middle-class position were a stable career and ownership of small amounts of stocks. The collapse of the housing market, the loss of any reality of stable employment in all but a few sectors, and the collapse in the stock market (severely cutting into the financial basis for retirement in 401K plans, etc.) all add up to the massive looting of the middle class. This process cannot, however, be simply described as widespread proletarianization, nor does it signal the inevitable collapse of the capitalist system. On the contrary, the current

crisis is a crucial battle in the struggle between the potential for insurgency on one hand, and the potential for another restructuring of class society on the other.

The crisis of whiteness bears with it a set of unique opportunities, but also a set of crippling limitations. The limits: Those who are recovering from middle class delusions can be seen *en masse* concerning themselves with what brand of tape to use so as not to hurt the walls of the capitol building, or thanking the armed police officers about to arrest them, or believing that the police and the union leadership is on their side, or having a whole range of absurd ideas that the problems they face can be fixed by a recall election. Never mind a whole mythology of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. Some rather large pushes, activists, if you wish to become dangerous.

The opportunity: Those for whom any *event* was always experienced as something that happened to *other people* are beginning to see themselves as the people they read about in the news: unemployed, homeless. Those for whom history was thought to have ended have found themselves the victims (and agents) of its ceaseless progression (and potentially its explosion). Divorced from a past, from any means to reproduce themselves, from any of the fictions promised to them as children, people are beginning to call into question all the assumptions and narratives upon which our social order is based. Those who months ago could never have seen themselves occupying buildings or sabotaging their workplaces have begun to find new ways to act together. To a certain degree, people are positioned to see that their own survival will be predicated on their own self-activity to destroy the conditions that have shaped their abysmal future.

The collapse of traditional subject positions begets the emergence of new class positions of exclusion: on the one hand total abjection and unwaged labor and on the other a diffusion of technologies-of-the-self constituting a global petite bourgeoisie. More realistically there will be a complete indistinction and oscillation between these positions. The grim reality is that each individual will have to bring continually-innovated and newly-commodified aspects of her existence to sell on the market, or else starve.

Contention Two: Re-creation and Technologies-of-the-Self

i

The new middle class is a class divorced from the promise of steady employment, of stable home-ownership, burdened with ever-increasing debt and the

ever-increasing necessity (since nothing can be taken for granted any longer) for self-upgrades in order to have a chance at continued employment. A middle class for whom the self becomes a zero-capital enterprise, a class of individuals who are at once utterly proletarianized (dispossessed, thrown into the street) and yet the pettiest of the bourgeoisie, managing their own beings as little businesses. This new disposition replaces the structural role of the older forms of middle-class subjectivity (namely, the suppression of class struggle through the bonding of workers' survival to the survival of capitalism, and the intensification of the necessity of work through enormous quantities of debt) by positioning the individual in conflict with himself. Class war becomes something that is waged internally between one's proletarian interests and one's "better interests," between self-management and unmanageability, between the refusal of work, the scarcity of work, and the impetus to work more and more . . . The struggle in Wisconsin saw slogans such as "save the middle class" — which meant to save its structural form — but what the current struggles are effecting (because of their positive character) is a restructuring of capitalism toward the *global, virtual* middle class. We can give the name real subsumption to the process by which a world created and operated through our muscles becomes a world operated through energy in the form of fuel. Real subsumption marks the ability of dead labor to dominate the living. When we say dead labor, we mean a vast array of machines and apparatuses, produced by the living activity of humans that is taken from them and comes to mediate their relationship to their own survival. This is the ultimate achievement of capital: total alienation. The shift to privatized and commodified homes (made possible by the increasing centrality of machinery in our daily lives) marked the onset of what can be called the real subsumption of life under capital.

While the real subsumption of life under capital is taken for granted by many, we believe with the advent of a whole new set of machines and apparatuses, that we are now experiencing what could be called the real subsumption of subjectivity. By this we mean the colonization and economization of what it means to be alive at all — the totality of our features, looks, interests, relationships, dispositions, inclinations, sexuality, gender, tastes, body parts, physique, etc.

We can follow Foucault in his exploration of what he called technologies-of-the-self. It seems natural that after twenty-five years of inquiry into the production and disciplining of subjectivities (madness, deviancy, criminality, sexuality) Foucault would turn to the study of the ways in which people can deploy power to shape themselves. He named technologies of the self as the ability of individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of perfection or

immortality. Through this analysis, we can begin to see the emergence of a situation wherein each individual body can become the capitalist — the entrepreneur — of itself and the very possibility of its life. For each entrepreneur of the self, the (supposed) entirety of his “being” constitutes his own private property, his own capital, his own profit-logic. This entrepreneurial subjectivity reveals the dreadful reality that we all have the opportunity to become whatever we can make of ourselves, and then to bring the product to market.

ii

Just as what we would roughly identify as formal subsumption is made possible by the production of certain machines at the business level (mining equipment, transportation infrastructure, factories) and real subsumption is enabled by the production of specific machines at the domestic level (household appliances, personal transportation), the phase of *real* real subsumption is effected by the deployment of an entirely new set of machinery at the personal level — this time, the vast network of hardware and software that comprises the world of information technology.

Put another way, through the process of total subsumption, individuals have been deconstructed and concurrently reconstructed as a crossing of apparatuses and technologies of the self. It is now impossible to speak of an individual as being a body bound by flesh: instead, we have the intersection of Facebook profiles, smart phones, bank accounts, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers, tagged pictures, health and criminal records, gym memberships, DNA profiles, finger prints, lists detailing our tastes music/books/films, model portfolios, mug shots, fetish chat rooms, online hook-ups, typefaces, degrees, screen names, avatars, tablets, Twitter feeds, Grindr, Flickr, Socializr, Tumblr, iSnitch applications, GPS coordinates, risk statistics, drivers licenses, surveillance footage, blog entries, friend networks and whatever might turn up through the Google search of a name.

In the same way we are alienated from a life outside the machinery in which dead labor congeals, we are equally alienated from conceiving of our bodies or being called by our names outside of the innumerable apparatuses that conceive, identify, name, measure and track us as data points. The domination of machines over our lives is nearing perfection. These apparatuses alienate us from our communication, relation, befriending, seduction. What’s more, they now comprise the totality and the process by which we identify, name and constitute our (current and potential) selves and relationships. The individual is dead. Atomization proliferates forever.

iii

The combination of an ever-increasing Lazarus layer of surplus population, the vast diffusion of technologies of the self, and the *real* real subsumption of life and subjectivity under capital coincide to produce a new economic-social terrain wherein every aspect of what could be called an individual has been fully integrated into their quantifiable market value. The collapse of traditional subject positions is managed through the proliferation of a new positions: app designers, graphic designers, cyber sex workers, queer theorists, feminist publishers, social network engineers, trend hunters, eBay sellers, social justice activists, performance artists, porn directors, spammers, party promoters, award winning baristas. We are forced to continually define ourselves, to enact countless operations upon ourselves so as to produce ourselves anew each day as someone worth taking to market — our basic survival depends on the ceaseless deployment of increasingly discreet technologies of the self. Everything is for sale: our sex appeal, our fetishes, our tattoos, our radicalism, our fashion sense, our queerness, our androgyny, our fitness, our fluidity, our abnormality, our sociability. Facebook and Twitter function as the new resume. We are caught in the unending necessity to be continually educating, training, exploring, perfecting, and fine-tuning ourselves. Our continual self-invention is both economic imperative and economic engine.

iv

Let us quote at length from the essay “Preliminary Notes on Modes of Reproduction” by ‘gender mutiny,’ published in the journal *Pink and Black Attack*:

You can hear it on the street and in the workplace, in the college classroom and the executive boardroom, at the latest radical convergence and at the beach, at dance parties and in underground venues: the logic of duality is sooo last millennium.

We are living in a postmodern world, and you are a postmodern girl. Which is to say, you are not really a *girl* as such.

Postmodernity is a social order that takes places as social disorder; it is the form of the destabilization of formerly stable forms. Destabilization could be said to begin by attacking binary structure but it immediately, incessantly, and necessarily goes on to destabilize whatever structure; postmodernity is thus characterized by its destabilizing force and not by whatever modernist strictures linger about. The traces of modernity are merely modern, which

is to say *old-fashioned*; the paradoxical need to go beyond the modern is what characterizes the frenzy of post-modern activity. The form of structure today is a post-structural modality akin to the Situationist dream of fluid architecture — a modal and mobile form of structure whose engine is a strong distaste for anything static.

Primary in postmodernity's (de-/re-)structuring is a shift in sexual differentiation — the very structure which constituted the means by which life was understood to be created. The destabilization of binary oppositional sexes constitutes a crisis in the family and in the reproduction of life, but this crisis is not one that must spell the end of reproduction. A host of techniques of biotechnology, cyberproduction, and social work are emerging to enable 'queer' reproductive possibilities and to overcome the limits of the human womb which too easily ceases to function.

An analysis of postmodern sexual reproductive technologies falls short, however, of recognizing the way in which the central questions of reproduction have been displaced from the act of baby-making to the production of selves, just as the centering of baby-making in procreationist thought usurped the former importance of the question of God's creation of the cosmos.

The primary mode of reproduction in a post-dialectical world is the reproduction of the individual. We call this mode of reproduction 're-creationism.'

Postmodern singularities are not created by God or their parents, but constructed through pluralistic processes that are increasingly 'artificial,' 'social,' and at the same time — paradoxically — self-realized. These processes are the processes of identification.

The ontological maxims of re-creationism are neither "God made me" nor "my parents gave birth to me" but "I made myself, therefore I am," "I am made and remade through everything," "I am what I eat," "I am not *me* without my phone," "I am a self-made man," &c. One's creator is either oneself or everything outside of oneself; it is both simultaneously. The fault for one's existence can no longer be put upon a specific creator (no longer can one rant at God "why did you create me?" or hate one's parents for bringing oneself into the world); it is only oneself who is to blame while at the same time *everything is to blame*.

The pluralistic reproductive process cannot suffer limits. Its reproduction is always an ontological operation, a veritable explosion of reproductive

modality that cannot be analyzed in forms of 'trinarism,' 'quaternism,' &c. These do not exist. Once binary reproduction has been destabilized, this destabilization reproduces itself and the rhizomal 'towers' from a network — a multiplicitous (post-)structuralism rather than a balanced structure.

The idea now is to produce more towers, unique and individuated, decentralized, matrixial, marching across the landscape at an ever-increasing rate. The hegemony of the Twin Towers has fallen only to give way to a whole metropolis of skyscrapers — a psychogeographical skyline, a horizon of possibilities and futures . . .

The postmodern worker is the self-made and self-managed worker. Stable long-term employment — unionized, salaried career opportunities with their attendant job security, benefits and pensions — is disappearing while part-time, short-term, piecemeal, casual, waged and self-employed work take its place. The proletarian must take on a certain *flexibility*; he must continually 'upgrade himself' through continual education and training. Meanwhile, labor becomes more efficient and the market becomes less prone to rewarding non-work. Re-creationism is thus both an economic imperative acting upon labor and an imperative — a drive — in the interests of the economy.

Meanwhile, re-creationism provides the only market-expansion opportunities that late-capitalism has available to itself. No longer able to reach new geographic demographic markets through traditional expansion, capitalism today must create new markets out of nothing or else expand into extra-dimensionality. New markets now require new subcultural-forms and identity-forms. The tendency of market expansion in late-capitalism is towards there being a market for each individual and ever-new markets as individuals re-create their identities, bodies, and desires. Static forms can only impede this expansion; thus, a certain self-hatred must be made to drive old forms into undesirability, and a taste for the new, hip and abnormal must be cultured.

Identities must be produced — produced *as commodities and for commodities*. Identification, that is, the process of re-creationism, is what produces these identities. Inherent in this production is a certain form of anti-identification that opposes itself to stable, essential, static and, ultimately, *old-fashioned* identity-forms in order to compel the production and marketing of new ones.

Each new identity is a new tower to which consumers can flock to escape the passé nature of the old ones. Eventually — that is, soon and very soon —

there will have to be a tower for each person (“*You know, there could be as many genders as there are people. . .*”), in fact many more, and the scale of such production far surpasses the limits of the old workplaces. The Fordist production line can make multiple, identical products, but today each new identity must have the air of the unique. The ‘creative’ labor of identity production is thus displaced from the old workplaces. By social imperative and desire, the individual is put to work, unpaid, to create new identities ‘for himself.’ (Reproductive work — whether baby-making, class struggle, or Facebook — is always unpaid.)

The postmodern Spectacle is a collection of images that must increasingly be produced uniquely by and for each individual (the ghost of reproduction must not linger on the screen), but it must also enable a certain form of ‘social interaction.’ An apparatus of Spectacle production that is socially networked affords its producer/consumer a profile and newsfeed unique to him but also the ability to ‘connect’ with his ‘real’ friends. Reality, in the end, is the product.

Contention Three: Serve / Negation

i

In an effort to isolate a strategic horizon and to avoid certain dead ends, we will consider the proposals of radical queer theorist Micha Cardenas in her recent book *Trans Desire*. Throughout the book, Micha offers her experience with a radical porn collective as an example of what she believes to be a subversive praxis of biopolitical resistance through porn production. She begins:

This paper will work with a process ontology, a concept of material reality that is constantly in the movement of becoming, in the churning flux of the chiasmic unity, a reality unbound in its material richness, where scales of observation can be wildly traversed in time and space, where everything is multiplicity and it is only the limited view of our current perceptions that creates the occasional appearance of wholeness and stillness.

Her “churning flux of chiasmic unity” is nothing new to us. There is already a name for this “reality unbound in its material richness”: capitalism. The image of re-creationism we elaborated in the third point of our second contention could very succinctly be described as throwing of bodies into this churning flux as bodies

“constantly in the movement of becoming.” We read “becoming” as a continuous series of technologies of the self, a constant stream of status updates, an endless fine-tuning and rewriting of one’s identity to be more perfectly compatible with the needs of the market. Cardenas begins with the sinister postmodern operation of valorizing the meaninglessness of life under capital. If this is our framework, we are doomed from the start.

Under the heading “Creating a Queer Porn Commons” Cardenas goes on to describe her work with Sharing is Sexy (SIS):

I will examine the Sharing is Sexy collective as an example of porn production as radical political gesture . . . I would like to discuss a collaborative project which I am participating in, Sharing is Sexy (SIS), as a material example [of a] collective project that aims at creating queer porn that is licensed under a Creative Commons, By Attribution, Non Commercial, Share Alike license. The process of creating and distributing porn is used to create radical queer community and to facilitate new conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. SIS uses non-commercial license to facilitate a porn making praxis, to be able to invite someone to experiment with the expression of their sexual desires and to know that no one is making money off of it (or very little money at best, in the case of bandwidth). SIS does not want porn corporations to use their content and resell it with massive infrastructures, which SIS would consider commercial use.

There is a failure of understanding here in the belief that the absence of an immediate exchange of money qualifies something as non-commercial or anti-capitalist. The simple fact that one is not paid for one’s labor is not enough to disqualify it from being labor. A great deal of labor, perhaps even the majority, is unwaged. An wide array of unpaid work has been subsumed so as to still produce a great deal of value. One isn’t paid to update their Facebook profile. No licensing in existence can truly exempt something from the market. Where she says “distribution to create radical queer community” we can read “investment in the creation of new radical queer markets.” These techniques of self-production can be as queer or as radical as possible, this will only cement their position as the *avant-garde* of capital.

She goes on:

I am interested in an experimental, materialist, affective approach to epistemology or meaning. I am approaching SIS as a concrete exploration of the possibilities of porn production, as a form of biopolitical resistance, and as an attempt to apply open source methodologies to cultural production with my own body and emotions.

It is unclear what is meant here by ‘biopolitical resistance.’ Porn is clearly a biopolitical terrain: a zone of the deployment of power that works to construct human subjectivity and sexuality. Where Micha goes astray is in only conceiving of power a top-down operation, as purely normative. The sexual practices portrayed in her porn, however radical they may be, are just as constructed and constructing as the dominant practices found in any other porn. If we are to read this as “biopolitical resistance” then we are naming as resistance what is simply the status quo functioning of pornography: to produce and discipline the sexual desires of its viewers. Changing the imagery does not change these productive forms of control. Beyond this, the application of open-source methodologies to cultural production is simply descriptive of cultural production as it already functions. Social media is the perfect example of the way in which our bodies and our emotions are put in the service of production through “open source methodologies.”

She continues:

With respect to oppression of subaltern identities, non-oppressive porn that does not ‘contain’ oppression is not enough. SIS strives to make anti-oppression porn that challenges the institutions of oppression along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Similarly with capitalism, I still harbor hope of making anti-capitalist porn that challenges the existence of capitalism.

Micha’s ambitions become increasingly dubious as we go on. No such cultural production, however “anti-oppressive” its content, can escape the fundamentally oppressive structure of the institution. It is still reliant on mediated production, distribution and consumption of sexuality. It is disseminated through material channels of dead labor based on real exploitation. A strong argument can be made that any gesture to integrate or assimilate marginalized groups into structurally flawed forms only acts to legitimate the form itself. We remain alienated regardless of the flavor of the now vindicated alienation. Secondly, to even evaluate the form in a vacuum, one must question what it means to be anti-oppressive in nature, especially when “anti-oppression” has become just another label to increase the value of any commodity: people still pay thousands to attend anti-oppression classes and academics use the trendiest brand of identity politics to sell books and fill rosters. The consumption of anti-oppressive porn is in no way intrinsically anti-capitalist. In fact, it is merely pioneering the way for pornographers to market a new brand of sexual commodities to the most discerning ethical consumers. One needn’t search too hard on Google to realize that this is already the situation.

In the section “Building Queer Network Subjectivities, Community as Resistance to Biopower,” she goes on:

We are facilitating a process of building new genders and sexualities by making porn more accessible because the viewer can know that the images were not made under exploitative conditions, the images are free and they are licensed to be shared. Creating a dynamic of sharing is important to us in order to facilitate dialogue and processes of feedback or exchange and allowing new shapings of desire to come out of those feedback processes. . .

The activity of SIS can be seen on numerous levels as an act of biopolitical resistance: it challenges commodification of expressions of queer desire, allows the collective members to explore their own desires, and facilitates community offline and online through dialogue and the sharing of content, building a queer porn commons. SIS not only provides the conditions of possibility for the creation of new subjectivities that challenge gender and sexual norms for its participants but it also acts as biopolitical information vectors, spreading embodied resistant desires. Radical queer media, distributed on the net or passed hand to hand in zines, but also with live events like burlesque shows, can act as lines of flight, potentials of inoperativity, spreading from the individual act of creative world building with one’s body or one’s community to other people and other places. These radical transmissions virtualize techniques of biopolitical resistance in the minds of the viewers, individuation in new assemblages and deterritorializing queer resistance to biopower. . .

With pornography, this function of the imagined subject in the fantasy can operate like the mirror stage, where the subject imagines themselves one way and gradually becomes that. . . . A challenge for Radical porn, which often presents a viewer with a new conception of what is possible, would be to understand how to enable a viewer to identify with the person portrayed in the work. . . .

This porn is more authentic, and therefore more erotic because it is easy to relate to because these are real people, normal people, people like you.

There is nothing about the production of new genders and sexualities that resists capitalism; to the contrary, this production is fertile terrain for new economic growth, as we have already established. But this delusion may bear with it a certain kind of truth — or, to be more precise, a misconception of a truth. It

makes sense here to speak of transsexuality, because this particularly self-conscious process of producing new genders operates as a microcosm of the whole social production of new subjectivities of which we are speaking. Transsexuality bears a totally negative aspect that relentlessly destroys capitalist subjectivities, yet this negativity is bound within a productive process that continually produces new capitalist subjectivities.

ii

It is revealing that the emphasis of *Sharing is Sexy* is in the act of sharing itself. It is crucial for us to continually bring our analysis back to this point as sharing marks the real limitation of this strategy, but also of an entire set of ideas that believe that sharing is the revolution, is communization, or is the end of the commodity relationship. There is a criticism of this line of thought within theories of communization that articulates a bright line between sharing and communization as the totally negative material undoing of capitalist society and its corresponding forms. From the text “Reflections around *Call*”:

In *Call* the term communization is systematically understood as ‘making common.’ in the previous quotation for instance the ‘acts of communization’ are described as ‘making common such-and-such space, such-and-such machine, such-and-such knowledge.’ That which is to put in common is use, as when it is said that to communize a space is to liberate its use . . . In the same logic, if communization is ‘making common,’ then communism is systematically assimilated with sharing. The theme of sharing is omnipresent in *Call*. . .

The point is not that sharing and communism have nothing to do with another, but we have trouble understanding how they can be synonymous. Sharing already exists in capitalism: social institutions as important as the family function on the basis of sharing, and even in countries where capitalism is the oldest and where familial relation reduces itself to its simplest expression (the parent-child relation), capital, even economically, would not survive without this form of social sharing

We will follow this criticism. Sharing may very well be sexy, but despite Micha Cardenas’ (or Food Not Bombs’ or the lending library’s) insistence to the contrary, it has nothing to do with the undoing class society. Sharing is desirable, and even beneficial, but capitalism will allow for almost an unlimited vision of sharing so long as the structural reproduction of the commodity relation is not challenged.

Let us take this criticism further, by locating the Self alongside the state, the commodity, the family, and gender as a fundamental form of capital and consequentially a terrain in which to do battle, and a limit to be destroyed. From here on, we cannot allow ourselves to be limited to a vision of unlimited sharing between coherent Selves. Such maintenance of the atomized forms, regardless of what is held between, is just a reshaping of misery. Rather, it is necessary to immediately engage in the sabotage of the Self, the strike against subjectivity. What separates me from you, what forms me and constitutes my entirety must be put into question and undone. Beyond the obvious need to destroy my gender, my race, my class position there is the more vital need to struggle against my image, my technologies of the self, my singular debility.

iii

In thinking about what it means to struggle against identities and predicates, we can look to the idea of *the swerve* articulated by the group Theorie Communiste. The swerve, a reference to the way flowing water hits a rock and is necessarily split into two streams, is perhaps the best way to describe how in the course of a struggle, any subject must reach and experience its own subjectivity as a limit, as an objective constraint, and to struggle against it. Through struggle, one must reach the point at which it becomes impossible to both continue to struggle and to maintain one's self.

For the proletariat, to act as a class is currently, on the one hand, to have no other horizon than capital and the categories of its reproduction, and on the other, for the same reason, it is to be in contradiction with, and to put into question, its own reproduction as a class. This conflict, this swerve in the action of the proletariat, is the content of class struggle and what is at stake in it. From daily struggles to revolution, there can only be a rupture. But this rupture is prefigured in the daily course of the class struggle each time that class belonging appears, within these struggles, as an external constraint which is objectified in capital, in the very course of the proletariat's activity as a class . . .

The proletariat's action as a class is characterised by a swerve within itself through practices that externalise their own existence as class practices as a constraint which is objectified in the reproduction of capital. It is no longer possible to do anything more as a worker, while remaining a worker. This confrontation of the proletariat with its own constitution as a class is now

the content of the class struggle and what is at stake in it is the putting into question by the proletariat of its own existence as a class and of all classes.

Currently, the revolution is predicated on the supersession of a constitutive contradiction of the class struggle: for the proletariat, being a class is the obstacle that its struggle as a class must get beyond, abolish. Class unity can no longer be formed on the basis of wage labor and the struggle over immediate demands as a prerequisite for its revolutionary activity. The unity of the proletariat can now only be the activity in which it abolishes itself by abolishing everything that divides it.

While we certainly reject any deterministic or scientific approach to explaining how a revolution ‘must’ happen, the theories of anti-state ‘communizers’ are interesting specifically because they reject the core tenets of Marxism: workers’ identity, the role of the Party, class unity, valorization of the means of production, the dictatorship of the proletariat, formalism, even the workers’ movement itself.

Any practice that aims to elaborate the swerve within the set of struggles that will emerge through the course of the current crisis must begin with a study and understanding of the subject positions being put into question by the crisis itself. The desire is for struggles to reach the point that there is a swerve against the positions that the participants are desperately attempting to cling to. Those occupying buildings, refusing to leave their foreclosed homes, sabotaging their places of work, defying their predicates, disobeying the regime of whiteness, violently rejecting middle class complacency, must all inevitably come up against the brutal truth that each social role marks a real limits to their activity, and that the possibility of supersession of these limits is found within their activity itself.

In the same way, those who champion the collapse of the old subjects while proposing the formation of new ones must be confronted at all costs. To struggle for a new fluid identity must be seen as the bearing the limitation of all struggle for identity, as being merely the management of the decomposition of capital so as to restructure and preserve it. For us there can be no affirmative or positive subject, only an undoing of the material foundations of subjectivity.

iv

Some proposals:

- The widespread practice of identity theft (which effects not only the expropriation of resources from financial institutions but also the unraveling of those institutions’ ability to accurately identify individuals by linking with

any degree of certainty an individual and his official identity — name, SSN, account number);

- The rise of the Anonymous phenomenon that began with petty 4chan hooliganism and went on to “troll society” (launching attacks from the cover of internet anonymity through practices of trolling, slander, leaking of huge quantities of confidential information including personal accounts data, massive online piracy networks for software, music, films, porn, books, etc. — not to mention IRL piracy in Somalia or anywhere — DDOS assaults on various institutions and organizations, especially agents in information control and management, attacks and creation of counter-repressive technology networks in solidarity with North African rebels experiencing severe government repression of internet communication);
- Total refusal of debt (giving the collectors the run-around);
- Flash mob expropriations and attacks;
- Pushing the inherent contradictions of identity politics towards their most extremist conclusions in order to undermine any logical basis that its circulation still retains (and outright attacking its priests);
- Wearing masks and destroying things;
- Squatting, looting, workplace theft and all forms of expropriation that make it possible for us to live in refusal of the apparatuses that produce us as workers or any other subject.

What these practices have in common is twofold: the sabotage of the systems of identification (by which we mean the technological networks by which an individual can be identified by financial, governmental, and social institutions as being his unique self — i.e. his social security number; as possessing certain attributes; and/or as belonging to a group, class, society, etc.), and some level of secrecy or anonymity on the part of the saboteurs. These latter practices (Anonymous, wearing literal or figurative masks, mobbing, secret societies, and so on) demonstrate that individuals necessarily take on, or emerge as, new forms of negative-being while assaulting systems of identification. Negative-being bears no relation to the forms of liberal, reductionist, being-in-common-at-the-lowest-common-denominator type of group mentality that is promoted by slogans about sharing, consensus, direct-democracy, equality, nor to the hip performance-art-style production of new subjectivities, but rather enacts in-itself the negation of the subject (the refusal of obedience, of attribution, and of identification) and thus of the very foundation of liberal society.

If we can return to Micha for just a moment:

This leads to my critique of sabotage as an important political strategy. Sabotage assumes a single world, assumes that the worker spends most of his days in the factory making machines or in the cubicle writing software, and therefore his best chance of resistance is in sabotage. Our strategy with SIS values subversion over sabotage, focusing on reuse of the garbage of capitalism for our own purposes of world building. In our heterotopic world and multi-faceted identities, it makes sense for us to bring home the cameras we use at work for photographing products and use them to produce queer anti-capitalist porn.

Micha is correct in her recognition that the old workers struggles are doomed. Where she is dead wrong is in her conclusions drawn from this. This society is re-constituted in every moment of every day. All the normative gestures carried out by society's members reproduce the social relationship of capital, and the not-so-normative gestures have their niche markets too. All of us — and especially the hip and radical among us — are positioned as workers in a social factory with no outside that is busily churning out new subjectivities and methods of tracking, identifying, categorizing, and managing them, and whose machinery is ripe for sabotage. Subversion can only offer us a surface level restructuring, a re-arrangement of elements that has never been in any way related to the possibility of destroying capitalism. No, we need to recognize that sabotage remains our invariant task. We are speaking here of a sabotage of the technology and social networks that assign, monitor, classify, and designate subjectivity.

To return to the figure of pornography: The dead labor of thousands of boys not unlike myself, extracted from them in the form of the capture of their image and the spectacle of their sexuality is put into service. I am structured, formed, constituted by the unending reproduction of these specters. I, like an innumerable population of bodies, am captured by these images and animated by them. If it would have ever been possible to separate my own desire from the desires of the apparatuses that shape me, it isn't any longer. Through a miserable range of techniques of the self, I am re-created like Adam in the image of the God commodity, the dead labor taken from bodies for the cost of a wage. Through the successful application of these techniques, my self also becomes a marketable commodity. My sex, my hips, my tattoos, my particular skill set is alienated from me as an image, taken, multiplied, deployed through an almost endless network of apparatuses (tablets, computers, iPhones, network cables, servers, wifi, memories, bodies, fantasies) so that my dead labor may infinitely haunt bodies in the way all of ours are haunted.

There is no subversive practice that can undo this haunting of the living by the dead. For the ceaseless reproduction and exploitation of my image, and all

images that are put into the service of the commodity relationship to be halted in even the slightest way would require the total sabotage and destruction of every apparatus that acts toward this reproduction. We cannot orient ourselves towards the subversion of the cyborg network that enchants us as commodities. We have to take it all down.

v

We will end with an anecdote. With the vast depletion of disposable income and the advancement of new technical forms, Borders has been the first major bookstore chain to need to close their doors. Walking through their stores before the massive closures, one found shelves entirely empty of books, genre signs hanging in disarray, security apparatuses unplugged and hoping to be bought. Even if one had wanted to purchase an item, it would have been utterly impossible since no employees could be found — they were all too busy smoking cigarettes and gossiping. In this moment of crisis, of restructuring, of re-creation we cannot be caught in the traps of glorifying either the dying forms, or the emergent new ones. We are not for the book as physical or electronic commodity. We don't care about Borders any more than we will care about whatever capitalist enterprise will replace it. Rather, we need to discover the truth hidden in plain site. One need only to look to the banners hanging above the doors of each closing Borders location to read, in bold-face text:

Final Days

Everything Must Go

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
June 19, 2014



baedan
Identity In Crisis
summer 2012

authors' manuscript, baedan — journal of queer nihilism, issue 1