DISPATCHES FROM THE RUINS:
DOCUMENTS & ANALYSES FROM UNIVERSITY STRUGGLES, EXPERIMENTS IN SELF-EDUCATION
Dispatches from the Ruins: Documents & Analyses from University Struggles, Experiments in Self-Education

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Brian Holmes, Research and Destroy, and Dead Labor, “Communiqué from an Absent Future—Further discussion,” available at: http://www.revolutionbythebook.akpress.org/communique-from-an-absent-future-%E2%80%94further-discussion-round-one/


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Anonymous, “No Conclusions When Another World is Unpopular,” published in After the Fall: Communiqués from Occupied California. Available for download at: http://afterthefallcommuniques.info/

We’ve got the vision
We’ve got each other
Now let’s have some fucking fun.
— The Imaginary Committee
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Communiqué no. 2 ||
To Our Friends
the Imaginary Committee

To our friends everywhere:

Yeah it’s overwhelming, but what else can we do -

Either:
Search idiotically for nonexistent jobs in offices and wake up for the morning news?
Keeping ourselves alive just to continue live another miserable day?

Or:
Begin and act from our own conditions.
November 2009, this is what is happening: we have found each other, and we are learning to act, finally.

This means developing close bonds, learning what it truly is to say ‘comrade’; someone who shares your conditions, shares your enemies, and who you trust with your life.
Someone who knows that it is always necessary to take sides. We have learned what it means to say we.

Now more than ever is the time to experiment, to try and try again. To learn how to make better barricades, to discover our courage, to fight without end.
Of course we’ll make mistakes – we are only just beginning to wake up.

We’ve got the vision
We’ve got each other
Now let’s have some fucking fun.

We are with those barricaded in buildings, throwing rocks in the streets, and drinking their Chancellor’s champagne.
From now on, this is all solidarity means.

To our comrades: multiply, expand, deepen what we have begun. To our enemies: have fun with your ruins.

TOTAL SOLIDARITY WITH BERKELEY, DAVIS, UCLA, FRESNO, FULLERTON, NAPA VALLEY!

FREE THE ARRESTED!
DROP ALL CHARGES AND RESTRAINING ORDERS!
ADMINISTRATORS AND COPS OFF CAMPUS!

From inside occupied Santa Cruz,
And in the fullest complicity,
An autonomous faction of the UCSC Kerr Hall Occupation

Some passing thoughts on the Berkeley and Santa Cruz occupations, from someone who was there briefly anonymous

It is no great secret that the terminal crisis of capitalism is before our eyes: the welfare state, the bitter product of two world wars, the child of Hitler and Noske, wherein a certain social safety net was provided for a measure of social peace, is in the process of being forcibly liquidated by the exigencies of an increasingly bankrupt social system. This much is evident to all those who have a basic thinking capacity. And thus, those who are protesting for a defense of this transient historical form will find nothing here of value, nor even anything here addressed to them. Such people can protest all day for a return to the glory days they imagine, but since these halcyon times never existed anyways, one can see they will certainly have no success now.

Rather we address ourselves to those who believe in any fashion in the “terminus of student life”; but not of course to open something so worthless as a literary polemic or discussion, nor to presume to give prescriptions or orders- all we do here is attempt a “generalization of insinuation”. For, to be right means nothing, what is important is acting in consequence.

The movement has already become acquainted with its enemies: the unionist, student politician type being only the most insidious and veiled. In this we have had to re-learn one of the primary lessons of the Movement of ’77: the actual complicity of all unions and parties, however radical sounding, with the cops. At Berkeley, this special type of policing seems far more prevalent than at Santa Cruz, along with the historical baggage of Savio and the Black Panthers weighing like a nightmare on this current generation, not to mention the tired front-group appeals to some sort of radicality concerning Obama, which is about as sad and deluded as one could get. Whereas at SC, these safety valves were less firmly in place, and the flimsy protection of last resort for American capitalism, that is to say the pathetic ideological detritus of Crimethinc, was more in evidence. At SC, the occupation of Kerr Hall marked a high point of initiative and offensive, as the protestors left their original building and took another. This perhaps shows the opportunities afforded by the “repressive tolerance” of the SC administration. Yet after a while even this was not enough in truth, what was important was not so much the building taken, but the audacity of the participants. This energy was lost throughout the following time, as the occupation tried to sit still while the police sent informants and surveyed the area, readying a response. Meantime, a list of responsible, and because of that, totally boring and irrelevant demands were made. It must be said that these demands were far less reasonable than others that might be made, or even better, as happened previously, there could be a breaking with the logic of demands itself. For the demands, to our knowledge, were not fulfilled in any serious way, nor could they be by a terminally ill capitalism on life support- rather there was a recognition of force, and the peasant ferocity of the police quickly gave way to a leni-
ency when a crowd was present (at all occupations, from what one can gather, but especially in the case of SC and Berkely). Thus far, no one has deigned to say what is explosive, or perhaps implosive, in the US situation- the knavery of the police (smashing that girl’s hand, rubber bullets, numerous instances of wanton brutality, etc.) is rather the product of a deep fear among the US elite: their army is twice defeated, collapsing from a morale and logistical perspective; the country is essentially bankrupt; the inequality, notable even for the sociologists, continues to grow. These times are revolutionary, it must be said, even if the people are not yet.

What must change this is willfulness. At SC, certain proposals were insinuated as to the hosting of a love-in, or auto-reducing, to open lines of supplies and communications. An interruption of the “business operations of the University” is only the beginning; far more important is to elaborate new forms-of-life to replace the old world. Against this, one excuses oneself from acting with the old Situationist shuffle step of not wanting to be an avant-garde. But if not us, who, and if not now, when are we to taste the delights of communism? We must be honest here: if a radical nucleus allows pitiful demands to be made, for fear of being too radical, then they only allow themselves to become pitiful. At the end of the SC occupation, a clever choice was made to withdraw from Kerr Hall without arrests. But this is also because there was nothing worth getting arrested for, let alone dying for. And to think of the splendor of Exarcheia, and how Alexandros was killed there, and the comrades there fight the cops, fascists and state-controlled armed struggle groups every day and face a biopolitical democracy that has revealed the Nazism in its heart- no, no, there has been far too much shallow triumphalism thus far from the unions and bureaucrats, pleased to have stirred out of their sickbed for a breif while; we must be honest, film screenings commemorating what has happened thus far must be discarded, true revolutionaries can not be satisfied with what has thus far transpired, even indulgently, as if we wait long enough without acting radical, revolutionary things will happen on their own. It is time we leave the beautiful soul of the post-1972 Situationism that does nothing but criticize behind, in order to direct and succour the unthinking consciousness that tries to act. Communism can not be talked about, it must be really lived. This is the historic task, at once simple and complicated, of this, the final moment of world-spirit. The prisoners of Plato’s cave must be led into the sunshine of the revolution, not bantered with in the darkness of capitalism.

Ergo, really living communism must be our objective. As the Kerr Hall protesters perhaps discovered when they were leaving the building, what mattered was not a building they took, certainly not the architectural concrete disaster of Kerr Hall, but what was in their hearts. A wall falling down means nothing, so long as we believe in communism, since it was never a country, or a party, but a way or relating to one another. One slogan appropriate to this revelation might be the title of the latest Tiqqun re-issue in France: Everything has failed, long live communism!

Concordantly, writing petty trash about saving and defending the university, or any other number of things, must be forgotten. Our first task must be to liberate all of our prisoners: poor Doug and so many others. And just as in the prior form of spirit, factory strikes became qualitatively more revolutionary when they posed political, international goals, so must we leave behind the sad demands of students pleading and whining for integration into a failed social system: we should rather aim to punish the wicked, to deliver a crushing riposte to the infamous scoundrels and their arrogant pretensions of this depraved time. Moreover, in Greece, the Conspiracy of the Nuclei of Fire are our prisoners too; these poor kids framed by an increasingly repressive state need to be liberated. There is another ridiculous new arrest in the Tarnac affair, coming on the heels of an intimidation arrest in Rouen, which only underlines the petty malice of the government that its frame up there has collapsed. And the 9 defendants are still prohibited from seeing one another! This is all too shameful: let us call for an unlimited human strike, since the revolutionary general strike of the working class is no longer the proper figure of spirit, respond to a 32% increase with rent strikes, mass expropriation, sabotage of classes, refusal of alienated social relations- here’s hoping we collapse the dollar and further aggravate the crisis!
This is where our movement must go in order not to be covered with infamy; at the hour when the Greeks and Austrians descend en masse on American embassies—to help us, to magnify our losses!—to allow others to pose these shit demands and to do nothing crazy with these buildings when we take them is simply ineptitude plastered over with good will. Why are not the clocks spirited away, masks given to all, monogamy annulled, electronics banned, counter-intelligence set up to ferret out spies, look outs placed around the building, sorties mounted to harass the enemy, food expropriated, and surreptitious withdrawals enacted to commence the party somewhere else? We know the Commune is not dead, it is wherever we are: “The hopes and expectations of the world up till now had pressed forward solely to this revelation, to behold what absolute Being is, and in it to find itself. The joy of beholding itself in absolute Being enters self-consciousness and seizes the whole world; for it is Spirit, it is the simple movement of those pure moments, which expresses just this: that only when absolute Being is beheld as an immediate self-consciousness is it known as Spirit.” This, one suspects, is precisely what exists in Tarnac, in Exarcheia, in millions of hearts the world over, and it is this that the dying old world hates so much. As for us, it is time to start really living what we believe.

In closing, the future of humanity will be communist, or not at all. This current movement can remain ignominiously tied to a collapsing system, its leaders, unions, daily routine, practices, and parties, or it can desert this sinking ship, and accomplish greater things than anyone can presently imagine. These are the ethical, profoundly metaphysical choices of the moment: There is no longer a problem of the Head. There is only a problem of the body, of the act.

So that perhaps some on the campuses will know at least one of the authors of this piece, and better understand their encounters, which may have confused them, owing to the caprices of this strange war of shadows in which we find ourselves engaged, and thus remembering may change prior opinions that were formed, this is signed,

M.

Post-script: “In other words: the situation is excellent. This isn’t the moment to lose courage.”

Preoccupied: The Logic of Occupation
Inoperative Committee

Someone stands on a table and yells, “This is now occupied.”
And that’s how it begins.

The New School, New York City
occupied from Dec 17-19, 2008

I.

Days and nights of conspiracies beforehand, materials in waiting, meetings folded within meetings, tension dripping like sweat from the palms of individuals who a week earlier never believed they’d be at the front of the barricades in their very own school. A panopticon of consumption and labor turned into a zone of offensive opacity. Identities that clouded our communication evaporate before our eyes and we see each for the first time as not who we are but how we exist. Adverbs replace both nouns and adjectives in the grammar of this human strike, where language is made to speak for the very first time without fear of atrophy.

An occupation is not a dinner party, writing an essay, or holding a meeting; it’s a car bomb. The university is our automobile, that vehicular modem of pure alienation, transporting us not outwards across space but inwards through time. If our goal is the explosion of time, then occupation is our dynamite. We use our spaces and bodies as bombs and shields in this conflict with no name. Indiscernible, we sever the addiction to visibility that only guarantees our defeat. Thought has no image, and neither shall we. Shards of words bounce off inoperative objects and reverberate through the occupied halls, telling a story of accomplished impossibilities and undecidable victories.

II.

The university shall never again be merely the lukewarm appendage to civil society that our (hypo)critical theorists so highly acclaim; rather, as our friends in Greece have shown, the university can also be an appendage to civil war, a space in which impenetrable bodies and inflammable knowledges can conspire towards the dissolution of their very condition, that is, separation. Yet it is exactly that sharing between life and thought that is preemptively banned from the territories marked under the sign “university.” Such territories betray their innocence not only in their concrete unfolding, but in their very name.

There is nothing “universal” about the university anymore except the universality of emptiness. Students and professors spend their waking lives covering up this void with paltry declarations and predictable nonactions. The void should no longer be avoided; it should be unleashed.

Seceding from the university is no longer enough. One must bring it down as well.

III.

The New School for Social Research, that walking archive of decay, lives off the consumption of potential threats to its own institutional perpetuation. The labor of knowledge that fills journals, books and classrooms produces a social catalogue of investment opportunities for the managers of capital and the administrators of security. Every insight into the structure of social life produced therein is formulated as a proposal for modifications in the measurements of our prison walls. This activity of producing novel recommendations for the continued submission of the population is called critique.

Critique holds the key to the meaning of the present, for it is now by means of critique that every possible liberation is foreclosed. Notice an abomination in the distribution of sensibility we call experience? Critique it, submit it, and be assured that the object of your outrage will be incorporated into the next year-end report under the
heading, “To be Developed.” Critique illuminates all the errors of a society that its managers have overlooked. It is the perfect interlocking mechanism of stagnation, stunting the growth of burgeoning, subjective revolt by offering one a whole buffet of irresistible, irrelevant options for “change.” A release valve for intellectual dissonance, critique today resembles the state-sponsored “strikes” of communist countries, where the desire for resistance is satiated by a regimented diet of acceptable means of conflict, supervised by its very enemies. Critique must be abandoned in favor of something that has no relation whatsoever to its enemy, something whose development and trajectory is completely indifferent to the nonlife of governance and capital.

By nicely folding unruly subjects back into the order of horizontal domination, the New School fulfills its legacy as site of liberalism, that glorious ideology and practice of self-sponsored subjugation. Its reputation—its historical image—is the means by which it impales the present on the spike of the past. The only way to escape this slow death is to abolish its history altogether. No more founding moment, no more exile, no more nightmare; no more libels, no more justifications, no more memories. The New School is dead, and with that we are born. We are an image from the future, and the past is yet to come.

“Social Research” is the name for the mechanism by which ideology invades its most salient critics. Its purpose is to account for all the parts of the social whole, and to organize it in a way that is presentable to the police for the care of the population. The police-care of “social research” is one of our enemies, and we can no longer use that phrase in good faith. We are moving from the New School for Social Research to the New School for Social War.

IV.

How does one block the inertia of banality that structures our daily rhythms? Not by activating the identity of a political subject within us, an identity which only works to tailor more precisely the clothing of our subjugation, but by demobilizing the field of vision before us. For every object we see and every movement we envision is already a fossilization of our desires, and in order to truly wrench open a course of action, we must close down every route we’ve been given. Our dreams provide no directions and no maps. It is rather from within the territory itself that our imaginations can be constructed.

The intersecting vectors of capital and governance bind us to forms of living that are not straightforwardly deflected. It is easy to stop exploiting others for a day; it is hard to stop exploiting oneself. We are not up against an enemy that can be knocked down and trampled over; we are positioned within an enemy that must be stripped away.

Every site houses the potential for this stripping, but not every time welcomes this interruption. The task of the provocateur is to probe the locations that stitch together their own circulation within the metropolis. One must listen to the tempo of authority that codes the functions, logics, and schedules of order on every block. Penetrating the secret of every site, it is only a matter of time before time can be exposed therein too. There is a cadence to chaos, and if its notes are played right, inertia’s silence will shatter like glass.

Unalienated activity doesn’t “just happen” but neither is it so well planned. Only its conditions can be staged, and from then on, nothing is certain. But if one can achieve even that moment, that breakthrough, then nothing else matters.

We notice three moments in this gesture: solidify, probe, strike.

To solidify is to build secret solidarities with others based on the sharing of wants and needs. This is not the creation of a political organization or the formation of an affinity group. This is the practice of binding oneself to others through a collective dependency that makes common the means of existence. No more loose networks and no more short experiments. To solidify means to dis-identify oneself alongside others, creating denser relations of mutual necessity in the process. One’s self dissolves as the relations solidify, building shared trust, commitment and desires without individual interruption. One solid relationship is more effective than a hundred vague ones. The extension of the domain of struggle will be determined by such solidities.

To probe is to test for those moments when possibility can pierce through the cell bars of normality. In other words, to notice the short openings when hierarchical power fractures, and to deepen it. Opportunities can be very quick, and one must have fingertips on the pulse of the situation to see if it’s ready to burst. Probing means looking for the void of every situation, marking what is absent and how its absence is policed. Exclusion, mismanagement, inequality—these are some motifs that signify a potential lacuna. There is no way to account for these voids by speculation alone. Why? Because they are structurally negated by the order of the situation itself. They are inconsistent by definition with the logic of the situation. They only respond to direct interruption, the exposure of the contradiction at the heart of a situation. To probe is to test the inconsistence of a situation, and this means ripping all consistencies that bind oneself to it. Irreducibly singular, the minutest of detail might just reveal a tiny window into the irruption of anarchy. What is difficult to accept is our non-agency in the genesis of these moments; we cannot mobilize towards them. We can only take advantage of their self-generated mobility.

To strike is to attack the function of a space and to suspend the rhythm of its time in a determination location. The question is not how to make this happen, but what impedes our own capacity to unleash it. For the potentiality of action lies in our ability to remove the impotentiality that structures our very existence. In other words, to go from potentiality to act, one must first traverse the impotentiality of our lives, eliminating it fear by fear. At every moment of danger, the task is to push the situation farther until it is easier to go all the way across the world instead of turning back around. Every strike is singular, composed of a specific and contingent set of lives and desires, contexts and contents. But these singularities share certain universal forms: inoperativity of essential functions, a suspension of time, an undecidability of its existence, and the birthing of new horizons of possibility. An anti-police brutality riot, a workplace slow-down, a restaurant sit-in, a vandalized gallery, a university occupation—all are strikes in different ways. A strike cannot start
from a general problem, but it can become one. What distinguishes revolutionaries from reformists today is not the ideologies of either, but rather their activities in relation to the generalizing or inhibiting of singular strikes. Still, the strike is only a unit in the general strategy of sabotage, giving it content, opening its wounds. If it is accomplished, then new subjects are left in its wake, faithful to its occurrence, committed to its continual detonation.

The occupation of the new school was such an adventure.

It was not without its problems.

VI.

To defuse spontaneity, have a meeting. Then another, and another. Wait ten minutes, and then start over. This is the logic of the radical liberals. Ashamed of the failures of the 60’s, they seek to relive its worst moments and rectify them in the present, as if that would bring honor to the cemeteries which house their dead. Every site of conflict is deemed counterproductive, and every moment of possibility is deemed too soon. Believing that they are the true heirs to the “lessons” of the past, they smother the present with their dead language, providing false directions that lead only to entrenched stability. Comfort is their goal, and compromise is their strategy. Their tactics vary from scripted civil disobedience to scripted civil obedience. They embrace their own image, incapable of moving forward without a mirror to guarantee their existence. Names, demands, and identities fill their arsenal, and one should be wary of their approach. To expose them does not mean to oppose them directly, for opposition can produce a sense of legitimacy of their project. Rather, like certain villagers do to state authorities when they come by to see how their colony is doing, one should nod and agree, and then act according to their complete irrelevance. Indifference can be a weapon if it used right. These individuals should be made redundant, entirely superfluous.

Avoid them at all costs.

VII.

The logic of the demand is not as straightforward as one would hope. On the one hand, it grounds one’s struggle in terms that are easily recognizable, consensual, and ‘strategic’; but on the other hand, it binds one to the very power it seeks to depose, guaranteeing its further existence. Perhaps this is where the concept of the “infinite demand” enters. For if our demands are infinite, so goes the thought, then our struggle will be too. The goal is then to batter the opposing power with an infinite series of demands, which they can begin to concede, but never possibly complete. Compelling, but ultimately an alibi for reform, a series of binding delays which blunts the force of any potential upheaval.

However, the political strategy of ‘infinite demands’ has absolutely nothing to do with the ethical principle of ‘infinitely demanding.’ While the former is directed to the hierarchical power that dominates it from those who critique it, the latter pours out from the void of a situation towards the subjects who compose it. Those who occupy, strike, or sabotage are not the ones who infinitely demand, rather it is occupation, striking, and sabotage themselves which are infinitely demanding in their fulfillment. We do not demand something infinite by means of occupation; we are demanded by occupation to infinitely extend it. This is why there is no excuse for conceding in an occupation. Every demand is already a defeat, and the only genuine failure is one that occurs in the attempt to expand it.

VIII.

The only thing worse than the radical liberals are the authoritarian anti-authoritarians, those caricatures of militants who fear commitment like it was the plague. Unable to clip the chains that bind them to their own boredom, they seek refuge in the hostility of others, where alienation can be exposed, but never destroyed. Clever in their manipulation of people, their activities resemble the broken movement of marionettes who, having puppets of their own, think they control themselves. Only going so far as their fears allow them, they run at the first sight of exposure, incapable of lasting in the light. They have clear enemies, but no clear friends, since their trust is grounded only on the ability to default. Their words speak volumes in what they conceal, namely, themselves. Like shopping malls, their texts are indistinguishable across the planet, providing the same atmosphere of desolation and the same program of rebellion.

Let them produce their conflicts, for they won’t last beyond their expiration date.

IX.

Why was it that an overabundance of philosophy students were involved in the occupation? Not to say students of economics, political science, anthropology, and others weren’t there, but it did seem sometimes like we were at the Piraeus in 400BC. The reason for this opens up onto a metareflection, a thought on the way we think the relation between thought and practice. In “grounded” disciplines, disciplines of the “real world,” there is a certain collective agreement that there must be an equal and identifiable attunement between our words and our deeds, between what one studies and what one lives. This seemingly respectable attitude presupposes that every thought has a direct correlation with some political strategy or tactic. Hence, the critique of neoliberal trade policies comes with a certain set of recommendations on democratizing trade, the critique of racial profiling comes with a set of actions that confirm one’s anti-racism. In other words, one is trained to attach every concept to a compatible affect, and the combination of the two provides a politics.

Philosophy, however, entails no such treaty with the words it uses, and this gives it both its poverty and its wealth. On the one hand, this can be said to signal the decay of moral integrity by which thought is abused. But on the other hand, this releases our thought from the strictures of a dead politics. Philosophers have no allegiance to programs, platforms, or “practice.” Rather, life and thought can merge in a zone of indistinction which needs no justification. When this is accomplished, no form of thought is too abstract, and no form of action is too extreme. What unites them is not some democratic council of reason, but a form of life which no reason can govern.

This ungrounded relation is called ethics.

X.
Occupation mandates the inversion of the standard dimensions of space. Space in an occupation is not merely the container of our bodies, it is a plane of potentiality that has been frozen by the logic of the commodity. In an occupation, one must engage with space topologically, as a strategist, asking: What are its holes, entrances, exits? How can one disalienate it, disidentify it, make it inoperative, communize it? The problem with this practice of spatial inversion is that it requires a particular mode of temporality which makes such actions more of less conclusive. What blocks the physical reinterpretation of spatial function is the time of “emergency,” when everyone is in a perpetual crisis due to the encroaching police or some force of repression. When this state of exception structures the time of the event, everyone becomes smothered with fear, and meetings dominate the use of the territory. To escape this downfall, buffer zones are necessary, multiple rooms, hallways, and passages to defuse the incoming threats. Reconfigurations of space are useful for not only mediating the barrage of internal and external policing operations, but also for providing a release from the pathetic injunction to “mobilize.”

XI.

In the end, there is one enemy that unites them all: the order of time. The homogenous wait of time, pushing us down, stringing us along its empty routines and endless cycles, enforced by the largest coalition of individuals across the planet. Every boss, every policeman, every administrator, every authority—those are the obvious ones. For the violence of time is furthered by all those citizens and critics whose plans, programs, and platforms are based on the uninterrupted continuation of the present. Every boss, every policeman, every administrator, every authority—those are the obvious ones. For the violence of time is furthered by all those citizens and critics whose plans, programs, and platforms are based on the uninterrupted continuation of the present. Every boss, every policeman, every administrator, every authority—those are the obvious ones. For the violence of time is furthered by all those citizens and critics whose plans, programs, and platforms are based on the uninterrupted continuation of the present.

Don’t be afraid to proceed when confronting new things. Each one of us, as we’re getting older, has things planted in their brains. You too, although you are young. Don’t forget the importance of this fact. Back in 1991, we confronted the smell of the new world and, trust us, we found it difficult. We learned that there must always be limits. Don’t be scared by the destruction of commodities. Don’t be scared by people looting stores. We make all these, they are ours. You (just like we in the past) are raised to get up every morning in order to make things that they will later not be yours. Let’s get them back all together and share them. Just like we share our friends and the love among us.

XII.

The coming occupations will have no end in sight, and no means to resolve them. When that happens, we will finally be ready to abandon them.

Q. Libet
January 2009

[Appendix]

From Athens workers to the students:

Don’t stay alone. Call us; call as many people as possible. We don’t know how you can do that, you will find the way. You’ve already occupied your schools and you tell us that the most important reason is that you don’t like your schools. Nice. Since you’ve already occupied them change their role. Share your occupations with other people. Let your schools become the first buildings to house our new relations. Their most powerful weapon is dividing us, just like you are not afraid of attacking their police stations because you are together, don’t be afraid to call us to change our life all together.

Don’t listen to any political organization (either anarchists or anyone).

Do what you need to. Trust people, not abstract schemes and ideas. Trust your direct relations with people. Trust your friends; make as many people as possible in your struggle your people. Don’t listen to them when they’re saying that your struggle doesn’t have a political content and must seemingly obtain. Your struggle is the content. You only have your struggle and it’s in your hands to preserve its advance. It’s only your struggle that can change your life, namely you and the real relations with your fellowmen.

Dec 2008
 Communiqué from an Absent Future: On the Terminus of Student Life

Research and Destroy

INTRODUCTION: 7 AGAINST POMPEII

WE LIVE AS A DEAD CIVILIZATION. We can no longer imagine the good life except as a series of spectacles preselected for our bemusement: a shimmering menu of illusions. Both the full-filled life and our own imaginations have been systematically replaced by a set of images more lavish and inhumane than anything we ourselves would conceive, and equally beyond reach. No one believes in such outcomes anymore.

The truth of life after the university is mean and petty competition for resources with our friends and strangers: the hustle for a lower-management position that will last (with luck) for a couple years rifted with anxiety, fear, and increasing exploitation—until the firm crumbles and we mutter about “plan B.” But this is an exact description of university life today; that mean and petty life has already arrived.

Just to survive, we are compelled to adopt various attitudes toward this fissure between bankrupt promises and the actuality on offer. Some take a naïve romantic stance toward education for its own sake, telling themselves they expect nothing further. Some proceed with iron cynicism and scorn, racing through the ludicrous charade toward the last wad of cash in the airless vault of the future. And some remain committed to the antique faith that their ascendingly hard labor will surely be rewarded some day if they just act as one who believes, just show up, take on more degrees and more debt, work harder.

Time, the actual material of our being, disappears: the hours of our daily life. The future is seized from us in advance, given over to the servicing of debt and to beggar our neighbors. Maybe we will earn the rent on our boredom, more likely not. There will be no 77 virgins, not even a plasma monitor on which to watch the death throes of the United States as a global power. Capitalism has finally become a true religion, wherein the riches of heaven are everywhere promised and nowhere delivered. The only difference is that every manner of crassness and cruelty is actively encouraged in the unending meantime. We live as a dead civilization, the last residents of Pompeii.

Romantic naïveté, iron cynicism, scorn, commitment. The university and the life it reproduces have depended on these things. They have counted on our human capacities to endure, and to prop up that world’s catastrophic failure for just a few more years. But why not hasten its collapse? The university has rotted itself from the inside: the “human capital” of staff, teachers, and students would now no more defend it than they would defend a city of the dead.

Romantic naïveté, iron cynicism, scorn, commitment: these need not be abandoned. The university forced us to learn them as tools; they will return as weapons. The university that makes us mute and dull instruments of its own reproduction must be destroyed so that we can produce our own lives. Romantic naïveté about possibilities; iron cynicism about methods; scorn for the university’s humiliating lies about its situation and its good intentions; commitment to absolute transformation—not of the university, but of our own lives. This is the beginning of imagination’s return. We must begin to move again, release ourselves from frozen history, from the igneous frieze of this buried life.

We must live our own time, our own possibilities. These are the only true justifications for the university’s existence, though it has never fulfilled them. On its side: bureaucracy, inertia, incompetence. On our side: everything else.

LIKE THE SOCIETY TO WHICH IT HAS PLAYED THE FAITHFUL SERVANT, THE UNIVERSITY IS BANKRUPT. This bankruptcy is not only financial. It is the index of a more fundamental insolvency, one both political and economic, which has been a long time in the making. No one knows what the university is for anymore. We feel this intuitively. Gone is the old project of creating a cultured and educated citizenry; gone, too, the special advantage the degree-holder once held on the job market. These are now fantasies, spectral residues that cling to the poorly maintained halls.

Incongruous architecture, the ghosts of vanished ideals, the vista of a dead future: these are the remains of the university. Among these remains, most of us are little more than a collection of querulous habits and duties. We go through the motions of our tests and assignments with a kind of thoughtless and immutable obedience propped up by subvocalized resentments. Nothing is interesting, nothing can make itself felt. The world-historical with its pageant of catastrophe is no more real than the windows in which it appears.

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 tuitions 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.

This is the prospect for which we have been preparing since grade-school. Those of us who came here to have our privilege notarized surrendered our youth to a barrage of tutors, a battery of psychological tests, obligatory public service ops—the cynical compilation of half-truths toward a well-rounded application profile. No wonder we set about destroying ourselves the second we escape the cape prod of parental admonition. On the other hand, those of us who came here to transcend the economic and social disadvantages of our families know that for every one of us who “makes it,” ten more take our place—that the logic here is zero-sum. And anyway, socioeconomic status remains the best predictor of student achievement. Those of us the demographics call “immigrants,” “minorities,” and “people of color” have been told to believe in the aristocracy of merit. But we know we are hating not despite our achievements, but precisely because of them. And we know that the circuits through which we might free ourselves from the violence of our origins only reproduce the misery of the past for others, elsewhere.

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.

Meanwhile the graduate students, supposedly the most politically enlightened among us, are also the most obedient. The “vocation” for which they labor is nothing other than a fantasy of falling off the grid, or out of the labor market. Every grad student is a would be Robinson Crusoe, dreaming of an island economy subtracted from the exigencies of the market. But this fantasy is itself sustained through an unremitting submission to the market. There is no longer the least felt contradiction in teaching a totalizing critique of capitalism by day and polishing one’s job talk by night. That our pleasure is our labor only makes our symptoms more manageable. Aesthetics and politics collapse courtesy of the substitution of ideology for history: booze and beaux arts and another seminar on the question of being, the steady blur of typeface, each pixel paid for by somebody somewhere, some not-me, not-here, where all that appears is good and all goods appear attainable by credit.

Graduate school is simply the faded remnant of a feudal system adapted to the logic of capitalism—from the commanding heights of the star professors to the serried ranks of teaching assistants and adjuncts paid mostly in bad faith. A kind of monasticism predominates here, with all the Gothic rituals of a Benedictine abbey, and all the strange theological claims for the nobility of this work, its essential altruism. The underlings are only too happy to play apprentice to the masters, unable to do the math indicating that nine-tenths of us will teach 4 courses every semester to pad the paychecks of the one-tenth who sustain the fiction that we can all be the one. Of course I will be the star, I will get the tenure-track job in a large city and move into a newly gentrified neighborhood.

We end up interpreting Marx’s 11th thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” At best, we learn the phoenix-like skill of coming to the very limits of critique and perishing there, only to begin again at the seemingly ineradicable root. We admire the first part of this performance: it lights our way. But we want the tools to break through that point of suicidal thought, its hinge in practice.

The same people who practice “critique” are also the most susceptible to cynicism. But if cynicism is simply the inverted form of enthusiasm, then beneath every frustrated leftist academic is a latent radical. The shoulder shrug, the dulled face, the squirm of embarrassment when discussing the fact that the US murdered a million Iraqis between 2003 and 2006, that every last dime squeezed from America’s poorest citizens is fed to the banking industry, that the seas will rise, billions will die and there’s nothing we can do about it—this discomfited posture comes from feeling oneself pulled between the is and the ought of current left thought. One feels that there is no alternative, and yet, on the other hand, that another world is possible.
We will not be so petulant. The synthesis of these positions is right in front of us; another world is not possible; it is necessary. The ought and the is are one. The collapse of the global economy is here and now.

II

THE UNIVERSITY HAS NO HISTORY OF ITS OWN; ITS HISTORY IS THE HISTORY OF CAPITAL. Its essential function is the reproduction of the relationship between capital and labor. Though not a proper corporation that can be bought and sold, that pays revenue to its investors, the public university nonetheless carries out this function as efficiently as possible by approximating ever more closely the corporate form of its bedfellows. What we are witnessing now is the endgame of this process, whereby the façade of the educational institution gives way altogether to corporate streamlining.

Even in the golden age of capitalism that followed after World War II and lasted until the late 1960s, the liberal university was already subordinated to capital. At the apex of public funding for higher education, in the 1950s, the university was already being redesigned to produce technocrats with the skill-sets necessary to defeat “communism” and sustain US hegemony. Its role during the Cold War was to legitimate liberal democracy and to reproduce an imaginary society of free and equal citizens—precisely because no one was free and no one was equal.

But if this ideological function of the public university was at least well-funded after the Second World War, that situation changed irrevocably in the 1960s, and no amount of social-democratic heel-clicking will bring back the dead world of the post-war boom. Between 1965 and 1980 profit rates began to fall, first in the US, then in the rest of the industrializing world. Capitalism, it turned out, could not sustain the good life it made possible. For capital, abundance appears as overproduction, freedom from work as unemployment. Beginning in the 1970s, capitalism entered into a terminal downturn in which permanent work was casulized and working-class wages stagnated, while those at the top were temporarily rewarded for their obscure financial necromancy, which has itself proved unsustainable.

For public education, the long downturn meant the decline of tax revenues due to both declining rates of economic growth and the privatization of tax-breaks for beleaguered corporations. The raiding of the public purse struck California and the rest of the nation in the 1970s. It has continued to strike with each downward declension of the business cycle. Though it is not directly beholden to the market, the university and its corollaries are subject to the same cost-cutting logic as other industries: declining tax revenues have made inevitable the casualization of work. Retiring professors make way not for tenure-track jobs but for precariously employed teaching assistants, adjuncts, and lecturers who do the same work for much less pay. Tuition increases compensate for cuts while the jobs students pay to be trained for evaporate.

In the midst of the current crisis, which will be long and protracted, many on the left want to return to the golden age of public education. They naively imagine that the crisis of the present is an opportunity to demand the return of the past. But social programs that depended upon high profit rates and vigorous economic growth are gone. We cannot be tempted to make futile grabs at the irretrievable while ignoring the obvious fact that there can be no autonomous “public university” in a capitalist society. The university is subject to the real crisis of capitalism, and capital does not require liberal education programs. The function of the university has always been to reproduce the working class by training future workers according to the changing needs of capital. The crisis of the university today is the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers.

We cannot free the university from the exigencies of the market by calling for the return of the public education system. We live out the terminus of the very market logic upon which that system was founded. The only autonomy we can hope to attain exists beyond capitalism.

What this means for our struggle is that we can’t go backward. The old student struggles are the relics of a vanished world. In the 1960s, as the post-war boom was just beginning to unravel, radicals within the confines of the university understood that another world was possible. Fed up with technocratic management, wanting to break the chains of a conformist society, and rejecting alienated work as unnecessary in an age of abundance, students tried to align themselves with radical sections of the working class. But their mode of radicalization, too tenuously connected to the economic logic of capitalism, prevented that alignment from taking hold. Because their resistance to the Vietnam war focalized critique upon capitalism as a colonial war-machine, but insufficiently upon its exploitation of domestic labor, students were easily split off from a working class facing different problems. In the twilight era of the post-war boom, the university was not subsumed by capital to the degree that it is now, and students were not as intensively proletarianized by debt and a devastated labor market.

That is why our struggle is fundamentally different. The poverty of student life has become terminal: there is no promised exit. If the economic crisis of the 1970s emerged to break the back of the political crisis of the 1960s, the fact that today the economic crisis precedes the coming political uprising means we may finally supersede the cooptation and neutralization of those past struggles. There will be no return to normal.

III

WE SEEK TO PUSH THE UNIVERSITY STRUGGLE TO ITS LIMITS.

Though we denounce the privatization of the university and its authoritarian system of governance, we do not seek structural reforms. We demand not a free university but a free society. A free university in the midst of a capitalist society is like a reading room in a prison; it serves only as a distraction from the misery of daily life. Instead we seek to channel the anger of the dispossessed students and workers into a declaration of war.

We must begin by preventing the university from functioning. We must interrupt the normal flow of bodies and things and bring work
and class to a halt. We will blockade, occupy, and take what’s ours. Rather than viewing such disruptions as obstacles to dialogue and mutual understanding, we see them as what we have to say, as how we are to be understood. This is the only meaningful position to take when crises lay bare the opposing interests at the foundation of society. Calls for unity are fundamentally empty. There is no common ground between those who uphold the status quo and those who seek to destroy it.

The university struggle is one among many, one sector where a new cycle of refusal and insurrection has begun—in workplaces, neighborhoods, and slums. All of our futures are linked, and so our movement will have to join with these others, breaching the walls of the university compounds and spilling into the streets. In recent weeks Bay Area public school teachers, BART employees, and unemployed have threatened demonstrations and strikes. Each of these movements responds to a different facet of capitalism’s reinvigorated attack on the working class in a moment of crisis. Viewed separately, each appears small, near-sighted, without hope of success. Taken together, however, they suggest the possibility of widespread refusal and resistance. Our task is to make plain the common conditions that, like a hidden water table, feed each struggle.

We have seen this kind of upsurge in the recent past, a rebellion that starts in the classrooms and radiates outward to encompass the whole of society. Just two years ago the anti-CPE movement in France, combating a new law that enabled employers to fire young workers without cause, brought huge numbers into the streets. High school and university students, teachers, parents, and file union members, and unemployed youth from the banlieues found themselves together on the same side of the barricades. (This solidarity was often fragile, however. The riots of immigrant youth in the suburbs and university students in the city centers never merged, and at times tensions flared between the two groups.) French students saw through the illusion of the university as a place of refuge and enlightenment and acknowledged that they were merely being trained to work. They took to the streets as workers, protesting their precarious futures. Their position tore down the partitions between the schools and the workplaces and immediately elicited the support of many wage workers and unemployed people in a mass gesture of proletarian refusal.

As the movement developed it manifested a growing tension between revolution and reform. Its form was more radical than its content. While the rhetoric of the student leaders focused merely on a return to the status quo, the actions of the youth—the riots, the cars overturned and set on fire, the blockades of roads and railways, and the waves of occupations that shut down high schools and universities—announced the extent of the new generation’s disillusionment and rage. Despite all of this, however, the movement quickly disintegrated when the CPE law was eventually dropped. While the most radical segment of the movement sought to expand the rebellion into a general revolt against capitalism, they could not secure significant support and the demonstrations, occupations, and blockades dwindled and soon died. Ultimately the movement was unable to transcend the limitations of reformism.

The Greek uprising of December 2008 broke through many of these limitations and marked the beginning of a new cycle of class struggle. Initiated by students in response to the murder of an Athens youth by police, the uprising consisted of weeks of rioting, looting, and occupations of universities, union offices, and television stations. Entire financial and shopping districts burned, and what the movement lacked in numbers it made up in its geographical breadth, spreading from city to city to encompass the whole of Greece. As in France it was an uprising of youth, for whom the economic crisis represented a total negation of the future. Students, precarious workers, and immigrants were the protagonists, and they were able to achieve a level of unity that far surpassed the fragile solidarities of the anti-CPE movement.

Just as significantly, they made almost no demands. While of course some demonstrators sought to reform the police system or to critique specific government policies, in general they asked for nothing at all from the government, the university, the workplaces, or the police. Not because they considered this a better strategy, but because they wanted nothing that any of these institutions could offer. Here content aligned with form; whereas the optimistic slogans that appeared everywhere in French demonstrations jarred with the images of burning cars and broken glass, in Greece the rioting was the obvious means to begin to enact the destruction of an entire political and economic system.

Ultimately the dynamics that created the uprising also established its limit. It was made possible by the existence of a sizeable radical infrastructure in urban areas, in particular the Exarchia neighborhood in Athens. The squats, bars, cafes, and social centers, frequented by students and immigrant youth, created the milieu out of which the uprising emerged. However, this milieu was alien to most middle-aged wage workers, who did not see the struggle as their own. Though many expressed solidarity with the rioting youth, they perceived it as a movement of entrants—that is, of that portion of the proletariat that sought entrance to the labor market but was not formally employed in full-time jobs. The uprising, strong in the schools and the immigrant suburbs, did not spread to the workplaces.

Our task in the current struggle will be to make clear the contradiction between form and content and to create the conditions for the transcendence of reformist demands and the implementation of a truly communist content. As the unions and student and faculty groups push their various “issues,” we must increase the tension until it is clear that we want something else entirely. We must constantly expose the incoherence of demands for democratization and transparency. What good is it to have the right to see how intolerable things are, or to elect those who will screw us over? We must leave behind the culture of student activism, with its moralistic mantras of non-violence and its fixation on single-issue causes. The only success with which we can be content is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the certain immiseration and death which it promises for the 21st century. All of our actions must push us towards communication; that is, the reorganization of society according to a logic of free giving and receiving, and the immediate abolition of the wage, the value-form, compulsory labor, and exchange.

Occupation will be a critical tactic in our struggle, but we must resist the tendency to use it in a reformist way. The different strategic uses of occupation became clear this past January when students
occupied a building at the New School in New York. A group of
friends, mostly graduate students, decided to take over the Student
Center and claim it as a liberated space for students and the public.
Soon others joined in, but many of them preferred to use the action
as leverage to win reforms, in particular to oust the school’s presi-
dent. These differences came to a head as the occupation unfolded.
While the student reformers were focused on leaving the building
with a tangible concession from the administration, others shunned
demands entirely. They saw the point of occupation as the creation
of a momentary opening in capitalist time and space, a rearrange-
ment that sketched the contours of a new society. We side with this
anti-reformist position. While we know these free zones will be par-
tial and transitory, the tensions they expose between the real and the
possible can push the struggle in a more radical direction.

We intend to employ this tactic until it becomes generalized. In 2001
the first Argentine piqueteros suggested the form the people’s struggle
there should take: road blockades which brought to a halt the
circulation of goods from place to place. Within months this tactic
spread across the country without any formal coordination between
groups. In the same way repetition can establish occupation as an
instinctive and immediate method of revolt taken up both inside
and outside the university. We have seen a new wave of takeovers in
the U.S. over the last year, both at universities and workplaces: New
School and NYU, as well as the workers at Republic Windows Fact-
ory in Chicago, who fought the closure of their factory by taking it
over. Now it is our turn.

To accomplish our goals we cannot rely on those groups which posi-
tion themselves as our representatives. We are willing to work with
unions and student associations when we find it useful, but we do not
recognize their authority. We must act on our own behalf directly,
without mediation. We must break with any groups that seek to limit
the struggle by telling us to go back to work or class, to negotiate,
and reconcile. This was also the case in France. The original calls for
protest were made by the national high school and university student
associations and by some of the trade unions. Eventually, as the rep-
resentative groups urged calm, others forged ahead. And in Greece
the unions revealed their counter-revolutionary character by cancel-
ing strikes and calling for restraint.

As an alternative to being herded by representatives, we call on stu-
dents and workers to organize themselves across trade lines. We urge
undergraduates, teaching assistants, lecturers, faculty, service work-
ers, and staff to begin meeting together to discuss their situation.
The more we begin talking to one another and finding our common
interests, the more difficult it becomes for the administration to pit us
against each other in a hopeless competition for dwindling resources.
The recent struggles at NYU and the New School suffered from the
absence of these deep bonds, and if there is a lesson to be learned
from them it is that we must build dense networks of solidarity based
upon the recognition of a shared enemy. These networks not only
make us resistant to recuperation and neutralization, but also allow
us to establish new kinds of collective bonds. These bonds are the
real basis of our struggle.

We’ll see you at the barricades.

Research and Destroy, 2009

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Communiqué from an Absent Future — Further Discussion

Brian Holmes, Research and Destroy, & Dead Labor

I recently posted Research & Destroy’s Communiqué from an Absent
Future on this blog. The manifesto, circulated during the recent
University of California walkout, has been generating a lot of online
discussion.

I thought it might be useful to try to continue that discussion in a
more, uh, “organized” manner…one that would free it from the sort
of tit-for-tat exchanges that happen in listserv debates and within
the confines of blog/Facebook comment boxes (though, of course, I
courage comments to this post).

I talked to one of the Communiqué’s authors, and to Brian Holmes
(who wrote, I thought, a very interesting response to the manifesto1),
and to folks involved with the New School occupation2. Together,
we came up with three questions, based on reservations about and
critiques of the Communiqué we’d seen circulated online.

So, here’s how the discussion will happen:

Round One, below, will be three sets of responses to the questions we
came up with: one a collective response from Research and Destroy,
one a collective response from Dead Labor (the aforementioned New
School occupiers), and an individual response from Brian Holmes
(who is one of the organizers of the “Continental Drift Seminar”3).

Round Two, which will be posted in a week or two, will be everyone’s
responses to the first round of responses.

These are the three questions folks were asked to answer:

1) Whaddya mean the management class is being proletarianized!?! Isn’t this
somehow an insult/misrecognition regarding the REAL proletariat?

2) Does addressing the university student as the potential revolutionary subject get
us closer to revolution? How? How not?

3) What would a non-reformist goal for a university be, if one exists?

Let the games begin!

Best,
charles

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1 http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/10/01/the-u-c-strike/
2 http://newschoolinexileblog.blogspot.com/
3 http://www.16beavergroup.org/drift/index.htm
The R&D communiqué seems to have provoked skepticism with the brief passage, “The crisis of the university today is the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers.” Against misreading, perhaps we should say that the crisis of the university is the crisis of the reproduction of the capital-labor relationship. Classes are a relation; when we talk about capital and labor we mean the poles of this relation in motion, not a series of rigid sociological categories with, say, the right amount or right kind of immobilization. The current crisis of profitability, for example, is not just a crisis of and for capitalists; it goes to every point in the social grid. Whether or not one thinks of the places traditionally reserved for university graduates—the professional, the technician, the manager—as middle-class or some privileged fraction of the working-class, the university has no existence save by relationship to work and future work prospects. Even if one thinks narrowly of the true proletariat as unskilled manual laborers, such a group still remains the other of the university: the truth of class society from which university entrants seek immunity or escape. By serving as a real or imagined sorting system, the university (and like organs of class reproduction) assists in the perpetuation not only of the working-class but all classes.

This is precisely what has begun to decompose. Close to half of university graduates work in unskilled and service-sector occupations for which their degrees are entirely unnecessary. Those who do find employment in the technical, professional, and managerial occupation discover that decades of routinization and labor-market oversupply have nullified the advantage of these positions. Computer programming becomes data-entry, so-called “middle”-management positions nothing more than routinized clerical work. As manufacturing jobs departed with the high industrial era, it was precisely these other positions to which capital shifted its attention, attempting, rather desperately, to save on labor costs in a local-global competition—managing the managers so that they, in turn, might hector and superexploit the inferiors they were made to fear becoming. No doubt the university continues to reproduce a (shrinking) class of elites. The broad lines, however, are clear: a university degree is now as mythical a form of security as the value of a home in 2006. This myth forms, in part, of university graduates—the professional, the technician, the manager—as middle-class or some privileged fraction of the working-class, the university has no existence save by relationship to work and future work prospects. Even if one thinks narrowly of the true proletariat as unskilled manual laborers, such a group still remains the other of the university: the truth of class society from which university entrants seek immunity or escape. By serving as a real or imagined sorting system, the university (and like organs of class reproduction) assists in the perpetuation not only of the working-class but all classes.

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There’s no need to overread “capital no longer needs us as workers.” We understand that there is no capital without the extraction of surplus-value from workers: capitalism is nothing but this extraction in motion. But capital now casts about wildly in its attempts to find new pools of accumulation: it cannot valorize itself to the degree it would like, and many workers find themselves without the dubious but nonetheless necessary benefits of such exploitation. The annihilation visited on the manufacturing sectors has leapt to the fields of work that can’t be compressed through labor-saving mechanization. There is nowhere for capital to turn but to the intensification of labor, the harrying of workers, managerial mechanics. Yes, capital will find use for some of us; many will find little or no employment. This is not to say that the college graduates inhabit the same place in the structure as the most immiserated workers—in both objective and subjective terms the composition of the working-class exhibits great variety. Solidarity means recognizing these differences in relation; it means a revolutionary program with the will to destroy them. . .

1) Whaddya mean the management class is being proletarianized!!?! Isn’t this somehow an insult/misrecognition regarding the REAL proletariat?

2) Does addressing the university student as the potential revolutionary subject get us closer to revolution? How? How not?

The university with its ceremonial robes still holds on to something of the medieval—a distant whiff of the guild, with its masters, apprentices, stock boys. It is no doubt a challenge to persuade professors, graduate and undergraduate students to identify themselves as part of a larger class of labor. No doubt this is in part because each occupies a visibly different place in the matrix of the exploited, and some are more rewarded than others for their participation. This failure of class consciousness, this blindness to base material conditions, is a description of the problem that exists at all strata—not a reason to look elsewhere for problems.

Do students have a peculiar or novel position in this problem of consciousness, of self-identification within the matrix of capital and its possible overcoming? Yes and no—an answer that goes for almost every group among the exploited. Let us imagine the student who indeed goes four years entirely free from wage labor: that nearly extinct case, the pure student, who exists largely in the idealizations of the idiot bourgeois, and in the resentment of some few representatives of the immiserated industrial proletariat of North America whom, having failed to realize themselves as a revolutionary class, now would bar the doors of their historic defeat.

The novel role of these “pure students” (as representatives of the problem at hand) is not that they are free from wage exploitation for four idyllic years. It is that they are the subject of an epochal historical bargain. No mass of surplus value will be extracted for these four years—on promise that the training received therein will allow correspondingly greater value extraction over the following fifty. They are, in short, a personification (complete with skateboard and laptop) of capital’s widespread wager on relative as against absolute surplus value. Allowing greater historical specificity, they are the burgeoning subclass conjured by late capital’s increasing dependence on technologies of management—including managerial bodies—to defer its own crisis.

So what is not novel, not peculiar? That, en route to refusal and insurrection, students are easily bought off. Less easily than unions,
in some formal sense of negotiation (if there is one lesson to learn from 1968, it is this); more easily, in that it is easier to purchase a student with an abstraction like democracy or peace. Everyone has their price. Correspondingly, everyone is a potential subject of the logic of price, and of its undoing —

3) What would a non-reformist goal for a university be, if one exists?

This question is hard to answer, because we can’t extract universities from the world around them. We can’t take individual universities and re-make them along communist lines, as though they could function as oases in the desert. This is a bit like trying to “free” workers by re-making individual workplaces into workers’ cooperatives. While businesses that are co-managed on a democratic basis by workers, who also divide the profits, may have certain advantages for those who work there, they are in no meaningful way moving beyond capitalism—they must make a profit in order to survive, they must pay for rent and equipment, and all the workers must make a wage that allows them to pay for all of the costs of survival. In a society in which the vast majority of people must spend most of their lives selling their labor for a wage, educational institutions will necessarily be places of social reproduction, places that train people to work. None of the possibilities for transforming the university within capitalism are able to overcome this problem.

The most commonly heard goal on the left for the university is the goal of accessibility—that is, making higher education free and available to all people. While we certainly agree that this kind of transformation would allow people from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds to compete more easily against wealthier people in the job market, it does not change the basic fact that people would still be forced to compete for the ability to work. In fact as more people get bachelors’ degrees, what we find is not a decrease in wealth inequality but a decrease in the worth of the degree, to the point where now to compete for many jobs degree holders must go back to school for more training.

The other goal for the university sometimes discussed in radical circles is the goal of a space where “real” learning can take place, in a mode that is either explicitly radical or at least in opposition to the values of a society based on wage labor. Those who take this position usually cite the importance of the Arts and Humanities as disciplines that play a central role in fostering human creativity, teaching critical thinking, and transmitting knowledge about the world. They point out that these disciplines are under attack and sometimes call for the creation of an autonomous “people’s” university operated by teachers and students, where learning will trump profit as a guiding principle. Of course we agree about the value of creativity and critical thought. However, any university that operated along these lines would quickly become irrelevant to the vast majority of people who need an education that provides them with a better chance of finding work. It would be useful only to those who aim to translate the cultural capital acquired through training in the Arts and Humanities into jobs in the culture industry or to those who are independently wealthy.

The honest answer to the question about a non-reformist goal for a university is that our world is structured in such a way as to make radical change within one sphere impossible. Only by dismantling the whole can we hope to produce institutions that actually provide for people’s needs in a meaningful way. In other words, focusing on the university as a site of radical transformation is a mistake. The real value of university struggles is not their ability to transform the university, but their potential to draw attention to the interrelations between the reproductive and productive spheres. As students begin to articulate themselves as workers and future workers, the mythology around the university starts to dissipate and the separation between students and workers begins to disappear.

A non-reformist approach to the university must expose what universities really are: institutions that reproduce the workforce, that is, that train and educate people to become workers, depending upon the particular needs of the economy at any given moment; and workplaces in their own right, employing teachers, staff, and service workers. We must also demonstrate that movements for university reform take the wrong position at a critical historical moment, a moment of capitalist crisis. Hearkening back to a time of generous government spending on public needs is the wrong strategy when the public purse is shrinking rapidly. Instead of trying desperately to show how the government can meet our needs, we should use the opportunity to show how it can’t meet our needs—to demonstrate capitalism’s inherent instability and its inability to provide for people. The system is faltering, and instead of trying to get it working smoothly again we need to aid its demise.

Instead of thinking of the university as our goal, we should see it as the means to an end: a useful place that can help us in our struggle against capitalism by exposing many of the contradictions inherent in the system as a whole. The university is simply one of many sites where these contradictions become concentrated—like workplaces, schools, prisons, and neighborhoods. We analyze a part to shed light on the whole. The most important thing is to demonstrate the university’s relationship to all of these other sites. Once these connections are made then university struggles blend more easily into other struggles in workplaces and communities. Strikes and expropriations (such as occupations) can be ways of demonstrating these connections. Taking over a university is really just taking over private property and collectivizing it—just like any property anywhere else in society. The point is to show that the university doesn’t belong just to the students who attend classes there or the individual workers who are employed there, but to all of the working class.

As for the role of universities in a free society, I think most of us at R&D agree that they will not exist. Learning and teaching will take place in very different modes, based on people’s varied needs and desires. But we think these modes will emerge through the process of communication, as people begin to experiment with new social forms, and can’t be prescribed now.

BRIAN HOLMES RESPONSE

I want to take these questions in a different order, or all at once. To address students as revolutionaries is to address them as equals, right now not later. It’s the best way of recognizing the long implosion of
middle-class status that the financial crisis has suddenly thrust in our faces: “We are all going bankrupt,” says the communiqué from the second Santa Cruz occupation. Addressing students as revolutionaries asks the question, it possible to depose the people who run things this way?

Bankruptcy is a powerful word. It drains the belief from an institution the way news of an accident drains the blood from your face. At last, some disbelief. With tuition practically doubling, job markets plunging, health care non-existent for huge amounts of people, and flexible contracts getting more coercive by the day, it’s right to say that proletarianization is haunting the student population, and that’s what comes off clearest in the Communiqué from an Absent Future. I especially like the cynical realism: it hits people where they are, it’s perfect. But words like “proletarian” or “working class” will never catch the aspirations of people going to school, they have a lot more to lose than their chains. What they have to lose are the potentials, the life chances, offered by the social state. Face it, people want something from the state! The budget cuts break their promise, that’s what hurts, that’s what makes people angry. “Occupy everything” is a great response, not because it’s the total appropriation of everyday life here and now—that’s overblown and it’s an illusion—but because occupation is a political “No!” that draws a line and proves that a fight is essential. What’s needed is to stop the neoliberal machine from privatizing everything, which can only be done by a break, a frontal opposition that wrenches everyone out of their routines and opens up new chances, puts the whole social deal back on the table. The bankruptcy of the system reveals its potential value, and at the same time, its actual ruin by the elites who are creating a society that no one else wants to live in.

The question is, how to make the break? The radical point of the Communiqué is to avoid useless negotiation that only delays the inevitable. And it’s effective. But you better also avoid empty radicalism that only touches a small and easily neutralizable group. Here’s the paradox: passion is essential, the rhetoric of insurrection is good for sparking it, the experience of revolt is fundamental and it changes your life—but the riot never lasts for more than a few days. And the problems are immensely bigger than the rhetoric can encompass. No one should forget that the management plans that are being imposed, and the financial engineering behind them, are typical products of the university itself, which is the laboratory of neoliberalism and one of its most powerful institutions, it’s hardly slated to disappear in some catastrophic collapse. To oppose those techniques and to depose the people behind them is going to require, not the abandonment of the institution, but its complete refashioning, which would have to be done by strong currents of internal and external subversion. The aim is rational and affective reshaping, changing the feel and the very logic of the place. It’s not about form, it’s about transforming the institution that fabricates social beings, with their subjectivity and their knowledge and their technical skills. If we don’t transform it, the current brand of dominant subjectivity is gonna stay in power and set up lots more police. But the question is how to get people to make the change, when in fact, so many interest groups are profiting from the situation as it is, while others are trying to hang on to their status quo, and still others are too scared or just too dazed to mobilize. Invocations of early twentieth-century struggles are not going to do the trick. Marx did not live through the 1930s and there is no analysis in Capital of the class structure produced by the social state, let alone the perverse twists that neoliberalism has given it. ’68 already failed on outdated schemas and slogans. With the same starting points, this time will be no different. You have to begin with all the complexity of real life, and get the people living it to push it much further.

The specter of bankruptcy has shocked the ones who thought they could hang on to their current positions, the professors I mean. What they need to do—and to be forced to do—is publicly recognize that that they are losing their old liberal dream of the university, even while the students are slipping massively towards a precarious existence that has nothing to do with the subjects they came to study. I would say, the revolutionary strategy is getting a fraction of the proffs to radicalize. That will send a lot more students over the line, don’t you think? It will take a three-sector alliance—the precarious students and contract faculty, the service workers of the university, and the full professors threatened in both their pocketbook and their sense of mission—to stand up to all the other interest groups who, so far, have been the winners. The Communiqué pushes mainly towards the affects of fear and refusal of exclusion, it doesn’t show how knowledge and cooperation become a weapon. I’d say, go for critique in action, occupy everything you can, but start opening up perspectives for a more complex resistance.

After the RNC protests in St Paul in ’08 and similar paramilitary abuses at the recent G20 meeting in Pittsburgh, what’s missing are ideas about how to develop a radical struggle in a country that’s set up such an extreme repressive apparatus. We need non-violent techniques for direct action, fresh arguments for the right to dissent by professors and political figures, a mobilization of legal support, and, at the same time as all that, a refusal of the procedural limits that make the repressive system into its own tautology, allowing only the kinds of debates that insure its own reproduction. Movements are strong when they have lots of openings. In France these days, small coteries of people whisper about what’s happening in the countryside, in Tarnac, the coming insurrection. But the huge social movements of which those people form one interesting part require cooperation among many different levels of society. They are based in a continuous analysis of legislative, legal, and economic changes, along with a cultural production of counter-values and ways of reimagining the common, the public sphere, solidarity and social rights. In America we lack outbursts of revolt and sustained movements in order to overcome the enforced paralysis that has kept such ideas from getting anywhere near the mainstream over the last thirty years. For that we have to radicalize the universities, which is why I think this movement is so important.

Nothing is gonna happen in a day, or in one single social situation either. The rot in the system is deep and the neoliberal rationality is still convincing for large numbers of people. If we are lucky and some initial battles are won at UC, still there is going to be a need for longer-term strategies that can give intellectuals—read: revolutionaries—a role in society again. That also requires forming serious groups off campus, and outside the career fixation that sucks away most of the time and energy of people getting their degrees, publishing their papers, and looking at their navels in the complicated and submissive ways that people are trained for in the universities, and...
particularly in the humanities. It’s amazing how effective that training is, to the point where nobody seems to have any materialist curiosity anymore. Few intellectuals today have much of a grasp of how society functions in its deadly complexity. Neither outdated Marxist categories nor even brilliant riffs on Situationist insurrectionism are gonna give anyone that understanding, the knowledge of how to subvert the system. How does a revolutionary go about changing the wills of engineers, scientists, accountants, doctors, entertainers, politicians—or at least, of young people who aspire to become those things, but also see the dead-ends of society as it is?

Some answers to that question were already learned in the counter-globalization movements, and the existence of free-software networks is proof of the possibility to transform the technical basis of life in the overdeveloped societies. Now the reality of climate change is making larger numbers of people aspire to that kind of transformation. By studying how things work, by going out to other groups in society and getting their perspectives, by finding out their economic and technical problems as well as their cultural and affective ones, we could build a capacity to bring new agendas into the university system and also out into the population at large. This process points a way out of the bubble, a way to live outside the incredible complacency that has been the inflexible rule in America in these past years and decades. Continental Drift and the other groups I am collaborating with are made to do that, it’s an anti-zombification strategy, a way to prolong the autonomy of thought and emotion that’s gained in struggles and street demonstrations. The point is to create social sites where that kind of autonomy can root and ramify and gain resistance over time, to form a real common sense in the face of decay and deepening problems. That’s why I came back to America from Europe, because there seems to be some possibility to do that here, now that the major swindles of the last thirty years are finally bankrupt. So anyway, there’s my two bits on the three questions, hope there was something useful.

**DEAD LABOR RESPONSE**

1) *Whaddya mean the management class is being proletarianized?! Isn’t this somehow an insult/misrecognition regarding the REAL proletariat?*

To speak of a distinct class of managers, whose function may arguably be facilitating the integration of the proletariat in response to its periodic intensified contradictions, is to run the risk of reducing the dynamic processes of proletarianization and mediation into fixed, sociological categories. Undoubtedly, this obscures the historical development, qualitative diffusion and generalization of the compulsion to sell one’s labor power.

What cannot be ignored however is the fact that the great bureaucracies of the 20th century have had their final gasps of air, both with the lucidity of their illusions, as well as their prominence in neutralizing and circumscribing class struggle. Their only recourse has been to recede into an image of themselves for the vultures of empirical analysis.

Thus, what is lost in such a point of departure is the understanding that the process of proletarianization is precisely that of mediation; the mediation between subject and object, individual and social, thought and practice, all of which become mangled and reconfigured through the intermediate of capital.

The superior question would be to inquire into the methods by which the proletariat itself produces generalized self-management as the object of capital. It is here that the proletariat emerges strictly as a form, the drive to sell labor power, with varying content, to the ultimate evasion of the metaphysician. Immediately, the notion of a more authentic or “real” proletariat dissolves upon an abstract equalization in which its only “real” expression derives from the contradiction between self-valuing value and labor power. Archaic questions and inquiries into the “real” proletariat only divert analysis of proletarianization into a petrified and glorified object, finding refuge in its preservation that aims for an emancipation without self-abolition, ultimately deepening class society.

However, in order for the proletariat to combat its own existence as a class, and thus dissolve existing conditions in *general*, its only recourse is to proceed from its particular relation to both the productive and reproductive processes, and from the social categories to which these processes provide expression. This entails calling into question all fractions of proletarian existence, from the circuits of both the production and reproduction of capital. The latter, defined with a particular relation to the production process whereby capital is not necessarily generated, but rather provided social lubrication and logical adherence for global production processes, still demonstrates the qualities of the productive proletariat merely in the exchange of their labor power with a capital engaged in the sphere of production. Thus, the notion of the proletariat is not limited to those who toil strictly within the productive process or exist as a uniform assemblage without its own specified mediums, features, or echelons. Instead, the proletariat resides precisely in the contradictions of productive labor that structure society as a whole.

This perspective further renders the proletariat as an *a priori* socio-economic category stale and useful only to the extent that its specified categorical forms are utilized for its further integration with capital. If one were to pay recognition to the proletarianization of what may vulgarly be identified as a “management class,” it is only in the hope of elucidating the contradictions between labor and capital as diffuse and without regard to traditional class narratives, instead constituting various modes and dynamics of exploitation both within the productive and reproductive spheres. Anything less perpetuates the notion of class as an exterior constraint to the proletariat’s self-abolition.

2) *Does addressing the university student as the potential revolutionary subject get us closer to revolution? How? How not?*

No. The only revolutionary subject we acknowledge in the present is capital. Capital constantly revolutionizes our activities, our wants, our needs. The revolution within and against the revolution of capital will be done by its objects. The name given to that particular object of capital which produces value through its living labor has historically been called the proletariat. This object, because its activity is the most direct expression of capital, has the potential to negate it. Why? Because the proletariat is a *function* of capital, and hence, in interrupting itself, it interrupts the function of capital as
well. This does not produce revolution or communism, only insurrection, the gap in which the possibility of nonalienated life can be asked meaningfully, truthfully. Insurrection, the horizon and limit of our potential antagonistic activity today, poses the material possibilities in which communism can be achieved. But from insurrection to communism, there is no common term. We do not impose our view of how that rupture between the two will take place, we can only narrate the history of its attempted failures.

In the present moment, the question of the proletariat wanders aimlessly amongst the population. Neither here nor there, its nominal absence reveals its material omnipresence. Only that which can no longer be identified has been fully diffused. The great potential to valorize all activities is the common project of humanity today; it is our collective identity, our global home. From the standpoint of capital, there is no longer any difference between making a television show and watching a television show. They are both congealed modes of dead labor which offer up statistics to be interpreted for the further intensification of capital into life. In other words, objective proletarian functions have been extended to the population at large, and along with it, subjective proletarian conditions attach themselves. The former case means we are always working, and the latter means we are always alienated. From the proletariat to proletarianized life, this is the history of our present.

Granted such a situation, the university student is in no way outside the circuits of exploitation and alienation. But neither is the video artist, the drug dealer, the internet addict, the zine maker, the dumpster diver, the guerrilla gardener, the social critic, the radical publisher, the anti-capitalist organizer, the train hopper, the bank robber, the co-op manager. All these jobs of modern life are exactly that, jobs. A job is no longer what is done in return for a wage, it is rather what is done to acquire the means of existence, and this is exactly what capital seeks to incorporate into its accounting books.

The need of a constantly emerging revolutionary subject for its theories chases the Marxist ideologue over the entire surface of the globe: the French communards, the German industrial working class, the Russian soviets, the white American machinist, the black American urbanite, the nationalist revolutionary in the third world, the postcolonial subaltern, the unwaged female, ad infinitum.

Never has addressing any of these as the potential revolutionary subject gotten us any closer to revolution. In fact, by ignoring the totalizing nature of capitalism as a social system, attempts to concentrate on particular social actors have served only to fracture the coherency of revolutionary critique and impede its negative function.

The university student does not exist in isolation. What is higher education if not training for a life of wage labor? Gone are the days when attendance at university was an ascetic phase for the sons of the ruling class, an initiation into the upper echelons of capitalist society. Nowadays, students often work before and during their college years. After school they will be ejected into the “free market” for labor power to toil their lives away, gifted with a hefty debt burden. Even the process of learning, such as it exists today, is steeped in neoliberal ideology and geared towards fostering docility and compliance.

To separate the university student from the worker is to separate the what-is-becoming from the what-will-be. This wholly ignores the ways in which capitalist social relations are reproduced. In this era, our enemy has subsumed the greater parts of our lives. The prevailing mode of production requires a social factory where all sectors of society are enlisted (often unpaid) in reproducing capitalist social relations. The university student is no exception.

When workers withdraw their labor, when students block their universities, when the unemployed loot their stores, when the youth burn their neighborhoods—and when this is done all in relation to each other—we call them the proletariat. Nothing unites them but a collective disgust with their lives under capital, a disgust expressed not in political terms, but in practical refusal. The proletariat is the anti-political subject that knows itself by destroying itself. Destroying itself, it clears away all the shit of a society built on its labor and consumption.

This name, proletariat, must be divorced from its usual, narrow definition. How can we talk seriously of revolutionary potential without including unions of the unemployed in revolutionary Spain, militant communist women’s groups during Italy’s Hot Autumn, or the revolutionary students of May 1968? It is not up to us to address them. It is the entirety of the expropriated, inside and outside the workplace, that must address itself.

The university student is not the potential revolutionary subject. It is but a reflection of its own future and, like the whole of the proletariat, it is a subject that can only reach its potential through self-abolition. This is our goal, this is our struggle.

#3: What is a non-reformist goal for a University?

There is no non-reformist goal for a university. Until capital ends, all our goals become means of furthering its value. This does not, however, make the process of achieving them less worthwhile.

An alternative to having reformist or non-reformist goals is to have revolution. But if 1) revolution is understood as a violent resolution of the historic contradictions in a given society; 2) the revolution of the global proletariat entails the final struggle of humans against themselves as alienated beings, then a struggle which aims at overcoming reformism must seek to reveal the conditions in which the contradictions of history culminate such that any further goal is impossible outside of ending alienated life in its totality. In this explosive situation any reformist goal of détente is impossible. This situation sets up the ultimate “goal”, though we have surely been forced down this path more so than we would like to admit.

Furthermore, universities are not revolutionary subjects. Universities are ancient hierarchical institutions which are symptomatic of class society and have preserved themselves with great success for centuries. The university is so entrenched in the past and separated from the outside world that it is only in the past 60 years or so that it has taken on the aspects of a bourgeois revolution. Only recently have universities, at least in the most advanced sectors of capitalist society, been open to workers; the privatization process is a part of this revolution, the turn towards training and craft and the proletarianization of professors and students alike are mature products of
this historic change. Any revolutionary path at this stage must lead outside of the university.

As we mentioned in our response to question #2, only the totality of the proletariat, the vast majority of humanity, has revolutionary potential, certainly not an alienated institution like a university. University students however can initiate the expansion of struggle and help proliferate the revolutionary condition.

The ultimate “goal,” if we must assume a normative stance, or better, the result which can lead from this particular decadent historical situation of the proletariat’s university students is best characterized as the will of living labor to abolish itself in the struggle for a liberated social totality.

Talk of reformist and non-reformist goals are uninteresting and blind to the fluidity of resistance. The question is not of this binary, but of the tactical and strategic moves which may bring us closer to the abolition of the university, the destruction of that which divides us, and the integration of all that remains.

Given our “goal,” it is simple to presume that the authorities, ipso facto, have zero legitimacy. What will be won in the final analysis must be taken. Taken with a combination of force and cunning.

Yes, our ultimate “goal” is presupposed in this conversation. For reasons of tactics and strategy, what may crudely be termed as reformist positions may be taken up—indeed, even with great enthusiasm—for reasons of delay and relationship-building. But instead of the old Leftist strategy of winning reforms so as to strengthen ourselves, we know that the most advanced struggles today are those in which we win without winning anything commensurable within the system; we win but realize there really are no victors in this game. So long as the final “aim” is neither cast aside nor given secondary status, this method is acceptable.

What is interesting is how this can be done. A singularity of unflinching force is beyond our present means and conditions, so standing toe-to-toe with those against whom we are positioned is not the immediate solution. While passion and honesty would have us occupy everything right now without a single demand to authorities, the generalized situation of immanent crisis is not as urgent among all our fellow proletarians, so this cannot be our only move.

Delay: in both New School occupations, negotiations, issue-driven banners and liberalisms were embraced in order to feign cooperation and moderation while more endgoal-appropriate methods were explored. This delay led to the realization of the situation as unsustainable without the expansion of our occupation or the intensification of social conflict.

Coordination: resistance is nothing if not fluid. Those who begin the fight as liberals today may become, through struggle, comrades against the commodity tomorrow. There is no classroom like the field of social antagonism. Indeed, many at The New School were radicalized by the first occupation—the limitless possibilities breaching what was previously off-limits to the individual’s purview. Understanding the capacity for change within an individual in the context of an antagonistic moment, it may be wise to stand by the hoisting of the reformist banner in order to grow with potential comrades.

There will be no rest until the social sleep is broken. How we wake is the only relevant interrogation.
Invent the Future, Reverse the Present

UniCommon

The extraordinary months of struggle we experienced have changed us profoundly, and at the same time have changed the students and the precarious workers who have been animating with passion and continuity the conflicts of the past two academic years. They have opened spaces previously unthinkable, reversed temporality, reshuffled each one’s identity. From Paris to London and Rome down to the Mediterranea a very solid spectre is haunting the world: a generation’s rebellion against the policies of austerity and cuts in education which particularly affect young people, their future, the future of Europe otherwise in decline.

A spectre who is reproducing and that we bet will reappear again; that is solid not only because it takes to the streets and besieges the buildings symbol of power, but also because it is a congealment of experiences, hopes and demands, wishes and imagination, collective intelligence, which, starting from the student movements of recent years, has shown the possibility and the need to transform the present, because an alternative to the crisis can only be born of the movement.

UniCommon is our new journey, a bet on the revolt, the ambition of constituting a challenge beyond the crisis of capitalism and its intellectual utopia. We have never been foolish enough to think that there was a good capitalism, made of innovation and technologies of language. We always knew that when there is capital relation then there is exploitation, and when there is exploitation there is a theft, be it physical exertion or, rather, of words, passions, relationships and life. Today more than ever, though, we know that this theft is not accompanied by any further development: those governing us are corrupted parasites who compress our freedom to learn and produce.

What we have done is to build alternative and common narratives, marking a difference from how they would like to draw and represent us, stories that have given strength and durability to our demands. Thousands, in distant places, we shouldered our shields-book, we besieged government buildings, we took into the streets and we experienced the power of collective action. UniCommon wants to begin a journey along with many others, continue to tell the practices of struggle and transformation and to renew the imagination of new paths to be covered together.

UniCommon is a network that joins together different experiences and that claims a knowledge that is critical and of quality, a new welfare for everyone, the conquest of areas of autonomy and freedom! UniCommon is also an experimentation in the web, a network of multimedia communication and political organization: a new portal of information and connection of the struggles in the world of education, of production of speech and opinion, for sharing self-reform practices in the university of the crisis.

Join UniCommon, the future is unwritten!

Knowledge is power arm yourself!

The apologists of the “knowledge society” told us that the capital would have done without the exploitation, that the work would have been turned in “activity”, or at least, would have been integrated in “lifelong learning” as a dimension of indefinite development of individual skills. Well, the students have never believed it! This disbelief was exemplified by the struggles against all attempts of University reforms during the past two decades. Today more than ever, the failure of any idea of harmonious and progressive development of cognitive capitalism, of which the crisis has shown the true face, rises up clearly: deskilling of knowledge, wild precarity, youth unemployment at 30%, apprenticeships and internships, which are reduced to forms of unpaid work (rather than training!). We are facing a paradigm shift: the student component is less and less managed in terms of “development of human capital”, while it is increasingly educated at precarity and downgrading of lifestyles as a pervasive cultural horizon.

The final reform, which states the transition to university-enterprise, comes at a time when the university is no longer thought as the driving force of development, rather it seems to work as a filter regulator, with the aim of managing the youth work force surplus. In this context the processes of differential inclusion are tightening: for the first time in years, the enrollment at the university falls (-5% of students in public universities, +2% in privates for 2010/11), but most universities begin to differentiate themselves (In University of series A, B, C, and by division between teaching and research universities), with the effect that the best will (maybe) remain at their previous level, and the worst will be reduced to a lower rank.

Today, producing quality knowledge means that we have to measure ourselves with an material impossibility of spaces, time and ways of expressing our intelligence. It is in this context that the knowledge of the struggles is naturally seen as the space in which to articulate new forms of excellence and innovation, never predictable, but as the result of a daily conquest that only collective action can provide. The new challenge of self-formation, a practice that has been spreading for years in universities all over Italy and now passes through the London -“free school”- occupations, is in being able to connect directly the living knowledge that is born in the struggles and the construction of excellence, battle for the autonomy and capacity for invention. It is not a question of imposing an instrumental relationship or simply put the knowledge in service of the struggles. What
is at stake is to rewrite the statute of knowledge, breaking any established rule, and this becomes possible only if we get it to mature together with the time of the movements and the cycles of rebellion. Only through conflict a new excellence becomes possible!

All this is accompanied by the reform of governance, which will make the forms of decision within the universities more rigid and anti-democratic, giving maximum power to the Board of Directors, as the supreme enterprise governing body. Needless to say that we are not going to have nostalgia for the Faculty boards, sad narcissistic theater places. It is impossible to think that it is enough to regret the principles of representation that the movements have been able to put into crisis. The stakes are higher: to build public spaces, real bodies of radical democracy, able to build autonomous forms of direct decision-making.

The movements of recent years have taught us many things like being able to question any label and established identity. We now know that, in a phase of so fierce attack by those who govern us, we can not ignore the defense of the existing public university, even if we never liked it as it was. However, we also learnt that the movement lives in the constituent power of the common, beyond the public-private dichotomy.

It is in the context of the extraordinary struggles of recent years, from the Wave movement to this heated autumn, we intend to build self-reform practices which can speak immediately of institutions of the common. It is against the model of university-enterprise, completely failed, as evidenced by the student protests in the Anglo-Saxon area, we want to take back from the bottom up, piece by piece, that knowledge of the present that they who want to deny us.

**Book Block is everywhere! The common challenge of euro-mediterranean struggles**

UniCommon is born from the assumption that a new generation is on its way towards a different future. Rome, London, Wien, Athen, Paris, Il Cairo, Tunis and Algeri speak with the same voice of who grew up among precariousness and new poverty, without rights or social mobility, inside the corporatization of education at a global level. From these common features characterizing our generation, UniCommon wants to take up the challenge of a new european space reshaped by the mediterranean struggles.

Since years, struggles on education, against privatization and de-qualification of knowledge inside schools and universities, have been considering the european space as a necessary field of experimenting new relationships, political practices and claims. From one side of the mediterranean to the other, a skilled and mature generation, but also precarious and without rights, shouts the urgent necessity to imagine a different future, hankers for a contamination and crossing of Maghreb’s revolts with its disruptive strength.

This is the great challenge we aim to win these months: being able to create a direct relation among struggles against austerity policies, against the disinvestment of education, against precarity as permanent blackmail, against any command. We aim to be contaminated and changed by these relations among different subjects, as we did during this intense autumn.

The european and mediterranean space becomes an amazing field of experimentation where we can share and create a common language: new public investment on education and research, the struggle against corporation and privatization, the continuous construction of the university of the common through the device of self-education and the processes of self-reform.

Moreover, the struggles of last months tell us an obvious fact: the necessity to build up a new social deal able to answer the needs and desires of who has grown up within precariousness and without any right; a new social deal that starts from the defense of acquired rights, but immediately acts toward the construction of new ones to imagine a democracy on a youth scale.

UniCommon wants to be all these things: the struggles against fees and cuts in the United Kingdom; the struggles of egyptian students that drive out Mubarak; the struggles in Frankfurt against austerity policies, neo-liberalism and its crisis; the struggles in Puerto Rico and United States that occupy universities to make lessons in the streets. UniCommon wants to cross the universities of the new Europe of struggles to make the university of the common and to keep practicing the Book Block we created to imagine a possible transformation, in Rome as in London.

*Get up, stand up, make the university of common!*

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**Income against the crisis: towards the European general strike**

To imagine a new welfare in the era of precariousness and crisis becomes more and more a necessity. The present forms of guarantee are completely inadequate and anachronistic with respect to the society we live in, the conditions of labor have completely changed and in the last decade we haven’t experienced any form of guarantee connected with the new precarious conditions of work. This is to affirm that today, in Italy, we are still facing an old social State completely unable to relate to the society and its transformations, and, above all, to the new generations who don’t have any kind of guarantee, neither continuity of work, nor an adequate wage or income. Blackmail is the only form of negotiation we are obliged to accept.
In this context, poverty is the only perspective set down for a whole generation; precarity is the condition of life for youth that invest a whole life in an education that is not valorized in the world of employment, and for those who enter the world of employment jumping from an on-call contract to illicit work. A whole generation is overwhelmed by the blackmail of contemporary capitalism, a pervasive parasite of our lives, a blackmail that deny us a secure future and a decent perspective of life. We are living in a world where wealth is more and more concentrated in the hands of those few who speculatively exploit our knowledge and bodies, hiding themselves behind the crisis and austerity policies to deny us the access to what is due to us.

Inside this perspective it is necessary to put the conquest of new rights, citizenship and basic income at the center of our mobilizations, practices and language. Our claims must be immediately translated into our daily practices, unveiling the rhetoric according to which the crisis is producing scarcity and economic misery; to affirm immediately that the wealth exists but must be appropriated means to build an idea of society able to guarantee a decent future to everybody.

The attack to our future, to rights acquired through long cycles of struggles, does not regard the youth composition of society only. Today, as last autumn struggles in France have shown, we are facing a transversal and trans-generational attack that hit both the precarious students and the "guaranteed" workers. An attack moved by different faces of power, but that uses always the language of who want to impose a life model that that uses precarity as a social and ontological paradigm.

What we experienced last autumn is just the beginning of a path that during this spring must have the ability to generalize a common lexicon and common practices to refuse the future they want to impose us. The refusal that have to be translated in the construction of an alternative. The general strike of next May 6th, that we obtained all together, could be the occasion for a total stoppage of the country’s production, a stoppage of the capitalistic valorization that corresponds to the reopening of a protagonism of the society inside the processes of self-determination and democracy. A great day when, together with many and different people, we can act new practices of struggle up to the challenge awaiting us.

1. Tute Bianche: the practice of conflict and communication

White overalls (typical work clothes) where used for the first time in Italy in September 1994, during a violent demonstration staged by social centre activists in Milan. Social centres concentrated their effort in Milan, opposing the evacuation of the historical social centre Leoncavallo: 10,000 militants cornered the municipal administration, the police, the power players in the city and re-conquered the self-managed area, the present site of the social centre.

But it was only years later, beginning in 1998, that the Tute Bianche became a political movement. The movement took shape in Rome, looking to the protests of the French unemployed. The choice of the garment, the white overalls, was a very precise one: compared to the blue overalls (traditionally the garment of the working class), white overalls are the symbol of the youth workforce, mostly precarious, working on short term labour contracts, without rights or guarantees, excluded from the Fordism Social Contract which includes permanent labour contracts, paid holidays and sick and maternity leave and social security payment. A workforce with average qualifications, the result of mass schooling which took place after ’68. These are the distinctive traits of the style in which the actions of the Tute Bianche were carried out and of their political agenda: blitzes with a high communication impact (the occupation of political and economical headquarters, unilateral price reduction of tickets to museums, cinemas, public transport, irruptions into live television programs), which imposed visibility on what is invisible (job insecurity), demanding social security benefits not related to job performance, the right to education and mobility. The Tute Bianche established a strong link between the practice of conflict and the practice of communication, identifying in the mainstream media the battleground for conflict, in the belief that even radical conflict must define a positive tension with consensus.

Beginning in 1999 the white overalls made their appearance in street demonstrations. Along with the use of helmets and shields, white overalls became the symbol of a broader movement, involving most of the Italian social centres. A movement which interpreted new forms of civil disobedience. The aim of the Tute Bianche movement remained the same, to give visibility to the invisible, but the focus shifted to other issues: the detention centres for migrants, the war -it was the time of the war in Kosovo. The background of the independent movement which distinguishes the social centres blended.

From Tute Bianche to the Book Bloc

Francesco Raparelli

It seems a century has gone by since the political season of the Tute Bianche (White Overalls), but it was only a little over ten years ago. Ten years in which much has happened. Despite the historical shifts that have taken place in these past ten years, rebellious students in Rome and in London last autumn endorsed the experience of conflict invented by the Tute Bianche: shields and helmets for body protection; violation of the red zones and of the headquarters of institutional political power, barricaded behind their edifices, with no democratic relationship with society.

Such practices weren’t merely an imitation of the previous experiences of conflict, but in fact gave a whole new reading to them, an absolutely original one and a very effective one: shields were replaced by the book-shields, armour displaying the point that knowledge has become the means of physical protection for those protesting against the dismantlement of the public university, against job insecurity and unemployment. There are many more differences marking this new interpretation of the conflict. Let’s continue in order.
with the Anglo-Saxon theme of civil disobedience, and this mix was exemplified in the street marches: with the use of helmets and shields for protection the Tute Bianche violated the red zones, disobeying laws considered unjust, those on the detention of illegal migrants as well as on military intervention.

With the Seattle uprising of November 30, 1999 and the surfacing of alter-globalization movements, we witnessed yet another change: the practice of civil disobedience and the violation of the red zone was targeted on the international summits of the world powers, from OECD and the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund to the G8, institutional powers which are considered illegitimate, authoritarian and anti-democratic. The great financial institutions in fact imposed on national states economic policies which restricted welfare and social rights, and, on enterprises, downsizing and salary squeezes. The peak of this new phase was reached during the anti-G8 protests in Genoa: the Tute Bianche movement decided to do without the symbol of its identity, the white overalls, but nevertheless attempted to violate the red zone. The repression in response was without precedent, the Berlusconi government, backed by the arrogance of the Bush administration, declared war on the alter-globalization movement: Carlo Giuliani was killed, hundreds of protesters were tortured inside the Diaz school building and the Bolzaneto police station. The practice of civil disobedience suffered a significant setback but the movement decided to roll out the conflict in other social areas (job insecurity, migration/citizenship, the common good), other than challenging the summits of international powers: this was the beginning of the movement of the “Disobedients”.

2. From the “Onda” movement to the “Book Bloc”: the Italian student protest

The Onda (Wave) student movement broke on the scene back in September 2008, during the crucial phase of the global financial crisis. In September the historic US investment bank Lehman Brothers failed, while Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the banking giants managing half of the U.S.’s mortgage loans, were nationalized. The subprime mortgage crisis led to the clampdown on credit, the central banks (from the Federal Reserve to the Central European Bank) injected market liquidity, draining the public coffers. The response to the crisis meant an exorbitant increase in public debt and a huge shift of resources to the banks. It was in this grim setting that Italian students broke their silence, taking to the streets to boldly shout out: “We won’t pay for the crisis!”

The Onda however came as an answer to the Italian political crisis. In the spring of 2008 Berlusconi was again elected to lead a government. The government he formed through a vile pact with the Northern League, an Italian xenophobic political party, went to work to deal with financial collapse with these precise remedies: cuts to the welfare, and most of all, slashing financial resources for public education, schools and universities, for culture, art, and entertainment. “You can’t eat culture” was the motto of the Minister for Economy, Giulio Tremonti, while the Minister for Welfare, Maurizio Sacconi, reminded newly university graduates that that they must get used to humble and manual jobs. This was a direct attack on intelligence which distinguished the Italian answer to the systemic crisis of capitalism.

Schools took the initiative to fight back: for the first time children, alongside their teachers and parents played a leading role in over night occupations. The fight was against the abolition of full-time schooling, the re-introduction of the single teacher per class, the pious moralization -the compulsory school smock uniform. Soon after the lower schools acted, university students began their protest. Rome and the city’s University, La Sapienza, was the centre of the protest which quickly fanned out to agitation and occupations in dozens of other universities across the country. Prevailing over this more traditional form of protest, occupation, were wildcat demonstrations. Students poured out of their classrooms and campuses in oceanic waves to occupy the streets and block them, paralyzing the city and the railway traffic in massive demonstrations, invading railway stations, crowding the tracks. A generation with no future, condemned to uncertainty (in their work, their affections, their lives), began, in 2008, to break silence and to discover strength through experience on the streets. This collective voice and body defined a new form of strike action: the metropolitan strike, the strike of who have no right to strike. By paralyzing the city, in fact, silence can be broken, and dissidence is shared, it becomes general. Likewise production, which flows through the city, the people, the goods, is blocked. The slogan chanted by the students was clear: “If you block our future we’ll block the city!” Hundreds of thousands of students—on October 30 there were one million students and teachers demonstrating in the streets and in the squares—for two months undermined Berlusconi’s popularity and threatened the stability of his government.

From the occupied universities to the city, from the city to the festive atmosphere in the occupied universities, places of cultural experimentation. During the months of the Onda movement self-training practices flourished: seminars, free universities, independent research laboratories, projects for grassroots change of the public university, the statue of disciplines and knowledge. The movement was well aware that the defence of the public university meant the invention of a new university. On the one hand public funding is essential, but at the same time, the elimination of divisions between disciplines and criticism of knowledge and driving out feudal power plays, typical of the Italian university, are just as important. Where the government attacked the movement describing it as conservative and nostalgic, the movement made clear the innovative aspects without taking a single step back in defending the public nature of education, in public schools and in the university.

The Onda movement, even though extraordinary in strength and extent, could not win. The autumn protests had no effect on the budget bill, fast tracked through parliament that summer. Students were undoubtedly afflicted by a strong sense of isolation: no matter how high the consensus tipped towards them, no other social sector was mobilized and the general strike called for by the Cgil, the main Italian trade union organization, towards the end of autumn was late and weak. Meanwhile, the Minister for Education took time to write the reform bill. Having starved the beast, as Reagan would put it, the question was its survival, even in hardship. In the autumn of 2009 Mariastella Gelmini, the Minister for Education, introduced the bill for reforming education. It wasn’t so much a reform, as much
as a compendium of measures to implement the cuts: research was dealt a severe blow; governance was re-designed along authoritarian guidelines, the entry of private sector, banks and other enterprises, to the university administration boards was encouraged, the right to education was abolished, replaced by student honour loans.

In 2010, while the bill was being discussed and voted in Parliament, the student protest movement broke out again. This time, the movement was quick to establish an important link with the working class protests and with other sectors of society being strangled by the crisis, beginning with the migrants. While the government was intent on definitely destroying the public university, Fiat was trying to abolish the national work contract and the rights won by the class struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. In October the first virtuous bond was forged among students, labour workers, temporary employees in intellectual and entertainment areas as well as social centres and environmental organizations. In November the student movement took charge of the protest with unprecedented strength. At the same time as the extraordinary days of London, students made forays into the Senate chamber for the first time in the history of the Italian republic and besieged the Chamber of Deputies and both houses of parliament for days while occupying the rooftops of faculties, monuments and blocking the railways and the streets. There was an unprecedented escalation in the conflict, which reached its peak December 14 during a massive demonstration in Rome against the Berlusconi government. An estimated 100,000 protesters, students and temporary workers, besieged the headquarters of power for hours, clashing several times with the police. A generation with no future, that shouted out during the Onda movement in 2008, finally unleashed its anger. The anger over job uncertainty and unemployment and over the growth of poverty they are being subject to. From Rome to London the battle is for public education and against European austerity policies, the very policies that subsidized banks with public funds during the crisis, while slashing welfare to balance budgets.

During these exceptional days the Book Block made its appearance. The practice of holding up shields in the demonstrations was not a fortuitous one: aimed to break the ban and challenge the government until the education reform bill was withdrawn. Each shield was a book, a classic, a literary must: Petronius, Boccaccio, Deleuze, Spinoza, Morante, Miller, Machiavelli, the Italian Constitution, and so on. Books to oppose the violence of the government and the police force, for body protection of those not willing to give up their future, for those who believe that knowledge is always an expression of freedom. With the book-shields students conquered the wider public’s attention and an unprecedented consensus. Whereas the Tute Binate movement used shields to symbolize its identity, here the use of the shields was different: the protest tactics varied, from occupation of rooftops to railway stations, faculty buildings and streets, and the shields were brought out, serving as protection against the police when necessary. The book-shields have an extremely significant symbolic value, but do not specifically refer to any particular identity. The student protest followed in the path pioneered by the Tute Binate movement, with special attention to the link between practices of conflict and communication, but spoke of something different: a leading player as a new social subject, the youth workforce on temporary labour contracts, totally pitted against two-dimensional politics. The fact that Book Blocks rapidly spanned across the national borders and made their appearance in London displays the transversal, polyphonic and pluralistic aspect of their nature. Everyone can choose his or her own book, everyone can make his or her own shield, everyone can recount his or her own personal rebellion.

3. Europe, the Mediterranean, the insurrection

What do London, Rome Tunis and Cairo have in common? What are the factors shared by the insurrections which were sparked last autumn and are continuing? In the first place, the social subjects involved: students, new graduates, short-term contract workers. The newly qualified workforces with no future and no rights, excluded from the social pact. The new poor, if we are able to give a material rather than a moral meaning to the concept of poverty. Poverty today is defined by the distance between the knowledge and the skills acquired and real life and work conditions: “I study hard, yet nothing lies ahead”, “Despite many years of hard work I’m poorer than my parents”, “I make do with jobs that have nothing to do with what I studied for”. These are the words echoing through the minds of millions of young Europeans, North Africans and Egyptians. A shared condition of being downgraded is what is sparking the protests unsettling Europe and the Mediterranean regions.

Secondly, the forms of protest. Insurrections and uprisings, the demand of rights and resources against the crisis and its remedies. Likewise, insurrections are imposing democracy and fighting the parasitic powers of the state and finance. The link between the claim for democracy, class demands and demands for redistribution of wealth is not accidental. We live in a time in which capitalism is radically separated from the expression of liberal democracy, we only have to turn to China to grasp this. Where manpower takes over the skills and the functions of the capital (Marx would say “fixed capital” or machinery) capital needs to limit individual freedom by maintaining uncertainty. Where capital becomes profit and finance, no mediation can suffice and politics must merely administer what is already in place and its inevitability. The uprisings that have flooded the European and Mediterranean scene can do nothing other than speak in a new language, one which is both anti-capitalist and democratic.
In contemporary global capitalism there is no more outside ... there is only an inside marked by exploitative relationships.

— Alberto De Nicola and Gigi Roggero
part II. Further Analysis


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The Corporate university and the Financial Crisis: What is Going on?

Christopher Newfield and the Edu-factory Collective

Edu-factory Collective: In the US over the last two decades, scholars and politicians have strongly discussed the crisis of the university. You contribute to this debate by authoring papers and books; could you give us the coordinates of this dispute?

Christopher Newfield: The crisis of the university was first caused by conservative attacks on the democratization of society that the post-World War II university — especially the public university — was spreading in American society. These attacks focused on the university not only because it harbored centrist and leftwing ideas, but also because it produces the scientific and technological innovations on which the business system depends, and the trained cadres that run that system — the so-called “workforce of tomorrow” without which no Internet company or investment bank could function for a day. The Right recognized in the 1960s that the university was producing a mass middle class that was openly disputing the worldview of the Cold War economic and military elites who had kept a firm grip on US politics in the 1950s. The university seemed to be the wellspring of these troublesome people, who were protesting racial segregation, sympathizing with the victims of colonization, and marching against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. Unlike large corporations, national politics, law firms, white churches, and other pillars of the establishment, the university was instilling technical knowledge, political confidence, and economic entitlement not just into a controllable elite but into the 50-60% of the population that by the mid-1970s had spent at least some time in college.

One flank of the Right’s attack was the “culture wars,” endless and largely successful attempts to discredit civil rights and public services (signalled by popular terms such as “cultural of dependency,” “welfare queens”) and to discredit the new social knowledge emerging from universities (“political correctness,” “multiculturalism”). The Right targeted any form of academic knowledge that had been enriched by contact with social movements. The second flank was the budget wars, in which higher education was praised as the key to a successful “knowledge economy,” while at the same time being cut in terms of public support. The sector that was especially targeted was the public universities that taught 80% of American college students by 1995. The numbers are disturbing: an Urban Institute study showed that higher education’s share of state appropriations nationwide fell from 6.7% to 4.5% in the last quarter of the 20th century, and a University of California report found that state support for each of its students has fallen about 40 percent in real dollars since 1990. The money that was cut was devoted to general public higher education — the activities that brought learning, independence, personal development, and leadership abilities to ordinary students. These cuts did not affect elite private schools or federally funded research: the schools whose graduates run Wall Street and Washington were wealthier than ever. This wealth came in large part from their investments in hedge funds and other “structured investment vehicles” that have recently blown up, but which were allowing the endowments of Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton to grow between 15% and 30% a year for a number of years in a row. Similarly, federal granting agencies oriented more of their programs toward commercial results and doubled their funding in real dollars between 1990 and 2005: 70% of this money went directly to business and most of the rest to universities.

Edu-factory: Thus, the financialization of the university was allowable by the budget wars. Financialization was a process which affected both the private and public university although in a different way. Contemporary capitalism does not, in fact, save the university from the financialization process that was one of its features just before the current financial crisis. In this regard, what role will university will in the political and cultural growth of contemporary society?

C. N.: The cuts spared the corporate end of higher education while squeezing its mass base. The dominant result is that the multitude of newly minted graduates, with poorer skills, more debt, and less exposure to citizen-building fields (whose own confidence has been severely damaged), cannot expect to have democratic control of their society, but must aspire to slots that will be doled out according to the political and economic leaderships’ interpretation of economic conditions.

This brings us to the current crisis. The most immediate result will be further cuts in public services, including public universities. Wealthy elite schools will also be hurt this time: Cornell University has already announced a hiring freeze as it calculates its endowment losses, and others will follow. Federal research will be hit, affecting the budgets of the big research universities. The US ran a very large federal deficit during the boom in order to fight the war in Iraq and cut taxes on capital returns. Governments will be under tremendous pressure to run their public sector on the cheap, and higher education will continue to decline. In a sense the financial crisis is the final triumph of the Right’s “squeeze doctrine.” This was developed during the Reagan administration: use market deregulation and tax cuts for the rich to degrade public services, undermine popular support for them, and create deficits so large that the government will be forced to cut itself again. In the universities, the outcome has been a kind of financial neutron bomb. It has left the technological fields standing, while disabling the fields associated with independent cultural and political thought and with social development.

Edu-factory: One more aspect of the articulation between the financial crisis and the crisis of the university seems, for us, to be the student loans system. This system works as the socialization of the risk inside the corporate university. By means of the student loan system, students take on their own a part of the risk of the corporate university, paying in advance a part of their future wages (as it happens for the future contract in the stock market). In fact, they are going to pay their student loans for several years after the end of their education.
In this framework, we could think about the student loans system as a sort of financialization of welfare. This is an ambivalent process: on one hand there is the students’ recourse to credit to secure their access to education, on the other hand there is finance which generates a perverse response to people’s need to access education. The perverse action of finance is the reduction of the students’ future wages by the debts they contract for education.

This opens up a process of profound disqualification of both the academic work and knowledge production. This process, inside academia, works by the déclassement of labor power, by a strong increase of precarious and contingent labor, as well as by the process of loss of political confidence you refer to.

C. N.: Two things are happening at once. The first is the general increase in post-graduate debt (Nellie Mae, the student-loan provider, “found that the average student-loan debt had more than doubled” between 1991 and 1997; in addition, “the average credit card debt for the class of 2002 was over $3000.” In that year, “39 percent of students [were] graduating with ‘unmanageable levels of student loan debt’.” For African American and Hispanic students, the levels were 55 percent and 58 percent, respectively. A few years later, the actual average student loan debt level for the class of 2007 was nearly $21,900: $19,400 for borrowers at public universities and nearly $25,700 for borrowers at private colleges. To keep things at even this low level of control, four-fifths of all undergraduates work in college, one-third of them full-time, the other two-thirds an average of twenty-five hours a week). Students lose future wages and become more dependent on accepting any kind of work they can find, and more pliable in those jobs. Student debt hasn’t yet created debt servitude, but it increases financial insecurity and most likely political docility. Second, student debt has intensified both class and race inequality in the US. Latinos and African Americans are more likely to have unacceptable levels of student debt and to default on their debt later, which can create havoc in their personal lives. A third result is that students of color are increasingly found in two-year and local four-year colleges, and not at the major research publics or elite private universities where they might have an Obama-style career path into major leadership positions. In addition, four-year universities are increasingly affordable only for more affluent students, and one result is that nearly all of the gains in college participation of the past 30 years have gone to students from the top 25% of family incomes. Finally, student debt discourages entry into the public sector and public service oriented jobs. If one leaves law school with $125,000 in loans, one is less inclined to work in poverty or discrimination law for non-profits that pay $55,000 a year when one can join a corporate firm at $150,000 to start, and pay off one’s creditors.

Edu-factory: Do you think it is possible to overturn the political docility connected with the debt system and open up a battlefield in which to fight against both the crisis of the university and the financial crisis? In Italy the current students’ struggles have a slogan: “We won’t pay for your crisis.” Do you think it is possible to build up a similar process in the US context?

C. N.: That is an excellent slogan: we need it in the US! Most students and faculty act as though the crisis came like an earthquake or a hurricane, and that it is the new reality that requires us to lower our expectations.

This is wrong, but few students and faculty are as yet fighting back: Americans may be obsessed with money, but they generally don’t know much about how it works.

We need a new democratization movement that sees the public university as a cornerstone. So far, the faculty is missing in action. They are divided between tenure-track and non-tenure track (the latter, “adjunct” faculty teach 40% of all courses in US universities with no security of employment, much lower wages, higher course loads, and lesser benefits). They are also divided between “star” faculty who have international reputations and outside job offers that they can use to increases their individual salaries and research resources, and “stalwarts” who spend most of their time teaching and doing service and who have no individual salary leverage. This mixed-up and splitup group has not sided with students in demanding proper resources for combining mass access with high quality. Many of us continue to work on this, but only work stoppages and large-scale threats (all faculty applying for jobs at other universities, etc.) will match the enormous pressure coming from politicians to save the money for banks.

Everyone knows that you can’t have democracy without a free press, one that is intellectually and financially independent. You also can’t have a democracy without a free university. A regrouped democracy movement should rest in part on a demand for universal higher education — egalitarian access to the best quality, with its mission defined by its participants.

Notes on the Edu-factory and Cognitive Capitalism

George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici

Following up on our brief history of the work of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA), here we share some reflections on two concepts that have been central to this discussion: the Edu-factory and cognitive capitalism.

First, we agree with the key point of the “Edu-factory” discussion prospectus:

As was the factory, so now is the university. Where once the factory was a paradigmatic site of struggle between workers and capitalists, so now the university is a key space of conflict, where the ownership of knowledge, the reproduction of the labor force, and the creation of social and cultural stratifications are all at stake. This is to say the university is not just another institution subject to sovereign and governmental controls, but a crucial site in which wider social struggles are won and lost.

CAFA’s support for the struggles in African universities followed from the same analysis and logic. Universities are important places of class struggle, and not only in Europe and North America. We insisted on this point against the critics of the post-colonial university,
who looked down on any effort to defend educational systems that they saw as modeled on colonial education. We argued that university struggles in Africa express a refusal to let international capital:

- decide the conditions of work;
- appropriate the wealth invested in these institutions which people have paid for;
- suppress the democratization and politicization of education that on African campuses had grown through the 1980s and 90s.

More generally, in the same way as we would oppose the shutting down of factories where workers have struggled to control work and wages — especially if these workers were determined to fight against the closures — so we agree that we should resist the dismantling of public education, even though schools are also instruments of class rule and alienation. This is a contradiction that we cannot wish away and is present in all our struggles. Whether we are struggling around education, health, housing, etc. it is illusory to think that we can place ourselves outside of capitalist relations whenever we wish and from there build a new society. As students’ movements across the planet have shown, universities are not just nurseries for the leaders of a neoliberal elite, they are also a terrain for debate, contestation of institutional politics, and reappropriation of resources.

It is through these debates, struggles and reappropriations, and by connecting the struggles in the campuses to the struggles in other parts of the social factory, that we create alternative forms of education and alternative educational practices. In Italy, for instance, with the contract of 1974, metalmechanic workers were able to win 150 hours of paid study leave per year in which, together with teachers, mostly from the student movement, they organized curricula that analyzed the capitalist organization of work, also in their own workplaces. In the US, since the 60s, the campuses have been among the centers of the anti-war movement, producing a wealth of analysis about the military-industrial complex and the role of the universities in its functioning and expansion. In Africa, the university campuses were centers of resistance to structural adjustment and analysis of its implications. This is certainly one of the reasons why the World Bank was so eager to dismantle them.

The struggle in the Edu-factory is especially important today because of the strategic role of knowledge in the production system in a context in which the “enclosure” of knowledge (its privatization, commodification, expropriation through the intellectual property regimes) is a pillar of economic restructuring. We are concerned, however, that we do not overestimate this importance, and/or use the concept of the Edu-factory to set up new hierarchies with respect to labor and forms of capitalist accumulation.

This concern arises from our reading of the use that is made of the concept of “cognitive capitalism” as found in the statement circulated by Conricerca as well as in the work of some Italian autonomists. True, we need to identify the leading forms of capitalist accumulation in all its different phases, and recognize their “tendency” to hegemonize (though not to homogenize) other forms of capitalist production. But we should not dismiss the critiques of Marxian theory developed by the anti-colonial movement and the feminist movement which have shown that capitalist accumulation has thrived precisely through its capacity to simultaneously organize development and underdevelopment, waged and un-waged labor, production at the highest levels of technological know-how and production at the lowest levels. In other words, we should not dismiss the argument that it is precisely through these disparities, the divisions built in the working class through them, and the capacity to transfer wealth/surplus from one pole to the other that capitalist accumulation has expanded in the face of so much struggle.

There are many issues involved that we can only touch upon in these notes. We want, above all, to concentrate here on the political implications of the use of the notion of “cognitive capitalism,” but here are a few points for discussion.

First, the history of capitalism should demonstrate that the capitalist subsumption of all forms of production does not require the extension of the level of science and technology achieved at any particular point of capitalist development to all workers contributing to the accumulation process. It is now acknowledged, for instance, that the plantation system was organized along capitalist lines; in fact, it was a model for the factory. However, the cotton picking plantation slaves in the US South of 1850s were not working at the level of technological know-how available to workers in the textile mills of the US North of the time, though their product was a lifeline for these same mills. Does that mean that the Southern slaves were industrial workers or, vice versa, the Northern wage workers were plantation workers? Similarly, to this day, capitalism has not mechanized housework despite the fact that the unpaid domestic work of women has been a key source of accumulation for capital. Again, why at the peak of an era of “cognitive capitalism” do we witness an expansion of labor in slave-like conditions, at the lowest level of technological know-how — child labor, labor in sweatshops, labor in the new agricultural plantations and mining fields of Latin America, Africa, etc.? Can we say that workers in these conditions are “cognitive workers”? Are they and their struggles irrelevant to and/or outside the circuit of capitalist accumulation? Why has wage labor, once considered the defining form of capitalist work, still not been extended even to the majority of workers in capitalist society?

This example and these questions suggest that work can be organized for capitalist accumulation and along capitalist lines without the laborer working at the average level of technological/scientific knowledge applied in the highest points of capitalist production. They also suggest that the logic of capitalism can only be grasped by looking at the totality of its relations, and not only to the highest point of its scientific/technological achievement. Capitalism has systematically and strategically produced disparities through the international and sexual/racial division of labor and through the “underdevelopment” of particular sectors of its production, and these disparities have not been erased, but in fact have been deepened by the increasing integration of science and technology in the production process. For instance, in the era of cognitive labor, the majority of Africans do not have access to the Internet or for that matter even the telephone; even the miniscule minority who does, has access to it only for limited periods of time, because of the intermittent availability of electricity. Similarly, illiteracy, especially among women, has grown exponentially from the 1970s to the present. In other words, a leap forward for many workers, has been accompanied by a leap
backward by many others, who are now even more excluded from the “global discourse,” and certainly not in the position to participate in global cooperation networks based upon the internet.

Second and most important are the political implications of a use of “cognitive capitalism” and “cognitive labor” that overshadows the continuing importance of other forms of work as contributors to the accumulation process.

There is the danger that by privileging one kind of capital (and therefore one kind of worker) as being the most productive, the most advanced, the most exemplary of the contemporary paradigm, etc., we create a new hierarchy of struggle, and we engage in form of activism that precludes a recomposition of the working class. Another danger is that we fail to anticipate the strategic moves by which capital can restructure the accumulation process by taking advantage of the inequalities within the global workforce. How the last globalization drive was achieved is exemplary in this case.

Concerning the danger of confirming in our activism the hierarchies of labor created by the extension of capitalist relations, there is much we can learn from the past. As the history of class struggle demonstrates, privileging one sector of the working class over the others is the surest road to defeat. Undoubtedly, certain types of workers have played a crucial role in certain historical phases of capitalist development. But the working class has paid a very high price to a revolutionary logic that established hierarchies of revolutionary subjects, patterned on the hierarchies of the capitalist organization of work. Marxist/socialist activists in Europe lost sight of the revolutionary power of the world’s “peasantry.” More than that, peasant movements have been destroyed (see the case of the ELAS in Greece) by communists who considered only the factory worker as organizable and “truly revolutionary.” Socialists/socialists also lost sight of the immense (house) work that was being done to produce and reproduce industrial workers. The huge “iceberg” of labor in capitalism (to use Maria Mies’ metaphor) was made invisible by the tendency to look at the tip of the iceberg, industrial labor, while the labor involved in the reproduction of labor-power went unseen, with the result that the feminist movement was often fought against and seen as something outside the class struggle.

Ironically, under the regime of industrial capitalism and factory work, it was the peasant movements of Mexico, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and to a great extent Russia who made the revolutions of the 20th century. In the 1960s as well, the impetus for change at the global level came from the anti-colonial struggle, including the struggle against apartheid and for Black Power in the United States. Today, it is the indigenous people, the campesinos, the unemployed of Mexico (Chiapas, Oaxaca), Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, the farmers of India, the maquila workers of the US border, the immigrant workers of the US, etc. who are conducting the most “advanced” struggles against the global extension of capitalist relations.

Let us be very clear. We make these points not to minimize the importance of the struggles in the Edu-factory and the ways in which the Internet has led to the creation of new kinds of commons that are crucial to our struggle, but because we fear we may repeat mistakes that may ultimately isolate those who work and struggle in these networks. From this viewpoint, we think that the “no-global” movement (for all its difficulties) was a step forward in its capacity to articulate demands and forms of activism that projected the struggle in a global way, creating a new type of internationalism, one bringing together computer programmers, artists, and other edu-workers in one movement, each making its distinctive contribution.

For this political re-composition to become possible, however, we need to see the continuity of our struggle through the difference of our places in the international division of labor, and to articulate our demands and strategies in accordance to these differences and the need to overcome them. Assuming that a recomposition of the workforce is already occurring because work is becoming homogenized — through a process that some have defined as the “becoming common of labor” — will not do. We cannot cast the “cognitive” net so widely that almost every kind of work becomes “cognitive” labor, short of making arbitrary social equations and obfuscating our understanding of what is new about “cognitive labor” in the present phase of capitalism. It is an arbitrary move (for instance) to assimilate, under the “cognitive” label, the work of a domestic worker — whether an immigrant or not, whether s/he is a wife/mother/sister or a paid laborer — to that of a computer programmer or computer artist and, on top of it, suggest that the cognitive aspect of domestic work is something new, owing to the dominance of a new type of capitalism.

Certainly domestic work, like every form of reproductive work, does have a strong cognitive component. To know how to adjust the pillows under the body of a sick person so that the skin does not blister and the bones do not hurt is a science and an art that requires much attention, knowledge and experimentation.

The same is true of the care for a child, and of most other aspects of “housework” whoever may be doing this work. But it is precisely when we look at the vast universe of practices that constitute reproductive work, especially when performed in the home, that we see the limits of the application of the type of computer-based, technological know-how on which “cognitive capitalism relies.” We see that the knowledge necessary for reproductive work can certainly benefit from the use of the Internet (assuming there is time and money for it), but it is one type of knowledge that human beings, mostly women, have developed over a long period of time, in conformity with but also against the requirements of the capitalist organization of work.

We should add that nothing is gained by admitting housework into the new realm of cognitive labor, by redefining it as “affective labor” or, as some have done, “inmaterial labor,” or again “care work.” For a start, we should avoid formulas that imply a body/mind, reason/emotion separation in any type of work and its products.

Moreover, does replacing the notion of “reproductive work,” as used by the feminist movement, with that of “affective labor” truly serve to assimilate, under the “cognitive” label, the work of a domestic worker (whether immigrant or not, whether a wife/sister/mother or paid laborer) or the work of a sex worker to that of a computer programmer or computer artist? What is really “common” in their labor, taking into account all the complex of social relations sustain-
ing their different forms of work? What is common, for instance, between a male computer programmer or artist or teacher and a female domestic worker who, in addition to having a paid job, must also spend many hours doing unpaid labor taking care of her family members? (Immigrant women too often have family members to care for in the countries to which they migrate, or must send part of their salary home to pay for those caring for their family members.)

Most crucial of all, if the labor involved in the reproduction of human beings — still an immense part of the labor expended in capitalist society — is “cognitive,” in the sense that it produces not things but “states of being,” then, what is new about “cognitive labor”? And, equally important, what is gained by assimilating all forms of work — even as a tendency — under one label, except that some kinds of work and the political problematic they generate again disappear?

Isn’t the case that by stating that domestic work is “cognitive work” we fail, once again, to address the question of the devaluation of this work in capitalist society, its largely unpaid status, the gender hierarchies that are built upon it, and through the wage relation? Shouldn’t we ask, instead, what kind of organizing can be done — so that domestic workers and computer programmers can come together rather than assuming that we all becoming assimilated in the more magnum of “cognitive labor”?

Taking reproductive work as a standard also serves to question the prevailing assumption that the cognitivization of work, in the sense of its computerization

/ reorganization through the Internet — has an emancipatory effect. A voluminous feminist literature has challenged the idea that the industrialization of many aspects of housework has reduced housework time for women. In fact, many studies have shown that industrialization has increased the range of what is considered as socially necessary housework. The same is true with the infiltration of science and technology into domestic work, including childcare and sex work. For example, the spread of personal computers, for those houseworkers who can afford them and have time to use them, can help relieve the isolation and monotony of housework through chat rooms and social networks. But the creation of virtual communities does not alleviate the increasing problem of loneliness, nor helps the struggle against the destruction of community bonds and the proliferation of gated worlds.

In conclusion, notions like “cognitive labor” and “cognitive capitalism” should be used with the understanding that they represent a part, though a leading one, of capitalist development and that different forms of knowledge and cognitive work exist that cannot be flattened under one label. Short of that, the very utility of such concepts in identifying what is new in capitalist accumulation and the struggle against it is lost. What is also lost is the fact that, far from commodifying labor, every new turn in capitalist development tends to deepen the divisions in the world proletariat, and that as long as these divisions exist they can be used to reorganize capital on a different basis and destroy the terrain on which movements have grown.

The Pedagogy of debt
Jeffrey Williams

Student loans, for more than half those attending college, are the new paradigm of college funding. Consequently, student debt is, or will soon be, the new paradigm of early to middle adult life. Gone are the days when the state university was as cheap as a laptop and was considered a right, like secondary education. Now higher education is, like most social services, a largely privatized venture, and loans are the chief way that a majority of individuals pay for it.

Over the past decade, there has been an avalanche of criticism of the “corporatization” of the university. Most of it focuses on the impact of corporate protocols on research, the reconfiguration of the relative power of administration and faculty, and the transformation of academic into casual labor, but little of it has addressed student debt. Because more than half the students attending university receive, along with their bachelor’s degree, a sizable loan payment book, we need to deal with student debt.

The average undergraduate student loan debt in 2002 was $18,900. It more than doubled from 1992, when it was $9,200. Added to this is credit card debt, which averaged $3,000 in 2002, boosting the average total debt to about $22,900. One can reasonably expect, given still accelerating costs, that it is over $30,000 now. Bear in mind that this does not include other private loans or the debt that parents take on to send their children to college. (Neither does it account for “post-baccalaureate loans,” which more than doubled in seven years, from $18,572 in 1992–1993 to $38,428 in 1999–2000, and have likely doubled again).

Federal student loans are a relatively new invention. The Guaranteed Student Loan (GSL) program only began in 1965, a branch of Lyndon B. Johnson’s

Great Society programs intended to provide supplemental aid to students who otherwise could not attend college or would have to work excessively while in school. In its first dozen years, the amounts borrowed were relatively small, in large part because a college education was comparatively inexpensive, especially at public universities. From 1965 to 1978, the program was a modest one, issuing about $12 billion in total, or less than one billion dollars a year. By the early 1990s, the program grew immodestly, jumping to $15 billion to $20 billion a year; and now it is over $50 billion a year, accounting for 59 percent majority of higher educational aid that the federal government provides, surpassing all grants and scholarships.

The reason that debt has increased so much and so quickly is because tuition and fees have increased, at roughly three times the rate of inflation. Tuition and fees have gone up from an average of $924 in 1976, when I first went to college, to $6,067 in 2002. The average encompasses all institutions, from community colleges to Ivies. At private universities, the average jumped from $3,051 to $22,686. In 1976, the tuition and fees at Ivies were about $4,000; now they are near $33,000. The more salient figure of tuition, fees, room, and board (though not including other expenses, such as books or travel
This increase has put a disproportionate burden on students and their families — hence loans. The median household income for a family of four was about $24,300 in 1980, $41,400 in 1990, and $54,200 in 2000. In addition to the debt that students take on, there are few statistics on how much parents pay and how they pay it. It has become common for parents to finance college through home equity loans and home refinancing. Although it is difficult to measure these costs separately, paying for college no doubt forms part of the accelerating indebtedness of average American families.

Students used to say, “I’m working my way through college.” Now it would be impossible to do that unless you have superhuman powers. According to one set of statistics, during the 1960s, a student could work fifteen hours a week at minimum wage during the school term and forty in the summer and pay his or her public university education; at an Ivy or similar private school, the figure would have been about twenty hours a week during term. Now, one would have to work fifty-two hours a week all year long; at an Ivy League college, you would have to work 136 hours a week all year. Thus the need for loans as a supplement, even if a student is working and parents have saved.

The reason tuition has increased so precipitously is more complicated. Sometimes politicians blame it on the inefficiency of academe, but most universities, especially state universities, have undergone retrenchment if not austerity measures for the past twenty years. Tuition has increased in large part because there is significantly less federal funding to states for education, and the states fund a far smaller percentage of tuition costs. In 1980, states funded nearly half of tuition costs; by 2000, they contributed only 32 percent. Universities have turned to a number of alternative sources to replace the lost funds, such as “technology transfers” and other “partnerships” with business and seemingly endless campaigns for donations; but the steadiest way, one replenished each fall like the harvest, is through tuition.

Although state legislators might flatter themselves on their belt-tightening, this is a shell game that slides the cost elsewhere — from the public tax roll to individual students and their parents. This represents a shift in the idea of higher education from a public entitlement to a private service. The post-World War II idea, forged by people like James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard and a major policy maker, held that the university should be a meritocratic institution, not just to provide opportunity to its students but to take advantage of the best and the brightest to build America. To that end, the designers of the postwar university kept tuitions low, opening the gates to record numbers of students, particularly from classes previously excluded. I have called this “the welfare state university” because it instantiated the policies and ethos of the postwar, liberal welfare state.

Now the paradigm for university funding is no longer a public entitlement primarily offset by the state but a privatized service: citizens have to pay a substantial portion of their own way. I call this the “post-welfare state university” because it carries out the policies and ethos of the neoconservative dismantling of the welfare state, from the “Reagan Revolution” through the Clinton “reform” up to the present draining of social services. The principle is that citizens should pay more directly for public services, and public services should be administered less through the state and more through private enterprise. The state’s role is not to provide an alternative realm apart from the market, but to grease the wheels of the market, subsidizing citizens to participate in it and businesses to provide social services. Loans carry out the logic of the post-welfare state because they reconfigure college funding not as an entitlement or grant but as self-payment (as with welfare, fostering “personal responsibility”), and not as a state service but a privatized service, administered by megabanks such as Citibank, as well as Sallie Mae and Nellie Mae, the critical federal nonprofit lenders, although they have recently become independent for-profits. The state encourages participation in the market of higher education by subsidizing interest, like a start-up business loan, but eschews dependence, as it leaves the principal to each citizen. You have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.

This also represents a shift in the idea of higher education from a social to an individual good. In the postwar years, higher education was conceived as a massive national mobilization, in part as a car- ruyor from the war ethos, in part as a legacy of the New Deal, and in part as a response to the cold war. It adopted a modified socialism, like a vaccine assimilating a weaker strain of communism in order to immunize against it. Although there was a liberal belief in the sanctity of the individual, the unifying aim was the social good: to produce the engineers, scientists, and even humanists who would strengthen the country. Now higher education is conceived almost entirely as a good for individuals: to get a better job and higher lifetime earnings. Those who attend university are construed as atomized individuals making a personal choice in the marketplace of education to maximize their economic potential. This is presumably a good for the social whole, all the atoms adding up to a more prosperous economy, but it is based on the conception of society as a market driven by individual competition rather than social cooperation, and it defines the social good as that which fosters a profitable market. Loans are a personal investment in one’s market potential rather than a public investment in one’s social potential. Like a business, each individual is a store of human capital, and higher education provides value added.

This represents another shift in the idea of higher education, from youthful exemption to market conscription, which is also a shift in our vision of the future and particularly in the hopes we share for our young. The traditional idea of education is based on social hope, providing an exemption from work and expense for the younger members of society so that they can explore their interests, develop their talents, and receive useful training, as well as become versed in citizenship — all this in the belief that society will benefit in the future. Society pays it forward. This obviously applies to elementary and secondary education (although given the voucher movement, it is no longer assured there, either), and it was extended to the university, particularly in the industrial era. The reasoning melds citizenship ideals and utilitarian purpose. The classical idea of the American university propounded by Thomas Jefferson holds that democratic participation requires education in democratic principles, so it is an
but extraneous to the aims of higher education. What if we were to think of it as a necessary evil attached to higher education? Debt is not just a mode of financing but a mode of pedagogy. We all know that the wealthiest class of students is more likely to go to college than the bottom quarter of the population. According to current statistics, the bottom quarter of the population had the rate of 37 percent in 2004. Something is wrong with this picture. The way they work for students is that the federal government pays the interest while the student is enrolled in college and for a short grace period after graduation, providing a modest “start-up” subsidy, as with a business loan, but no aid toward the actual principal or “investment.” For lenders, the federal government insures the loans. In other words, banks bear no risk; federal loan programs provide a safety net for banks, not for students. Even by the standards of the most doctrinaire market believer, this is bad capitalism. The premise of money lending and investment, say for a home mortgage, is that interest is assessed and earned in proportion to risk. As a result of these policies, the banks have profited stunningly. Sallie Mae, the largest lender, returned the phenomenal profit rate of 37 percent in 2004. Something is wrong with this picture.

There is no similar safety net for students. Even if a person is in bankruptcy and absolved of all credit card and other loans, the one debt that cannot be forgone is student loans. This has created what the journalists David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams have called a generation of “indentured students.” We will not know the full effects of this system for at least twenty years, although one can reasonably predict it will not have the salutary effects that the GI Bill had. Or, simply, students from less privileged classes will not go to college. According to current statistics, the bottom quarter of the wealthiest class of students is more likely to go to college than the top quarter of the least wealthy students. Opportunity for higher education is not equal.

Debt is not just a mode of financing but a mode of pedagogy. We tend to think of it as a necessary evil attached to higher education but extraneous to the aims of higher education. What if we were to see it as central to people’s actual experience of college. What do we teach students when we usher them into the post-welfare state university?

There are a host of standard, if sometimes contradictory, rationales for higher education. On the more idealistic end of the spectrum, the traditional rationale is that we give students a broad grounding in humanistic knowledge — in the Arnoldian credo, “the best that has been known and thought.” A corollary is that they explore liberally across the band of disciplines (hence “liberal education” in a nonpolitical sense). A related rationale is that the university is a place where students can conduct self-exploration; although this sometimes seems to abet the “me culture” or “culture of narcissism” as opposed to the more stern idea of accumulating knowledge, it actually has its roots in Socrates’s dictum to know oneself, and in many ways it was Cardinal John Henry Newman’s primary aim in The Idea of a University. These rationales hold the university apart from the normal transactions of the world.

In the middle of the spectrum, another traditional rationale holds that higher education promotes a national culture; we teach the profundity of American or, more generally, Western, culture. A more progressive rationale might reject the nationalism of that aim and posit instead that higher education should teach a more expansive and inclusive world culture but still maintains the principle of liberal learning. Both rationales maintain an idealistic strain — educating citizens — but see the university as attached to the world rather than as a refuge from it. At the most worldly end of the spectrum, a common rationale holds that higher education provides professional skills and training. Although this utilitarian purpose opposes Newman’s classic idea, it shares the fundamental premise that higher education exists to provide students with an exemption from the world of work and a head start before entering adult life. Almost every college and university in the United States announces these goals in its mission statement, stitching together idealistic, civic, and utilitarian purposes in a sometimes clashing but conjoined quilt.

The lessons of debt diverge from these traditional rationales. First, debt teaches that higher education is a consumer service. It is a pay-as-you-go transaction, like any other consumer enterprise, subject to the business franchises attached to education. All the entities making up the present university multiplex reinforce this lesson, from the Starbucks kiosk in the library and the Burger King counter in the dining hall, to the Barnes & Noble bookstore and the pseudo-Golds Gym rec-center — as well as the banking kiosk (with the easy access Web page) so that they can pay for it all. We might tell them the foremost purpose of higher education is self-searching or liberal learning, but their experience tells them differently.

Second, debt teaches career choices. It teaches that it would be a poor choice to wait on tables while writing a novel or become an elementary school teacher at $24,000 or join the Peace Corps. It rules out cultural industries such as publishing or theater or art galleries that pay notoriously little or nonprofits like community radio or a women's shelter. The more rational choice is to work for a big corporation or go to law school. Nellie Mae, one of the major lenders, discounted the effect of loans on such choices, reporting that “Only 17 percent of borrowers said student loans had a significant
impact on their career plans.” It concluded, “The effect of student loans on career plans remains small.” This is a dubious conclusion, as 17 percent on any statistical survey is not negligible. The survey is flawed because it assessed students’ responses at graduation, before they actually had to get jobs and pay the loans, or simply when they saw things optimistically. Finally, it is fundamentally skewed because it assumes that students decide on career plans tabula rasa. Most likely, many students have already recognized the situation they face and adapted their career plans accordingly. The best evidence for this is the warp in majors toward business. Many bemoan the fact that the liberal arts have faded as undergraduate majors, while business majors have nearly tripled, from about 8 percent before the Second World War to 22 percent now. This is not because students no longer care about poetry or philosophy. Rather, they have learned the lesson of the world in front of them and chosen according to its, and their, constraints.

Third, debt teaches a worldview. Following up on the way that advertising indoctrinates children into the market, as Juliet Schor shows in Born to Buy, student loans directly conscript college students. Debt teaches that the primary ordering principle of the world is the capitalist market, and that the market is natural, inevitable, and implacable. There is no realm of human life anterior to the market; ideas, knowledge, and even sex (which is a significant part of the social education of college students) simply form sub-markets. Debt teaches that democracy is a market; freedom is the ability to make choices from all the shelves. And the market is a good: it promotes better products through competition rather than aimless leisure; and it is fair because, like a casino, the rules are clear, and anyone — black, green, or white — can lay down chips. It is unfortunate if you don’t have many chips to lay down, but the house will spot you some, and having chips is a matter of the luck of the social draw. There is a certain impermeability to the idea of the market: you can fault social arrangements, but whom do you fault for luck?

Fourth, debt teaches civic lessons. It teaches that the state’s role is to augment commerce, abetting consuming, which spurs producing; its role is not to interfere with the market, except to catalyze it. Debt teaches that the social contract is an obligation to the institutions of capital, which in turn give you all of the products on the shelves. It also teaches the relation of public and private. Each citizen is a private subscriber to public services and should pay his or her own way; social entitlements such as welfare promote laziness rather than the proper competitive spirit. Debt is the civic version of tough love.

Fifth, debt teaches the worth of a person. Worth is measured not according to a humanistic conception of character, cultivation of intellect and taste, or knowledge of the liberal arts, but according to one’s financial potential. Education provides value-added to the individual so serviced, in a simple equation: you are how much you can make, minus how much you owe. Debt teaches that the disparities of wealth are an issue of the individual, rather than society; debt is your free choice.

Last, debt teaches a specific sensibility. It inculcates what Barbara Ehrenreich calls “the fear of falling,” which she defines as the quintessential attitude of members of the professional middle class who attain their standing through educational credentials rather than wealth. It inducts students into the realm of stress, worry, and pressure, reinforced with each monthly payment for the next fifteen years.

The Student Loan Debt Abolition Movement in the U.S.
George Caffentzis

Debt has had a crushing impact on the lives of those who must take student loans to finance their university education in the US. For tuition fees that have been so notoriously high in private universities now are rising in public universities so quickly they are far out-pacing inflation. Student loan debt in the US has been much higher than in Europe (with the exception of Sweden), though recent developments there would indicate that this gap may soon no longer exist (Usher).

We should also take into account the fraudulent way in which the loans have been administered by the banks and the vindictiveness with which those who have been unable to pay back have been pursued by collection agents. The most frustrating aspect of student loan debt being the legally toothless position the debtor is in, because government policy has relentlessly vested all the bargaining power in the hands of the creditors.

But however agonizing the situation of the indebted, the debt is growing. As of September 2010 total student loan debt amounted to $850 billion, having just surpassed credit card debt by about $20 billion for the first time. And it is rising at a catastrophic rate, e.g., by 25% in 2009 to meet the rising cost of tuition and other college fees. Even the Great Recession has not put an end to this financial explosion. On the contrary, while credit card debt has leveled off, student borrowing has continued to grow to cover the rising costs of living as well as the tuition fees, especially by unemployed workers who are “going back to school” to get a “better,” or at least some, job in the future.

Logic, therefore, makes the remission and abolition of student loan debt a necessary demand for the university student movement, especially in an era when the need for “an educated work-force” has become an institutional axiom. However, student loan debt abolition (for instance) was not a focus or prominent issue in the student mobilization that peaked last spring, especially in California. This constitutes an impasse for the movement, since meeting after meeting it has become clear that refusing the blackmail of the debt and calling for abolition of tuition fees are pivotal to every form of struggle on our campuses. Students holding three jobs to repay (or avoid) loans or taking as many credits they can fit in their schedules to reduce the length and cost of schooling, can neither be active in campus protests against budget cuts and the commercialization of education nor can they engage in self-education and the creation of “knowledge commons.”
In this contribution to the Edu-factory network’s discussion of debt, I think beyond this impasse, asking why an organized debt abolition movement does not exist in the US and what needs to be done to assist its formation.

A first consideration is that the very conditions that would call for mass student protest against indebtedness have so far contributed to preempt this possibility. Even before the time to pay back is upon them, the debt has profound disciplining effect on students, Taylorizing their studies and undermining the sociality / and politicization that has traditionally been one of the main benefits of college life (Read).

An even more important consideration is the fact that student loans are constructed so that students do not pay them back while they are students. Student loans are time bombs, constructed to detonate when the debtor is away from the campus and the collectivity college provides is left behind. Once we recognize this we can also see that there is a hard-fought struggle around the student loan debt throughout the US, but (a) it operates in a non-communal, micro-social, serial way, mainly through default; (b) it is a struggle that involves subjects other than students, taking off precisely once students cease to be students, for only after they leave the campus do the debt collectors show up at their doorsteps. In other words, while the visible student movement has not so far made debt abolition its goal another movement with that goal has been growing to a large extent underground. One former student after another is rejecting loan payments through default, but they are not publicly announcing it. “For fiscal year 2008 the default rate increased to 7.2 percent, compared with 6.7 percent in 2007 and 5.2 percent in 2006” after a long period of decline from 1990, when it hit a peak of 22.4%, and 2003, when it hit a trough of 4.5%. (NB: These somewhat misleading statistics are calculated according to “cohort” years. For example, the 2007 cohort default rate is the proportion of federal loan borrowers who began loan repayments between October 2006 and September 2007, and who had defaulted on their loans by the end of September 2008. Therefore, they dramatically underestimate the true default rate) (Lederman).

As typical of “invisible” movements, statistics fail us in drawing its proportions. We have no estimate, for instance, of how many have been driven to suicide or how many have been forced to go into exile due to their student debts. Nor do we have a measure of the social impact of the growing de-legitimation of the student debt machine. We can only speculate about the consequences of disclosures concerning the collusion between the university administrations (especially in the case of “for profit” institutions) and the banks, now commonly acknowledged in the media as well as in congressional investigations. For sure, blogs and web-groups are forming to share experiences and voice anger about student loan companies like the biggest one, the Student Loan Marketing Association (nicknamed “Sallie Mae”). On Google alone, there are about 9,000 entries under the rubric “Sallie Mae Sucks,” and another 9,000 under “Fuck Sallie Mae.” Browsing through the chat rooms, with their harrowing stories of wrecked lives and mounting frustration against the operations of Sallie Mae, makes it clear that the potential for a debt abolition movement is high. So far, however, most attempts that have been made to give an organizational form to this anger have largely demanded the application of consumer protection norms to the management of the debt.

A well-known example is StudentLoanJustice.org (SLJ.org) that systematically compiles testimonials on the subject, organized state-by-state, revealing in graphic detail the dread, disgust, and humiliation indebtedness generates. These testimonies also reveal why, despite their anger and despair, debtors hesitate to join in an open debt abolition movement. As the founder of SLJ.org, Alan Michael Collinge, points out that there are many obstacles to such course of action:

*Even now, the barriers to inciting meaningful political action at the grassroots level are daunting. For one thing, facing large — often impenetrable — student debt is a highly personal matter. Many debtors are too embarrassed or humiliated even to tell their immediate family members and close friends about their situation, let alone join in a grassroots effort challenging the injustice of student lending laws.” (Collinge: 93)

The Kantian imperative that debts ought to be repaid cost what may is also weighing on the minds of the debtors despite the fact that the conditions imposed by student loan companies are often fraudulent and generally unfair. As mentioned, many of the developing student debtor organizations refuse to speak of “abolition.” What fuels their indignation is the arbitrariness and arrogance of the creditors’ management of the debt, not the debt itself. As the “content author” of the SallieMaeBeef.com website writes:

Allow me to make one thing clear. This site is not for people who chose not to make their payments. Choosing not to pay a debt is one’s own fault. Sallie Mae, like many companies, makes mistakes. I don’t fault them for that. What matters is how they resolve the problems. They did a terrible job resolving the mistakes they made with my account, and I found out that I was far from being the only person suffering because of THEIR mistakes. I also found that they allegedly prey on borrowers, trapping people into paying 2 to 3 times (sometimes significantly more) what they borrowed. There is simply no excuse for it. (www.SallieMaeBeef.com).

The very choice of the term “Beef” in the title of the organization suggests a complaint or a private dispute, not a demand or a public arraignment. SLJ.org, one of the most publicized student loan protest organizations, also rejects both individual or collective refusals to pay– witness what its founder writes of one of SLJ.org’s members, Robert, whose $33,000 debt became $155,000 through the ploys of the financial company which held his debt : “like most SLJ.org members, Robert absolutely agrees that he should pay what he owes, but he simply cannot deal with a debt of this magnitude” (Collinge: 19).

In other words, prominent anti-student loan debtors organizations re-affirm the principle of the student debt. They believe that the safeguards and regulatory oversight that apply to other consumer loans – mortgages, auto loans, and credit card charges – should be applied to student loans as well, which presently is not the case because of the repeated governmental actions taken to block this option.

*In 1998 Congress made the student loan “the only type of loan in US history non-dischargeable in bankruptcy” (Collinge: 14). This
means that presently even after filing for bankruptcy and been re-
duced to the status of a pauper, a debtor is still deemed responsible
for payment on student loans, cost what it may, perhaps even facing
a charge of fraud and imprisonment, if some politicians have their
ways.

*In 1998 all statutes of limitations for the collection of student loan
debt were eliminated.

*Since the beginning of the federal student loan program in 1963,
the freedom to change lenders in order to find better terms for a loan
has been denied.

Once the commodity approach to education is accepted, the po-
titical strategy adopted becomes predictable. According to Collinge,
“it is imperative that standard consumer protections be returned to
student loans” (Collinge: 20). This means, for a start, that student
loans should be made dischargeable in bankruptcy, should have a
statute of limitations apply to them, and it should be possible to refi-
nance them with other lenders. These are the demands put forward
by SLJ.org since its formation in 2005, supported in varying degrees
by a number of liberal politicians like Hillary Clinton, Ted Kennedy,
Dick Durbin, and Congressmen George Miller and Danny Davis
(see the Acknowledgements section of (Collinge: 151)).

Over the last five years this “consumer protections” strategy has
produced significant legislative results addressing some of the griev-
ances listed above. These include the passage of three major acts:
The College Cost Reduction Act of 2007 (that halves the interest
rate on federally subsidized loans and cuts lender subsidies and col-
collection fees slightly), The Student Loan Sunshine Act of 2007 (that
requires university officials to fully disclose any special arrange-
ments between them and lending companies), and in 2010 the Student Aid
and Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA) (described below). For all
these cautious legislative efforts however, SLJ.org and similar organ-
izations have not achieved any of their major objectives. If we add
the return to power, as Speaker of the House, of John Boehner, “by
far the largest recipient of campaign contributions from student loan
interests” (like Sallie Mae) and their most aggressive watchdog, we
can conclude that the “consumer protection” approach to student
debt has reached its limit. Indeed, when Boehner speaks of repealing
the Health Care Bill (whose complete name is the “Health and
Education Reconciliation Act”), he certainly alludes also to the edu-
cation rider hidden in it, as much as to the parts of the bill dealing
with health care.

What then are the prospects for the struggle against student loan
indebtedness?

Clearly a premise for the rise of an openly organized student loan
debt abolition movement is that the organized campus student move-
ment and the student loan debtor movement off the campuses meet.
Indeed, they need each other and will be in crisis as long as they
remain separated. On the one side, the student movement activists
cannot call for the liberation of education without confronting the
debt peonage waiting for them and their fellows, and on the other,
the student loan debtors movement must go beyond the limits of
its stalemated “consumer protections” approach. The sense that a
limit has been reached in this regard is indicated by the enormous
interest generated in early 2009 by Robert Applebaum’s Keynesian
proposal, “Cancel Student Loan Debt to Stimulate the Economy,”
where he called for the government to forgive government student
loans and pay back to banks and finance companies the outstanding
private student loans (Applebaum).

The combination of an underground struggle involving millions of
loan defaulters, intensified by mass unemployment and cuts in so-
cial spending, and the exodus of thousands of debtors fleeing the
debt collectors hounding them, just as the campuses are becoming
again places of mass, open agitation, has set the stage for a student
loan debt abolition movement that Edu-factory network, for one, has
been calling for.

It is the possibility of this encounter, I believe, that prompted Con-
gress to pass SAFRA that was signed into law by President Obama
on March 30, 2010. George Miller, the archetypal East San Fran-
cisco Bay liberal, surely had a sense of the political winds that were
blowing when he introduced the bill into Congress in July 2009, just
as the occupations at the UCAL campuses of Santa Cruz and Berke-
ley were being planned and a 32% tuition fee increase was being
discussed by UCAL’s trustees. But he was certainly looking as well
at the rates of defaulting loans and what they expressed in political
terms, for I could not otherwise understand why its buffering attempt
would take the form of a student loan debt reduction bill, when the
student movement on the campuses was not openly calling for it.

SAFRA is full of diversionary and ameliorating moves in the strug-
gle between debtors and creditors that attempt to cushion the impact
of the Crisis on student debtors.

(i) it replaces the private institutions with the federal government as
the creditor, by halting loan-guarantees to the banks—a major source
of interest revenue for the latter at no risk to themselves. The billions
of dollars that will be “saved” would be used to increase scholarships
for low-income students (Pell grants);

(ii) it provides for a reduction of debt payments, from 15% to 10%
of discretionary income;

(iii) it provides for more debtor-friendly “forgiveness” conditions
(viz., the debt would be “forgiven” for those working in the “private”
sector—if payments were made on time—in 20 years instead of the
previous 25 years, and in 10 years for those in “public service,” in-
cluding teaching and the military).

These more favorable conditions are meant to forestall an increase
in default rates— for if the “crisis” continues and unemployment rates
remain high, the student debt machine is bound to collapse and will
force a “bail out” of student loan debtors similar to Applebaum’s
“Cancel Student Loan Debt to Stimulate the Economy” proposal.
They are also meant to prevent an escalation of student activism
on the campuses and above all to keep the two movements divided.
Whether SAFRA will succeed in doing this is not something we can
foresee at this stage. We can, however, see some steps that appear
necessary to build an abolition movement besides the obvious one of
bringing both movements together in a national student loan aboli-
ition convention.
Building a student loan debt abolition movement also requires that we reframe the question of the debt itself. A first step must be a political house cleaning to dispel the smell of sanctity and rationality surrounding debt repayment regardless of the conditions in which it has been contracted and the ability of the debtor to do so. Most important, however, from the viewpoint of building a movement is to redefine student loans and debts as involving wage and work issues that go to the heart of the power relation between workers and capital. Student debt does not arise from the sphere of consumption (it is not like a credit card loan or even a mortgage). To treat student loans as consumer loans (i.e., deferred payment in exchange for immediate consumption of a desired commodity) is to misrepresent their content, making invisible their class dimension and the potential allies in the struggle against them.

Student debt is a work issue in at least three ways:

1. Schoolwork is work; it is the source of an enormous amount of new knowledge, wealth and social creativity presumably benefiting “society” but in reality providing a source of capital accumulation. Thus, paying for education is for students paying twice, with their work and with the money they provide.

2. A certificate, diploma, or degree of some sort is now being posed as indispensable condition for obtaining employment. Thus the decision to take on a debt cannot be treated as an individual choice similar to the choosing to buy a particular brand of soap. Paying for one’s education then is a toll imposed on workers in exchange for the possibility, not even the certainty, of employment. In this sense, it is a collective wage-cut.

3. Student debt is a work-discipline issue because it represents a way of mortgaging many workers’ future, deciding which jobs and wages they will seek, and their ability to resist exploitation and/or to fight for better conditions (Williams).

The overarching goal of capital with respect to student loan debt is to shift the costs of socially necessary education to the workers themselves at a time when a world market for cognitive labor-power is forming and a tremendous competition is already developing between workers. Employers’ refusal to massively invest in education in the US is not, in fact, a misreading of its class interests as theorists like Michael Hardt maintain (Hardt). It is the result of a clear-cut assessment of the new possibilities opened up by globalization, starting with the harvesting of educated brains as well as muscles from every part of the world. Capital’s strategic use of student loan debts to enforce a harsher work-discipline and force workers to take on more of the cost of their reproduction makes the struggle for debt abolition one that necessarily affects all workers. Accepting the student debt is accepting a class defeat, for it is certainly marks a major set back with respect to the 1970s when education was still largely financed by the state.

Certainly university teachers (like myself and many readers) and our unions and associations must take an active role in the abolition of student loan debt. For we are on the frontline, but in a compromised position, because we must “save the appearances” and pretend that for the university, cultural formation is of the essence, while we know that the student loan money is the source of much of the university’s budget and that the future debt peonage of many of our students “pays” our wages today (Federici). Just as, hopefully, most professors would object to be paid by a university whose revenue was the product of slave labor, so too must we object to having our students pay us at the cost of their post-graduation bondage.

Finally, debt in general is constructed to humiliate and isolate the debtor (Caffentzis). But demands for its abolition can be unifying, because it is everybody’s condition in the working class worldwide. Student loan debt, credit card debt, mortgage debt, medical debt: across the world, for decades now, every cut in people’s wages and entitlements has been made in the name of a “debt crisis” of one sort or another. Debt abolition, therefore, can be the ground of political re-composition among workers. If this is the path it takes with respect to student loan debt, the student movement in the US will experience a decisive turning point and opening out to many allies beyond the campus.

Bibliography


Eight Theses on University: Hierarchization and Institutions of the Common
Alberto De Nicola and Gigi Roggero

1. Bill Readings wrote The University in Ruins in the middle of the Nineties. The state university is in ruins, the mass university is in ruins, and the university as a privileged place of the national culture is in ruins. The same national culture is in ruins. We read this process from the perspective of our participation in living labor movements: this is the point of view from which we situate our analysis. And the crisis of the university, and of the national culture too, was affected first of all by these movements. So, we have no nostalgia: this is the style in which we approach our analysis. In fact, the corporatization and the making of a ‘global university’, to use the words of Andrew Ross, is not a unilateral imposition. They are processes based on social relationships. That is to say, relationships of force. It is not useful to oppose this process in the name of the past, because we contributed to the breaking of that past. Rather, we have to transform these processes into a field of conflict. We must assault these processes at an advanced stage: this is the problem. We need to analyze these processes to discover forms of resistance and lines of flight.

2. What is the university today? From the capitalistic point of view, it is one of the sites for the hierarchization of the workforce. The mechanisms of valorization, devalorization, declassement and segmentation of the workforce are based on knowledge and the control of knowledge production. But the university is not the only site of such control, because there is a spillover of knowledge production from educational institutions: it is widespread in networks of social cooperation. These networks are ambivalent, a conflictual combination of autonomy and capitalistic command, of struggles for freedom and marketized outcomes. So, in the wider metropolitan context, the university becomes ever less central in capitalist hierarchies. Nevertheless, it remains a site of great space-time concentration of the workforce.

3. How is value produced in the university? When knowledge becomes a central means of production, the capitalistic problem is how to measure it. In the last round of edufactory discussion, we wrote that in what we call cognitive capitalism there is also a ‘cognitiveization of the measure’. That is to say, the imposition of artificial units of measure to reduce living knowledge to abstract knowledge. The copyright and patent systems, student credits, the accumulation of social and human capital, the writing of references for researchers and teachers (Matteo Pasquinelli talks about a sort of ‘reference economy’) are examples of such artificial units. These are also artificial units to measure the value of each institution in the university hierarchy. The liberal cult of the meritocracy is dead, and we’re not sorry about this in any way. Today the corporate university is based on a parasitical rent. From this point of view, it is paradigmatic of contemporary capitalism.

4. The hierarchization of the university is not governed by a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. In contemporary global capitalism there is no more outside, there is no outside between the university and the metropolis, there is only an inside marked by exploitative relationships. Differential inclusion is the response to movements that in the Sixties and in the Seventies challenged university governance. For example, in US the response to the Black power movement and the creation of autonomous institutions for Black Studies was a combination of brutal repression and differential inclusion. This is evidenced, as Noliwe Rooks has recently illustrated, by the strategies of the Ford Foundation and its selective funding to Black Studies programs, which favours moderates and marginalizes radicals. So, contemporary university governance aims to include so that it can control. But this also means also that such governance is a process continuously open to crisis and based on the impossibility of the classical forms of governing living labor. In this framework, as effectively described by Mezzadra and Neilson, the production of borders becomes the main device of governance and multiplication of labor regimes: borders are not lines that divide by processes of inclusion and exclusion, but they are mobile, flexible and changing areas of hierarchization.

5. But there is always an excess within this inclusion: living labor/knowledge. From this point of view, borders are also sites of resistance and lines of flights. Precarious workers and students – as workers, and not workforce hierarchically integrated in the education process – are border subjects. This does not mean they are marginal and oppressed figures who are not completely included: they are a potential excess in the hierarchization process. We learned an important lesson in the recent ‘precarious researchers’ mobilization in Italy: when precarious researchers exclusively claim the recognition of their place in the workforce hierarchy and their inclusion in the ivory tower, this excess is politically closed. From this point of view, the ‘creative class’ or ‘knowledge workers’ are not simply categories of sociological theories. They are first of all political concepts. On one hand, they legitimise the out-of-date and unusable ‘concept of the international division of labor’ and ‘the correlate spectrum of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers’ (Mezzadra and Neilson). The division between intellectual and manual labor – as well as the gender division of labor, the division between productive and repro-
ductive labor, or between cognitive and affective labor etc. – is not objective, but a device to hierarchize and to control labor power. On the other hand, the actors of the ‘creative class’ want to claim their legal rights in the differential inclusion regime, but they don’t bring this regime into question.

6.

The university is not central to capitalist production. But it is central as a political site. In last edu-factory round we saw some great examples of students, graduate students and precarious workers mobilizations all around the world: from China to the US, from Greece to Italy, from South Africa to France. We use the terms of Italian ‘operaismo’, the relationship between the technical class composition (fundamentally based on capitalistic division of labor) and the political class composition, that points to the combination between exploitative relationships and processes of subjectivation, conflicts and collective identification: then the university workers (that is to say, students and precarious workers) are central in political class composition, not in the technical one. Within workers' struggles and class composition there is a hierarchy, but it is not determined by the capitalist hierarchy: on the contrary, it is based on the articulation between positions in the production system and subjectivity, that is to say the potential refusal of capitalist hierarchy. Such hierarchy is continuously put into question by the struggles themselves. There is a relationship between technical and political composition, but no homology and symmetry. So, how we can transform the university into a political site for struggle and exodus? This is the question. In fact, the metaphor of the ‘edu-factory’ does not mean that the university is the same as industrial factories. Rather, it means that we have to organize ourselves, as industrial workers did, but in a different mode and with different kinds of institutions.

7.

This is the specific base of the translation issue. The diffusion of the Anglophone university as a model of ‘global university’ happens through continuous translation: ‘homolingual translation’ to use the effective categories proposed by Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon. For example, in Italy the corporate university model is not fully developed, but mixed with the conservation of feudal academic power. Nevertheless, this does not contrast the corporatization trend. On the contrary, feudal power is the particular way in which the corporate model is translated into the Italian university system. The interruption of capitalistic translation in the global university does not mean to return to the national university of culture, but to pose the problem of translation (that is to say, ‘heterolingual translation’) from the point of view of living labor/knowledge. ‘Heterolingual translation’ refers to the question of the relationship between technical and political class composition, between singularity and the production of the common, and it also refers to the communication of struggles. This translation moves in an autonomous space-time dimension that intersects the global capitalistic plane but doesn’t coincide with it. Today anyone who uses the historicist and traditional centre-periph-

dery model is not able to analyze global capitalist development. First of all, she has been unable to see that this model was shattered by struggles and the irruption of the margins in the centre.

8.

Dwelling in the Ruins, this was the question posed by Readings. That is to say, dwelling without nostalgia. But also, dwelling without shutting ourselves up in elective ghettos. Dwelling in the ruins brings up for us the central problem: how can we organize the liberation of living labor/knowledge power? How we can break the filters and gatekeepers of the differential inclusion, university governance and its parasitical rent? We have to distinguish between ghetto and autonomy. The ghetto is completely functional to the governance regime: it is a particular form of differential inclusion. Autonomy is the liberation of collective power. It is struggles and exodus, resistance and flight lines, the refusal of dominant knowledge and the production of antagonistic living knowledge. Chandra Talpade Mohanty says that what constitutes segregation from the viewpoint of power could be overturned in autonomy to create oppositional knowledges from the transformational viewpoint. This viewpoint is constituted by acting minorities, not as marginal but central minorities. We have to abandon the majority point of view, that is to say universalism and the exportation of universal models. The great issue concerning institutions implies the necessity to go beyond the dialectic between institutional and anti-institutional action. Dwelling in the ruins entails struggles and resistance against the corporate university, acting on the borders, and the immediate building up of institutions of the common. As edu-factory shows, all around the world there are a lot of experiences of self-education, autonomous universities, and organized networks of oppositional knowledge production. Now the main problem is the organization and translation of these into institutions of the common. That is to say, institutions continuously open to their own subversion, not universalistic but based on irreducible singularities, aiming toward the construction of the common and collective command within social cooperation.
The only Possible relationship to the university Today is a Criminal one.
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“To the university I’ll steal, and there I’ll steal,” to borrow from Pistol at the end of Henry V, as he would surely borrow from us. This is the only possible relationship to the American university today. This may be true of universities everywhere. It may have to be true of the university in general. But certainly, this much is true in the United States: it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spit its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.

The only Possible relationship to the university Today is a Criminal one

“Philosophy thus traditionally practices a critique of knowledge which is simultaneously a denegation of knowledge (i.e., of the class struggle). Its position can be described as an irony with regard to knowledge, which it puts into question without ever touching its foundations. The questioning of knowledge in philosophy always ends in its restoration: a movement great philosophers consistently expose in each other.” — Jacques Rancière

“I am a black man number one, because I am against what they have done and are still doing to us; and number two, I have something to say about the new society to be built because I have a tremendous part in that which they have sought to discredit.” — C. L. R. James

Worry about the university. This is the injunction today in the United States, one with a long history. Call for its restoration like Harold Bloom or Stanley Fish or Gerald Graff. Call for its reform like Derek Bok or Bill Readings or Cary Nelson. Call out to it as it calls to you. But for the subversive intellectual, all of this goes on upstairs, in polite company, among the rational men. After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the Undercommons of Enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.

What is that work and what is its social capacity for both reproducing the university and producing fugitivity? If one were to say teaching, one would be performing the work of the university. Teaching is merely a profession and an operation of what Jacques Derrida calls the onto-/auto encyclopedic circle of the Universitas. But it is useful to invoke this operation to glimpse the hole in the fence where labor enters, to glimpse its hiring hall, its night quarters. The university needs teaching labor, despite itself, or as itself, self-identical with and thereby erased by it. It is not teaching then that holds this social capacity, but something that produces the not visible other side of teaching, a thinking through the skin of teaching toward a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization. But it is teaching that brings us in. Before there are grants, research, conferences, books, and journals; there is the experience of being taught and of teaching. Before the research post with no teaching, before the graduate students to mark the exams, before the string of sabbatics, before the permanent reduction in teaching load, the appointment to run the Center, the consignment of pedagogy to a discipline called education, before the course designed to be a new book, teaching happened. The moment of teaching for food is therefore often mistakenly taken to be a stage, as if eventually, one should not teach for food. If the stage persists, there is a social pathology in the university. But if the teaching is successfully passed on, the stage is surpassed, and teaching is consigned to those who are known to remain in the stage, the sociopathological labor of the university. Kant interestingly calls such a stage “self-incurred minority.” He tries to contrast it with having the “determination and courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another.” “Have the courage to use your own intelligence.” But what would it mean if teaching or rather what we might call “the beyond of teaching” is precisely what one is asked to get beyond, to stop taking sustenance? And what of those minorities who refuse, the tribe of moles who will not come back from beyond (that which is beyond “the beyond of teaching”), as if they will not be subjects, as if they want to think as objects, as minority? Certainly, the perfect subjects of communication, those successfully beyond teaching, will see them as waste. But their collective labor will always call into question who truly is taking the orders of the Enlightenment. The waste lives for those moments beyond teaching when you give away the unexpected beautiful phrase unexpected, no one has asked, beautiful, it will never come back. Is being the biopower of the Enlightenment truly better than this?

Perhaps the biopower of the Enlightenment know this, or perhaps it is just reacting to the objecthood of this labor as it must. But even as it depends on these moles, these refugees, they will call them uncollegial, impractical, naive, unprofessional. And one may be given one last chance to be pragmatic why steal when one can have it all, they will ask. But if one hides from this interpellation, neither agrees nor disagrees but goes with hands full into the underground of the university, into the Undercommons this will be regarded as theft, as a criminal act. And it is at the same time, the only possible act.

In that Undercommons of the university one can see that it is not a matter of teaching versus research or even the beyond of teaching versus the individualization of research. To enter this space is to inhabit the ruprual and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons. What the beyond of teaching is really about is not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it’s about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion.
and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood, and one cannot initiate the auto-interpellative torque that biopower subjection requires and rewards. It is not so much the teaching as it is the prophecy in the organization of the act of teaching. The prophecy that predicts its own organization and has therefore passed, as commons, and the prophecy that exceeds its own organization and therefore as yet can only be organized. Against the prophetic organization of the Undercommons is arrayed its own deadening labor for the university, and beyond that, the negligence of professionalization, and the professionalization of the critical academic. The Undercommons is therefore always an unsafe neighborhood.

Fredric Jameson reminds the university of its dependence on “Enlightenment-type critiques and demystification of belief and committed ideology, in order to clear the ground for unobstructed planning and ‘development.’” This is the weakness of the university, the lapse in its homeland security. It needs labor power for this “enlightenment-type critique,” but, somehow, labor always escapes.

The premature subjects of the Undercommons took the call seriously, or had to be serious about the call. They were not clear about planning, too mystical, too full of belief. And yet this labor force cannot reproduce itself, it must be reproduced. The university works for the day when it will be able to rid itself, like capital in general, of the trouble of labor. It will then be able to reproduce a labor force that understands itself as not only unnecessary but dangerous to the development of capitalism. Much pedagogy and scholarship is already dedicated in this direction. Students must come to see themselves as the problem, which, counter to the complaining of restorationist critics of the university, is precisely what it means to be a customer, to take on the burden of realization and always necessarily be inadequate to it. Later, these students will be able to see themselves properly as obstacles to society, or perhaps, with lifelong learning, students will return having successfully diagnosed themselves as the problem.

Still, the dream of an undifferentiated labor that knows itself as superfluous is interrupted precisely by the labor of clearing away the burning roadblocks of ideology. While it is better that this police function be in the hands of the few, it still raises labor as difference, labor as the development of other labor, and therefore labor as a source of wealth. And although the enlightenment-type critique, as we suggest below, informs on, kisses the cheek of, any autonomous development as a result of this difference in labor, there is a break in the wall here, a shallow place in the river, a place to land under the rocks. The university still needs this clandestine labor to prepare this undifferentiated labor force, whose increasing specialization and managerialist tendencies, again contra the restorationists, represent precisely the successful integration of the division of labor with the universe of exchange that commands restorationist loyalty.

Introducing this labor upon labor, and providing the space for its development, creates risks. Like the colonial police force recruited unwittingly from guerrilla neighborhoods, university labor may harbor refugees, fugitives, renegades, and castaways. But there are good reasons for the university to be confident that such elements will be exposed or forced underground. Precautions have been taken, book lists have been drawn up, teaching observations conducted, invitations to contribute made. Yet against these precautions stands the immanence of transcendence, the necessary deregulation and the possibilities of criminality and fugitivity that labor upon labor requires. Maroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers. And what will the university say of them? It will say they are unprofessional.

This is not an arbitrary charge. It is the charge against the more than professional. How do those who exceed the profession, who exceed and by exceeding escape, how do those maroons problematize themselves, problematize the university, force the university to consider them a problem, a danger? The Undercommons is not, in short, the kind of fanciful communities of whimsy invoked by Bill Readings at the end of his book. The Undercommons, its maroons, are always at war, always in hiding.

There is no distinction between the American university and Professionalization

But surely if one can write something on the surface of the university, if one can write for instance in the university about singularities those events that refuse either the abstract or individual category of the bourgeois subject one cannot say that there is no space in the university itself? Surely there is some space here for a theory, a conference, a book, a school of thought? Surely the university also makes thought possible? Is not the purpose of the university as Universitas, as liberal arts, to make the commons, make the public, make the nation of democratic citizenry? Is it not therefore important to protect this Universitas, whatever its impurities, from professionalization in the university? But we would ask what is already not possible in this talk in the hallways, among the buildings, in rooms of the university about possibility? How is the thought of the outside, as Gayatri Spivak means it, already not possible in this complaint?

The maroons know something about possibility. They are the condition of possibility of production of knowledge in the university the singularities against the writers of singularity, the writers who write, publish, travel, and speak. It is not merely a matter of the secret labor upon which such space is lifted, though of course such space is lifted from collective labor and by it. It is rather that to be a critical academic in the university is to be against the university, and to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it, and to institute the negligence of that internal outside, that unassimilated underground, a negligence of it that is precisely, we must insist, the basis of the professions. And this act of against always already excludes the unrecognized modes of politics, the beyond of politics already in motion, the discredited criminal para-organization, what Robin Kelley might refer to as the infrapolitical field (and its music). It is not just the labor of the maroons but their prophetic organization that is negated by the idea of intellectual space in an organization called the university. This is why the negligence of the
critical academic is always at the same time an assertion of bourgeois individualism. Such negligence is the essence of professionalization where it turns out professionalization is not the opposite of negligence but its mode of politics in the United States. It takes the form of a choice that excludes the prophetic organization of the Undercommons to be against, to put into question the knowledge object, let us say in this case the university, not so much without touching its foundation, as without touching one’s own condition of possibility, without admitting the Undercommons and being admitted to it.

In his lecture entitled “Qu’est-ce que la critique?” in 1978, Michel Foucault described the spread and replication of governmentality in Western Europe in the 16th century, claiming that along with this governmentalization of all possible areas of life and finally of the self, critique also developed as the art not to be governed like that. Even without going into more depth here on the continuities and breaks between the historical forms of developing liberal governmentality and the current forms of neoliberal governmentality, it may be said that the relationship between government and not to be governed like that is still a prerequisite today for reflecting on the contemporary relationship between institution and critique. In Foucault’s words: “[…]

Foucault continues: “And if we accord this movement of governmentalization of both society and individuals the historic dimension and breadth which I believe it has had, it seems that one could approximately locate therein what we could call the critical attitude. Facing them head on and as compensation, or rather, as both partner and adversary to the arts of governing, as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as a way of limiting these arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding a way to escape from them or, in any case, a way to displace them …”

These latter categories are the ones I want to focus on in terms of the transformation and a further development of the question of contemporary forms of institutional critique: transformations as ways of escaping from the arts of governing, lines of flight, which are not at all to be taken as harmless or individualistic or escapist and esoteric, even if they no longer allow dreaming of an entirely different exteriority. “Nothing is more active than fleeing!”, as Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet write, and as Paolo Virno echoes almost literally: “Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting.”

If “the arts of governing” mean an intertwinedness between governing and being governed, between government and self-government, then “transforming the arts of governing” does not consist simply of any arbitrary transformation processes in the most general sense, because transformations are an essential quality of the governmentality setting. It is more a matter of specifically emancipatory transformations, and this also rescinds a central aspect of the old institutional critique. Through their emancipatory character these transformations also assume a transversal quality, i.e. their effect goes beyond the particular limitations of single fields.

Counter to these kinds of emancipatory transversal transformations of the “arts of governing”, there is a recurring problem in art discourse: that of reducing and enclosing more general questions in one’s own field. Even though (self-)canonizations, valorizations and depreciations in the art field – also in debates on institutional critique practices – are often adorned with an eclectic, disparate and contradictory selection of theory imports, these imports frequently only have the function of disposing of specific art positions or the art field. A contemporary variation of this functionalization consists of
combining poststructuralist immanence theories with a simplification of Bourdieu’s field theory. The theories that argue on the one hand against an outside in the sense of Christian or socialist transcendence, for instance, and on the other for the relative autonomy of the art field, are blurred here into the defeatist statement, “We are trapped in our field” (Andrea Fraser). Even the critical actors of the “second generation” of institutional critique do not appear to be free from these kinds of closure phantasms. Fraser, for instance, conducts an offensive self-historicization in her *Artforum* article “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique” (September 2005) with the help of a brief history of the terms, ultimately limiting all possible forms of institutional critique to a critique of the “institution of art” (Peter Bürger) and its institutions. In reference to Bourdieu, she writes: “… just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a ‘totally administered society’, or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.” Although there seems to be an echo of Foucault’s concept of self-government here, there is no indication of forms of escaping, shifting, transforming. Whereas for Foucault the critical attitude appears simultaneously as “partner” and as “adversary” of the arts of governing, the second part of this specific ambivalence vanishes in Andrea Fraser’s depiction, yielding to a discursive self-limitation, which only just allows reflecting on one’s own enclosure. Contrary to all the evidence of the manifold effectivity not only of critical art practices throughout the entire 20th century, she plays a worn-out record: art is and remains autonomous, its function limited to the art field. “With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it.”

Yet exactly this would also be a point in Foucault’s concept of critique, the critical attitude: instead of inducing the closure of the field with theoretical arguments and promoting this practically, thus carrying out the art of governing, a different form of art should be pushed at the same time which leads to *escaping the arts of governing*. And Foucault is not the only one to introduce these new non-escapist terms of escape. Figures of flight, of dropping out, of betrayal, of desertion, of exodus, these are the figures proposed – especially against cynical or conservative invocations of inescapability and hopelessness – by several different authors as poststructuralist, nondialectical forms of resistance. With these kinds of concepts Gilles Deleuze, Paolo Virno and several other philosophers attempt to propose new models of non-representationist politics that can equally be turned against Leninist concepts of revolution as taking over the state and against radical anarchist positions imagining an absolute outside of institutions, as well as against concepts of transformation and transition in the sense of a successive homogenization in the direction of neoliberal globalization. In terms of their new concept of resistance, the aim is to thwart a dialectical idea of power and resistance: a positive form of dropping out, a flight that is simultaneously an insistent practice. Instead of presupposing conditions of domination as an immutable horizon and yet fighting against them, this flight changes the conditions under which the presupposition takes place. As Paolo Virno writes in *The Grammar of the Multitude*, the exodus transforms “the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives.”

When figures of flight are imported into the art field, this often leads to the misunderstanding that it involves the subject’s personal retreat from the noise and babble of the world. Protagonists such as Herman Melville’s “Bartleby” in Deleuze and Agamben or the “virtuoso” pianist Glenn Gould in Virno are seen as personifications of individual resistance and – in the case of Bartleby – of individual withdrawal. In a conservative process of pillage and reinterpretation, in art-critical discourse these figures are thus so far removed from their starting point that flight no longer implies, as it does with Deleuze, fleeing to look for a weapon. On the contrary, here the old images of retreat into an artist hermitage are re-warmed, which are not only deployed in neo-cultural-pessimistic (art) circles against participative and relational spectacle art, but also against collective interventionist, activist or other experimental strategies; for instance when the head of *Texte zur Kunst*, Isabelle Graw turns to “the model of the preoccupied painter working away in his studio, refusing to give any explanation, ostentatiously not networking, never traveling, hardly showing himself in public”, the reason for this is allegedly to prevent the principle of the spectacle from “directly accessing his mental and emotional competencies.”

Although Graw refers to Paolo Virno directly before the passage quoted, neither Virno’s problematization of the cultural industry nor his concept of exodus tends toward these kinds of bourgeois expectations of salvation by the artist-individual. With the image of the solitary painter, who eludes the “new tendency in capitalism to expect any salvation from the artist-individual. With the image of the preoccupied painter working away in his studio, refusing to give any explanation, ostentatiously not networking, never traveling, hardly showing himself in public”, the reason for this is allegedly to prevent the principle of the spectacle from “directly accessing his mental and emotional competencies”.

What the poststructuralist proposals for dropping out and withdrawal involve, however, is anything but this kind of relapse into the celebration of an individual turning away from society. The point is to thwart dichotomies such as that of the individual and the collective, to offensively theorize new forms of what is common and singular at the same time. Particularly Paolo Virno has lucidly developed this idea in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. In allusion to the concept of the General Intellect, which Karl Marx introduced in his *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, Virno posits the concept of the “public intellect”. The assumption of Marx’ concept indicates that “intellect” is not to be understood here as a competence of an individual, but rather as a shared tie and constantly developing foundation for individuation. Thus Virno neither alludes to media intellectuals in the society of the spectacle, nor to the lofty ideas of the autonomous thinker or painter. That kind of individualized publicity corresponds more to Virno’s negative concept of “publicness without a public sphere”: “The general intellect, or public intellect, if it does not become a republic, a public sphere, a political community, drastically increases forms of submission.”
Virno focuses, on the other hand, on the social quality of the intellect. Whereas the alienated thinker (or even painter) is traditionally drawn as an individual withdrawing from idle talk, from the noise of the masses, for Virno the noise of the multitude is itself the site of a non-state, non-spectacular, non-representationist public sphere.

This non-state public sphere is not to be understood as an anarchic place of absolute freedoms, as an open field beyond the realm of the institution. Flight and exodus are nothing negative, a reaction to something else, but are instead linked and intertwined with constituent power, re-organizing, re-inventing and instituting. The movement of flight also preserves these institute practices from structuralization and closure from the start, preventing them from becoming institution in the sense of constituted power.

What does this mean in relation to the artistic practices of institutional critique? From a schematic perspective, the “first generation” of institutional critique sought a distance from the institution, the “second” addressed the inevitable involvement in the institution. I call this a schematic perspective, because these kinds of “generation clusters” are naturally blurred in the relevant practices, and there were attempts – by Andrea Fraser, for instance – to describe the first wave as being constituted by the second (including herself) and also to attribute to the first phase a similar reflectedness on their own institutionality. Whether this is the case or not, an important and effective position can be attributed to both generations in the art field from the 1970s to the present, and relevance is evident in some cases that goes beyond the boundaries of the field. Yet the fundamental questions that Foucault already implicitly raised, which Deleuze certainly pursued in his Foucault book, are not posed with the strategies of distanced and deconstructive intervention in the institution: Do Foucault’s considerations lead us to enclose ourselves more and more in power relations? And most of all, which lines of flight lead out of the dead end of this enclosure?

To make use of Foucault’s treatments of this problem for the question of new institution practices, I would like to conclude this article with a longer recourse to the later Foucault, specifically to his Berkeley lecture series “Discourse and Truth” from fall 1983 and the term parrhesia broadly explained there.

Parrhesia means in classical Greek “to say everything”, freely speaking truth without rhetorical games and without ambiguity, even and especially when this is hazardous. Foucault describes the practice of parrhesia using numerous examples from ancient Greek literature as a movement from a political to a personal technique. The older form of parrhesia corresponds to publicly speaking truth as an institutional right. Depending on the form of the state, the subject addressed by the parrhesiastes is the assembly in the democratic agora, the tyrant in the monarchical court. Parrhesia is generally understood as coming from below and directed upward, whether it is the philosopher’s criticism of the tyrant or the citizen’s criticism of the majority of the assembly: the specific potentiality of parrhesia is found in the unequivocal gap between the one who takes a risk to express everything and the criticized sovereign who is impugned by this truth.

Over the course of time, a change takes place in the game of truth “which – in the classical Greek conception of parrhesia – was constituted by the fact that someone was courageous enough to tell the truth to other people. [...] there is a shift from that kind of parrhesiastic game to another truth game which now consists in being courageous enough to disclose the truth about oneself.” This process from public criticism to personal (self-) criticism develops parallel to the decrease in the significance of the democratic public sphere of the agora. At the same time, parrhesia comes up increasingly in conjunction with education. One of Foucault’s relevant examples here is Plato’s dialogue “Laches”, in which the question of the best teacher for the interlocutor’s sons represents the starting point and foil. The teacher Socrates no longer assumes the function of the parrhesiastes in the sense of exercising dangerous contradiction in a political sense, but rather by moving his listeners to give account of themselves and leading them to a self-questioning that queries the relationship between their statements (logos) and their way of living (bios). However, this technique does not serve as an autobiographical confession or examination of conscience or as a prototype of Maoist self-criticism, but rather to establish a relationship between rational discourse and the lifestyle of the interlocutor or the self-questioning person. Contrary to any individualistic interpretation especially of later Foucault texts (imputing a “return to subject philosophy”, etc.), here parrhesia is not the competency of a subject, but rather a movement between the position that queries the concordance of logos and bios, and the position that exercises self-criticism in light of this query.

In keeping with a productive interpretation for contemporary institutional critique practices, my aim here is to link the two concepts of parrhesia described by Foucault as a genealogical development, to understand hazardous refutation in its relation to self-revelation. Critique, and especially institutional critique, is not exhausted in denouncing abuses nor in withdrawing into more or less radical self-questioning. In terms of the art field this means that neither the belligerent strategies of the institutional critique of the 1970s nor art as a service to the institution in the 1990s promise effective interventions in the governmentality of the present.

What is needed here and now, is parrhesia as a double strategy: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation, and as self-questioning.

What is needed, therefore, are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time, practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being-institution. Instituent practices that conjoin the advantages of both “generations” of institutional critique, thus exercising both forms of parrhesia, will impel a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism. This link will develop, most of all, from the direct and indirect concatenation with political practices and social movements, but without dispensing with artistic competences and strategies, without dispensing with resources of and effects in the art field. Here exodus would not mean relocating to a different country or a different field, but betraying the rules of the game through the act of flight: “transforming the arts of governing” not only in relation to the institutions of the art field or the institution art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions.
Extradiplinary Investigations: Towards a New Critique of Institutions

Brian Holmes

What is the logic, the need or the desire that pushes more and more artists to work outside the limits of their own discipline, defined by the notions of free reflexivity and pure aesthetics, incarnated by the gallery-magazine-museum-collection circuit, and haunted by the memory of the normative genres, painting and sculpture?

Pop art, conceptual art, body art, performance and video each marked a rupture of the disciplinary frame, already in the 1960-70s. But one could argue that these dramatized outbursts merely imported themes, media or expressive techniques back into what Yves Klein had termed the “specialized” ambiance of the gallery or the museum, qualified by the primacy of the aesthetic and managed by the functionaries of art. Exactly such arguments were launched by Robert Smithson in his text on cultural confinement in 1972, then restated by Brian O’Doherty in his theses on the ideology of the white cube. They still have a lot of validity. Yet now we are confronted with a new series of outbursts, under such names as net.art, bio art, visual geography, space art and database art— to which one could add an archi-art, or art of architecture, which curiously enough has never been baptized as such, as well as a machine art that reaches all the way back to 1920s constructivism, or even a “finance art” whose birth was announced in the Casa Encendida of Madrid just last summer.

The heterogeneous character of the list immediately suggests its application to all the domains where theory and practice meet. In the artistic forms that result, one will always find remains of the old modernist tropism whereby art designates itself first of all, drawing
the attention back to its own operations of expression, representation, metaphorization or deconstruction. Independently of whatever “subject” it treats, art tends to make this self-reflexivity its distinctive or identifying trait, even its raison d’être, in a gesture whose philosophical legitimacy was established by Kant. But in the kind of work I want to discuss, there is something more at stake.

We can approach it through the word that the Nettime project used to define its collective ambitions. For the artists, theorists, media activists and programmers who inhabited that mailing list – one of the important vectors of net.art in the late 1990s – it was a matter of proposing an “immanent critique” of the Internet, that is, of the technoscientific infrastructure then in the course of construction. This critique was to be carried out inside the network itself, using its languages and its technical tools and focusing on its characteristic objects, with the goal of influencing or even of directly shaping its development – but without refusing the possibilities of distribution outside this circuit. What’s sketched out is a two-way movement, which consists in occupying a field with a potential for shaking up society (telematics) and then radiating outward from that specialized domain, with the explicitly formulated aim of effecting change in the discipline of art (considered too formalist and narcissistic to escape its own charmed circle), in the discipline of cultural critique (considered too academic and historicist to confront the current transformations) and even in the “discipline” – if you can call it that – of leftist activism (considered too doctrinaire, too ideological to seize the occasions of the present).

At work here is a new tropism and a new sort of reflexivity, involving artists as well as theorists and activists in a passage beyond the limits traditionally assigned to their practice. The word tropism conveys the desire or need to turn towards something else, towards an exterior field or discipline; while the notion of reflexivity now indicates a critical return to the departure point, an attempt to transform the initial discipline, to end its isolation, to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation and commitment. This back-and-forth movement, or rather, this transformative spiral, is the operative principle of what I will be calling extradisciplinary investigations.

The concept was forged in an attempt to go beyond a kind of double aimlessness that affects contemporary signifying practices, even a double drift, but without the revolutionary qualities that the Situationists were looking for. I’m thinking first of the inflation of interdisciplinary discourses on the academic and cultural circuits: a virtuoso combinatory system that feeds the symbolic mill of cognitive capital, acting as a kind of supplement to the endless pinwheels of finance itself (the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a specialist of these combinatories). Second is the state of indiscipline that is an unsought effect of the anti-authoritarian revolts of the 1960s, where the subject simply gives into the aesthetic solicitations of the market (in the neopop vein, indiscipline means endlessly repeating and remixing the flux of prefabricated commercial images). Though they aren’t the same, interdisciplinarity and indiscipline have become the two most common excuses for the neutralization of significant inquiry. But there is no reason to accept them.

The extradisciplinary ambition is to carry out rigorous investigations on terrains as far away from art as finance, biotech, geography, urbanism, psychiatry, the electromagnetic spectrum, etc., to bring forth on those terrains the “free play of the faculties” and the intersubjective experimentation that are characteristic of modern art, but also to try to identify, inside those same domains, the spectacular or instrumental uses so often made of the subversive liberty of aesthetic play – as the architect Eyal Weizman does in exemplary fashion, when he investigates the appropriation by the Israeli and American military of what were initially conceived as subversive architectural strategies. Weizman challenges the military on its own terrain, with his maps of security infrastructures in Israel; but what he brings back are elements for a critical examination of what used to be his exclusive discipline.

This complex movement, which never neglects the existence of the different disciplines, but never lets itself be trapped by them either, can provide a new departure point for what used to be called institutional critique.

### Histories in the Present

What has been established, retrospectively, as the “first generation” of institutional critique includes figures like Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. They examined the conditioning of their own activity by the ideological and economic frames of the museum, with the goal of breaking out. They had a strong relation to the anti-institutional revolts of the 1960s and 70s, and to the accompanying philosophical critiques. The best way to take their specific focus on the museum is not as a self-assigned limit or a fetishization of the institution, but instead as part of a materialist praxis, lucidly aware of its context, but with wider transformative intentions. To find out where their story leads, however, we have to look at the writing of Benjamin Buchloh and see how he framed the emergence of institutional critique.

In a text entitled “Conceptual Art 1962-1969,” Buchloh quotes two key propositions by Lawrence Weiner. The first is A Square Removed from a Rug in Use, and the second, A 36”x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall (both 1966). In each it is a matter of taking the most self-referential and tautological form possible – the square, whose sides each repeat and reiterate the others – and inserting it in an environment marked by the determinisms of the social world. As Buchloh writes: “Both interventions – while maintaining their structural and morphological links with formal traditions by respecting classical geometry… – inscribe themselves in the support surfaces of the institutions and/or the home which that tradition had always disavowed…. On the one hand, it dissipates the expectation of encountering the work of art only in a ‘specialized’ or ‘qualified’ location…. On the other, neither one of these surfaces could ever be considered to be independent from their institutional location, since the physical inscription into each particular surface inevitably generates contextual readings.”

Weiner’s propositions are clearly a version of immanent critique, operating flush with the discursive and material structures of the art institutions; but they are cast as a purely logical deduction from minimal and conceptual premises. They just as clearly prefigure the symbolic activism of Gordon Matta-Clark’s “anarchitecture” works, like Splitting (1973) or Window Blow-Out (1976), which confronted the gallery space with urban inequality and racial discrimination. From that departure point, a history of artistic critique could have led to...
contemporary forms of activism and technopolitical research, via the mobilization of artists around the AIDS epidemic in late 1980s. But the most widespread versions of 60s and 70s cultural history never took that turn. According to the subtitle of Buchloh’s famous text, the teleological movement of late-modernist art in the 1970s was heading “From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” This would mean a strictly Frankfurtian vision of the museum as an idealizing Enlightenment institution, damaged by both the bureaucratic state and the market spectacle.

Other histories could be written. At stake is the tense double-bind between the desire to transform the specialized “cell” (as Brian O’Doherty described the modernist gallery) into a mobile potential of living knowledge that can reach out into the world, and the counter-realization that everything about this specialized aesthetic space is a trap, that it has been instituted as a form of enclosure. That tension produced the incisive interventions of Michal Asher, the sledgehammer denunciations of Hans Haacke, the paradoxical displacements of Robert Smithson, or the melancholic humor and poetic fantasy of Marcel Broodthaers, whose hidden mainspring was a youthful engagement with revolutionary surrealism. The first thing is never to reduce the diversity and complexity of artists who never voluntarily joined into a movement. Another reduction comes from the obsessive focus on a specific site of presentation, the museum, whether it is mourned as a fading relic of the “bourgeois public sphere,” or exalted with a fetishizing discourse of “site specificity.” These two pitfalls lay in wait for the discourse of institutional critique, when it took explicit form in the United States in the late 80s and early 90s.

It was the period of the so-called “second generation.” Among the names most often cited are Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser. They pursued the systematic exploration of museological representation, examining its links to economic power and its epistemological roots in a colonial science that treats the Other like an object to be shown in a vitrine. But they added a subjectivizing turn, unimaginable without the influence of feminism and postcolonial historiography, which allowed them to recast external power hierarchies as ambivalences within the self, opening up a conflicted sensibility to the coexistence of multiple modes and vectors of representation. There is a compelling negotiation here, particularly in the work of Renee Green, between specialized discourse analysis and embodied experimentation with the human sensorium. Yet most of this work was also carried out in the form of meta-reflections on the limits of the artistic practices themselves (mock museum displays or scripted video performances), staged within institutions that were ever-more blatantly corporate – to the point where it became increasingly hard to shield the critical investigations from their own accusations, and their own often devastating conclusions.

This situation of a critical process taking itself for its object recently led Andrea Fraser to consider the artistic institution as an unsurpassable, all-defining frame, sustained through its own inwardly directed critique. Bourdieu’s deterministic analysis of the closure of the socio-professional fields, mingled with a deep confusion between Weber’s iron cage and Foucault’s desire “to get free of oneself,” is internalized here in a governmentality of failure, where the subject can do no more than contemplate his or her own psychic prison, with a few aesthetic luxuries in compensation. Unfortunately, it all adds very little to Broodthaers’ lucid testament, formulated on a single page in 1975. For Broodthaers, the only alternative to a guilty conscience was self-imposed blindness – not exactly a solution! Yet Fraser accepts it, by posing her argument as an attempt to “defend the very institution for which the institution of the avant-garde’s ‘self-criticism’ had created the potential: the institution of critique.” Without any antagonistic or even agonistic relation to the status quo, and above all, without any aim to change it, what’s defended becomes little more than a masochistic variation on the self-serving “institutional theory of art” promoted by Danto, Dickie and their followers (a theory of mutual and circular recognition among members of an object-oriented milieu, misleadingly called a “world”). The loop is looped, and what had been a large-scale, complex, searching and transformational project of 60s and 70s art seems to reach a dead end, with institutional consequences of complacency, immobility, loss of autonomy, capitulation before various forms of instrumentalization...

**Phase Change**

The end may be logical, but some desire to go much further. The first thing is to redefine the means, the media and the aims of a possible third phase of institutional critique. The notion of transversality, developed by the practitioners of institutional analysis, helps to theorize the assemblages that link actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don’t exhaust themselves inside it, but rather, extend elsewhere. These projects can no longer be unambiguously defined as art. They are based instead on a circulation between disciplines, often involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions – social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities – which can’t be reduced to an all-embracing institution.

The projects tend to be collective, even if they also tend to flee the difficulties that collectivity involves, by operating as networks. Their inventors, who came of age in the universe of cognitive capitalism, are drawn toward complex social functions which they seize upon in all their technical detail, and in full awareness that the second nature of the world is now shaped by technology and organizational form. In almost every case it is a political engagement that gives them the desire to pursue their exacting investigations beyond the limits of an artistic or academic discipline. But their analytic processes are at the same time expressive, and for them, every complex machine is awash in affect and subjectivity. It is when these subjective and analytic sides mesh closely together, in the new productive and political contexts of communicational labor (and not just in meta-reflections staged uniquely for the museum), that one can speak of a “third phase” of institutional critique – or better, of a “phase change” in what was formerly known as the public sphere, a change which has extensively transformed the contexts and modes of cultural and intellectual production in the twenty-first century.

An issue of *Multitudes*, co-edited with the *Transform* web-journal, gives examples of this approach. The aim is to sketch the problematic
field of an exploratory practice that is not new, but is definitely rising in urgency. Rather than offering a curatorial recipe, we wanted to cast new light on the old problems of the closure of specialized disciplines, the intellectual and affective paralysis to which it gives rise, and the alienation of any capacity for democratic decision-making that inevitably follows, particularly in a highly complex technological society. The forms of expression, public intervention and critical reflexivity that have been developed in response to such conditions can be characterized as extradisciplinary – but without fetishizing the word at the expense of the horizon it seeks to indicate.

On considering the work, and particularly the articles dealing with technopolitical issues, some will probably wonder if it might not have been interesting to evoke the name of Bruno Latour. His ambition is that of “making things public,” or more precisely, elucidating the specific encounters between complex technical objects and specific processes of decision-making (whether these are de jure or de facto political). For that, he says, one must proceed in the form of “proofs,” established as rigorously as possible, but at the same time necessarily “messy,” like the things of the world themselves.

There is something interesting in Latour’s proving machine (even if it does tend, unmistakably, toward the academic productivism of “interdisciplinarity”). A concern for how things are shaped in the present, and a desire for constructive interference in the processes and decisions that shape them, is characteristic of those who no longer dream of an absolute outside and a total, year-zero revolution. However, it’s enough to consider the artists whom we invited to the Multitudes issue, in order to see the differences. Hard as one may try, the 1750 km Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline cannot be reduced to the “proof” of anything, even if Ursula Biemann did compress it into the ten distinct sections of the Black Sea Files. Traversing Azerbaidjan, Georgia and Turkey before it debouches in the Mediterranean, the pipeline forms the object of political decisions even while it sprawls beyond reason and imagination, engaging the whole planet in the geopolitical and ecological uncertainty of the present.

Similarly, the Pan-European transport and communication corridors running through the former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, filmed by the participants of the Timescapes group initiated by Angela Melitopoulos, result from the one of the most complex infrastructure-planning processes of our epoch, carried out at the transnational and transcontinental levels. Yet these precisely designed economic projects are at once inextricable from the conflicted memories of their historical precedents, and immediately delivered over to the multiplicity of their uses, which include the staging of massive, self-organized protests in conscious resistance to the manipulation of daily life by the corridor-planning process. Human beings do not necessarily want to be the living “proof” of an economic thesis, carried out from above with powerful and sophisticated instruments – including media devices that distort their images and their most intimate affects. An anonymous protestor’s insistent sign, brandished in the face of the TV cameras at the demonstrations surrounding the 2003 EU summit in Thessalonica, says it all: ANY SIMILARITY TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR EVENTS IS UNINTENTIONAL.

Art history has emerged into the present, and the critique of the conditions of representation has spilled out onto the streets. But in the same movement, the streets have taken up their place in our critiques. In the philosophical essays that we included in the Multitudes project, institution and constitution always rhyme with destitution. The specific focus on extradisciplinary artistic practices does not mean radical politics has been forgotten, far from it. Today more than ever, any constructive investigation has to raise the standards of resistance.

NOTES:


7 “Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc... if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a totally administered world, or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.” Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique,” in John C. Welchman (ed.), Institutional Critique and After, Zurich, JRP/Ringier, 2006.


9 Marcel Broodthaers, “To be bien pensant… or not to be. To be blind.” (1975), in October 42, “Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs” (Fall 1987).


13 The video installation Black Sea Files by Ursula Biemann, done in the context of the Transcultural Geographies project, has been exhibited with the other works of that project at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, Dec. 15,
Articulating the Cracks in the Worlds of Power
16 Beaver Group talking with Brian Holmes

16 Beaver: When we started thinking about doing something like a seminar together, a few ideas emerged:

A. We didn’t want it to be a seminar in the ordinary sense, nor a workshop, nor a conference, nor a convergence, nor even a “model” for others.

B. We wanted to organize it with the minimum amount of money and without relying on any outside organizations, grants, or institutions.

C. We wanted it to be the beginning of a collaboration, between 16beaver and Tangent University and Brian Holmes and other colleagues ... to explore a new way of working together and sharing our know-what and know-how.

D. We wanted to bring people together who have been associated with our respective efforts to engage over a longer term in actually influencing one another.

E. To combine together, even more than our past collective efforts, our research interests and our activities, to try and make sense of what is taking place around us in the name of “politics” or “economic rationality” or “development,” and to find within our own practices the spaces and modes which might pose the greatest challenges and problems to “business as usual.”

F. To not be afraid to ask the most ambitious of questions, or to fail entirely.

Having arrived at year 2, we have a much larger number of collaborators and individuals who will be contributing to our ongoing inquiries. So these questions to you, Brian, are not meant in any way to reduce the voice of these inquiries to one spokesperson. They are instead meant to come back to some of the points of departure we shared and to explore both the theoretical concerns as well as the organizational ones.

In relation to the ideas we were exploring in the first year, what would you outline as the main theses?

Brian Holmes: Well, of course there are different levels, analytic and metaphorical, poetic and political, all entangled in the title, “Continental Drift.” And since we’ve tended in our work together to be strict, sociological and painstakingly historical, with an obsessive attention to economics, infrastructure and ideology, I’d like to turn that upside down for a change and begin with the poetics. On the one hand, the title evokes geology, plate tectonics, the geohistorical splitting of great landmasses, the telluric shifts that rip continents apart, the incredibly powerful and violent energies coursing through the world today. It’s a name for immensity. On the other hand, it immediately recalls something intimate and experimental, the situationist practice of drifting, of losing yourself, of abandoning conventional purposes and rationalized coordinates to seek out radically different orientations in experience, but on an unexpected planetary scale - as though you could wander across entire regions, spanning the gaps between worlds, or spiraling weightlessly through civilizations. So it’s a name for intimacy in immensity. At the same time, without any possible escape, the overblown image of continental drift tends to deflate into its opposite, something familiar or downright banal: the basic condition of global unification by technology and money, where it’s possible for privileged individuals to move freely but ignorantly about the earth, like taking the train across town for a buck and a quarter. So if you weave all those sensations together, the whole thing speaks of fault-lines in an overwhelming global unity, and of the elusive quest for a direct experience of a split reality. As though you could embrace the movement of a world that falls apart, as though you could embody the splintering cracks, the bifurcations, the shattering, and on the far side, begin understanding what it will be like to have to pick up the pieces....

16B: OK, so what about the economy, the sociology, that obsessively analytic dimension?

BH: What we managed to explore last year was above all a single thesis, drawn from the history of political economy: Karl Polanyi’s notion of the “double movement.” This refers to the fundamental paradox of capitalism, which by commodifying everything, by bringing every aspect of human experience under the rules of profit and reinvestment, at the same time provokes a defensive reaction of breakup, of escape, whether through withdrawal and autarky, warlike aggression, or the search for a better alternative. Polanyi, whose major work is called The Great Transformation, is really an ecological thinker. He shows how the notion of the self-regulating market, which is supposed to assign a proper price to everything and thereby secure the necessary resources for the continual production of an ever-expanding range of goods, fails tragically to account for all the factors involved in the reproduction of land, of labor, and of the very institution of exchange, money itself. What happens instead is that careless trading in these “fictitious commodities” tends to destroy them, to blight the land, to exhaust and even kill the laborer, to ruin the value of the money through unchecked speculation. Polanyi showed how these self-destructive processes operated up to the First World War, how they ultimately wiped out the international gold standard that had been built up by British liberalism, and then brought on the Great Depression. What resulted was a division of the world into five rival currency-blocs, which went to deadly war against each other from 1938 to 1945. After the war, of course, the people of the world had to pick up the pieces, for better or worse;
they had to establish new balances, new systems. Giving in to the history obsession, I tried to explain both the new basis of stability and the potential weaknesses of the postwar world-system that came together under the domination of the United States. With David Harvey’s help we analyzed the very shaky state of that system today, with all the strains that neoliberal globalization is now placing on the world ecology, on the conditions of existence for the global labor force, and even on the hegemony of the US dollar, whose continuing status as the international reserve currency has never been so uncertain.

**16B: That’s something we realized during the first sessions: empires always find a way to tax, and the US has done it through the dollar.**

**BH:** Exactly. By printing more dollars for export, by floating more Treasury bonds, by manipulating interest rates to create a favorable trade conditions, even by exploiting huge monetary crises, like the so-called Asian crisis in 1997-89. But all that finally destroys any possibility of cooperation. Observing the first movements toward the constitution of rival blocs - the emergence of the EU, of the Japanese-Chinese-Southeast Asian trading system, of NAFTA itself, of a potential socialist pole in Latin America around Venezuela - was a way to ask whether the “double movement” described by Polanyi might be repeating itself before our eyes. It was also a way to understand Al Qaeda’s call for a “new Caliphate” in the Middle East as another defensive reaction - though a particularly desperate and dangerous one - to the neoliberal push for global integration under highly exploitative unilateralist rules. I was very convinced by all those ideas, but at the same time, quite uncertain as to whether anyone would be ready to hear such things. Now, just one year later, all that speculation about a possibly violent breakup of the postwar world-system looks a lot less unlikely, after the experience of Hurricane Katrina, after the further decline of Iraq and Afghanistan into chaos, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the continually deteriorating situation in Palestine. Maybe we didn’t go far enough with the geopolitics! But at another level, closer to everyday experience, we also explored the consequences of the commodification of knowledge and culture, which many now consider a fourth “fictitious commodity.” As people working with knowledge and culture - as “immaterial laborers” - we tried to look around us, on Wall Street where 16beaver is located, and see what the pinnacle of networked symbolic exchange really entails. It’s tremendously important to understand the degree to which all forms of cultural and scientific production are increasingly being functionalized for market exchange, whose quintessence is the trading of immaterial goods on Wall Street. Financialization means the lived experience of semiotic obsolescence: the fact of producing symbolic trash, numbers that vanish infinitely into other numbers, the meaninglessness of making money with money. There is no inherently progressive aspect to immaterial labor, and “Empire” is still driven and piloted by imperialist nation-states, above all Britain and the USA. But still there is a deep ambiguity in the practice of immaterial labor, to the extent that it too is subject to a double movement - or in other words, to the extent that we too can recoil from the pressure of total commodification of ourselves, and look for ways to escape, or ways to fight back culturally, or better alternatives for the use of our minds, our expressive capacities and our sensoriums. I think that this uncertainty over the appropriate uses of culture and knowledge is potentially something which can be shared today, even across the geographical divides.

**16B: Based on the contributions others gave last year, what additional questions emerged for you, if any?**

**BH:** What emerges for me first of all is a better sense of the possible, of what we can really do together. Last year we had two separate sessions, each very intense, but different. The first was more formal, more difficult in a way, and I think whether rightly or wrongly I put out a lot of pressure to up the intellectual ante, to introduce a tremendous amount of political and economic theory into what have largely been artistic and activist discussions. I think that was important to most people, and at the same time there were some very good interventions by the more activist minded participants, mostly people who have worked together in Chicago, who have learned how to cooperate on very risky and often very successful projects, and who injected some elements of group process and horizontality that you can easily lose sight of in a heavily arty and academic context like New York.

The second session was somehow more relaxed, basically because we had gotten to know each other, and also because we had established some shared vocabularies. I forget at which point there emerged the notion of “felt public space” - related, I think, to a kind of dodgy reference to the artist Joseph Beuys - but anyway, the phrase was definitely an icebreaker, and it gives a good description, not only of the conversations that we had in that second session, but also of the kind of enlarged conversations that we might get to this time. By pooling experiences and talking through the details and difficulties of work that has been done in a wide range of places and contexts, what emerges is nothing homogeneous, but an incredible texture of differences and open possibilities that can’t be reduced either to political sloganeering or to discrete little rungs leading up the golden ladder of the art world. Instead there is just a world out there, the real one: and little animated bits of it come walking through the doors of 16beaver. After this excruciating year, with the new outbreak of war during the summer and the realization, by so many people around the planet, that the problems facing us are deep and vast and unlikely to just resolve themselves with passing time or the usual elections, what stands out is a heightened sense of the importance of speaking with other people, and of listening. The hope is to extend the conversations of last year into a network of feelers that reach out further and maybe touch all of us a little deeper, so that we can really get somewhere with all the crazy hyperstimulated global wandering that present-day life seems to require.

**16B: For some people, it is difficult to distinguish what we are attempting here from a colloquium that would happen say at some university or art institution. Is it important to differentiate?**

**BH:** Well, the problem I have, and maybe others have it too, is that the formalism and the professionalism of the museumuniversity-festival circuit sometimes keeps you from knowing either who you are, or what you’re really talking about. This is not to say we should close the museums, picket the universities, burn the libraries or go back to the land or whatever. But it is to say that unconventional and dis-
senting ideas don’t often come out of established and conventional functions. And when everybody tacitly agrees that cultural production can only take place under the beneficent gaze of the market and the state, and on their payrolls, what you get in my opinion is very dull and timid attitudes combined with grotesquely simulated and overblown emotions. Or, from the more ambitious and professional types, you may get hyper-specialized discourses and elaborate aesthetic affects, this sort of highly valorized cultural production which appears irreducible when it comes out of MIT or MoMA, but still doesn’t seem to be what we’re looking for.

To put it in more theoretical terms, there is no possibility of generating a critical counter-power - or counter-public, or counterpublic sphere - when there is no more search for relative autonomy, or when the collective self (autos) no longer even asks the question of how to make its own law (nomos). So the importance of this kind of project is to use it as a moment of experimentation, not just in the quest for the perfect theory or the perfect procedure, but cosmologically, to rearrange the stars above your head. Such events don’t often happen, the only solution is do-it-yourself. It’s also part of the search for the outside, which has existential necessity. I think I’ve learned the most about art and social theory from counter-summits with lines of teargas-bolching cops, and from those kinds of anarchist summertime universities where you camp out for a week and have a hard time finding a shower, but also get to cooperate directly with people whose words and gestures aren’t totally dissociated from their bodies and their actions. Well, since those moments I have felt a need to develop more complex discourses and experiments, but hopefully not more conventional and complacent ones; and it seems like with this project, 16beaver has been a kind of convergence center in many people’s search for different formats.

16B: Organizational speaking, what do you think is the importance of these kinds of activities? Although we may be reluctant to employ the word model, we are positing a certain mode of research/practice?

BH: I guess we’re positing it. I would guess that everyone involved in the organizing is secretly hoping that this will be some kind of turning point for their own practice, both in terms of the kind of critical research into contemporary society that is being proposed, and as a way to get beyond a certain social limit, a certain dependency on conventional institutions for fixing the calendars, setting the topics and themes, generally guiding the rhythm and focus of public interactions. I would guess that we’re all dreaming that with a little extra effort, we could regain a certain intellectual and artistic dignity, a sense that we are establishing our own questions and problematics, while setting up experimental spaces to deal with them. I think this is a widely shared aspiration right now, not only for people who are operating autonomously and independently, but also for others who are pushing the limits of institutions and regaining the capacity to do something challenging in public. But it still remains to do it, to fulfill collective goals and get some palpable and usable results - which probably explains the reluctance to talk about models in the meantime!

BH: For me, the relation would be in the possibility to have some transformative influence on the damnably complex reality that confronts everyone today, precisely the political-economic-cultural situations that we’re trying to discuss. For example, you’ve probably heard me use the phrase “liberal fascism.” What does that mean? Why should people involved with art and culture have to deal with such an idea? I’ve been trying to clarify the preconditions for liberal fascism on the psychosocial level, since I started my work on the flexible personality about five years ago. But at this point I think we should collectively define the concept, now that the reality exists, now that so-called Democrats have voted for the Military Commissions Act, which suspends habeas corpus and the right to a fair trial, or even the right not to be tortured, for anyone arbitrarily designated an “unlawful enemy combatant.” Meanwhile, in case you managed to forget it, a corporation named Kellogg Brown & Koot, aka Halliburton, has been given a $385 million contract to establish - I’m quoting directly from their website - “temporary detention and processing capabilities” to augment existing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities, “in the event of an emergency influx of immigrants into the U.S., or to support the rapid development of new programs.” New programs? Which new programs? What kind of potential is hiding in that juxtaposition between “unlawful enemies” and domestic Guantánamos? Why don’t people talk about it?

One thing is that there’s no adequate language to describe what’s going on. But the other problem is that defining a concept doesn’t necessarily help you do anything about the reality. What used to be known as the Left in the USA has lost any significant capacity to move from theoretical definitions to effective actions. Under such conditions, there is really no use to go blithely ahead with utopian thinking, it becomes hypocrisy. But utopian thinking is at the very origin of cultural practice, so far as I’m concerned. So this is what you call a crisis, a life-threatening moment. We know we should all “go out in the streets,” but when we get there, there’s no there there. We have to create arguments so strong that they can merge with feelings, in order to reshape reality. By trying to articulate an examination of contemporary conditions with a cooperative, non-professional public practice, I think we are moving away from the self-imposed blindness and silence that characterizes the hypermobile, hyperproductive citizen under a regime of liberal fascism. But there is much more to be done, and I am hoping to learn more about the practices of making things public that different people in the group have been developing.

16B: Given that in this second year, we are attempting to expand our questions from last year, what would you say from your perspective are the developments intellectually in your own work, discursively in terms of writings you have come across, and politically in the last year?

BH: Well, a year is a long time, so it may take a while to answer! Certainly in my own work I have pursued the inquiry that began with the text on “Neoliberal Appetites,” which I presented at 16beaver last year. The point is to see how specific social institutions impress upon us the basic underlying procedure of neoliberal subjectivity, which consists in understanding yourself, your accomplishments and your own creativity, indeed your own desire, as human capital, to be nourished and cherished in terms of its potential returns on the
market, and to be used as a measurement of the value of any kind of experience whatsoever. Of course, this capital is also something to be risked in particular ventures, the way you risk your money on the stock market. I think that both museums and universities are now doing a lot to encourage this kind of self-valuation among intellectuals and artists, through the exalation of creativity as a productive force, and through the institution of intellectual property as a technique for reifying that force, making inventions into contractual “things” that can be securely owned. I have written a text called “The Artistic Device” to explore how neoliberal subjectivation takes place in the knowledge society, notably by examining a performance where an artist takes on the role of a day trader. The text also looks at a deliberate attempt to escape this form of subjectivation, to establish a new cooperative ethic and even a new imaginary, inseparable from the immanent experience of crossing a continent on the trans-Siberian train. The text ends with a Foucauldian analysis of a British university museum that’s now under construction, called The Panopticon Museum. But I can guarantee you, this is not the same analysis of centralized power and internalized surveillance that has been repeated for the last thirty years. “The Artistic Device” is a text that people might want to read before our sessions. In addition to that I have been structuring a book on the whole problematic, with essays on the artists Ricardo Basbaum and Marko Peljhan, on the concept of swarming and its limits, on Felix Guattari and his schizoanalytic cartographies, as well as other things in the works. It’s all online at the Continental Drift section of www.utangente.org.

Outside my work, a particularly interesting discursive event has been the publication of two essays by Malcolm Bull, “The Limits of Multitude” and “States of Failure.” These use the language of political philosophy to point to something very much like Polanyi’s “double movement”: namely an attempt to consolidate a World Government, which inherently fails and whose failure gives rise to what Bull calls the “dissipative structures” of a new multi-polar world. In “States of Failure” Bull shows the root impossibility of a world run by pure economics, as in the Clintonian dream of the World Trade Organization. Such a World Government either becomes a full-blown global state with military powers, or it dissolves, in various fashions, under the influence of different groups and social formations. What becomes clear at the end of the text, in a few amazing pages, is that this dissolution is already underway, and that the whole political question is how to keep it as peaceful as possible: that’s where the specific character and orientation of the “dissipative structures” has so much importance. I think it can be interesting for the philosophically minded to read those texts before the upcoming Continental Drift sessions, as a way to understand that the issues we are dealing with here are very much those of our times. Bull’s development of the concept of World Government also vindicates, in a general way at least, the speculative research that my friends in Bureau d’Etudes have been doing for years.

The main thrust of my own research, however, has been in another direction, spurred on by the long-term realities of conflict and the particularly insane war of the summer months. It comes partially to light in a text called “Peace-for-War,” which I wrote for the conference series recorded at www.dictionaryofwar.org. But I have a lot left to do before I can complete this argument. In order to grasp the strange mix, in the current American administration, between a kind of archaic Cold-War mindset and a very futurist, hi-tech practice of preemption, I have been looking into the early period of cybernetics, which was the great applied social science of the postwar period. Basically it’s about control through negative feedback, or error control - like an anti-aircraft gun gradually homing in on its target, with the assistance of its automated tracking device and its human operator. This was the primary model for the early worldwide control systems that were installed after WWII, typically leaving a very reduced place for the human operator, as a kind of logical calculator and biological servomechanism nested inside the larger machine. The research shows how the fulfillment and closure of something like World Government was sought through the applications of cybernetic logic to city planning and to organizational and technological system-building at a global scale. But it also shows that the ambition to constitute a “closed world” (the title of a great book by Paul N. Edwards) was already overcome on the theoretical level in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the innovations of secondorder cybernetics, with its emphasis on positive rather than negative feedback. Second-order cybernetics was first defined by a guy named Heinz von Foerster, who tried to understand all the perturbations that arise when the observer is part of the machine that he or she observes, and attempts to reorient or transform. Rather than seeking to preserve the balanced state of a homeostatic system, second-order cybernetics tries to map out how a system unbalances itself, alters its very parameters and rules, then goes through phase-changes provoked by the excess of positive feedback. In fact, the notion of “dissipative structures” would come in right here. Similar ideas were taken up and played out in daily life by the counter-cultures, as a way to break down the grip of monolithic control systems on our minds. I think that if you look back on the psychedelic “acid tests” that were done around San Francisco in the mid-sixties, and at the particular role of electronic media as a kind of delirious counter- or alterinformation source in those experiences, you get a first inkling of this kind of systemic unbalancing.

Recently I’ve been reading a lot of texts by Felix Guattari to understand the deeper principles of counter-cultural subversion, and I think Deleuze and Guattari’s work does exactly that: it overflows cybernetic control through an excess of nomadic desire, in an aesthetic equivalent to the kinds of guerrilla tactics that were able to overcome the rationalist battlefield strategies of the US imperial system. Much of what we think of as avant-garde art still tries to pursue this kind of disruptive, overflowing movement. However, what the strategy of subversion ultimately led to, when postmodern capitalism had finished recycling it back into a new functional pattern, was the optimistic emphasis on innovation and phase changes that was characteristic of the New Economy. Second-order cybernetics, reborn as complexity theory, became the master discourse of the 1990s, of post-modernism, of the Internet boom: it was the cynical reason of immaterial labor, something I already more or less described in “The Flexible Personality.” Semiotic chaos was made into a productive principle, as becomes clear when you look at a landmark book like “Increasing Returns and Path Dependency in the Economy” published by W.B. Arthur in 1994, which specifically focuses on the role of positive feedback in the creation of financial values. But this kind of economic logic couldn’t last, it was just too unstable. In parallel to the collapse of the New Economy and the World Trade Towers, what we saw coming to the fore, with incredible suddenness, were more militant versions of emergence, prac-
ticed first by the antiglobalization movements, then very differently by the networked terrorists. In the 1990s, the system believed it could thrive on its capacity to destabilize itself. But in the end, that was an illusion.

What we finally arrive at is a desperate moment where the US government tries to regain or prolong the paranoid fantasy of static control promised by the Cold-War image of World Government, but now through an entirely new, extremely dynamic strategy of “preempting emergence,” to borrow the title of a brilliant article by Melinda Cooper, which is the third text I’d like to recommend. The individual’s sense of a desiring, creative and valuable self at risk in an unpredictable world - in other words, the neoliberal appetite for self-capitalization - is paralleled on a macro level by a government that lashes out with its full hegemonic power in the attempt to annihilate risks which at the same time it continually re-creates, by its own compulsive drive to extend neoliberalism’s constitutive instability to the entire earth. Here we have as situation as patently mad as the Cold War was, with all its strategic zero-sum games of Mutually Assured Destruction. And we see this new form of civilizational madness being built around us, in the form of the security architecture of biometrics, used for the computerized tracking and targeting of singularities on their labyrinthine paths through the world-space. This hyper-individualized control obsession underlies the liberal fascism of the Military Commissions Act.

In the face of the long-term bid by the US to achieve a kind of total planetary lockdown, societies in danger have reacted in two ways: by developing dangerous and aggressive forms of chaotic emergence, and by plunging into archaic religious identities which do not obey the rational models of mainstream cybernetics. In other words, they have reacted by risking the future and hiding in the past, which is the same symptomatic movement that we identified last year as “neolib goes neocon.” The Bush administration itself has become at once archaic, in its dependency on a religious address to world populations, and hypermodern, in its attempt to institute a molecular surveillance of the future. But there’s no room for a sane response on those two opposed planes: we need a way to survive and flower in a present that’s open to becoming and alterity. So all of the above is just a more precise, perhaps deeper and more urgent way of asking the basic question: What to do in the face of the double movement of contemporary capitalism, with its disastrous consequences? Or in other words, how can we “subvert” (if that’s still the word) a system which is so dramatically and dangerously failing in its simultaneous attempts to instrumentalize the archaic and to preempt emergence?

16B: Based on that response, one question is whether what you outline above is compatible with a multi-scale social ontology as proposed by some thinkers like Manuel De Landa. (consisting of individuals, families, groups, communities, neighborhood associations, social and cultural groups, activist groups, small and medium sized corporations, unions, courts, towns, cities, city councils, regional groups, universities, large enterprises, states, state governments, nations, federal governments, national political organizations, media organizations, lobby groups, ngo’s, international bodies, int’l courts, global corporations, conglomerates, trading blocs, ....) The question is not meant to undermine the proposals we have examined so far, nor to reject the assertion that there are extremely powerful forces attempting to preempt emergence, nor even to deny the fact that there are large concentrations of power in the hands of a shrinking number of players. It is meant instead to demand a theoretical approach that does not reduce the complexity of our societies - an approach which makes it more plausible to retain spaces for contradiction as well as spaces for hope, for the heterogeneous potentials which will alter the course of history.

BH: Well, I definitely agree, and what we are doing together is predicated on that approach. But to acknowledge the existence of multiple actors and a multi-scale society is one thing, to know what to do with it is another! The very quandary of democracy has always been the uncertainty of moving through those scales, compounded by the question of whether one would really want access to the power techniques used by the larger formations to manipulate the smaller ones, to homogenize them and make their actions knowable, predictable, steerable. The unpleasant suspicion that you are being steered, and the difficulty, or more often the impossibility, of going high enough up the ladder to challenge that steering effect and ask for more transparent decision-making procedures, is one of the things that can literally drive people nuts under the paradoxical regime of democracy, which says you are free to participate in the drafting and interpretation of the collective law, but then consistently proves the contrary. One of the traditional responses to this problem has been to become more deliberate, to participate in or actually develop structures which are at once larger than the immediate forms of face-to-face association, yet at the same time contain both ethical cultures and formal procedures to make sure that individuals and small groups still have some input. I don’t think that kind of deliberate action should be discounted, and the emergence of new parties, unions, NGOs, or the reform of old ones, is always worth attention. That’s also why I keep intervening in formal art institutions and university programs, and encouraging group interventions, though always from a position of relative autonomy. I admire tenacious people who are able to introduce change and experimentation on those levels, and want to contribute. But the present-day situation has seen a real paralysis of most of those structures, which becomes clear when you look at the paradigmatic case of the political party.

There were a lot of reasons, in the late nineteenth century, for individual politicians to accept party discipline, one of them being that the party provided a new place and a new set of rules for the decision-making process, outside the cacophony of the parliaments. So increasingly, in the twentieth century, policy was worked out at the headquarters of parties, which then confronted each other as voting blocs in the parliaments. Another advantage of the party was that it could have a broad popular membership, which proved essential for gathering information about what people really want in a democracy. And the fact of being consulted, of participating - another essential attraction for the politicians. But the professionally conducted opinion poll, then in recent years the focus group, gradually replaced the function of broad party membership as an
information-gathering device; and the function of advertising, then of the campaign as an integrated spectacle, also replaced the older, more organic ways of motivating people’s votes. So today the political party has everywhere become a televisial juggernaut piloted by a sociological research arm, which serves only to get the vote out once every few years, while the specialized political-economic deals required to raise money to pay for those studies and campaign extravaganzas are struck under a veil of ignorance and manipulated information, at levels of complexity which citizens are completely unprepared to understand. And this same kind of phenomenon also crops up at the municipal scale, the corporate scale, the branch scale in unions, the state or national scale in big NGOs and so on, to the point where the idea of moving freely between them becomes a real fiction! The need for very large actors to operate at the world scale and at the speeds made possible by modern communication and transportation finally makes leaders just give up the whole pretense of any complex give-and-take between the different groups and organizations you mentioned, to the point where a guy like Bush says, almost immediately after taking office, “If this were a dictatorship, it would be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I’m the dictator.” Under the pretext of urgency, people with that kind of mentality will actually set about destroying the possibility of any bottom-up relationship between the scales, the way the Israeli military methodically destroyed the brand-new civil communication and transportation infrastructure this summer in Lebanon, and over the last year or so in Gaza.

16B: This is why we wanted to add a fourth text to our list of shared references: a chapter from the Retort book “Afflicted Powers,” entitled “The State, the Spectacle and September 11.” Their book raises various critical questions and points where we may diverge from their analysis. But one interesting link to us is their discussion of the current regime’s need both for “failed states” abroad and for “weak citizenship” at the centers of capitalism.

BH: Yes, the Retort book is one of the few major statements to have come out of radical circles in the United States. They make an essential point when they say that state power now “depends more and more on maintaining an impoverished and hygienized public realm, in which only the ghosts of an older, more idiosyncratic civil society live on.” That’s what I was describing above. Yet they tend to see the spectacle cracking in the wake of September 11, and I think that’s particularly true beyond the US. September 11 and its consequences have brought many people to a shared understanding of the impossibility of any complex give-and-take between the different groups and organizations which legitimacy is based on belonging and representation, in the crisis of those political institutions which we would say, in the crisis of those political institutions which legitimacy is based on belonging and representation, in the crisis of those political institutions which legitimacy is based on belonging and representation.

Be Network, My Friend
Joan Miguel Gual and Francesco Salvini (Univeridad Nomada)

In Europe a new form of governing emerged. Government today acts on different levels at the same time: it permeates urban spaces and rearticulate borders in the everyday life of cities, it polarise pre-existing power relations, building new dependences in the contemporary geography of Europe. As a result the asymmetry of former Europe have not disappeared at all, but ruptures and fringes emerge every day and marginality and centrality exist one along the other.

This is the way in which contemporary capitalism is constituting a global market: playing on asymmetries for multiplying labour regimes and fragmenting social struggles. This proliferation of modes of exploitation stems in the crisis of unions, parties, welfare state and more in general, we would say, in the crisis of those political institutions which legitimacy is based on belonging and representation, in times when belonging has blown up and representation has become the impossible attempt to discipline social heterogeneity, reducing difference and social life under the command of capital.
The asymmetric constitution of Europe towards the outside – manifest in the differential inclusion of Eastern Europe, as well as in the permanent production of outsides to reproduce European power – involves a becoming-asymmetric not only in the colony, in the outside, but also in the metropole itself. This is the everyday life of European urban areas: the models of integration defined in Maastricht, Bologna, Amsterdam, Schengen dictate policies of exclusion and valorisation, of control and discipline, imposing a process of general precarcisation of social life and urban production. Following Mezzadra and Neilson (2008), the development of gentrification, the proliferation of internal borders and the securitarian obsession of urban governance display novel procedures of government aiming to multiply labour regimes and exploit every segment of society as much as possible, depending on the vulnerability of each subject, on her fragility, we would say, on her precarity.

Our question here is what social strategy of organizing can escape this multiplication of modes of exploitations not by recomposing unity, identity and homogeneity, but permitting difference, precarity, vulnerability to become a departure point for radical politics? For this we will focus just on one facet, an ongoing experimentation that, we think, has been relevant in the development of autonomous social struggles during the last decade: network not only as a tool, but as think, has been relevant in the development of autonomous social movements invented ‘network-institutions’, as transversal assemblage of new institutional forms that attempt to fight the governance of life – radically collapses into institutionality that interacts with existing institutions and traditional disciplines? This movement of subversion indeed needs not only to reappropriate the social values produced inside institutions and distancing from the false coherence of representation and to challenge the discipline of the contemporary capitalist rationality, of control and discipline, imposing a process of general precarcisation of social life and urban production. Nonetheless to exceed does not mean to leave behind, forget or refuse: it means to go beyond, overflow. Exceed as a practice for composing new sites for the production of situated knowledge and social cooperation able to open breaches where statements emerging in social mobilisations can proliferate.

Extra allow us to deal with the beyond, both in the physical meanings of the term – beyond the bureaucracies, beyond the walls of the institutions, in the open space of the metropolis – and in theoretical terms, exceeding the borders of discipline as canon of knowledge, as authority in the social production of knowledge. Possible practices for exploring such extraterritorialities are appropriation and transversality, as practices to trigger collective assemblages, occupying the street, the university, the social imaginaries, and to transform public spaces in common and hybrid spaces, subverting the norms and letting social conflicts blow up.

Autonomy is not enough. If we want to constitute dissident spaces for the production of subjectivities that do not respond to the order of government and to the command of capital, we need to constitute new hybrid ecologies for dissident socialities. We need to move on the margins, in and out institutions, in order to overwhelm and overcome them, in order to develop monstrous political practices, able to break the false coherence of representation and to challenge the discipline of major sciences (the royal sciences of the state) through the molecular acting of minor sciences (nomadic sciences), where knowledge becomes a situated process of production, that concretely modifies social reality, not formally, but in its everyday functioning.

This is why we think the most problematic task is not how to escape towards the outside, the outside of the hegemonic representation, but how to break the representation from the inside: how do we escape inside and challenge the functioning of the contemporary rationality of government? How do we invent a subversive and monstrous institutionality that interacts with existing institutions and traditional disciplines? This movement of subversion indeed needs not only to reappropriate the social values produced inside institutions and dis-
disciplines, but also to show the limits, the crises and the dramatic finitude of the contemporary institutional assemblages.

Practices generate contradictions and our experience is not an exception. But inside the privatization of the public and in the reduction of social autonomous production to the rules of capitalist accumulation, monster institutions wants to be an attempt to constitute new textures that tie life and politics: to produce new territories of social existence, to permit excess to avoid to become surplus, to claim and construct dissident and alternative life-forms where freedom, solidarity and life itself can gain new meanings beyond market regulation and political representation. This is for us the institutional generative principle of the processes in which the Universidad Nomada participates.

Social centres, Oficinas de derechos sociales and networks for militant research, as spaces where to reinvent the forms of cultural production, the relationship between life and labour, as attempts to reconfigure social struggles in the enlargement of production from the factory to the social life, and finally as sites for the production of autonomous knowledge, to demystify the functioning of contemporary capitalism but also to problematise the strategies of social movements. However this same institutional generative principle calls us to problematise and engage with constituted institutions like Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo in Murcia (CENDEAC), with Spanish Universities and so on, to open hybrid spaces to critique and investigate the procedures and the rationalities in the contemporary governance of social production.

In this process, extra is a constitutive prefix for the invention of monstrous institutions: extra as viral practice against the permanent attempt of normalisation and abstraction carried on by capital. Extra as constituent practice that explores the emergent territory of the right to the commons. Mending on these margins, exceeding and exploring, network institutions emerge as spaces of invention to actualise these commons, to loot and reappropriate the social values circulating in the instituted spaces, and at the same time making possible the invention and proliferation of radically democratic processes of organization for social production.

NOTES:

1 http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0508#redir
2 Cuidadania as a term plays with words: from ciudad (city) to cuidado (care), from ciudadanía (citizenship) to cuidadania. It resulted from a typographical error and has been useful to define the practices of feminists networks working on care labour, especially in problematizing the link between citizenship and transnational care.
3 (Foucault, 1997:32).
5 http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0508/lopezetal/en

University in Conflict event poster, Universidad Nomada

Poster for self-organized seminar on radical art practices at Mess Hall, an experimental cultural center in Chicago. Poster by Let’s Remake!
Edu-Factory Collective

**All Power to Self-Education!**

**WHAT WAS ONCE THE FACTORY IS NOW THE UNIVERSITY.** We started off with this apparently straightforward affirmation, not in order to assume it but to question it; to open it, radically rethinking it, towards theoretical and political research. The Edu-factory project took off from here, as an assemblage of various things. It is a transnational mailing list centered around university transformations, knowledge production and forms of conflict (http://listcultures.org/mailman/listinfo/ Edu-factory_listcultures.org), in which nearly 500 activists, students and researchers the world over have taken part from the beginning. With the vanishing of state borders, global space is definitively affirmed as a space of research and political action. In this book we report on one part of our debate: the complete contributions are available on the project website (www.Edu-factory.org). Our experience over the last few years has taught us to mistrust the faith often put in the supposedly spontaneous and horizontal mechanisms that the network purportedly holds. We’ve learned that the network is, on the contrary, a hierarchical structure and that horizontality is continually at stake in power relationships. We’ve learned to flee from every technology that doesn’t help us see how work is becoming more knowledge oriented, as social relations and even the experiences of political struggle are becoming more immaterial. We’ve learned that the network needs to be organized or, better yet, we need to organize ourselves within the network. Grasping the radical innovation of the network-form means, therefore, approaching it as a battleground that is continually traversed by power differentials and lines of antagonistic force, from the production of the common to capitalistic attempts to capture it. It is then necessary to defeat all “weak thought” of the network, which has catastrophically obscured the possibilities of surmounting representation and the political-party-form, with the villainous liquidation of the Gordian knots of organization and rupture. It is only from here that it is possible to begin the construction of those new forms of autonomous institutionality that Ned Rossiter calls organized networks.

From this perspective, Edu-factory is not only an experimentation with a new way of conducting discussions but also with a new way of organizing networks. On the one hand, the debate is temporally circumscribed and thematically identified: the two rounds of discussion — the first centered on conflicts in knowledge production, the second on processes of hierarchization in the educational marketplace and on the constitution of autonomous institutions — lasted three months each. Afterwards, the list closed to be reopened in the next cycle. This was, in other words, an attempt to pass from an extensive level to an intensive dimension of network organization. On the other hand, the list debate was scheduled around a calendar of previously planned interventions that allowed the richness of the discussion to be structured within a process of shared and focused cooperation.

Edu-factory is, above all, a partisan standpoint on the crisis of the university, which is clearly analyzed by various contributions. Already in the 1990s, Bill Readings wrote *The University in Ruins.* The state university is in ruins, the mass university is in ruins, and the university as a privileged place of national culture — just like the concept of national culture itself — is in ruins. We’re not suffering from nostalgia. Quite the contrary, we vindicate the university’s destruction. In fact, the crisis of the university was determined by social movements in the first place. This is what makes us not merely immune to tears for the past but enemies of such a nostalgic disposition. University corporatization and the rise of a global university, to use the pregnant category proposed by Andrew Ross, are not unilateral imposition, or development, completely contained by capitalist rationality. Rather they are the result — absolutely temporary and thus reversible — of a formidable cycle of struggles. The problem is to transform the field of tension delineated by the processes analyzed in this book into specific forms of resistance and the organization of escape routes. There is no other way for us to conceive theory other than as a theoretical practice, which is partisan and subversive. This is Edu-factory’s starting point and objective, its style and its method.

Let us return now to our initial affirmation. Might it be better to reformulate it in these terms: what was once the factory is now the university? But be careful: the university doesn’t function at all like a factory. Every linear continuity risks not only being a comfortable hiding place in the categories that we were once accustomed to, but also obscuring the possibility of comprehension, and thus action, within social and productive changes. The category of knowledge factory used by Stanley Aronowitz seems to us at once allusively correct and analytically insufficient. Allusively correct because it grasps the way in which the university is becoming immediately productive, its centrality to contemporary capitalism, including its particular organizational characteristics as well as control and discipline of living labor. The reform of the Italian education system, started by Berlinguer and Zecchino, gives us a clear example — just think about the frenetic modularization of courses and the staggering acceleration of the times and rhythms of study. It is no coincidence that these were among the principal targets of the students’ and precarious workers’ struggles in autumn 2005.

The category of the knowledge factory, however, is analytically insufficient, since it underestimates the specific differences between the “Fordist factory” and the contemporary university. Taylorism, in fact, is something that is historically specific; it is the scientific organization of work through the temporal measurement of single tasks, execution speed and serialization. If knowledge production is not measurable, except artificially, it is evident that Taylorist production methods (through chronometers, predictability and repetition of gestures, or virtual assembly lines) are unable to organize it. The ways in which labor power is produced have changed. It is at this level and in this gap that analyses of, and possibilities for, transformation can be located.

Our initial question, if anything, indicates the urgency of a political problem: is it possible to organize within the university as if it were a factory? Better yet: how should we situate the political knot implied in the evocative comparison between university and factory, beginning from the incommensurable difference of their concrete functioning and their respective spatial-temporal coordinates? In other
words, how can the problem of organization after the exhaustion of its traditional forms, the union and the political party, be rethought? Above all, how can it be rethought within the new composition of living labor, which no longer has an “outside”? A few lines of political research — still partially fragmentary but already quite concrete — have emerged.

If we could summarize the different global experiences that interacted in Edu-factory under a common name, it might be “self-education.” From the “Rete per l’autoformazione” in Rome to “Vidya Asram” in Varanasi, from the “Universidad Experimental” in Rosario to the “Experimental College” in the United States, self-education is neither a weak niche positioned at the margins of the education system nor an entrenched in impotent ideas and cultures gutted of resistance and subversive possibility. On the contrary, it emerged as a form of struggle for cognitive workers in contemporary capitalism. It involves, at the same time, conflict over knowledge production and the construction of the common, the struggles of precarious workers, and the organization of autonomous institutions.

Edu-factory, therefore, is a space where struggles connect, a space of resistance and organizational experiments. This is what, for example, Eileen Schell writes about concerning precarious workers’ struggles in the United States: here e-learning — an instrument for the virtualization (understood here not as the power of the possible but, on the contrary, as its negation) — is turned into practices of struggle and cooperation, in a sort of open-source unionism. We shouldn’t be fooled by the description of unions in universities, even though it highlights a different interpretive register with respect to the analysis of the end of the workers’ movement being conducted on the other side of the Atlantic. The relation between precarious workers and unions is upside-down in a certain sense, as the important graduate student mobilization of New York University (NYU) has shown. This struggle took shape as a conflict over the nature of cognitive work. While the administration refused to recognize the right of graduate students to organize a union — arguing that they are apprentices and therefore not workers — the students maintained that they are workers not only due to the fact that they sustain a large part of the teaching load, but also because they are producers of knowledge, research, and education. In these mobilizations, self-organized precarious workers affiliated themselves with the union (the United Auto Workers, in this case) that, among the range of unions, offered the most resources in economic, organizational and communicative terms. But they were prepared to change unions at any given moment; it is hardly surprising that precarious workers have no sympathy for calls for a return to a past that was sent into crisis by the conduct and movements of living labor in the first place. The question, rather, is how to link flexibility and autonomy. In this sense, the relationship with the union is disenchanted, flexible and cynical. The union should be understood as fully contained within the crisis of representation, where its structures survive, even parasitically, beyond their political function.

2.

From this space where struggles are connected, the centrality of knowledge clearly emerges. The contributions to the Edu-factory discussion definitively take leave from the cult of knowledge, historically rooted in the left, as a sacred and intangible fetish. Not only is knowledge a peculiar kind of commodity, but it is also an instrument of hierarchization and segmentation. Nevertheless, in the moment in which it becomes a resource and a productive instrument central for contemporary capitalism, knowledge structurally exceeds the measuring units of classical political economy. It is best to clarify to avoid all misunderstandings: the excess of living knowledge does not coincide deterministically with its liberation. We can take the case of the network and of the utopian ideas that have traversed it since its birth. The keywords — sharing, so-called horizontality, centrality of non-proprietary strategies, open source, the excess of cooperation with respect to the market — have become the daily bread of the Prince’s advisors’ realism. Starting from these characteristics, which describe forms of life and work in web 2.0, the liberal legal scholar Yochai Benkler formulates his hypothesis of a “horizontal production based on common goods.” It is a kind of capitalism without property, where intellectual property is no longer merely the forced imposition of an artificial measure onto an immeasurable knowledge production, but an economic organization that risks blocking those very same innovative processes. In order to chase and capture living knowledge’s movements, then, capital is continually compelled to modify the forms of valorization and accumulation, possibly even up to the point of putting property itself, a pilaster of modern history, into question.

In short, far from belonging to a progressive state of capitalist evolution, knowledge production is a battleground — and there is no liberation without rupture. The practices of appropriation and autonomy on one side, and the processes of capture and subsumption on the other, constitute the level of tension immanent to social cooperation. It is starting from here, from the attempt to define the analysis of the transition process that, in positive terms, was identified as the passage from “Fordism” to “postFordism” between the ’80s and ‘90s, that Carlo Vercellone proposes the category of cognitive capitalism (the more problematic aspects of which Silvia Federici and George Caffentizis discuss). The term capitalism indicates the permanence of the capitalist system, despite its profound changes, while the attribution of “cognitive” identifies the new nature of work, the sources of valorization and the structure of property. Without going any further into a discussion developed in the various contributions here, we’d like to allow ourselves one curious annotation. On the Edu-factory list, the harshest criticisms of the concept of cognitive capitalism, which was accused of underpinning a Eurocentric analysis of the transformations to production and labor, came from Europe and North America. However, in contributions from the places in the name of which such criticisms were formulated (for example India, China, Taiwan or Argentina) a particularly rich and open dialogue developed, based on the sharing of various analytic presumptions and closer examination of a few specific points. Beyond every polemic regarding the risk of speaking instead of others, which is to say claiming the function of representation on which postcolonial criticism has expressed words that we take as definitive, we’re interested rather in underlining the fracturing of the classical image of the international division of labor. This is illustrated by the contributions of Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, which indicates the concept of the multiplication of labor as a new area of theoretical research. It is just as important to underline how Vercellone tests the concept of cognitive capitalism in the analysis of the radical, extraordinary, and victorious student struggles against the CPE (the
labor laws regarding first jobs) in France during the spring of 2006. As in other experiences of conflict that have been examined in the Edu-factory project, for example the formidable mobilizations in Greece, and the revolts in France, where the forms of déclassement were among the central objectives. Outside every linear image of the intellectualization of labor, these struggles allow us to read the materiality of the processes of knowledge production through social relations. Here the cognitivization of labor signifies the cognitivization of measure and exploitation, the cognitivization of class hierarchy, salary regulation and the division of labor, beyond the already surpassed dialectic between center and periphery, between first and third world. In other words, these processes permit us to situate the new field of conflict on a terrain where the processes of capitalist subsumption and valorization, far from disappearing, are compelled to recompose the forms of command over the autonomy of living knowledge, after having been forced to definitively renounce their capacity to organize them.

3.

“Thus does the beginner, who has acquired a new language, keep on translating it back to his own mother tongue; only then has he grasped the spirit of the new language and is able freely to express himself therewith when he moves in it without recollections of old, and has forgotten in its use his own hereditary tongue”: what Marx himself therewith when he moves in it without recollections of old, knows to recompose the forms of command over the autonomy of living knowledge, after having been forced to definitively renounce their capacity to organize them.

Using the 20th-century labor movement’s categories, we could say that heterolingual translation is internal to class composition, which is to say the relationship between technical and political composition. Since these categories — incarnated in a historically determined subject, the working class, and based on the spatial-temporal linearity of the factory — can no longer be proposed in the same form in which the labor movement forged them, they consequently must be rethought from the beginning. In the relation between singularity and the production of the common, in the multitudes, the articulation of differences can acquire a disjunctive sense, in the measure in which singularities are lead to the identity of a presumed belonging (ethnic, sexual, communitarian, or social group). This is the technical composition that sustains the processes of differential inclusion. Here conflict doesn’t go beyond politically recognizing one’s own position in the capitalist hierarchy. We have confronted this limit in different mobilizations of precarious workers, for example in that of the researchers against the Moratti Reform in Italy. Their strength dissolved when they explicitly or implicitly identified themselves in specific categories (knowledge workers, the creative class, the “most intelligent part of the country”), which are not at all descriptive, but rather prescriptive. They are, in other terms, decomposition factors and rearticulations of common instances in key sectors; a sort of new identity of a middle class after its end, or the mediation and conservation of a social equilibrium of exploitative relations. Besides, the concept of cognitive labor — that, as Ross suggests, finds a paradigmatic anticipation in the forms of academic work — differentiates itself from the above indicated categories in the measure in which it is to be understood as the grid through which the entire composition of living labor and its transformations is to be read. We can accordingly redefine political composition as a process of disidentification, of disarticulation of the technical composition and of a new composition on a “line of force” that finds its definition in the production of the common. Let’s call this line of force “class.”

Against any possible sociological and economic interpretation, class is at stake in of a process of struggle, it is not its objective precondition. Between technical composition and political composition, be-
tween capitalist hierarchy and the differential potential of conflicts, there is a power relation, not a homology and symmetry. With these new spatial-temporal coordinates, in the student and precarious worker struggles from China to the United States, from Greece to Italy, from South Africa to France, through the possible processes of heterolingual translation and construction of common lexis and practices, our initial hypothesis about the university and the factory takes on a new hue. How can we transform the university into a political space for struggle and exodus, for the political composition of differences in a space-time of class, just as the factory was for the working class? Beyond, or rather against any naïve continuum, this is the political raison d'être of Edu-factory.

4.

The experiences of conflict that have been brought into relation through Edu-factory are situated within, or better said, inside and against the tranformations of the university. The contributions collected here provide an important grid to read the trends that are common on a transnational level and that find their own adaptations — in fact their own translations — in different contexts. These are the new spatial coordinates, which Wang Hui, Ranabir Samaddar, Franco Barchiesi and Stanley Aronowitz give as an outline in their respective contributions to Edu-factory, some available in this book and others available on the website as video interviews. According to these coordinates, the nation-state ceases to be the measure of analysis of the current changes, as the attempt to construct a European space of higher education, also known as the Bologna Process, demonstrates. In this framework, Toby Miller and Xiang Biao accurately profile the hierarchization process through which the education market is constituted, inside which the university — having resigned every pretext of exclusivity over the forms of production and transmission of knowledge — is located. The lively discussion on the list also permitted us to qualify the corporatization process of the education system in terms both more precise and qualitatively different from the currently diffused rhetoric. It is not simply a matter of public disinvestment and the growing private investment in the higher education sector: rather, it is the very dialectic between public and private that is breaking down. In fact, as Marc Bousquet demonstrates, it is the university that is becoming corporate and functioning according to the parameters of the corporate world. At the same time, as Ross perspicuously suggests, the “knowledge business” is modeling itself by importing conditions, mentalities, and habits from academic labor. Starting in the 80s, the theory of New Public Management, defined as a movement of thought and philosophy of public sector reform, was charged with managing the introduction of instruments and a logic of private organization into the university. Any recourse to the state against business has no sense today, if it ever did. The state, just like the “mandarin” government in universities, is in fact the guarantor of corporatization, going so far as to cease distinguishing between itself and private organizations. The alterations in the university should therefore be framed within the crisis of welfare. The conflictual genealogy of this crisis — which includes the radical criticism of the devices for disciplining the labor force and their universalistic and neutralizing systems, which chronologically and politically precede neoliberal reconstruction — illustrates the level of the current struggle. A struggle that, again, sheds no tears for the past.

In global space, as Mezzadra and Neilson suggest, borders decompose, recompose and multiply all at the same time. This is also true of the relation between the university and the metropolis. Once again, the example of NYU — a global brand of higher education — assumes paradigmatic traits in this regard. In fact, in New York two principle agents of gentrification, or studentification as it has been significantly defined, are universities: Columbia University in West Harlem and NYU on the Lower East Side. But if in the first case the borders of the campus are expanded to include a new zone, in the case of NYU the borders seem to dissolve in a mimetic relationship with the metropolitan fabric. So much so, that for NYU President John Sexton and the university’s administration, which comes entirely from the corporate world, the challenge is rethinking the metropolitan development of New York starting from the university, guiding the passage from the FIRE economy, based on finance, insurance and real estate, to a ICE economy, or the valorizing of intellectual, cultural and education resources. The borders, therefore, that become porous till the point of nearly dissolving themselves into the relationship between the corporate university and the metropolis, are continually retraced in order to subsume the knowledge production diffused in social cooperation. It isn’t by chance that the Lower East Side was a historic zone for sprouting movements and independent cultures, before becoming a development of Silicon Ally, the high-tech end of the Big Apple, during the ‘90s and now a potential motor for the ICE economy. Gentrification and studentification are open processes that transform the social composition and open new fields of conflict. In these processes we see the entire composition of labor commanded by revenue spread, according to the form of contemporary capitalist subsumption: from precarious labor in the universities to janitors and third-sector service workers. All this contributes to render metropolitan spaces valuable in so far as they are relational and cooperative fabrics, with the decisive role being played by finance and investments in urban transformations. Here, too, there is little to defend or conserve: what is left over is usually residual and sometimes even an obstacle to the possibility of liberation. Reconfiguring studentification in an antagonistic sense, attacking its dynamic on a deep level means, at the very least, rethinking the metropolis; constructing the university-metropolis starting with institutions of the common.

Since there is nothing external to the relationship between the university and the metropolis anymore, the mechanisms of selection and segmentation change too. They are no longer based on exclusion, or the rigid confine between who is “in” and who is “out,” but on processes of differential inclusion. In other words, in the framework of a permanent credit system, the level of qualification of the work force, as demonstrated by Xiang Biao starting from the case in China, doesn’t depend so much on the fact that individuals have a university degree or not, but above all on which educational institution they attended and the position of this institution on the hierarchy of the educational market. To put it in synthetic terms, with reference to the Italian situation: if up until the 1960s the bottleneck of selection was quite narrow, jammed between the completion of high school and entrance to the university, it became gradually wider, pressured by social movements long before the capitalist system’s need for endogenous rationalization. In fact it was ’68 that shattered the bottleneck, inaugurating what would be called the mass university. Now the problem for the Italian government isn’t
restricting access but augmenting it, in order to keep up with European and international statistics. However, the inclusion process is accompanied by a dequalification of knowledge, most of all those kinds of knowledge that are normally recognized. What is called the highschoolization of the university means that students must climb the ladder to earn or, better yet, credit themselves with skills expendable on the job market. In this situation, the old expression “the right to education” loses meaning, to the extent in which conflict shifts to the quality of inclusion and knowledge production as new hierarchization devices.

Here are the lines of intersection between the making precarious of academic work precarious and the imposition of new cognitive measures that range from the system of intellectual property and educational credits all the way to their corresponding characteristic, debt — a question elaborated in detail by Jeffery Williams in the American context. Here a new student figure is embodied, no longer as a member of the work force in training, but as a worker. Recent literature shows decisive analytical traces of this change. It is within this framework that the university assumes a new role insofar as it is one of the many nodes and devices of metropolitan control, which artificially measure and regulate the value of cognitive labor power through skill stratification and intellectual qualification. This artificial measure not only lacks an objective character but also loses the capacity to accurately describe the abilities of single workers. Aihwa Ong and Xiang Biao (who have both actively taken part in our list discussions) have demonstrated this in particularly convincing ways, for example in the case of the Indian “technomigrants,” who represent the motor of development in Silicon Valley as well as in the Australian high-tech industry. These figures are forced to drive taxis or work low wage jobs to be able to reach an income sufficient to sustain their mobility and negotiate the immigration politics in order to enter or stay in the country. The forms of differential inclusion that affect the changing figure of the citizen also pass through the imposition of borders regulated by artificial cognitive measures. The above cited texts, just like the whole experience of Edu-factory, invite us to break away from traditional points of view in reading these changes in the educational system and in cognitive labor. The same applies to biocapital — here intended in a very specific sense: the way in which social relations unfold in the processes of capital invested in biotechnologies. This is not because centers and peripheries don’t exist anymore in absolute but because their relation breaks up and rearticulates itself continually in the metropolis in so far as it is an immediately global space. Above all, this relation doesn’t follow the traditional dividing lines of the global market anymore. Hence, if we do not look to what is happening in China or India, in Singapore or in Taiwan, we exclude ourselves from the possibility of grasping the world’s becoming one and therefore our ability to transform it.

5.

Edu-factory is a project situated on the frontier: between the university and the metropolis, between education and labor, between the rubble of the past and exodus, between the crisis of the university and the organization of the common. Whereas the border imposes a dividing line, the frontier is a dense space, ambivalent and traversable, a place of escape and constituent practices. There is a productive force on the frontier that can be explored and appropriated in antagonistic ways. Here, there is a reconfiguration of the spatial and temporal coordinates in which the crisis of the university can be questioned and fought. We could say that the relation between cognitive labor and subsumption processes are configured primarily as a conflict over time, which not by chance has been a central focus of the student and precarious worker struggles around the world. The creation of artificial units of cognitive measure that try to maintain the vigilance of the law of value where it has long ceased to be valid configures itself — to cite Walter Benjamin — as the imposition of the empty and homogeneous time of capital on the full and heterogeneous times of living knowledge. Or, in Marx’s terms, as a continual reduction — a monolingual translation — of living knowledge’s production times to time units of abstract labor. The concept of the common is materially incarnated as beginning with the temporality of living knowledge, a concept that we can find in the contributions of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, of Jason Read and James Arvanitakis. The common is, from a class point of view, the escape route from the crisis of the public/private dialectic to which we previously alluded. It would be useful to clear up one point, which constitutes a subject of divergent readings on the question of the commons in the Italian and transnational debate. When we speak about the common we are not referring to a good to be defended or protected, but to the affirmation of social cooperation’s autonomy and self-organization. The common, far from existing in nature, is therefore produced: it is always at stake in constituent processes, capable of destroying relations of exploitation and liberating the power of living labor.

The common isn’t the umpteenth repositioning of a new dawn, or a weak preconfiguration of utopian hope. The common is that which lives in the present, a full virtuality, intended this time as the potentiality of the actual. The paths of self-education confronted in Edu-factory are not marginal spaces but, to use the categories of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, new spatialtemporal coordinates for the production of oppositional knowledges and the organization of living knowledge’s autonomy. They are expressions from the point of view and practices of minority agents. The debate about autonomous institutions begins with the abandoning of majority thought, the empty temporality of the abstract subject, and the export of universal models. This theme (which was discussed not only on the Edu-factory list but also in other important political formats, for example the European web journal “Transform” (http://transform.epcp.net) and Uninomade, which furnishes Toni Negri and Judith Revel’s contribution that closes the present volume), is both an innovative project of theoretic research and a political program. How do we reply to the question: why pose the theme of autonomous institutions with such urgency? We could answer as follows: because the exodus is already upon us. We’ve experimented with it in the political and social expressions of what we call multitude. And nevertheless we would have to add: exodus does not naturally coincide with autonomy. Exodus must conquer autonomous organization by organizing its own institutions.

There are a few historically important examples. One is the case of Black Studies in the United States. Far from belonging to the progressive evolution of academic disciplines or in the national integration processes, Black Studies began with the barricades of the 1968
Third World Strike in San Francisco, the affirmations of the Black Power movement, and the rifles on the shoulders of black students at Cornell University. Just as, Mohanty suggests, postcolonial studies becomes a soothing postmodern phenomenon if its genealogy is not traced back to anticolonial struggles, those who would still think that knowledge production belongs to the ireneric field of cultural and scientific objectivity are finally forced to reconsider. In a recent book dedicated to this extraordinary history, Noliwe Rooks clarifies how the passage of the Black movement from the lexis of rights to the exercise of power has nothing to do with the third internationalist idea of taking control of the state or with the symmetrically opposite positions of John Holloway. Rather, it involved the rupture of democratic integration and the constitution of separate institutions, autonomously controlled and self-managed by the Black community. It was the attempt to change the word exercising power relations hic et nunc in complete independence from the state. The response to the institutional organization of exodus and separation is concretized in a lethal articulation of brutal repression and differential inclusion, the sum of which is represented by the Ford Foundation’s strategies. Rooks briefly lingers on the selective financing of Black communities and Black Studies to favor the leaders of the groups that sustained the cause of racial integration and attempted to marginalize radical militants. University governance here is a response to struggles and autonomous organization: inclusion becomes a device of control and, where this is not possible, it is always ready to exercise violence.

Analogously, today the forms of university governance cannot allow themselves to uproot self-education. To the contrary, self-education constitutes a vital sap for the survival of the institutional ruins, snatched up and rendered valuable in the form of revenue. Governance is the trap, hasty and flexible, of the common. Instead of countering us frontally, the enemy follows us: the origin of this asymmetrical conflict is the ungovernability and infidelity of living labor. That means, on one hand, that governance is permanently faced with its own crisis, which is genealogically determined by the autonomy of living knowledge and the impossibility of vertical government. On the other hand, we must immediately reject any weak interpretation of the theme of autonomous institutions, according to which the institution is a self-governed structure that lives between the folds of capitalism, without excessively bothering it. In the worst cases, this can even become individual entrepreneurship. So, the institutionalization of self-education doesn’t mean being recognized as one actor among many within the education market, but the capacity to organize living knowledge’s autonomy and resistance. This means determining command and collective direction within social cooperation, as well as producing common norms that destruct the existing university. It involves the institution of a new temporal relation — nonlinear and anti-dialectic, full and heterogeneous — between crisis and decision, between constituent processes and concrete political forms, between the event and organizational sedimentation, between rupture and the production of the common. These are relations that, to the extent in which they are immanent to class composition and the temporality of conflict, break with the presumption of a general will and with power’s sovereign transcendence. They force an opening towards the potentiality of the actual. This is why common institutions are continually traversed by the possibility of their subversion. To paraphrase Marx, the autonomous institution is the concrete political form of common possession which is the base of individual property.

From this point of view, Edu-factory allows us to map the global geography of autonomous institutionality. The investigational method utilized by the Counter Cartographies collective reveals itself not only as a learning tool, but also as a constitutive process. In self-educational experiences, knowledge — whose power devices are revealed by detailed analyses of Sunil Sahasrabudhey and Randy Martin — is disarticulated and composed along new lines. Knowledge production in this context is therefore the refusal of transmitted knowledge from the rubble of the university. Better yet: refusal is the full affirmation of the autonomous subject. It is non-cooperative production, to use Vidya Ashram’s words, or productive cooperation against and beyond capital. In this direction, the European prospective — used in Italy as an instrument of legitimation for the center-left’s university reform and then abruptly abandoned to national regurgitations in the face of an impasse — should be taken up once again, beginning from the institutionality of the common. It is on this base that the project for a Global Autonomous University, which is elaborated in Vidya Ashram’s contribution in this book, was born. This project does not seek for recognition in the education market, but rather to expose its mechanisms. Here the descriptive plane meets the project’s prescriptivism, and theoretical research opens towards a political program. Here the blueprints are drawn for a sort of Edu-factory 2.0, no longer merely a space of discussion and connections, but of common organization.

We started with the crisis of the university, and this is also where we will conclude — or better yet, with the intimate liaison between this crisis and the global economic crisis. It is precisely this double crisis that students and precarious workers refuse to pay for. We Won’t Pay for Your Crisis is, not coincidentally, the slogan that characterized the Italian movement, known as the Anomalous Wave (www.uniriot.org) in the final months of 2008. In any case, the “communism of capital” recently evoked by The Economist is nothing other than the continuing subsumption of living knowledge and its production of the common in the accumulative regimes of the productive metropolis and its ganglion nerve centers, such as the corporate university. In the “communism of capital,” crisis is no longer a cyclical fact but a permanent element.

The conflicts that arise with the interlacing of these two processes are at the center of this book. As these social struggles demonstrate, the time of crisis also offers great possibility. It shouldn’t be stopped, but assaulted. The slogan that accompanies the “wild demonstrations” — or those protests that are not officially organized in compliance with local laws — of students and precarious workers clearly delineates the two parts of the conflict: on one hand impeding the conservation of the existent, and on the other, the force of transformation. On one side the resignation of the university system, on the other, the autonomy of living knowledge. There is nothing in-between: representative institutions are skipped over because the movement is irrepresentable. In fact, the movement is already an institution itself, absorbing even the functions of political mediation within autonomous organization and definitively removing them.
from representative structures. The task now is to render the “self-reform of the university” — that these social movements are accomplishing through struggles and practicing with self-education — a comprehensive project.

This also allows us to rethink the theme of freedom in materialistic terms — a theme evoked just as much by the forms of labor and the transformations of the university as it is systematically restricted by precariousness, educational programs and differential modes of higher education financing. This is an ample research area that we'd simply like to flag as urgent. If freedom is understood in the classical sense, as freedom of opinion, it is not negated but rather required by the new regime of accumulation. It is an indispensable productive resource and source of identity for the creative and the knowledge worker. Thus, freedom becomes radical criticism of exploitation only if it is incarnated in the autonomous potency of living knowledge instead of within simple power relations. The freedom of the common is partisan.

We’ve already mentioned it, and with this we’ll conclude: a few years ago “changing the world without taking power” became diffused rhetoric and an inflated refrain. It created more problems than it resolved. Above and beyond an obvious contestation that was already true for the class composition that destructured Fordism, it misconstrued the concept of power, flattening it onto the state. The exercise of power, immanent to power relations and class composition, is rather a condition of possibility for common organization and the rupturing of the political unity of the state. In this movement, exo-

dus becomes living knowledge’s autonomy. We need to take a step back to avoid having to restart from the beginning. Therefore, after having recognized the irreducibility of living knowledge’s excess and the diffuseness of the network form, we now have to combine spatial extensionality with temporal intensity, the accumulation of force with the verticality of rupture. Let us end with a phrase that despite its being a bit antiquated perfectly summarizes the situation: autonomous institutions of the common are the terrain on which to rethink the actuality of revolution after its classical forms have been definitively exhausted. The university is, for us, one of the possible spaces for experimenting with this revolution.

NOTES:

05 Benkler, Y. (2007), La ricchezza della rete. La produzione sociale trasforma il mercato e aumenta le libertà, Università Bocconi Editore, Milano.
07 Ivi, pp. 125–126.
To me, the word insurrection means to rise up, it means to take on ourselves, our dignity as human beings, as workers, as citizens in an uncompromising way. But it also means something else. It means to fully unfold the potency of the body and of collective knowledge, of society, of the net, of intelligence.

—Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi
[Appendix] **Notes Toward Lessons Learned**

67  Movement, Learning: a few Reflections on the Exciting UK Winter 2010 **Manuela zechner**

70  No Conclusions When Another World is Unpopular **Anonymous**

72  Lesson of Insurrection: A Call to Revolt on a European Scale **Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi**

72  Additional Resources
1. Something starts

An event rocks our world. It produces a rupture in the continuous flow of our life; is has a ‘before’ and ‘after’, it marks a clear point or intervention in the flow of our life and into our understanding of who we are, what we are doing and why. An event is a powerful dynamic of subjectivation, a movement through which we are recomposed as subjects. It’s not a merely quantitative dynamic that determines how much of an importance a situation takes on for us, but the degree to which we are moved by it, its degree of resonance. An event resonates, and so we hold it dear even once the situation that brought it about has passed: we want to stay faithful to it. Most events are short, pass in a flash, but they can have a long echo, many waves. They can transform us, and because we want them to transform us, we operate all kinds of efforts to stay close to what they made us see, feel, grasp, become. We try to re-member events, give them a body, inhabit and incorporate them into our previous life. And so we do with this November: remember remember. After Millbank, I heard people say, over and again and in different formulations: ‘I can’t believe it’, ‘something has moved’, ‘we have done it’, ‘it is really happening’, ‘there’s a movement’… We remember by holding meetings, assemblies, training sessions, discussions, preparing ourselves to become more, more like what we want to be. This text tries to operate this sort of re-membering through writing.

We liked the taste of 50,000 people gathered in joy and anger. It rocks what our bodies can do together. This text attempts to reflect on the emergence of a student movement in November 2010 through retracing its affective dimension.

2. November

November 10th. Reverberating waves of cheers, chants, moving in and out of different phases, phrases, rhythms as we walked along a national students’ demonstration against a government that is about to send the precarious and poor into pauperization. Young people, home-made banners, fresh voices. We got lost in various groups, saw our groups mixing, disintegrating, re-gathering in the general movement. We danced with strangers as a sound-system passed. Many smiles exchanged, beautiful radiant strangers and lit up familiar faces. Many new faces flashing up across streams of signs, sounds, fabrics, temperatures, colors, smells. A bright winter day, a lot of heat. How did this all hold together? Who prepared this? No one did, we did. Weeks of organising, flyering, discussing, banner making, networking, thinking. A lot of efforts and a lot of desire, anger and creativity. Desire to change things, anger at being made into idiots, slaves, paupers, creativity sparking in that moment where we have so little to lose. Get us to this point and we’ll be more than willing to fight, because our society is bigger than yours, we won’t eat your shit.

November 24th. Then another demonstration, another range of university walkouts and demonstrations across the country, another seven thousand people in the streets of London, a wave of university occupations sets off. Massive police showoff this time: 800 officers paranoically kettling in a few thousand protesters in London, for nine hours, at temperatures close to zero degrees Celsiuus. The tactic attempts to demoralise people, disuade them from their right to protest. Yet cookies and tea circulate, interviews get done, fires keep them warm, a rave behind a bus shelter, five young students chatting cosily in a narrow phone booth, spontaneous speeches, a smashed up police car (left as bait?) and a few broken windows…). Spirits are up: This marriage must end in divorce! Education for the Millions, not the Millionaires! Cuts perpetuate privilege! I can’t get no education no no no no… Cuts are nuts! Education is a right! I hope I’m as good a liar as Clegg when I leave drama school! Nick Clegg = Tory Slag! Big Society: Bollocks! Tory Force, Kiss my Arse! Adopt a Prof for Xmas! How will I learn to SPEL? David Thatcher Education Snatcher! These men have ‘ETON’ our future!

November 30th. Another day of action and demonstration: this time the crowd swarms through the city, defying the kettling techniques the police had so obviously set out to use. But repression and kettling won’t defeat this movement: small groups of protesters break out to defend their right to protest in ‘public’ space, rallying down London’s most expensive shopping streets and traffic junctions, stopping traffic and making themselves visible to the city and it’s people. No ifs, no but’s, no education cuts! The police struggles to apply their military techniques to these colourful, youthful, cheerful swarms, running after them hopelessly, trying to contain them. It snows with great intensity, the day leaves us feeling like kids that played in the snow, made the city ours. This movement learns fast, with every demonstration, every meeting there are new tactics, ideas, affects put into circulation.

3. Dance vs. depression

So what next? Something is going on around us – not the predictable witch hunt that the police and media are staging, condemning a ‘violence’ that was only ever property destruction (unlike the horse and baton charging of the police, or their recent killing of Ian Tomlinson, for instance), calling it the ‘activists’ vs. ‘the peaceful students enabled witch hunt that the police and media are staging, condemning a ‘violence’ that was only ever property destruction (unlike the horse and baton charging of the police, or their recent killing of Ian Tomlinson, for instance), calling it the ‘activists’ vs. ‘the peaceful students wanting to exercise their right to protest’, trying the usual tactics of division. What strikes us after these days is something rather less fathomable. Why do peoples faces seem so beautiful? Why does this appear like such a beautiful movement, full of shining and bright people? In their moments of utterance at meetings, in their smiles and calm postures of listening, in their dances, with their placards, in their responses to the media: graceful folk. Ballerina-like poses as bodies try kicking in windows. Radiant faces and eyes, where did those come from, did we never notice?
Affects circulate more intensively these days, in the way that a heart pumps blood faster sometimes. Those people who used to walk with eyes lowered, tired, bent, whose voices we remember sounding worn out, sad, hopeless, cynical, slowly come to appear in a different light and tone. More alive, new hopes and inspirations flash color across our skin, we speak to each other with inspiration, step across the depressing fraction lines of political groups, try our best to catch up with everyone. This struggle is too important to be lost to internal disagreements, we can’t let them divide us at this point. We’re all in this together…

We know the reasons for those recent years of depression, how it bore upon our souls and bodies, our relationships and economies.

The collapse of the global economy can be read as the comeback of the soul. The perfect machine of neoliberal ideology is falling to bits because it was based on the flawed assumption that soul can be reduced to mere rationality. The dark side of the soul, fear, anxiety, panic and depression has finally surfaced after looming for a decade in the shadow of the much-touted victory and promised eternity of capitalism.

That was before something happened, before things got intolerable. Manoeuvring oneself out of a period of depression and apathy doesn’t occur through psycho-pharmacological treatment, taking uppers and calmers, going shopping or watching TV, voting in elections, paying for a therapist to hear us. We’re here because we got the taste of a new body, new movements, voices and ways of being affected. That’s how we can smile at each other today, when the most brutal cuts are coming down on a population condemned to precariousness and poverty. We found that a new wealth lies between us, and can empower us to fight:

The identification of richness and acquisition is deeply embedded in the social psyche and in the social affect as well. But a different perception of richness is possible, one that is based on enjoyment, not with possession. I’m not thinking of an ascetic turn in the collective perception of wealth. I think that sensual pleasure will always be at the foundation of wellness.

4. Potentials and challenges

Here’s a movement that is coming to know the importance of its joyfulfulness, of resonance, of our desire and our wellbeing. Right now the rhythm of events is dizzying, groups struggle to stay on top of it, care for vital energies within it, stay in touch with our energies and feelings. Avoiding burnout will be a key challenge for this movement: our youthfulness in bold and strong, but we also know that we are vulnerable beings — and that’s not necessarily a bad thing at all. Perhaps we know that as much as a movement can be divided ideologically, it can be cut off from itself affectively. It’s not easy to operate affective resistance when things are moving so fast: we need to hold our culture of care very dear. To be vulnerable is to be strong, if we have a culture of collective care in place, modalities of taking breaks, looking after our bodies, paying attention to our relationships amongst each other. As winter flus knock us out, it’s good to remember that this is only a beginning, that we can go at this in our own time, connected as much as possible to each other.

The power of these recent events — which no one still quite knows how to refer to, gladly: ‘what happened last week’, ‘the Millbank protest’, ‘the Millbank riot’, ‘what happened at the Tory HQ’, ‘Millbank’ — lies in the fact that we carried them with joy, that we don’t have a name ready for them. Names will come, slowly but surely, as we keep organizing. Different affects will come. With them will come challenges to find temporalities alternative to last minute organizing, tonalities alternative to the hypertension of alarmed and thrilled bodies and voices. At this point, our energy and openness is something that manipulative media and police campaigns can’t take away. Vulnerability means exposure to potential violence, but also openness to change and to solidarity: the best thing we could do with our precariousness is let it be the basis for a collective openness, solidarity and care.

We’re incredibly sensitive, we feel a lot. Apathy is the absence of feeling, emotion (pathos), which is produced by an education system that trains us to become apathetic specialists, precarious workers, reserve armies to cater to those well off, consumers lost in meaninglessness. Apathy is an obvious response to a world that we feel depressed, crazy, unhappy. There was a sense to our apathy: an orientation towards something else — even if not present yet — away from the hysteria of late capitalism. As things around us went in the direction of illness and death, leaving us isolated and stuck, we shut ourselves off, often suspended our sensibilities, so as not to suffer too much. We’re incredibly sensitive, we feel a lot. Apathy is the absence of suffering, feeling, emotion (pathos), which is produced by an education system that trains us to become apathetic specialists, precarious workers, reserve armies to cater to those well off, consumers lost in meaninglessness. Apathy is an obvious response to a world that leaves us only two options, to compete or to rot.

Our surge of feeling means we’ve come in touch with our suffering, each others suffering, and built solidarity from it. What joy — ! Let’s hope we can be a ‘pathic’ generation, inventing new ways of sensing and enjoying, knowing how sad it is to be sick and stuck in capitalism. We lie in bed and dream of what happened in the last weeks — those thousands of people, this messy sensuality, this event we can’t quite name, our organisational ideas, agendas and conflicts. We keep giving this November different names, colours, stories, doubts, doing justice to the wealth of experiences it holds together. There wasn’t
just one issue at stake here, but so many: they connect to the pain and dreams of other people, of generations. Another key challenge to this movement will be to link with other sectors that have been cut, extend solidarity out beyond the university. It’s clear that this movement needs to grow to involve all those affected by the cuts (that is, almost everyone) with the ultimate aim of bringing this government down – and with it, all the bullshit rhetorics of ‘austerity’, of ‘being in this together’, of the holiness of ‘work’, of ‘excellence’, of the ‘big society’, of ‘competitiveness’, and so forth. We need to build a shared, cross-sectoral, poly-vocal analysis of those policies of misery, to build a resistance that explodes those empty promises. We are seeing transversal connections be made, bit by bit, as other sectors’ struggles take on force: the fire fighters, the tube workers, public sector workers, unemployed, women, disabled… There are a lot of transversal connections to be created and strengthened still.

As this movement begins to articulate itself, produce (counter-) images, discourses, songs, affects and feelings, it faces a third big challenge: to articulate an alternative to the horrid notion of self-management that the Conservatives (aided by a Liberal Democratic farce) have put out there. Our self-organisation is not that of the ‘big society’; our teach-ins and free schools are not those that the Con-Dems want us to run for free. While their big society discourse is about legitimising the dismantling of public services, the end of redistribution policies and the beginning of a new era of free labour, of an ever more crass separation between the privatized services of the rich and the pseudo-autonomous, unfunded institutions of the precarious and paupers. We will not have this: these coming weeks and months will see much discussion, research and writing go into putting out there. Our self-organisation is not that of the Con-Dems cheap appropriation of our cultures of self-organisation, the articulation of a powerful counter-discourse, a refusal of the management that the Conservatives (aided by a Liberal Democratic farce) have put out there. Our self-organisation is not that of the rich and the pseudo-autonomous, unfunded institutions of the precarious and paupers. We will not have this: these coming weeks and months will see much discussion, research and writing go into articulating a powerful counter-discourse, a refusal of the Con-Dems cheap appropriation of our cultures of self-organisation, self-education, solidarity. Our sense of humour is bigger than yours, as we reclaim spaces:

For a lovely video of this protest, see http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/gallery/2010/nov/25/justin-bieber-tickets-queue for some images of these slogans.

For a lovely video of this protest, see http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/video/2010/nov/30/student-protests-day-three

And some images of girl power, in a reactionary article of the daily mail: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1332811/TUITION-FEES-PROTEST-Students-streets-girls-leading-charge.html


And some images of girl power, in a reactionary article of the daily mail: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/10/student-protest-fees-violent

http://www.guardian.co.uk/breakingnews/2010/nov/18/students-unemployed-workers-strike

http://www.wrp.org.uk/news/5905


Bifo, “How to Heal a Depression,” 2008, Minor Compositions

http://www.minorcompositions.info/BifoHowToDealADepression.pdf


http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/firefighters-protest-against-savage-cuts-2136332.html


http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/firefighters-protest-against-savage-cuts-2136332.html

http://www.wrp.org.uk/news/5905


http://www.feministfightback.org.uk/?p=281

http://disabledpeopleprotest.wordpress.com/
No Conclusions When Another World is Unpopular
Anonymous

I.

We will not be free when we are educated, we will be educated when we are free.
—Pisacane, 1857

Society has reached the stage of potential mass unemployment; and mass employment is increasingly a manipulated product of the state and state-like powers that channelize surplus humankind into public works, including armies and official or semiofficial political organizations, in order to keep it at once alive and under control.—Leo Lowenthal, USC Berkeley Professor, 1949.

Before the Fall we felt it briefly, in each hour and a half interval: the ten minute grace period between classes, waiting for a lecture to begin, assigning ourselves one uncomfortable chair amongst 130 other uncomfortable chairs, and so began the telling of human History—grand, anecdotal, scientific, relevant or apropos of nothing. And just as we felt this loss, it disappeared. So we laughed, we fell asleep, we posed calculated questions, we watched a bald man every three days in a nice shirt pacing back and forth in an auditorium, the lights went dim, the lights came up, we collected ourselves, ate potato chips and a sandwich. We are kept alive, vaccinated, some even plump, yes, but we feel our surplus status. Excess. Excessive. This excessive-ness animates our underlying dissatisfaction. That we do not matter: our private morals, decisions, attitudes, preferences, manners—that we are kept so absorbed, busy forever arranging these abstractions into purchases, identities, further abstractions on the future, sacrosanct opinions on the past. We are governed by the abstraction of the future and a grand or alternative History, sure, but we are also governed by these abstractions of the present.

That is the crisis, a lost faith in an inhabitable future, that the work ahead is as limited as the work in place now: the absent future, the dead future, the unemployment, the anxiety. For an economy that so often drains meaning from the immediate present for an imaginary future, a loss of faith is crisis. A surplus population of students, writers, photographers, freelancers, philosophers, social theorists without a doubt—but also increasingly of engineers, scientists, lawyers, businessmen, politicians. The economy that animates the university is an arm of the economy and state—in all of its exclusions and exclusivity, its funding schemes and governance, is bound to and dependent upon the prison. Certainly this was momentarily evident when we snuck a glance behind the theater of scripted rallies and petitions and discovered the batons and tasers of riot cops, county jail and county court, and a multimillion dollar administrative public affairs media campaign aimed at criminalizing students. In this way there is no “outside” to the university: there are no “outside agitators” as the public relations office declares. For us the only outside agitators are the administration, its police, capital and the state.

And yet in the Fall something broke. Students and staff made a different claim on the university. We were not convinced that a dead future could be renegotiated through a “New New Deal.” We were not easily chaperoned to the endless deferral of “Sacramento,” we did not hide from the rain, we did not quietly suffer the eclipse of the university by the county jail system. Our faith in a future abstraction was not renewed; it was replaced by faith in one another in the present.

II.

The movement should exist for the sake of the people, not the people for the sake of the movement.—Aimé Cesaire

Secure at first food and clothing, and the kingdom of God will come to you of itself.—Georg W.F. Hegel, 1807

To put forth empty slogans to “Save the University” in a moment of student occupations is as misguided as calling to “Save the Prison” in a prison riot—redemption in this case would be to restore the status quo: the exclusions and incarceration, the slamming gates of the university and the warehoused social death of the prisoner.
yoked to San Quentin, computer factories in China, deforestation in Indonesia, mineral mining in the Congo, nuclear energy in Russia, green capitalism in Sweden, coffee houses on Telegraph, intellectual property rights in India, coked up hipster parties in Echo Park, and weed farms in Mendecino. Perhaps this is the university’s appeal as well. It is a world. Everywhere, connected to everything.

So we thought it was a matter of subtraction: to take ourselves and these buildings with us to transmit a message that “We will get what we can take,” that “Everything belongs to everyone.” Among some, the reaction was predictable. “Only children can take everything.” “We must all make sacrifices.” “Our leaders are doing their best and making difficult choices on our behalf.” Another world is unpopular. And yet we found, despite mistakes and despite successes, that another world was recharting the global map: solidarity messages and actions from Pakistan, Japan, Ireland, Germany, Austria, South Africa, Chicago, New Orleans, New York City.

And now we move outwards, towards the ways in which the university is maintained: compulsory labor, the rented homes of university students and workers, the police violence in these neighborhoods. We gravitate towards the Miwok tribe in Stockton, CA who in January this year occupied their headquarters after being served eviction papers. We gravitate towards the January 21st attempted occupation of a Hibernia Bank in downtown San Francisco in a struggle against homelessness, the occupation of Mexico City’s National University in the late 90s, the 2009 summer-long Ssangyong auto plant workers’ occupation in South Korea. We gravitate towards the young people who last year set fire to downtown Oakland to show they were still alive, to reveal a spark of their own relevance in the shadow of the police execution of Oscar Grant Jr. and so many others. We recognize ourselves in them. For all of our apparent differences, how we have been classified and filed under the logic of capital, race, gender, citizenship, ad nauseam, we know these categories do not guarantee a politics– we know our differences and commonalities are more complex than what is allowed in this world. Our faith is sheltered there, housed in mutual recognition, in building-seizures and confrontations.

III.

The present, due to its staggering complexities, is almost as conjectural as the past.—George Jackson, 1971

Over the past semester an important set of critiques were leveled at actions we gesture toward throughout this paper and any group engaged in direct action. The editors of this paper hail from different social movements and moments and frequently disagree. We cannot write a collective statement with positive prescription. What we do know is that all liberatory social movements benefit from the destabilization of the university as an institution, as both a dream factory of class mobility and an engine of profound inequality.

A social movement is a counter-force within an arena of power. At its best a counter-force destabilizes that arena and creates social and political openings, in the moment and in its wake. The longer a crowd exists the more dangerous it becomes. It’s there, in those openings, that we find fertile ground for broad and interpersonal solidarity, trust, dreams of the future, collective desire for anything. That is where we build our positive prescription, our visions. Meaningful, useful dreams are only dreamt in struggle, in the spaces opened and left behind by the fight.

The Fall was that kind of moment—a reemergence of new and old formations shaped around new and old realities and ideas. The creation of tactical and strategic openings. The real, if momentary, blockage of institutional policy and systematic violence. The necessary polarization; the flowering of new solidarities and the nourishing of the old; the possibility of generalized direct action, social ruptures; students and all the rest living in a more meaningful present instead of an institutionally-imposed, indebted future. Those currently in power want nothing more than the reproduction of stability and unquestioned legitimacy, the guarantee of an unchallenged control that lasts forever, the disparities each of us have tried to fight as though they were separate and separable catastrophes.

And so after the Fall we are left with some openings: March 4th is one among many. We’ve built, seemingly by vulgar and beautiful chance, a party. The occupation. The mob. A mobile force. A machine. This is to say many of us are you, and likely many of you are us. We are all bound together merely by inhabiting the same arena; many of “us” are people of color, queers, counter-settlers, 1st generation college students, service industry workers–traumatized, beat down, brilliant, and tender.

But we are also adventurists.
Lesson of Insurrection: A Call to Revolt on a European Scale
Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi

I would like to talk about something that everybody knows, but that, so it seems, no one has the boldness to say. That is, that the time for indignation is over. Those who get indignant are already starting to bore us. Increasingly, they seem to us like the last guardians of a rotten system, a system without dignity, sustainability or credibility. We don’t have to get indignant anymore, we have to revolt.

Arise. In the dictionary, the word ‘Insurrection’ is described in different ways. But I stick to the etymology. To me, the word insurrection means to rise up, it means to take on ourselves our dignity as human beings, as workers, as citizens in an uncompromising way. But it also means something else. It means to fully unfold the potency of the body and of collective knowledge, of society, of the net, of intelligence. To entirely unfold what we are, in a collective way. This is the point. Those who say that insurrection is a utopia are sometimes cynics, sometimes just idiots. Those who say that it is not possible to revolt, don’t take into account the fact that, to us, almost everything is possible. Only, this ‘almost everything’ is subjugated by the miserable obsession for profit and accumulation. The obsession for profit and accumulation led our country and all European countries to the verge of a terrifying catastrophe, into which we are now sinking, and we should realize we are already quite far into it. It is the catastrophe of barbarism and ignorance.

In Italy, the reform of the Berlusconi government and of his crawlers has already taken 8 billion euros away from the school, university and the education system, and soon it will take away even more. Everyone knows what the consequences will be, and not only in Brera, which is still a privileged place within the Italian education system. I have also taught in 3 or 4 other schools in this country, and I know what are, for example, the consequences of the reform of the crawler-minister Gelmini for an evening school for adults in Bologna. The Gelmini reform meant that the available budget for that school has shrunk to one third of that of three years ago. In the face of this process of devastation and barbarization produced by this reform, we can’t continue complaining. We must say: first of all, you all have to go, then we will take care of it. They have to go, just like the citizens of Tunis and Cairo said. I don’t know how the revolutions and insurrections in the Arab countries will end. A lot is up to us, I believe: whether or not Europe will be able to open a secular and innovative perspective. I don’t know how it will end up, but I know that they revolted and they won. What did they do? They said: we won’t leave this place. We won’t leave this square, we won’t leave this station, we won’t leave this parliament. We won’t leave until the tyrant and his crawlers go. This is what we have to say, what we have to do. By the end of spring 2011, this is what has to happen in Italy. We will occupy the central train stations in Milan, in Bologna and we will hold them until the tyrant and his crawlers will go.

But the tyrant and his crawlers are not the real problem. The real problem is an obsession, embodied in financial power, in the power of banks and in the idea that the life of society, the pleasure, well-being and culture of society is worthless. The only worthy things are accounting books, the profits of a minuscule class of exploiters and murderers. From our point of view, at the moment, these two problems, that of the tyrant and of his crawlers and that of the European financial dictatorship are one single problem. But we must understand that it would be useless to get rid of the tyrant and of his crawlers, if their places were taken by the murderers, by people like D’Alema or Fini, who are just as responsible. The destruction of the Italian school did not start with the tyrant and his crawlers. From what I know, it started with the Rivola Law, of which few have memory. It was a law issued in 1995 by the Emilia Romagna region, and it was the first law to give private schools the right to receive public funding. That is, it opened the door to the destruction of the public school and the sanctification of private universities such as Cepu.

So, there is one immediate problem: to hold the country, the squares and stations until the tyrant and his crawlers will go. But at the same time we have to be aware that power, true power, is no longer held in Rome. The Minister of Economy, Tremonti, said this. In an interview that appeared in La Repubblica on 30 September 2011, Tremonti replied to a silly journalist, who was trying to criticize him and instead fell in his trap, saying: ‘Why are you so angry at the Berlusconi government? Listen, we don’t decide anything. Decisions are taken in Brussels.’ Well, we don’t know it very well — who should tell us? La Repubblica, maybe? — but since 1st January 2011 the economic, social and financial decisions over individual countries such as Italy, France, Portugal or Greece are no longer taken by national parliaments. They are taken by a financial committee, formally constituted at European level. This is the rule and the ferocious application of the neoliberal, monetarist principle, according to which the only worthy things are bank profits and nothing else. It is in the name of growth, of accumulation and profit at the European level, that you are forced to live a shit life. And your life will be more and more of a shit life, if you do not rebel today, tomorrow, immediately! Because with every passing day your life increasingly, inevitably becomes a shit life.

They say: insurrection is a dangerous word. I repeat: arms are not implicit in the word insurrection, because arms are not our thing, for a number of reasons. First of all, because we don’t know where they are kept, secondly because we know that somebody has them, thirdly because we know that there are professional armies ready to kill, like they killed in Genova in 2001 and many other times. So, this is not the kind of confrontation we are looking for. We know...
that our weapons are those of intelligence and critique, but also the weapon of technology. For example, we learnt Wikileaks’ lesson, and we know that it is not only a lesson on sabotage and information; it is also a lesson about the infinite power of networked intelligence. This is where we will re-start. We know how to do it, how to enter your circuits, how to sabotage them, but we also know how those circuits – which are not yours, are ours – can be useful for our wealth, our pleasure, our well-being, our culture. This could be the use of those circuits that the collective intelligence produced and that capitalism stole, privatized, impoverished, that capitalism uses against us. This is the meaning of insurrection: to take possession of what is ours, to perform a necessary action of recognition of the collective body, which for too long has been paralyzed in front of a screen and needs to find itself again in a Tahrir Square.

An American journalist, Roger Cohen, wrote in a clever article: ‘Thank you Mubarak, because with your resistance you allowed the Egyptian people, who hadn’t talked to each others for years, to stay in that square for weeks and weeks.’ Like in wars, also during revolutions there are moments of boredom, and during those moments what is there to do? Talk to each other, touch each other, make love. Discovering the collective body, which has been paralyzed for too long. We will say ‘Tank you Berlusconi’, after weeks spent fighting on the streets of Italy. Afterwards, from the moment when the collective body will have awakened, the process of self-organization of the collective mind will begin. This is the insurrection I am calling you to. This is the insurrection that could even start from the Brera Academy, on a day in March 2011. Because the problem is that everyone knows what I just said. Maybe they don’t say it in such detail, but they know it. All that is necessary is to say: it is possible. There are millions of us, thinking this way. So, the next time 300,000 of us will take on the streets, let’s go back home at the end of the day. Let’s go on the streets with our sleeping bags, knowing that on that night we won’t sleep in our beds. This is the first step, this is the step we need to take. It’s easy! Then, the rest is complicated...

I have almost finished my lecture. I just want to come back to this place. This initiative of mine was born within the situation you all know. Students, lecturers, technicians, precarious workers at the Brera Academy, like those in any other school or university in Italy or abroad, they all know well what is happening. They know that, beyond a complex dance made of ‘I’ll give it you / no I won’t give it to you / maybe I will / but not tomorrow’, beyond the smoke screen of incomprehensible baroquisms, the problem is that there is no more money. How is this possible? What happened? How come all that money disappeared? Brera used to be loaded. It’s all gone. One could say: but Europe is rich, how come all of a sudden there’s no money? Europe is rich, with millions of technicians, poets, doctors, inventors, specialized factory workers, nuclear engineers... How come we became so poor? What happened? Something very simple happened. The entire wealth that we produced was poured into the strongboxes of a minuscule minority of exploiters. This is what happened! The whole mechanism of the European financial crisis was finalized towards the most extraordinary movement of wealth that history has seen, from society towards the financial class, towards financial capitalism. This is what happened! So, what is now happening in Brera is just a small piece, one aspect of the immense movement of wealth, our wealth, the wealth of collective intelligence, which is now being counted inside the strongboxes of the banks.

Well, we decide to pay some attention to the banks. And I communicate to you that from this moment, I, as a professor at Brera, will hold my classes inside a bank. My next lecture will be held on 25th March just there, inside the building of the Credit Agricole. It will be held there. Behind this statue, of which we can now see the ass, on the other side of the square there is a bank where I ask to hold my next lecture, on 25th March, at 11.30am. I’m not doing this because I am a deranged individualist. Well, I might also be a deranged individualist... But the reason why I took this decision and I communicated it to you is that in Europe, it has now been constituted the Knowledge Liberation Front. Maybe these kids could have been a little less rhetorical... The Knowledge Liberation Front called a teach-in in 40 European cities, on March 25th. First of all in London, because, as you know, after many years, on March 26 there will be a general strike in the U.K. This is because the U.K. is now under an exceptionally strong storm of financial violence, and thus on March 26th they will strike and will take on the streets. The day before, the Knowledge Liberation Front will perform 40 teach-ins in 40 European cities. In London, but also in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Prague, Barcelona, Madrid, Bologna, Milan and many other cities. We will do something very simple: we will dress smart, will go to the offices of a bank, will sit on the ground, will take out a banana, a cappuccino and a panini, just like civilized people do, and we will talk about molecular biology, about Goethe, we will read Faust, we will read poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, someone will talk about the poetics of Kandinsky and someone else about nuclear physics. This is what we will do on 25th March, in 40 European cities. Because the time has come for the society of Europe to become, once again, what it could have been in several moments of its history: purely and simply a civil society. Thank you.

Translation and subtitles: Federico Campagna, Anna Galkina,
Manlio Poltronieri
‘til always,
love and rage.
occupy everything.
Additional Resources

Books


Christopher Newfield, Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.


Journals

Transversal (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics)
http://transversal.ciep.net

Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization
http://www.ephemeraweb.org/

Workplace: a Journal of Academic Labor
http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/journal/index.php/workplace

Edu-factory Journal
http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/journal/

Affinities Journal
http://journals.sfu.ca/affinities/index.php/affinities

ACME Journal of Critical Geographies
http://www.acme-journal.org/

European activist groups / other resources

Unicommon – the Revolt of Living Knowledge (Italy)
http://www.unicommon.org/index.php

Edu-Factor (Italy / transnational)
http://www.edu-factory.org

Really Open University (UK)
http://reallyopenuniversity.wordpress.com

Carrotworkers’ Collective (UK)
http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/

Arts Against Cuts
http://artsagainstcuts.wordpress.com/

Occupied Leeds
http://occupiedleeds.wordpress.com/

Occupations UK
http://occupations.org.uk/

Universities in Crisis
http://www.isa-sociology.org/universities-in-crisis/

Bureau d’études
http://bureaudetudes.org/

California

After The Fall: Communiques from Occupied California
http://afterthefallcommuniques.info/

Anti-Capital Projects
http://anticapitalprojects.wordpress.com/

Research & Destroy
http://researchanddestroy.wordpress.com/

Imaginary Committee
http://theimaginarycommittee.wordpress.com

Occupy California
http://occupyca.wordpress.com/

We Are the Crisis
http://wearethecrisis.blogspot.com/

University Without Students
http://aucwithoutstudents.wordpress.com/

Reclamations Journal (on the Crisis in California)
http://reclamationsjournal.org

Those Who Use it
http://thosewhouseit.wordpress.com/
US

Democracy Insurgent (Seattle)
http://www.democracyinsurgent.org/

New School Reoccupied (NYC)
http://reoccupied.wordpress.com/

Beneath the University: The Commons!
http://beneaththeu.org/

Seminar on Biopower at CUNY
http://biopolitics09.wordpress.com/

How the University Works
http://howtheuniversityworks.com/wordpress/

1,000 Little Hammers
http://1000littlehammers.wordpress.com/

Militant / Co-Research

16 Beaver (US)
http://www.16beavergroup.org/

Counter Cartographies Collective (US)
http://countercartographies.org/

Micropolitics Research Group (UK)
http://micropolitics.wordpress.com/

Minor Compositions (UK)
http://www.minorcompositions.info/

Turbulence Collective (UK)
http://turbulence.org.uk/

Continental Drift / Brian Holmes (US)
http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/

Uninomade (Italy)
http://uninomade.org/

Universidad Nomada (Spain)
http://www.universidadnomada.net/

Precarias a la Deriva (Spain)
http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/antigua_casa/precarias.htm

Radical Education Collective
http://radical.temp.si/

NonStop Institute (US)
http://nonstopinstitute.org/

Team Colors (US)
http://warmachines.info/

El Kilombo (US)
http://www.ekilombo.org/

Colectivo Situaciones (Argentina)
http://www.situaciones.org/

Midnight Notes Collective (US)
http://www.midnightnotes.org/

Chto Delat // What is to be Done? (Russia)
http://www.chtodelat.org/

The Pinky Show (US)
http://www.pinkyshow.org/

This is Forever (US)
http://www.thisisforever.org/

Copenhagen Free University
http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk

Occupy Everything
http://occupyeverything.com/

Baltimore Development Cooperative
http://www.baltimoredevelopmentco-op.org/

Critical Spatial Practice
http://criticalspatialpractice.blogspot.com/

Compass / Midwest Radical Culture Corridor
http://www.midwestradicalculturecorridor.net/

Claire Pentecost / Public Amateur
http://publicamateur.wordpress.com/

Resources for free texts

AAAAARG
http://aaaaarg.org/

Zine Library
http://zinelibrary.info/

Fuck Verso
http://fckvrso.wordpress.com/

1,000 Little Hammers
http://1000littlehammers.wordpress.com/