

A photograph of a tunnel, likely a subway or underground passage, with a bright light at the end, creating a strong perspective effect. The tunnel walls are made of concrete and show signs of wear and discoloration. The light at the end is very bright, almost white, and casts a long, soft glow down the length of the tunnel. The overall atmosphere is one of mystery and depth.

Fire to the Houseprojects!

a manifesto for Berlin

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A Manifesto For Berlin

PREFACE

The following reflections came out of discussions we've had with friends and comrades in Berlin and elsewhere. They are an attempt to combat the prevalent atmosphere of paralysis, hopelessness, and depression within the radical milieu and amongst our friends in general; polemics against the bad weather here in the doldrums. Homer's characters feared nothing more than drowning, believing it to extinguish the fiery substance of the soul. Berlin, it seems, is where the drowned metamorphose into sea creatures and live on in the perpetual night of the deep ocean.

If we call for 'fire' to the Houseprojects, this is both to burn down what stands in their way, as well as to rekindle within them a genuinely combative force of rupture with this world, one inseparable from the elaboration of another idea of living.

Berlin is a city with an enormous amount of radical infrastructure. A smorgasbord of left-wing bars, social centers, house-projects, etc., offer the chance to partake in a left-wing cultural lifestyle. However, this expansive array of material resources seems to be shot through with a paralyzing form of life, one incapable of producing anything more than a fragmented, 'radical' bureaucracy staffed by a gang of self-appointed judges, that in the end breeds complacency rather than conflictuality. While this infrastructure can be an important tool, it seems we don't know how to use the hammer to hit the nail on the head.

In spite of its tremendous potential, struggles in Berlin seem everywhere to get stuck in dead-ends. At the risk of provoking indignation, we seek to identify some obstacles that block the self-overcoming of the present situation, and in this way to open up a genuinely strategic and tactical discussion about how we might begin to move again.

The biggest obstacle to such a discussion is the prevalence of a *moralistic* approach to power and resistance. The latter is most clearly visible in the discussions we've encountered around the refugee struggle, but it is by no means limited to them,

and seems to affect anarchists and other autonomous folks as often as it does mainstream leftists. We will therefore begin by drawing critical attention to a two-pronged gesture that we routinely encounter in Berlin: a *moralization of questions of strategy*, and a *strategization of morality*. Though perhaps well-intentioned (for whatever that's worth), this perspective too often generates only paralysis, isolation, and self-neutralization.

The critique of this political-strategic moralism raises fundamental questions about the relation between anti-racism, privilege-politics, and capitalist crisis. Specifically, it challenges conceptions of anti-racism based either on a pure negation of an outside enemy (antifascism) or else on a self-congratulatory 'recognition' of our lesser-privileged neighbors motivated ultimately by white guilt. In each case, we fail to extract ourselves from a leftist 'posturing' that never asks the question of what it would take to increase our collective power of acting, thinking, and living.

After laying out what we see as the strengths of such a vision, we will respond to some anticipated objections. We have no interest in polemics for their own sake, but we think there are genuine disagreements that cannot and should not be avoided, and questions around which it is important to make clear arguments, and to take up a position. If we push for different concepts of organizing, it is because they ultimately amount to divergent images of what power is, how it functions, and, most importantly, what sort of power we want to build between and around us. For example, we will argue for the importance of building shared power between a fluctuating 'us', rather than engaging in an external dialogue between us & them; of multiplying modes and terrains of conflict into a polyvocal intensification of overlapping hostilities, as opposed to the univocity of a movement 'possessed' by a single sociologically-understood Subject with a unique strategy; and for the elaboration of ethical attachments and friendships won by struggling around a shared perception of the intolerable, rather than the re-entrenchment of polarized identities derived from apparatuses of power.

In all of this, we think nothing can happen until Berliners make a fundamental shift away from a power-*phobic*, ideological, and moral preoccupation with the

suffering of others, and toward a situational, ethical perspective focusing on the *growth* of shared power and attachments to each other, beyond the confines of identity politics.

I

IDENTIFYING OBSTACLES

IDENTITY & GOVERNMENTALITY

Few of us can even remember the liberal welfare state. When we overhear talk of a ‘crisis of democracy’, of rampant inequality ‘corrupting’ a Society presumably based on a generalized inclusion and tolerance of difference, it is hard to feel anything. Our generation has been raised in a world that long ago transformed its *de facto* residue of non-inclusion into a *de jure* program. We have grown accustomed to our friends being paperless, permanently under- or unemployed, increasingly in debt, gassed and shot at by police, and locked up over bullshit. One is only scandalized by that which one does not anticipate. Abandonment is not an aberration. It is not the result of a failed Society, but of the dissolution of the integrative ideal per se, and its replacement by a new model of selective governance. In order to begin to dismantle the conditions that shape our lives, we must first arrive at a clear picture of the program that organizes them.

The technical problem of contemporary capitalist governance is not to gather differences into a whole, but to coordinate two contrasting imperatives, that of connection and disjunction. For some time now, the shabby remnants of the sovereign nation-state apparatus have been adapted and reduced to the subsidiary role of servicing an impersonal and intercontinental movement of value. Having abandoned even the superficial pretense of ensuring an integrated social totality, governance today is little more than a collection of technical means by which to impose and prolong the local conditions for the unimpeded circulation of commodities and information. Modern governance is nothing but the technical and political pre-condition for the economy, to which it consequently belongs: it is the set of routinized violences that are everywhere necessary to clear the ground for value. For a situation of generalized equivalence of commodities to exist, all beings and lives must first be stripped of any other appearance or relation to one another than that formatted by money. It is the political function of governance to clear-cut the situation, to convert the density of lived worlds into the lucid clearing in which value meets value.

“Creating, distributing, & consuming objects, services, or ideas does not belong to the sphere of economy per se; they become such only after being subordinated to a

discipline of economy. In other words, all activities, social relations & their results have to be economized before becoming economic. Economy is an achievement of economization rather than a starting point or a pre-existing reality that can be simply revealed & acted upon.”¹

This formatting of worlds into value has two valences, one connective, the other disjunctive.

On the one hand, urban zones previously occupied by the poor are torn down and rebuilt to house the new model Humanity: the “local neighborhood” is reinvented as a space for the cultivation and concentration of human aptitudes and skills into open-air laboratories of ‘creative’ human capital. The lives inserted into these local-topias outfitted exclusively for Value production are re-humanized in accordance with the values of an entrepreneurial horizontalism: a little anti-authoritarianism here (‘who needs a boss? I work for myself’), an ‘eco-friendly’ condo-village, a boutique neighborhood *fromagerie* staffed by autistic hipsters, sourced from bio-farms with no more history than their urban counterparts.

Between each of these nodes of creative capital, a maximum of flow must be established. An international network of high-speed trains, fiber optic cables, and supply chains form a cartography of valorized life, a life woven together by the winding and cranking of value, with free Wi-Fi streaming from one end of the network to the other, so that one may seamlessly and continuously self-promote, while warding off the vapidity of one’s own distance to oneself.

On the other hand, beyond this connective network of valorized flows and nodes lie disjunctive zones of restricted mobility and social abjection. A gradient of violence ranging from low-level harassment to systematic annihilation serve to hem in the lives of the disposable surplus populations which capital either cannot or cares not to employ.

1. Koray Çalıřkan and Michel Callon, “Economization, part 1: shifting attention from the economy towards processes of economization”.

Our program must be the inverse of this governmental relationship: to overcome social disjunction through the paralysis of the governmental apparatuses that configure it. In this respect, our abandonment constitutes a mixed blessing: that this world has nothing to offer us releases us from any loyalty to it. However, to adapt to this new horizon requires we not fall into old habits. We must attempt to understand how the social hostilities that once configured the liberal Society are being recalibrated and modulated by this new paradigm of governance. If governance through selective abandonment tends toward the dispossession of an ever-larger section of the population, if the model of an integrative whole no longer appears feasible to anyone, how are the racisms, gender violences, proletarianizations and illegalizations of the past being transformed by this new context? What new opportunities does it provide for building conflictual relationships across and beneath identities?

While this opens up a set of questions that have no pre-established answer, we are convinced that our priority must be to avoid re-entrenching precisely those holds of power within us that are everywhere being shaken loose by this new order. In this respect, as Deleuze and Guattari noted already in the early 70's, Capital's deterritorializing vector has both a schizo and a reactive valence. What it releases within us on the one hand, it attempts to re-capture with the other. Between the two dynamics (de/re-territorialization), there is a window of opportunity, a chance to escape from ourselves without being captured yet again in neo-archaisms, a chance to finally break free. Identity is less a site of potential empowerment than an effect of apparatuses of power by which we are captured.

This insight has practical consequences. If we seek our point of contact on the basis of the generated effect of this apparatuses (our lives in their separation: White, Black, refugee, German, etc.), we too often end up reproducing these qualities in their mutual and reciprocal exclusion. We enact a play of recognition between the givens of our situation, a sympathy with the suffering of others, a symbolic deference to those worse off. If we continue to take these givens as fixed forms, seeking nothing more ambitious than a coalition or *Bündnis* between the various effects of governance, our attempts to overcome the distance between us only condemn us in advance to reproducing it.

Where else can we start from? The honesty of identity politics lies in its recognition of the entirely *fictional* and ascriptive nature of the identities thrust upon us. That is, because they emerge from dynamics of domination and subordination that, precisely because they are contingent and historical, they can be unsettled and overthrown. Its mistake, however, is to respond to this history with nothing deeper than a play of recognition aimed at empowering these constituted forms in their difference. By asking those whose identities are structurally ‘privileged’ to recognize the deeper oppression of those around them, they ask the privileged to sidestep the hostilities that transect their lives as well. In the end, what is missed is not only the fact that these Western binaries mutilate us all in incapacitating ways, but also all the ways we flee, escape, and struggle against these forms of capture from within them. By its constant insistence on vigilant recognition of identities, the ‘undercommons’ beneath these apparatuses of capture are insistently ignored.

Rather than sidestepping our own experience, we should enter into conflict around the conditions of our own lives, not by accepting our identities (‘dominant’ or not) as a stable condition, but rather by fighting around the poverty and paltriness of the vision of happiness they offer to us. It is only from this latter basis, along the edge opened up by the space of hostility toward ourselves and the conditions that produce our own lives, there exists a space of contact with others fighting for their own lives. Yet in order for us to develop a sensitivity to this space of contact, it is first necessary to throw off the crushing weight of moralism that weighs like a nightmare on this town.

AGAINST MORALISM

“Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.” –Assata Shakur

In July of 2014 the Kreuzberg district of Berlin underwent a state of siege. Thousands of police descended on the region immediately surrounding the Ohlauerstraße school, which had been squatted by refugees for over a year, with the immediate aim of carrying out a forced eviction of the refugees and their supporters.

For over a week, this region of Kreuzberg became a site of continual conflict, with police cordons carving up large parts of the neighborhood, cutting off access to stores, apartment buildings, bridges, and thoroughfares. The cordons closest to the school were transformed into round-the-clock protests, sit-ins, noise demos, while marches continually snaked through the streets surrounding the cordons. While the majority of those living in the school evacuated when police first arrived, a couple dozen refugees and supporters barricaded themselves into the top floors of the building, threatening to burn it down and jump off the roof if police attempted to enter. A standoff ensued which lasted eight days.

During this time, we encountered many folks who were disgusted with having their lives enclosed by riot police, who had no shortage of reasons to resent this vulgar display of force, who had countless experiences of violence and abjection at the hands of police and the State. Hundreds of radicals, anarchists, and otherwise dispossessed lives surrounded the police cordons and filled the streets with anger. We found ourselves amongst crowds of people who hate the police, who hate being poor, hate having to scramble for increasingly overpriced housing, who are sick of the forced choice to either internalize the mutilated self-relation of the entrepreneur or else to beg the Jobcenter for welfare and shitty temp jobs.

Without wanting to overemphasize a single example, our starting point for this discussion is to ask whether there is something about the culture of 'radicalism' in Berlin that makes it act in such a way that, confronted with an occupying army sieging its own neighborhoods, its otherwise strong potential for antagonism allows itself to be routed and disarmed.

When discussing the possibility of taking autonomous action within this intensified situation with other radicals and anarchists in Berlin, we repeatedly encountered a set of assumptions about anti-racism that are so oft-repeated that they verge on a confession of faith. When we ask people in Berlin what possible engagement non-Black, non-refugee-status radicals can have in such moments, and in the dismantling of structural racism more broadly, we are told:

"It's not my movement"; "Refugees face greater risks"; "It's presumptuous for me to show up and dictate the terms of their struggle"; "Conflictual actions can put refugees in danger"; "My suffering is comparatively less, hence I have no basis from which to struggle over my own life (i.e. I should be grateful for what I have, I'm not eligible for revolution)"; "Any initiative we might make in the space of someone else's struggle is morally irresponsible."

We hear in these remarks a genuine concern for the suffering of others around them. We don't want to disparage or dismiss this concern, since we think it can motivate people to enter into conflict with the Metropolis. Nor do we wish to suggest that individual forms of solidarity with refugees, such as accompanying folks to the *Ausländerbehörde*, throwing soli-parties to raise money, or arranging anti-racist marriages, are pointless. To survive in circumstances of institutional abandonment and social non-reproduction is not nothing, and demands tremendous psychic energy. Without the conspiratorial collaboration between documented and undocumented people, circumstances would certainly become more dire. Still, these efforts do not add up to a strategy to transform the circumstances that make them necessary in the first place. For this a reflection on strategy is needed that is not based on moralism nor reduced to individualized forms of radical social work. And we need a reflection on the contradictions that shape this city that is not based solely or primarily on self-effacement or guilt.

Moralism is about recognizing the symbolic humanity of the Other, with the aim of transforming their suffering into a cause for legitimate indignation. Well-intentioned as this may be, this effort is laden with insidious metaphysical and juridical baggage.

It is perhaps worth recalling that to be 'deserving of citizenship' has always been the definitive mark of belonging to the *polis* or the political community of power in the West, the prerequisite of which was the metaphysical possession of distinctly 'human' attributes (reason, moral sense, etc.). Insofar as contemporary moralism remains continues to strive for inclusion in the realm of 'properly political' subjectivity, seeking only to widen its parameters rather than to challenge or escape them, it fails to extricate itself from an Occidental anthropology in which social

life (*bios*) assumes significance only by distinguishing itself from its organic and inorganic precursors (*zoē*). That this same bio-political matrix has always served to legitimate the dehumanization slavery, genocide, and colonialism doesn't seem to bother anyone, so long as one has secured inclusion for oneself.

In the same way--and irrespective of whatever 'anti-State' rhetoric it cloaks itself in--moralism remains fundamentally invested in the Western framework of law and rights. After all, it is essentially a technique for ascribing normative legitimacy to human life by rallying around universal values of freedom and dignity. Rather than dismantling the effects of regulation and incapacitation that stem from the legal form's penetration into all aspects of our lives, it complains that the legal framework of recognition and inclusion is *insufficiently universal*. Instead of critiquing the notion of a neutral and universal moral community as a hegemonic phantasm of the State, it monumentalizes itself in the pursuit of an ever-wider entry into its symbolic pantheon. Those who remain permanently shut out of this order, their bodies having long-since been *a priori* criminalized (i.e. they need not first transgress the law in order to find themselves on the wrong side of it), are once again symbolically thrown under the bus.

At a practical level, the integrative aim of moral politics is to sway the conscience either of the oppressor or of the general public, who would then feel moved to take up the cause of oppressed. We see this, for example, in the multitude of symbolic protests whose only goal is to capture media attention as a means by which to appeal to the forces of oppression. However, as Stokey Carmichael noted half a century ago,

“Dr. King’s policy was that nonviolence would achieve the gains for black people in the United States. His major assumption was that if you are nonviolent, if you suffer, your opponent will see your suffering and will be moved to change his heart. That’s very good. He only made one fallacious assumption: In order for nonviolence to work, your opponent must have a conscience. The United States has none.”

An inverse interpellation then also plays out in the other direction:

“The way the oppressor tries to stop the oppressed from using violence as a means to attain liberation is to raise ethical or moral questions about violence. I want to state emphatically here that violence in any society is neither moral nor is it ethical. It is neither right nor is it wrong. It is just simply a question of who has the power to legalize violence.”

In Berlin, questions about strategy tend all too often to be either skirted or utterly eclipsed by moral questions. What is permitted is to endlessly ruminate about someone else’s suffering, while renouncing all appeal to a concrete and realistic strategy to erase it (or our own suffering). This results in a narrowing of present hostilities, by claiming that only the most oppressed count, that the most oppressed should be leading the struggle, that they should ‘own’ the struggle. According to this schema, those that are not refugees are not eligible for revolutionary activity. This privatizes & particularizes the manifold of conflicts enveloped in our lived situations. Moreover, this line of argumentation re-entrenches the same logic we are trying to eliminate: the identities ascribed to us by apparatuses of power are solidified through a proprietary logic of struggle modeled on relations of ownership.

Once it is absolutized, this moralism is then presented as a strategy unto itself. It is important to note that ‘radical moralism’ is neither reformist nor revolutionary in itself. Its practical axiom is rather to suspend its own life, to place itself in parenthesis. We are expected to remove ourselves from any actively contributing role, and simply support whatever outcome the most oppressed ‘community’ determines for itself.

‘REFUGEES’, ‘SUPPORTERS’, & OTHER MYTHICAL COMMUNITIES

However, that there exists a ‘refugee community’ is in reality a myth, just as it is for Black people, queer people, or other such marginalized social categories. In general, the notion that a common experience of structural oppression (such as being denied residence papers) is sufficient to give rise to anything resembling a political community is a conceit all too often uncritically taken for granted, in spite of its

obvious falsehood. Put otherwise, a common dispossession does not entail that this dispossession bears within it a common project, a vision of emancipation, or (at an ethical level) a shared perception of the situation. *Identity is not solidarity.*

This unfortunate truth became eminently clear during the eviction of the squatted tent-city at Oranienplatz ('O-platz'). The ethical conflict between the refugees squatting O-platz, so often elided by their activist supporters, was all the same clearly perceived by the State. The latter, having no illusions of a homogeneous movement and long-versed in such colonial counter-insurgency techniques, were quick to pick up on the fissures between the occupiers, and used them to its advantage: having identified those who were willing to barter away their base of operations for nothing more than a promise of a 'judicial review of their cases' and a short stay in a hotel, they then convinced the latter to wreck the camp on their behalf, wielding knives at the other dissenting residents of the platz while the police stood back and watched.

In spite of its mythical falsehood, radical moralism cannot do without such a mythical community of suffering. For were it to recognize the ethical and political differences amongst those who suffer a common abjection, it would be compelled to take sides among them, and thereby to sully the purity of its own self-negation. This is precisely what it seeks at all cost to avoid: to recognize that the civil war between concepts of life cuts as deeply *within* peoples and identities as *between* them.

Instead, radical moralism internalizes its own structural identity and consolidates itself, producing the 'supporter' role as the mythical inverse of the refugee community, a sub-milieu within the wider 'anti-oppressive community'. Reducing all bodies to a binary couple of privileged / non-privileged, it envisions the empowerment of the one as being contingent on the inactivity or self-renunciation of the other. The best thing that those bodies structurally marked by 'dominant identities' can do for the 'less-privileged' is to play a protective, supportive role, while downplaying if not erasing their own ethical attachments. As some friends recently wrote,

“Communities of color’ have become in contemporary liberal anti-oppression discourse akin to endangered species in need of management by sympathetic whites or ‘community representatives’ assigned to contain political conflict at all costs.”²

THE CULTURAL RELATIVISM OF INTER-MYTHICAL GLOSSOLALIA

Between the mythologized ‘refugee community’ and the reciprocally mythologized ‘anti-oppression support community’, a strange sort of inter-mythological encounter emerges. When we relate to ourselves and to others exclusively as a personification of an illusory ‘group’ to which we belong by default, as if our bodies expressed nothing other than their identitarian form apart from any ethical content, we abandon in advance any attempt to develop a common language or shared perception of the situation. We are told that anti-oppression means to ‘center’ those with less privilege; in practice, it leads to a form of what left-communist guru Gilles Dauvé referred to recently as *cultural relativism* between mythologized communities. In these strange non-communicative encounters, people don’t listen to what is said, they look only at *who* is speaking. In this case, refugees fighting for social integration via dialogue with politicians must be ‘heard’ (though not listened to), while everyone else is peremptorily silenced, reduced to the ancillary role of a supportive yet fundamentally passive audience.

These monological encounters are entirely distinct from a sober discussion. For example, how many are prepared to openly discuss the material and political *impossibility* of the demands that the refugee movement has based itself upon? We don’t have any problem with impossible demands, as they can open up new evaluations of the intolerable, increase antagonism, and make visible another vision of life presently irreconcilable with the existing reality. But we have an issue when we keep running into people who speak as if they *actually believe* in these demands, as

2. Croatoan Collective, “Who is Oakland? Anti-oppression Activism, the Politics of Safety, and State Co-optation”. Accessible here: <https://libcom.org/library/who-oakland-anti-oppression-activism-politics-safety-state-co-optation>

if they could be achieved with anything less than a total wrecking of the German State (though we wouldn't stop there).

However, what is lost is not only a sober discussion about the practical means to achieve the stated ends in question (e.g. getting papers), but any honest debate over these ends themselves, and the often petty-bourgeois political vision of inclusion and citizenly participation they harbor within them ('we are workers, not criminals', etc.). Not only are these demands impossible, they may not even be desirable.

If radical moralism loses sight of the ethical element, of the war between ideas of living, it is because the consolidation of mythical communities cannot avoid falling into to the classic structuralist trap, i.e. the failure to see how practical agency outstrips and leaks beneath and between structurally fixed subjective positions. Correspondence between these two mythical communities is only possible via recourse to another myth: hegemonic politics.

AFFECTIVE POPULISM

While it narrows the antagonism within the struggle, focusing only on those 'most oppressed', moralism's tactical emphasis on symbolic recognition leads it at the same time to an excessive widening of the struggle. Appeals are made to those who otherwise have no interest at all in those who are suffering. Moral suasion is evangelical in nature: its strategy is one of conversion, of winning over public sentiment. Moralism thus inevitably degenerates into what we could call an 'affective populism': rather than asserting and enforcing its own ethical evaluation of what is acceptable and endurable, it appeals to the moral sentiments of an imagined 'public', the vast majority of whom have never and will never experience the characteristic suffering of a refugee. This obsession with publicity and spectacular victimization, which found its most extreme expression in the hashtag-obsessed US Occupy movement, ultimately leads such struggles to be captured by their own image of themselves as 'innocent':

“Police repression [w]as the motor of Occupy’s growth, provoking outrage and bringing massive numbers into the street. But at the same time, such responses usually depend on a notion of infringed rights, and implicitly a distinction between good (peaceful) and bad (violent) protesters. Therefore, cynically or not, they end up as mechanisms of self-policing, since people believe that the movement’s growth is predicated on the images of victimization and that they need to play for the cameras accordingly. The goal of getting favorable press – via an entirely hostile news industry – thus becomes an apparatus of self-regulation. [...] Everyone remains spellbound by a collectively hallucinated “public opinion,” in the light of whose stern gaze they are willing to self-police. This other-directedness is one of the problems with the ideology of struggle on the plane of images.”³

By abandoning the effort to use our suffering as a starting point for articulating a shared evaluation of the intolerable, and an idea of happiness that responds to this with a different idea of living and struggling in common, we lose the ethical dimension altogether. We lose sight of the real content of the war before we’ve even begun fighting.

The inner truth of moralism is the concern for human suffering. We in no way wish to erase this. However, to the extent that this concern remains stuck in an ethics of pity and a politics of symbolic legitimation, it will only circulate depression and lead struggles to pre-established defeat. Moralism is suffering made contagious. What else is there?

For starters, we need a sober conversation about what it would take to dismantle the conditions that produce this suffering in the first place. Yet we have the impression that the starting point for such a conversation needs to be something other than empathy with someone else, valuable as this is. Rather, it needs to be in a lived hostility against institutions that overlap us, yet of which we likely have radically different experiences.

How can we reorient our perception of the situation around a strategic axis? To begin with, we need to begin asking different questions, questions that require us

3. Jasper Bernes, “Square and Circle: The Logic of Occupy”, *The New Inquiry*, Sept 12, 2012. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/square-and-circle-the-logic-of-occupy/>

to become sensitive to situational dynamics in new ways. In place of the moralistic phobia of power and its paranoiac policing of 'dominant behaviors', which reinforces the identity of the victim rather than escaping it, we must learn how to see the ways in which struggles resonate, communicate, and circulate traces and embers of shared power between them *in spite of their separation*, and in ways that cannot be foretold in advance. In what remains, we will outline three shifts we think it crucial to adopt. We will then close with two practical proposals we see as following from them.

II

ELABORATING A STRATEGIC PERCEPTION

OUR HISTORICAL EPOCH

It is the peculiarity of our present historical moment that its most explosive struggles tend to surface outside of any conventional political ideological coordinates or contradictions. We are seeing conflicts around apparently minor increases in public transit fare (Brazil), hikes in student tuition (Quebec and London), infrastructural projects such as the dams and airports (France), and the renovation of public parks (Turkey) explode into massive riots, blockades and occupations lasting weeks and months, drawing broad cross-sections of the population into conflict with the state and the police. As they expand, these struggles tend to rapidly outstrip their initial coordinates, mutating into situations marked by complex and overlapping antagonisms. Not only is it increasingly difficult to map these struggles back to the structural identities of the specific groups of people directly touched by the initial conflict, but it is increasingly less relevant *who we were* at all prior to these situations. What matters, once we are in them, is the construction of a collective capacity and a language that is responsive to the lines of force that traverse the situation. It is not the subject I was prior to the situation, but the capacity we elaborate in struggling alongside each other that must be defended against those who seek to re-impose order. In this respect, the feature that is most decisive in struggles today lies in their organization around ethical lines of polarization rather than paradigmatic forms of suffering. [We reserve here an exception for those struggles centering on anti-Black police violence, where it is the sudden visibility of the ontological dispossession of Blackness as a killable object that serves as the occasion for a wider collective hostility against police]. Contemporary revolts have at their core not a coherent sociological subject or contradiction, but a collective phenomenon of *seeing the intolerable*:

“What counts amounted to a visionary phenomenon, as if a society suddenly perceived what was intolerable in itself and also saw the possibility of change. It is a collective phenomenon in the form of: ‘Give me the possible, or else I’ll suffocate.’ The possible does not pre-exist, it is created by the event. It is a matter of life. The event creates a new existence, it produces a new subjectivity (new relations with the body, with time, sexuality, the immediate surroundings, with culture, work).”⁴

4. Deleuze and Guattari, “May 68 Did Not Take Place”

It is this visionary character that possesses the potential to open up new lines of hostility toward aspects of our lives previously regarded as unassailable or immutable, allowing these struggles to expand and resonate across different places and contexts. These collective perceptions of the intolerable allow us to find our friends, to recognize our enemies, in a context in which friendship is inseparable from an activity simultaneously of flight and invention, in which we struggle to bury an undesirable world while nourishing the new dimension of ourselves that we previously lacked: our feeling of collective power.

At the same time as struggles tend to organize themselves around ethical hostilities largely detached from specific identities, the gestures they elaborate are circulating further and faster across the planet than ever before. It is as if each struggle advanced a diffuse and decentralized conversation around effective and meaningful tactics, being each time picked up and carried elsewhere. We've seen certain tactics quickly reach their limits when confined within the limits of one struggle, and then suddenly crop up elsewhere, in altered scenery, as if along a volcanic line of subterranean communication.

For example, the tactic of occupying public space without making demands—which gained widespread appeal during the Occupy Movement in the fall of 2011, spreading to over 300 cities in a matter of weeks—was first experimented with in 2009 by small pockets of the student movement in California and New York. In the spring and fall of 2009, student radicals on both coasts barricaded themselves into buildings under the banner, “Occupy Everything; Demand Nothing”. While their movement failed to spill over the confines of the university, remaining ‘a reading room in a prison’, the tactic of the non-dialogical takeover that it developed would spread like wildfire two years later. At the same time, other tactics used in these same student struggles would remain dormant for the time being: the freeway blockades attempted in Oakland during the student strike of 2009 continued to be seen as a derisory and adventurist tactic during the Occupy movement, even among comrades, only to reappear in full force across the country during the post-Ferguson anti-police struggles of 2014.

Tactics are like roots or bridges a struggle sends out. Their capacity to be stripped from their context and gain traction elsewhere is what confers on each particular event or eruption an untapped potential.

In short, our historical moment is marked by a two-fold deterritorialization of identity. Internally, they are organized around ethical perceptions that polarize situations rather than along conventional sociological lines; externally, what resonates and circulates is at a gestural rather than positional level (as opposed, for example, to the anti-imperialist movement of the late 60's and early 70's).

ETHICS IS SITUATIONAL

We are entering a period in which identity politics no longer responds in a fundamental way to the antagonisms we are seeing. Our task, if we are to rise to the level of the epoch, must be to adjust ourselves accordingly, to learn how to see the undercommons of our situational attachments rather than our structural positionality as our entry way into the present moment.

The strategic question is always situational, even when this situation is regional or trans-contextual. It amounts to investing in those relationships marked by a shared evaluation of the situation, whose growth and intensification already constitute a victory in themselves.

This applies first of all amongst our existing friends, but is perhaps even more important when these existing affinities intersect across identitarian lines within a situation of collective hostility, as was created in a *de facto* way by the Ohlauer siege. This struggle met its limits in the proprietary understandings of the hostility, which effaced all the other initiatives and conflicts people felt toward the police and the local Green party politicians. How else might it have played out?

We (the authors of this piece) may not have experienced racial profiling by the police, but we have been beaten, gassed, locked up, and surveilled by them, and

have our own reasons to desire their abolition. The life we desire to live with the friends we are attached to is made impossible by the existence of police. It is from this *lived* hostility towards police that we can find a basis for an encounter with another person struggling against them in their own way. Not as a ‘common project’ or horizon of freedom (for me to get free may very well require less than for you to do so) but rather in a *convergent hostility* toward a common apparatus, the abolition of which would start to erode the conditions that structure our difference, the conditions which presently make efforts at empathic recognition between us structurally dishonest. In other words, it is out of my desire to attack the conditions of my own suffering, to self-abolish, that we can meet up with others pursuing the consequences of their own evaluation of the intolerable. In the words of Fred Moten,

“The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?”⁵

Rather than deferring our hopes to the indeterminate future of the ‘revolution’, we should begin from the existing situations in which we are already immersed. We must seek out those forms of action or refusal that depose the law & state power in the here and now. The strategic question must not be, ‘who has power made us into’, ‘what is my social position vis-à-vis others?’, but rather, having acknowledged these factual givens of our lives, ‘what circulates between us?’ ‘What lines of hostility are already present within this situation?’ ‘Who are my friends, who are our enemies?’

Beginning from the situation means that these questions can only be answered immanently. Far too much emphasis is placed these days on ideological affinity, which locates our commonalities in abstractions we *bring to the* situation. Instead of seeking out connections with others based solely on ideological agreements or a vague commitment to ideals such as ‘anti-oppression’, ‘anti-racism’, ‘anti-hierar-

5. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Minor Compositions, 2013, 140-141.

chy', our basis needs to be contextual: with whom do we have a shared perception of the situation? Who sees the same tensions *within the phenomena* before us? Affinity unfolds a shared seeing that becomes a basis for collective intervention, or it is worthless.

How, by taking sides within the real situation we find ourselves in, by acting on the basis of the conflicts that structure our lives as they exist here and now, can we find our friends, and, by elaborating a life together, discover what increases our collective power of acting and of thinking, such that we develop a shared sensitivity to what is intolerable right here around us? When we speak of weaponizing our idea of happiness we don't mean the psychological state of pleasure, but rather a feeling of power that is inherently collective and partisan, that comes from facing the world and entering into conflict *together*. For anyone who has experienced such a feeling of collective capacity, the isolation of individual existence can only signify impotence.

GESTURE AND DEMAND

Revisiting the Ohlauerstrasse Siege

Two events have occurred in the past year which implicate questions of racial domination and hegemonic politics: the siege of Kreuzberg during the Ohlauerstrasse eviction in June of 2014, and the riots around the opening of the ECB building in Frankfurt in April of 2015. While these may appear at first to be entirely distinct struggles, we would suggest that the inability to see their inner connection constitutes a fundamental strategic blind spot, one symptomatic of the sorts of politics we seek to overcome.

What would it mean to extract our understanding of the Ohlauer siege from a moralistic register, and to re-read it through a strategic lens? Two questions arise immediately. First, whereas the ethical line ran between the police and the Greens/CDU on the one hand and the mass of pissed off people on the other, this line was brutally overcoded through the aggressive insistence by privilege politician supporters on the proprietary nature of the refugee struggle, who enforced

the mythological dyad, 'supporters/refugees'. This not only had the effect of narrowing the groups of people who felt 'authorized' or 'eligible' to act in response to their own perception of the disgusting spectacle that confronted them, but also prevented any open discussion of the sorts of tactics that might actually succeed in dismantling it.

This was doubly unfortunate, given this situation was one of the rather unique moments in which the movement actually articulated a short-term demand that was conceivably winnable: to maintain control over the Ohlauer school, and to use it as an autonomous refugee center. Given such a desire, what was needed was not a hegemonic mass of supporters capable of 'drawing media attention' to the importance of those struggling inside the building, but rather a strategic discussion around the lines of force arrayed in front of us: what would it take to put the government in a position where giving up control of this building felt easy? How might we, acting on our own perception of the ethical line, and our own hostility to police and politicians, have worked out a collective ability to paralyze the normal functioning of the Metropole, to tip the situation into *uncontrollability*, such that the question on the mind of the state is not "how can we avoid giving them this school back?", but "how can we *restore order* in Berlin?" It is a question not just taking initiative ourselves, but actually *taking the initiative* away from the police: not letting the entire time and space, rhythm and terrain of the conflict, be determined by the enemy. In this respect, we saw it as coherent and useful when, during the siege of Ohlauer, folks went to Friedrichshain and engaged in a rowdy march, clashing with police. While this had all the aspects of a Berlin ritual anarchist smash-and-dash, it at least made the step of thinking territorially, by opening up a new site of conflict elsewhere, mixing tactics otherwise not in use (for the most part) in Kreuzberg, and engaging people who were not themselves refugees but felt inspired by the actions refugees were taking, and thus took independent action with the aim of weakening the cops' sense of control over the situation.

At the same time, there is a question of our inroads not only with folks in the streets, but also with those barricaded inside the building. While we don't experience a common dispossession with these folks, nor do we share the hope that a dialogue with politicians will ever solve this, we know we were not alone in feeling

inspired by the militancy of the means they employed, their willingness to use their bodies to enforce their own survival. The gestures they undertook resonated with us far beyond the discourse that surrounded them (which positioned itself in regrettable ways against ‘criminals’). While their discourse appealed to the justice of legality, their tactics made clear that what was at stake wasn’t the legality of the school, but life itself: that *life without control over this space is unlivable*. What their gestures said to us was, ‘revolt or death’.

Rather than hitching ourselves onto the political demand at hand and playing a support role, we should take seriously the way in which these gestures resonated with our own experiences and desires. In their capacity to resonate across diverse lives and experiences, these gestures outstrip the identities of those who carried them out. The poverty of the *Linksradikaler* lay in failing to see the insurrectionary content of these acts as an invitation to respond in due fashion. For, taken in themselves, they were acts of pure, unmediated violence, “maroon abolitionism”, to borrow Alexander G. Weheliye’s term. They aimed to depose the law’s plan to evict the school in the here and now. Under the conditions of extreme captivity that subsume undocumented lives in Germany, what constitutes an insurrectionary gesture may be more subtle than a riot. But nothing stops us from responding with one.

There needs to be a way of corresponding with situations like the Ohlauer school siege that are mediated neither by representational politics nor by cultural relativism. When the occupiers barricaded themselves on the roof, there were two possible ways for people not inside of the school to correspond with them: one based on the demands the occupiers issued, the other based on the tactics they used. We see a yawning gulf between the two. On the one hand, the refugees expressed a set of demands aimed largely at politicians (keep the school); on the other hand, the tactics they used were militant as fuck. Rather than qualifying their actions (‘*because they are black* what they did was militant as fuck’), we read these actions affectively, as if they declared that ‘nothing presently imaginable is sufficient’. In this we are able to discover a point of contact with our idea of life, the point at which both feel themselves to be incompatible with the existent order.

Frankfurt, the ECB, and Infrastructural War

Identity and privilege politics are not only strategically ineffective, they also present a specious view of what ‘race’ is. Those who believe racism is a mere accumulation of individual intentions by unreflective persons suggest that racism could be abolished if we just raised enough consciousness among those in structurally higher positions of power. Racism becomes theorized as a problem of individual choice, as failed consumerism rather than institutionally administered violence. Such people imagine that deforestation could be stopped by purchasing e-books, that factory farming could be stopped by buying the right kind of milk at the supermarket. The wide menu of lifestyles that different groups of people consume within capitalism can only be understood as the management of their relative levels of hierarchy within capitalism. The real object of these activist trends is not a strategic destruction of racializing institutions, but rather to give people the opportunity to group into a culture of ‘critical whites’, a specialized cadre of ethical bureaucrats. In the end, reducing our response to racial abjection to a matter of lifestyle produces nothing but a disempowering leftist bureaucracy that attenuates hostility rather than expanding it into a subversive force.

And yet, fights against racism do have a logical target – economic governance. That is to say, the aggregate of connective and disjunctive governmental techniques that concentrate value into nodes of social reproduction while consigning the ‘useless’ to derelict spaces and racialized social positions of institutional abandonment. Fascist ideology doesn’t come from the beliefs of fearful poor people, it comes from the state, from institutions like the ECB in Frankfurt– icons of austerity, scarcity, & limited resources which must be distributed out by a state to a limited number of people. By intimidating people with poverty, proclaiming an economic crisis draws society even closer to ideals of utilitarianism, competition and markets for harsher economization. Their proposed solution is a personification of social contradictions: they tell us that the Jews are manipulating the economy to their own benefit, that the Mexicans are taking all the jobs, that the lazy Greeks take island vacations with German bailout funds, and that the Muslims are endangering the freedom of the market. Poverty and suffering are not based on real shortages of food, housing and other wealth. It is the economy

which uses state power to control the distribution of material resources & human activities. This order is guarded by a decision that some bodies can prosper, some will be allowed to enjoy expensive, specialized biological food, while others will be constantly thrown into prisons, warehoused in slums, left to capsiz in the Mediterranean, or exterminated by incessant war.

The demonstrations around the ECB opening in Frankfurt this spring presented (at least) two different strategic views of fights against austerity.

On the one hand, there were all the citizens that went out into the street to protest financial capitalism. These people's non-strategy was to show up and stand peacefully in the street so as to be a part of a political struggle, a *Bündnis* that always takes the form of a fatberg that might hope for the end of austerity, without realizing the impossibility of this demand. Their only other role was to wax indignant when the 'black bloc rioters' got too close to them.

On the other hand, there were antagonists that took the opportunity to wage war on the metropolis as an congelation of apparatuses: surveillance, policing, banks, etc. Not to install a new software, but to crash the computer. These attacks were not statements against financial capitalism, but enunciated a language of their own, an ungovernable force that doesn't disappear at end of the demo, but which carried the fire started that day back to their local situations, to build and expand upon. In order to convey a message one must speak the same language. We refuse this trap. As long as we speak their language & talk about rights, demands, violence or non-violence, economic policy, we remain stuck in discursive frameworks that doom us to failure, fools in a game whose rules are structured to keep us waiting before the gates of the Law, while storming the palace is never even thought of as a possibility.

For those who realize even this much, the mistake is to respond by laying claims to state power, by building a *Bündnis* strong enough to implement a more 'egalitarian economy'. This is the dream of a *revolutionary job* that plagues this town: social work, charity, 'if only we could get the right people in power', etc.

The point, however, is not to repair but to destroy economy, to build ungovernable material forces, to the point that our needs correspond less and less to economic thinking at all. To blockade it not in order to conquer it, but to turn our backs on it. It is only out of our positive indifference to it that the idea of economy can be truly thrown into crisis: misery is economic, happiness is not.

PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

Amoral Assemblies

The petty terror of identity and privilege politics have ground this town into paralysis. While it is hard to see how such discussions have produced any significant fights or revolts in our epoch, it would be easy for us to list-off countless conversations that have been sabotaged and derailed by privilege politicians (cf. the Open Assembly for Self-Organization initiative at Mehringhof last year, among numerous others)⁶. A shared strategic perception can only be developed if we give ourselves space and time to hash things out. In this respect, we see a desperate need for an honest conversation. To this end, we propose a series of amoral assemblies. These assemblies must be aimed at producing a strategic understanding of the situation, rather than a moralist understanding of how identities work. Without ignoring how our identities have informed our experience, we wish to open a space in which a situational and ethical emphasis can hold sway, in which we relate to each other as fellow antagonists rather than incarnations of the governmental apparatuses that brought us here. We don't want another plenum. We want a space in which we can find friends with whom to attach ourselves, a space to give voice to our visions of the intolerable, and work out a plan to attack the conditions that make our happiness impossible. A callout for such assemblies is forthcoming.

6. Cf. "Some Remarks on the Need for Open Assemblies in Berlin". Accessible at ill-will-editions.tumblr.com

Seizing Material Spaces Outside of Radical Milieus

We need to open up spaces of non-ideological and non-identitarian encounter, material spaces in which convergent hostilities can overlap without having to pass through the micro-bureaucratic cultural normalization of radical milieu lifestyles. Such spaces must be inviting, conflictual, and open-ended in form and function, allowing a genuine *encounter* within our neighborhoods and the spaces we traverse every day. Tearing down fences, building parks in empty lots, seizing abandoned buildings and using them for *actually inviting* food distribution (yes, that means non-vegan), are only a few of the possible ways to build lived dependencies and attachments with the people around us. We have taken one such space, and we will take more in the time to come.

CONCLUSION

Just because there's no 'economic crisis' in Germany doesn't mean we can't fight. We need to start seeing the war that is playing out on the terrain of our own lives. Cheap food, Hartz IV and legalized squats belong to a menu of counter-insurrectionary tactics whose ultimate effects are pacification and the attenuation of hostilities. Comfort is capture.

Berlin, June 2015

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