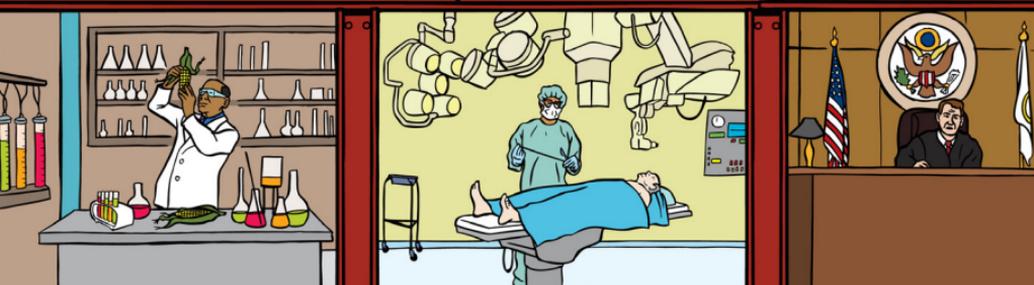
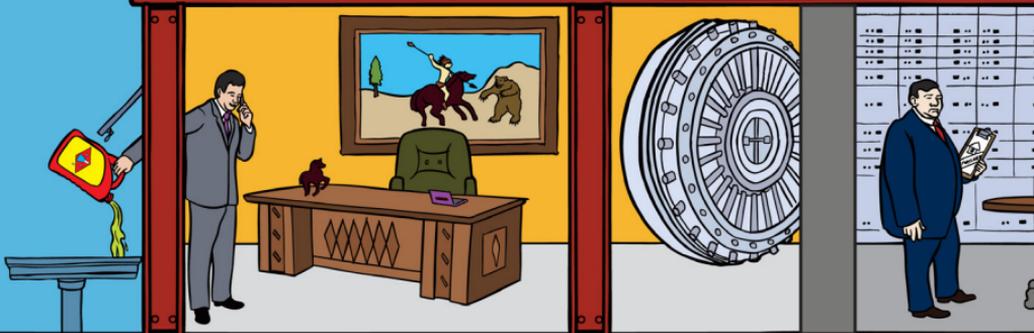
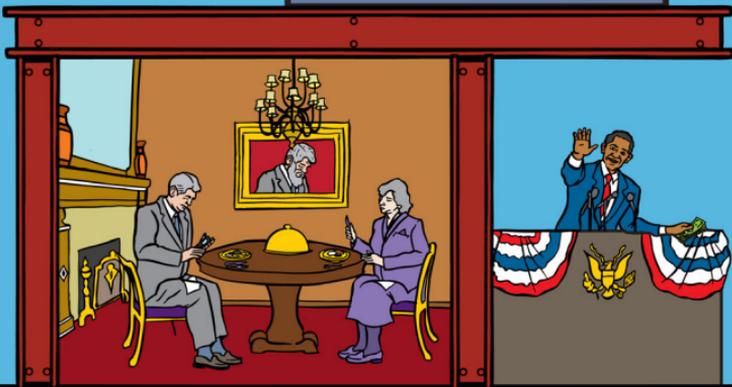
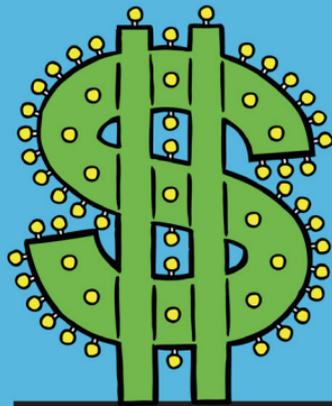
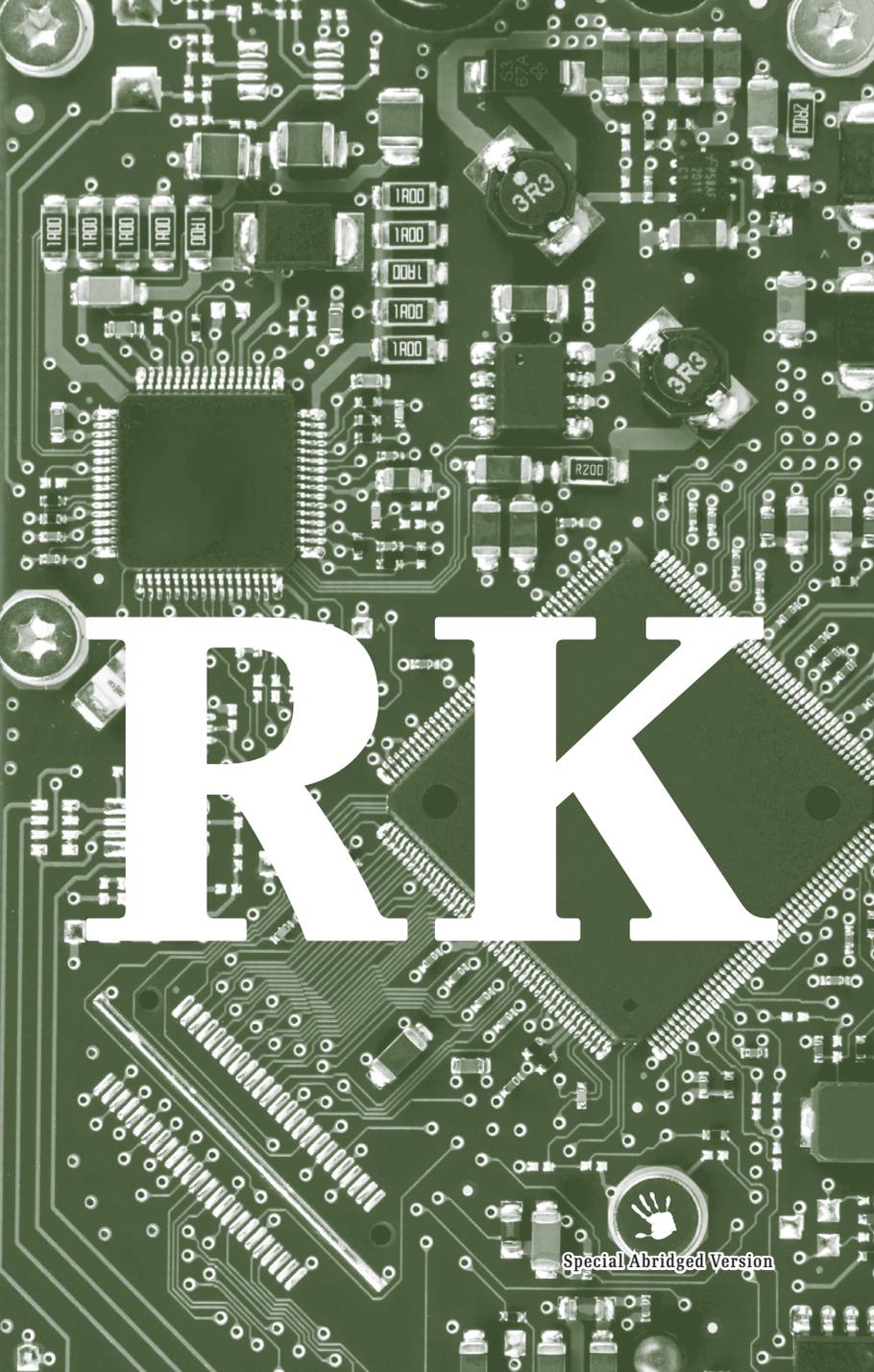


Work

Emergency
Abridged
Edition





WORK

CrimethInc. Workers' Collective / Salem, OR / Two Thousand Twelve

Special Abridged Version



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property is theft—steal it back
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The diagram of the pyramid of capitalist society is by
Packard Jennings: centennialsociety.com

A full-size electronic version of the diagram and an array of
poster designs are available here: www.crimethinc.com/work

You can obtain a printed version of the diagram, along with a
great deal of other material, via www.crimethinc.com

This is an abridged version of the complete work published in
2011, which is still available in full. We deeply appreciate P.O.S.
and friends soliciting and funding this project and arranging for
its distribution.

This little book is a message in a bottle for everyone who has ever suspected that our jobs are keeping us from making the most of our potential. That's a lot of people, even if most of us never say it out loud. It's hard to want to talk about it when it seems like there's nothing we can do to change it.

The original version contains 180 more pages that explore the accompanying illustration of the pyramid of the capitalist economy, scene by scene; this one covers the important introductory points and conclusions. When P.O.S. approached us about including an electronic copy of the book with his album, we admired the ambitiousness of the idea and we were eager to participate. Music should offer emergency escape hatches from this world, not just temporary vacations from it.

A book can't do the important things. It can't bring us together in the streets or provide new ways to survive. All this can do is pose questions, start a conversation, let you know you're not the only one, act as a beacon lighting the way to the possibility of another life. The rest is up to you, up to all of us. However intimidating it is to start this discussion, we're convinced that things are going to change—that they have to change. Let's find each other and make it happen.

At this moment, an employee in a grocery store is setting out genetically engineered produce rather than tending her garden;

A dishwasher is sweating over a steaming sink while unwashed dishes stack up in his kitchen;

A line cook is taking orders from strangers instead of cooking at a neighborhood barbecue;

An advertising agent is composing jingles for laundry detergent rather than playing music with his friends;

A woman is watching wealthier people's children at a daycare program rather than spending time with her own;

A child is being dropped off there instead of growing up with those who know and love him;

A student is writing a thesis about an activity that interests her instead of participating in it;

A man is masturbating with internet pornography instead of exploring his sexuality with a partner;

An activist, weary after a hard day's work, is putting on a Hollywood movie for entertainment;

And a demonstrator who has her own unique reasons to protest is carrying a sign mass-produced by a bureaucratic organization.

I. The Occupation





Occupation. The word brings to mind images of Russian tanks rolling through the streets of Eastern Europe, or US soldiers nervously patrolling hostile neighborhoods in the Middle East.

But not every occupation is so obvious. Sometimes occupations go on so long the tanks become unnecessary. They can be rolled back into storage, as long as the conquered remember they can return at any time—or behave as if the tanks were still there, forgetting why they do so.

How do you recognize an occupation? Historically, occupied peoples had to pay a tribute to their conquerors, or else render them some kind of service. A tribute is a sort of rent the occupied pay just to live on their own lands; and as for the service—well, what's *your* occupation? You know, what occupies your time? A job, probably, or two—or preparations for one, or recovery from one, or looking for one. You need that

job to pay your rent or mortgage, among other things—but wasn't the building you live in built by people like yourself, people who had to work to pay their rent too? The same goes for all those other products you have to earn money to pay for—you and others like you made them, but you have to buy them from companies like the one that employs you, companies that neither pay you all the money they make from your labor nor sell their products at the price it cost to produce them. They're getting you coming and going!

Our lives are occupied territory. Who controls the resources in your community, who shapes your neighborhood and the landscape around it, who sets your schedule day by day and month by month? Even if you're self-employed, are *you* the one who decides what you have to do to make money? Picture your idea of perfect bliss—does it bear a suspicious resemblance to the utopias you see in advertisements?

Not only our time, but also our ambitions, our sexuality, our values, our very sense of what it means to be human—all these are occupied, molded according to the demands of the market.

And we aren't the only territory under enemy control. The invisible occupation of our lives mirrors the military occupation of areas at the fringe of this conquered land, where guns and tanks are still necessary to enforce the property rights of robber barons and the liberty of corporations to trade at the expense of hostile locals—some of whom still remember what life is like without leases, salaries, or bosses.

You might not be all that different from them yourself, despite having been raised in captivity. Maybe in the boss's office, or in career counseling or romantic quarrels, whenever someone was trying to command your attention and your attention wouldn't cooperate, you've been chided for being *preoccupied*. That is—some rebel part of you is still held by daydreams and fantasies, lingering hopes that your life could somehow be more than an *occupation*.

There is a rebel army out in the bush plotting the abolition of wage slavery, as sure as there are employees in every workplace waging guerrilla war with loafing, pilfering, and disobedience—and you can join up, too, if you haven't already. But before we start laying plans and sharpening spears, let's look more closely at what we're up against.

i. Work



What exactly is work? We could define it as *activity for the sake of making money*. But aren't slave labor and unpaid internships work, too? We could say it's activity that accumulates profit for *someone*, whether or not it benefits the one who carries it out. But does that mean that as soon as you start making money from an activity, it becomes work even if it was *play* before? Perhaps we could define work as labor that takes more from us than it gives back, or that is governed by external forces.

Or perhaps we can only understand what work is by stepping back to look at the context in which it takes place. In a world of "diversity," one common thread connects us: we're all subject to the economy. Christian or Muslim, communist or conservative, in São Paulo or St. Paul, you probably have to spend the better part of your life trading time for money, or make someone else do it for you, or suffer the consequences.

What else can you do? If you refuse, the economy will go on without you; it doesn't need you any more than it needs any of the hundreds of millions already unemployed, and there's no point going hungry for nothing. You can join a co-op or commune, but you'll still face the same market pressures. You can canvas and lobby and protest on behalf of sweatshop workers, but even if you succeed in getting reforms passed, they—like you—will still have to work, whether in maquiladoras or NGO offices. You can go out at night in a black mask and smash all the windows of the

shopping district, but the next day you'll have to do your shopping somewhere. You could make a million dollars and *still* be stuck with your nose at the grindstone trying to keep your lead on everyone else. Even when workers overthrew governments to establish communist utopias, they ended up back at work—if they were lucky.

All this makes it easy to feel that work is inevitable, that there's no other way our lives could be structured. That's convenient for the ones who profit most from this arrangement: they don't have to prove that it's the *best* system if everyone thinks it's the only one *possible*. Is this really how life has always been?

Now, however, even the future of the economy is uncertain.

Forget about the Economy—What about Us?

When the economy crashes, politicians and pundits bewail the consequences for average working families. They demand emergency measures—such as giving billions of dollars of taxpayer money to the banks that caused the crisis by ripping off “average working families” in the first place. What's going on here?

We're told that our lives depend on the economy, that it's worth any sacrifice to keep it running. But for most of us, keeping it running is *always* a sacrifice.

When the economy crashes, mining companies stop blowing up mountains. Developers stop cutting down forests to build new offices and condominiums. Factories stop pouring pollutants into rivers. Gentrification grinds to a halt. Workaholics reconsider their priorities. Prisons are forced to release inmates. Police departments can't buy new weapons. Governments can't afford to mass-arrest demonstrators. Sheriffs sometimes even refuse to evict families from foreclosed homes.



Of course, millions more are forced out of their homes and go hungry. But the problem isn't that there's no housing or food to be had—it's not the *crisis* that causes that, but the fact that the system is still functioning. Long before the crash, people were being forced out of their homes while buildings stood empty and going hungry while food surpluses rotted. If more people go hungry during a recession, it's not because there has been any material change in our productive capacities, but simply one more example of how irrationally our society *always* distributes resources.

When workers go on strike, you can see some of the same effects as during a crash. They may go hungry, but they can also develop a new awareness of their power as they get to know each other outside the constraints of the daily grind. The rest of society suddenly notices that they exist. Sometimes they establish new collective projects and ways of making decisions. Occasionally they even take over their workplaces and use them to do things outside the logic of profit and competition. The same goes for student occupations.

So perhaps the real issue is that crashes and strikes don't go *far enough*. So long as the economy runs our lives, any interruption is going to be hard on us; but even if nothing ever went wrong, it would never deliver the world of our dreams.

And whether or not we're ready for change, things aren't going to go on this way forever. Who can still believe we're on the right track now that pollution is killing off species by the thousand and causing the polar ice caps to melt? Between global warming and nuclear war, industrial capitalism has already produced at least two different ways of *ending life on earth*. That doesn't sound very stable!

If we want to survive another century, we have to reexamine the mythology that grounds our current way of life.

The MYTHOLOGY of WORK

What if nobody worked? Sweatshops would empty out and assembly lines would grind to a halt, at least the ones producing things no one would make voluntarily. Telemarketing would cease. Despicable individuals who only hold sway over others because of wealth and title would have to learn better social skills. Traffic jams would come to an end; so would oil spills. Paper money and job applications would be used as fire starter as people reverted to barter and sharing. Grass and flowers would grow from the cracks in the sidewalk, eventually making way for fruit trees.

And we would all starve to death. But we're not exactly subsisting on paperwork and performance evaluations, are we? Most of the things we make and do for money are patently irrelevant to our survival—and to what gives life meaning, besides.



WORK IS NECESSARY.

That depends on what you mean by “work.” Think about how many people enjoy gardening, fishing, carpentry, cooking, and even computer programming just for their own sake. What if that kind of activity could provide for all our needs?

For hundreds of years, people have claimed that technological progress would soon liberate humanity from the need to work. Today we have capabilities our ancestors couldn't have imagined, but those predictions still haven't come true. In the US we actually work longer hours than we did a couple generations ago—the poor in order to survive, the rich in order to compete. Others desperately seek employment, hardly enjoying the comfortable leisure all this progress should provide. Despite the talk of recession and the need for austerity measures, corporations are reporting record earnings, the wealthiest are wealthier than ever, and tremendous quantities of goods are produced just to be thrown away. There's plenty of wealth, but it's not being used to liberate humanity.

What kind of system simultaneously produces abundance and prevents us from making the most of it? The defenders of the free market argue that there's no other option—and so long as our society is organized this way, there isn't.

Yet once upon a time, before time cards and power lunches, everything got done without work. The natural world that provided for our needs hadn't yet been carved up and privatized. Knowledge and skills weren't the exclusive domains of licensed experts, held hostage by expensive institutions; time wasn't divided into productive work and consumptive

leisure. We know this because work was invented only a few thousand years ago, but human beings have been around for hundreds of thousands of years. We're told that life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” back then—but that narrative comes to us from the ones who stamped out that way of life, not the ones who practiced it.

This isn't to say we should go back to the way things used to be, or that we could—only that things don't have to be the way they are right now. If our distant ancestors could see us today, they'd probably be excited about some of our inventions and horrified by others, but they'd surely be shocked by how we apply them. We built this world with our labor, and without certain obstacles we could surely build a better one. That wouldn't mean abandoning everything we've learned. It would just mean abandoning everything we've learned *doesn't work*.



WORK IS PRODUCTIVE.



One can hardly deny that work is productive. Just a couple thousand years of it have dramatically transformed the surface of the earth.

But what exactly does it produce? Disposable chopsticks by the billion; laptops and cell phones that are obsolete within a couple years. Miles of waste dumps and tons upon tons of chlorofluorocarbons. Factories that will rust as soon as labor is cheaper elsewhere. Dumpsters full of overstock, while a billion suffer malnutrition; medical treatments only the wealthy can afford; novels and philosophies and art movements most of us just don't have time for in a society that subordinates desires to profit motives and needs to property rights.

And where do the resources for all this production come from? What happens to the ecosystems and communities that are pillaged and exploited? If work is productive, it's even more *destructive*.

Work doesn't produce goods out of thin air; it's not a conjuring act. Rather, it takes raw materials from the biosphere—a common treasury shared by all living things—and transforms them into products animated by the logic of market. For those who see the world in terms of balance sheets, this is an improvement, but the rest of us shouldn't take their word for it.

Capitalists and socialists have always taken it for granted that work produces value. Workers have to consider a different possibility—that working *uses up* value. That's why the forests and polar ice caps are being consumed alongside the hours of our lives: the aches in our bodies

when we come home from work parallel the damage taking place on a global scale.

What should we be producing, if not all this stuff? Well, how about *happiness itself*? Can we imagine a society in which the primary goal of our activity was to make the most of life, to explore its mysteries, rather than to amass wealth or outflank competition? We would still make material goods in such a society, of course, but not in order to compete for profit. Festivals, feasts, philosophy, romance, creative pursuits, child-rearing, friendship, adventure—can we picture these as the center of life, rather than packed into our spare time?

Today things are the other way around—our conception of happiness is constructed as a means to stimulate *production*. Small wonder products are crowding us out of the world.

WORK CREATES WEALTH.



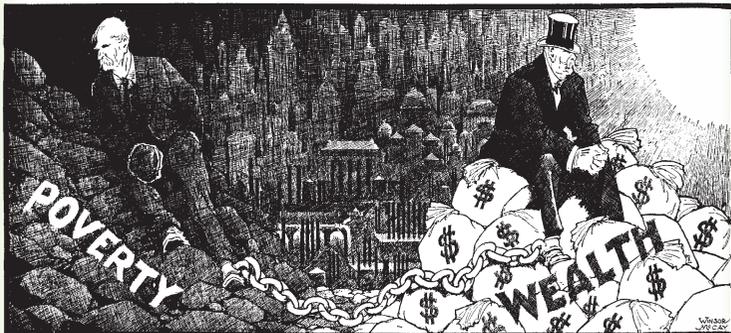
Work doesn't simply create wealth where there was only poverty before. On the contrary, so long as it enriches some at others' expense, work creates *poverty*, too, in direct proportion to profit.

Poverty is not an objective condition, but a relationship produced by unequal distribution of resources. There's no such thing as poverty in societies in which people share everything. There may be scarcity, but no one is subjected to the indignity of having to go without while others have more than they know what to do with. As profit is accumulated and the minimum threshold of wealth necessary to exert influence in society rises higher and higher, poverty becomes more and more debilitating. It is a form of exile—

the cruelest form of exile, for you stay within society while being excluded from it. You can neither participate nor go anywhere else.

Work doesn't just create poverty alongside wealth—it concentrates wealth in the hands of a few while spreading poverty far and wide. For every Bill Gates, a million people must live below the poverty line; for every Shell Oil, there has to be a Nigeria. The more we work, the more profit is accumulated from our labor, and the poorer we are compared to our exploiters.

So in addition to creating wealth, *work makes people poor*. This is clear even before we factor in all the *other* ways work makes us poor: poor in self-determination, poor in free time, poor in health, poor in sense of self beyond our careers and bank accounts, poor in spirit.



GOODNESS, GENTLEMEN, WE CAN'T ALL BE BILLIONAIRES—THAT WOULD JUST BE INFLATION. REALLY NOW! IF ANYONE IS TO BE RICH, SOMEBODY HAS TO BE POOR.



**YOU NEED
TO WORK TO
MAKE A LIVING.**

“Cost of living” estimates are misleading—there’s little living going on at all! “Cost of working” is more like it, and it’s not cheap.

Everyone knows what housecleaners and dishwashers pay for being the backbone of our economy. All the scourges of poverty—addiction, broken families, poor health—are par for the course; the ones who survive these and somehow go on showing up on time are working miracles. Think what they could accomplish if they were free to apply that power to something other than earning profits for their employers!

What about their employers, fortunate to be higher on the pyramid? You would think earning a higher salary would mean having more money and thus more freedom, but it’s not that simple. Every job entails hidden costs: just as a dishwasher has to pay bus fare to and from work every day, a corporate lawyer has to be able to fly anywhere at a moment’s notice, to maintain a country club membership for informal business meetings, to own a small mansion in which to entertain dinner guests that double as clients. This is why it’s so difficult for middle-class workers to save up enough money to quit while they’re ahead and get out of the rat race: trying to get ahead in the economy basically means running in place. At best, you might advance to a fancier treadmill, but you’ll have to run faster to stay on it.

And these merely financial costs of working are the least expensive. In one survey, people of all walks of life were asked how much money they would need to live the life they wanted; from pauper to patrician, they all answered approximately double whatever their current income was.

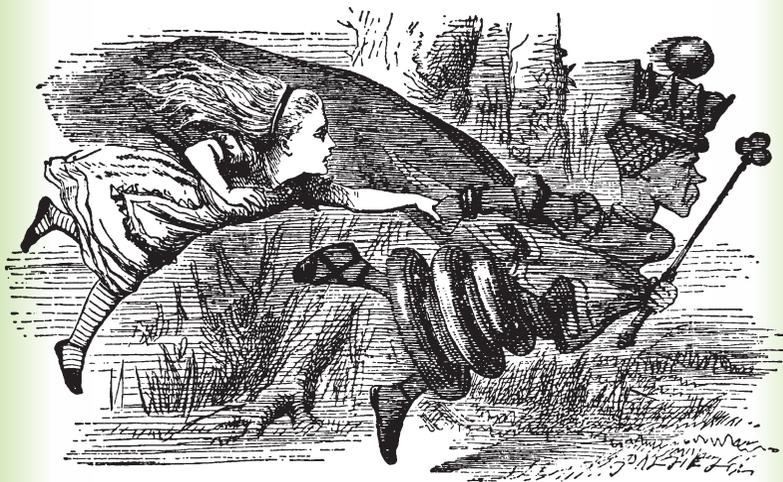
So not only is money costly to obtain, but, like any addictive drug, it’s less and less fulfilling! And the further up you get in the hierarchy, the more you have to fight to hold your place. The wealthy executive must abandon his unruly passions and his conscience, must convince himself that he deserves more than the unfortunates whose labor provides for his comfort, must smother his every impulse to question, to share, to imagine himself in others’ shoes; if he doesn’t, sooner or later some more ruthless contender replaces him. Both blue collar and white collar workers have to kill themselves to keep the jobs that keep them alive; it’s just a question of physical or spiritual destruction.

Those are the costs we pay individually, but there’s also a global price to pay for all this working. Alongside the environmental costs, there are work-related illnesses, injuries, and deaths: every year we kill people by the thousand to sell hamburgers and health club memberships to the survivors. The US Department of Labor reported that twice as many people suffered fatal work injuries in 2001 as died in the September 11 attacks, and that doesn’t begin to take into account work-related illnesses. Above all, more exorbitant than any other price, there is the cost of never learning how to direct our own lives, never getting the chance to answer or even ask the question of what we would do with our time on this planet if it was up to us. We can never know how much we are giving up by settling for a world in which people are too busy, too poor, or too beaten down to do so.

Why work, if it’s so expensive? Everyone knows the answer—there’s no other way to acquire the resources we need to survive, or for that matter to participate in society at all. All the earlier social forms that made other ways of life possible have been eradicated—they were stamped out by conquistadors, slave traders, and corporations that left neither tribe nor tradition nor ecosystem intact. Contrary to capitalist propaganda, free human beings don’t crowd into

factories for a pittance if they have other options, not even in return for name brand shoes and software.

In working and shopping and paying bills, each of us helps perpetuate the conditions that necessitate these activities. Capitalism exists because we invest everything in it: all our energy and ingenuity in the marketplace, all our resources at the supermarket and in the stock market, all our attention in the media. To be more precise, capitalism exists because our daily activities *are* it. But would we continue to reproduce it if we felt we had another choice?



“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.”

“I’d rather not try, please!” said Alice.

WORK IS A PATH TO FULFILLMENT.



On the contrary, instead of enabling people to achieve happiness, work fosters the worst kind of self-denial.

Obeying teachers, bosses, the demands of the market—not to mention laws, parents’ expectations, religious scriptures, social norms—we’re conditioned from infancy to put our desires on hold. Following orders becomes an unconscious reflex, whether or not they are in our best interest; deferring to experts becomes second nature.

Selling our time rather than doing things for their own sake, we come to evaluate our lives on the basis of how much we can get in exchange for them, not what we get out of them. As freelance slaves hawking our lives hour by hour, we think of ourselves as each having a price; the amount of the price becomes our measure of value. In that sense, we become commodities, just like toothpaste and toilet paper. What once was a human being is now an employee, in the same way that what once was a pig is now a pork chop. Our lives disappear, spent like the money for which we trade them.

Often we become so used to giving up things that are precious to us that *sacrifice* comes to be our only way of expressing that we care about something. We martyr ourselves for ideas, causes, love of one another, even when these are supposed to help us find happiness.

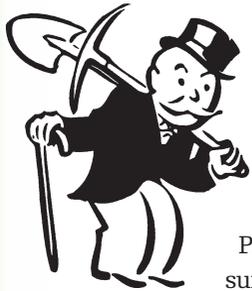
There are families, for example, in which people show affection by competing to be the one who gives up the most for the others. Gratification isn’t just delayed, it’s passed on from one generation to the next. The responsibility of finally enjoying all the happiness presumably saved up over years

of thankless toil is deferred to the children; yet when they come of age, if they are to be seen as responsible adults, they too must begin working their fingers to the bone.

But the buck has to stop somewhere.

“If hard work were such a wonderful thing, surely the rich would have kept it all to themselves.”

- Lane Kirkland



WORK INSTILLS INITIATIVE.

People work hard nowadays, that's for sure. Tying access to resources to market performance has caused unprecedented production and technological progress. Indeed, the market has monopolized access to our own creative capacities to such an extent that many people work not only to survive but also to *have something to do*. But what kind of initiative does this instill?

Let's go back to global warming, one of the most serious crises facing the planet. After decades of denial, politicians and businessmen have finally swung into action to do something about it. And what are they doing? Casting about for ways to cash in! Carbon credits, “clean” coal, “green” invest-

ment firms—who believes that these are the *most effective* way to curb the production of greenhouse gases? It's ironic that a catastrophe caused by capitalist consumerism can be used to spur more consumption, but it reveals a lot about the kind of initiative work instills. What kind of person, confronted with the task of preventing the end of life on earth, responds, “Sure, but what's in it for *me*?”

If everything in our society has to be driven by a profit motive to succeed, that might not be initiative after all, but something else. Really taking initiative, initiating new values and new modes of behavior—this is as unthinkable to the enterprising businessman as it is to his most listless employee. What if working—that is, leasing your creative powers to others, whether managers or customers—actually *erodes* initiative?

The evidence for this extends beyond the workplace. How many people who never miss a day of work can't show up on time for band practice? We can't keep up with the reading for our book clubs even when we can finish papers for school on time; the things we *really* want to do with our lives end up at the bottom of the to-do list. The ability to follow through on commitments becomes something outside ourselves, associated with external rewards or punishments.

Imagine a world in which everything people did, they did because they *wanted* to, because they were personally invested in bringing it about. For any boss who has struggled to motivate indifferent employees, the idea of working with people who are equally invested in the same projects sounds utopian. But this isn't proof that nothing would get done without bosses and salaries—it just shows how work saps us of initiative.



WORK PROVIDES SECURITY.

Let's say your job never injures, poisons, or sickens you. Let's also take it

for granted that the economy doesn't crash and take your job and savings with it, and that no one who got a worse deal than you manages to hurt or rob you. You still can't be sure you won't be downsized. Nowadays nobody works for the same employer his whole life; you work somewhere a few years until they let you go for someone younger and cheaper or outsource your job overseas. You can break your back to prove you're the best in your field and still end up hung out to dry.

You have to count on your employers to make shrewd decisions so they can write your paycheck—they can't just fritter money away or they won't have it to pay you. But you never know when that shrewdness will turn against you: the ones you depend on for your livelihood didn't get where they are by being sentimental. If you're self-employed, you probably know how fickle the market can be, too.

What could provide real security? Perhaps being part of a long-term community in which people looked out for each other, a community based on mutual assistance rather than financial incentives. And what is one of the chief obstacles to building that kind of community today? *Work*.

ca•reer (kə-rîr') *v. -intr.* 1. Move swiftly and in an uncontrolled way in a specified direction: *the car careered across the road and went through a hedge.*

WORK TEACHES RESPONSIBILITY.



Who carried out most of the injustices in history? *Employees*. This is not necessarily to say they are *responsible* for them—as they would be the first to tell you!

Does receiving a wage absolve you of responsibility for your actions? Working seems to foster the impression that it does. The Nuremburg defense—"I was just following orders"—has been the anthem and alibi of millions of employees. This willingness to check one's conscience at the workplace door—to be, in fact, a mercenary—lies at the root of many of the troubles plaguing our species.

People have done horrible things without orders, too—but not nearly so many horrible things. You can reason with a person who is acting for herself; she acknowledges that she is accountable for her decisions. Employees, on the other hand, can do unimaginably dumb and destructive things while refusing to think about the consequences.

The real problem, of course, isn't employees refusing to take responsibility for their actions—it's the economic system that makes taking responsibility so prohibitively expensive.



Employees dump toxic waste into rivers and oceans.

Employees slaughter cows and perform experiments on monkeys.

Employees throw away truckloads of food.

Employees are destroying the ozone layer.

They watch your every move through security cameras.

They evict you when you don't pay your rent.

They imprison you when you don't pay your taxes.

They humiliate you when you don't do your homework or show up to work on time.

They enter information about your private life into credit reports and FBI files.

They give you speeding tickets and tow your car.

They administer standardized exams, juvenile detention centers, and lethal injections.

The soldiers who herded people into gas chambers were employees,

Just like the soldiers occupying Iraq and Afghanistan,

Just like the suicide bombers who target them—they are employees of God, hoping to be paid in paradise.



THAT'S ENOUGH!

*YOU HAVE TO PAY YOUR OWN WAY—
EVEN IF THAT MEANS DOING IT AT
EVERYONE ELSE'S EXPENSE!
ANYTHING ELSE IS IRRESPONSIBLE,
SUICIDAL, A SIN AGAINST GOD,
A BETRAYAL OF YOUR POOR PARENTS,
A SLAP IN THE FACE OF ALL THE POOR
BASTARDS WHO HAVE NO OTHER CHOICE,
AND A VIOLATION OF THE
TERMS OF YOUR PROBATION—
NOT TO MENTION PROOF THAT YOU MUST
BE A SPOILED BRAT WITH A TRUST FUND!*

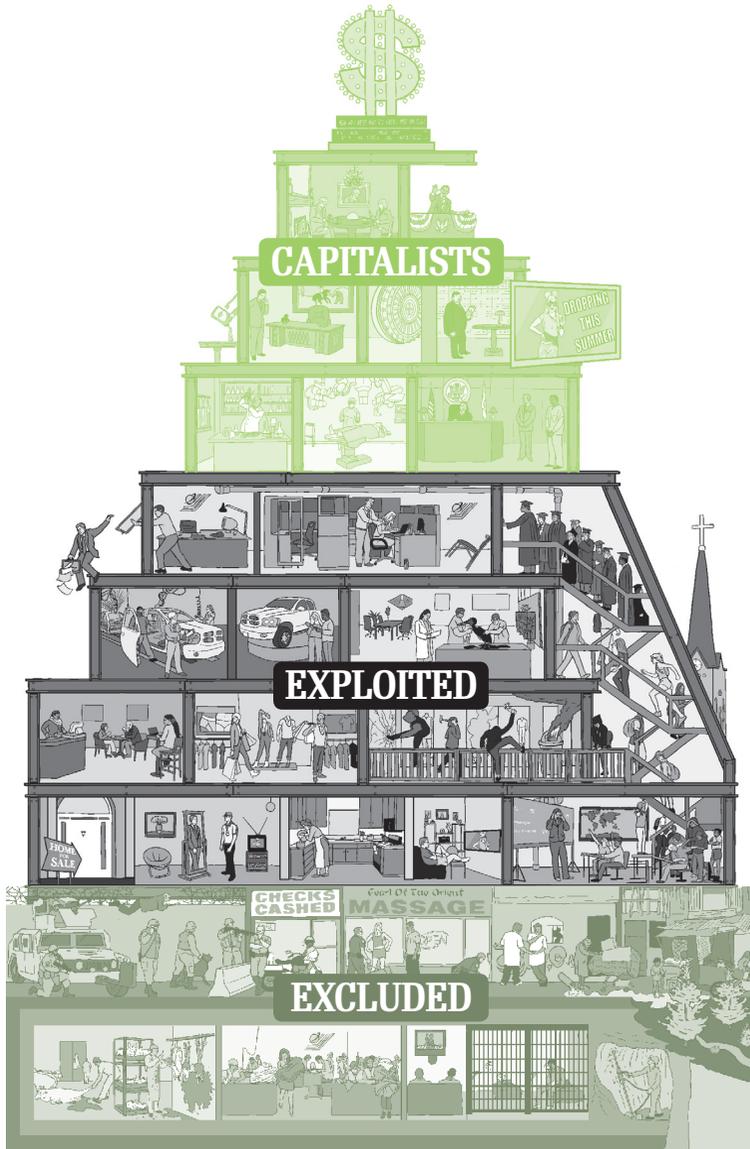
**NOW GET
BACK IN
THERE
AND GO
BACK TO
WORK!**



ii. The Economy

Let's be clear about this—critiquing work doesn't mean rejecting labor, effort, ambition, or commitment. It doesn't mean demanding that everything be fun or easy. Fighting against the forces that compel us to work is hard work. Laziness is not the alternative to work, though it might be a *byproduct* of it.

The bottom line is simple: all of us deserve to make the most of our potential as we see fit, to be the masters of our own destinies. Being forced to sell these things away to survive is tragic and humiliating. *We don't have to live like this.*



Understanding The Economy

The economy extends infinitely in all directions around us. It seems impossible to get a handle on how it works. How could anyone conceptualize the activities of billions of human beings?

The idea that you need *a complete understanding of the economy* to come to any conclusions about it just serves to silence people. By that reasoning, only the best-informed economists are entitled to decide whether to go to work in the morning. However informed we are, at every moment we all have to choose whether to continue what we've been doing or try something else.

Perhaps instead we can start from our individual positions, looking at the things that are familiar to us. If there are general principles that govern capitalism, they should be visible from wherever we begin. In this view, an economist isn't necessarily more qualified to talk about the economy than a janitor.

There are many ways to structure an analysis of the economy. One conventional approach is to break it into sectors according to the processes of production and consumption: sector one involves direct resource extraction such as mining and agriculture, sector two includes manufacturing and construction, sector three is the service industry, and so on.

In the 19th century over two thirds of US laborers worked in the primary sector; today, over 80% of the labor force is employed in the tertiary sector.

But if we want to focus on who benefits from the current state of affairs, it makes more sense to divide things up according to other criteria. Studying the flows of capital, we might say there are three basic categories: **capitalists**, who profit from others' labor; the **exploited**, whose activity turns a profit for others; and the **excluded**, who are left out of the equation and have to survive on the fringes of the economy. These categories are not exclusive or definitive; some people occupy multiple positions at once or during different phases of their lives.

Capitalists make money not only on what they *do*, but also from what they own. It takes money to make money, as the saying goes. Business owners, landlords, and large shareholders are capitalists. So are executives who receive salaries padded with money produced by other people's efforts. An employee who owns a small amount of company stock could be called a microcapitalist.

Capitalists derive their profit from the activity of the **exploited**. The majority of the exploited can only make money from their own labor, so it's easy for employers to pay them less than the value they produce. When banks and credit card companies make money off debtors, they're exploiting them, the same as a corporation that pays an employee a dollar to make a \$200 pair of shoes.

Untold millions are at the mercy of the economy but **excluded** from participating in it. The unemployed and the homeless are excluded, along with most of the occupants of favelas and shantytowns around the world. Prisoners are often both excluded and exploited, being forced to work at a pittance that amounts to slave labor. Being excluded is not the same as being outside the market—the dispossessed are poor precisely because they are *inside* capitalism.

This is only one version of the story, of course. A horror movie buff might use different language: *vampires*, *robots*, *zombies*. We could also structure our analysis in terms of production and consumption, or material versus immaterial labor. And alongside these economic structures are other power structures, like race and gender, that can be charted countless other ways. The economy cannot be understood apart from these—could modern capitalism have come about without the colonialism that plundered the so-called New World? How about the racism that justified slavery, or the sexism expressed in glass ceilings and unpaid domestic labor? Nor can these be remedied without changing the economy. How much difference does it make to have an African-American president when nearly a million black men are behind bars?

So all these dynamics can't be disentangled or reduced to a single narrative. A real working model of the world would be as immense and complex as the world itself. The point is to develop tools that can help us make sense of our lives and regain control of them.

TESTIMONY I: FINANCE

PICTURE THE BUSINESS OWNER of the old days: a shopkeeper, a family running a store, a small factory owner employing townspeople who walk to work. In all these cases, the owners were clearly identifiable, typically part of the same community as the workers.

When you hear about a company “going public,” it sounds so collective and democratic: everyone can buy in and be part of the growth and success. But who’s really accountable in this structure, and what kind of decisions does it produce?

I reflected on this during my decade as an employee of a Fortune 100 corporation. Publicly-traded corporations have owners, too, but you have to peel back many onion-like layers to learn anything about them. Technically, every shareholder is an owner with legal rights to a share of the firm. But the total number of shares in a company often extends to hundreds of millions; it would take diligent research to learn anything about everyone involved.

Visible individual investors are rare, though there’s still an occasional wealthy family or trust with holdings big enough to warrant special treatment. More often, share ownership is divided among institutional investors: hedge funds, holding companies, private corporations, evil investment firms—think Goldman Sachs—and the real *dark matter* of the economy, mutual fund participants. The last group includes everyone with a 401K, union-managed retirement fund, or individual retirement account. Fifty years ago, safe-deposit boxes held fancy stock certificates from a short list of companies: “We found a certificate for 100 shares of IBM after he died.” Now

a wide range of people each own tiny pieces of hundreds of companies, and those holdings change daily.

The net effect at the corporate decision-making level is that executives have free rein to invoke the mantra of “shareholder value” with little risk of actual shareholder feedback. Since the shareholders change constantly, focusing on shareholder value doesn’t mean answering to actual individuals who might have scruples of some kind. Rather, it means doing whatever it takes to make the company profitable and thus attractive to hypothetical investors. All the “ancillary criteria”—environmental impact, effects on employees and even customers—become secondary to what contributes to the value of each shareholder’s stocks.

What I observed at the micro-level was that whenever managers and executives wrestled with emotionally-loaded decisions, they fell back on shareholder value to resolve the dilemma. The investors were an abstract entity that could justify anything; even if there were real people somewhere on the other end of those shares, we could only picture them as a sort of personified profit motive.

Meetings followed a familiar pattern. We dialed into the conference line and exchanged pleasantries with colleagues in other parts of the country—weather, sports, purchases, travel-related conversation—until a critical mass of participants joined the video conference. Aside from the occasional executive support person, everyone on the call earned \$250K to \$850K a year. Most were married and childless; the few with school-age kids had stay-at-home partners and nanny support. They sent their children to private college-prep schools and exercised at country clubs. I’d look around at them and reflect on how their decisions affected so many families of less means.

I remember one in-person all-day session that ran behind schedule; at five p.m. the group discussed whether to continue into the evening or schedule additional time the following

day. One vice president, a divorced father of three in his late forties, mentioned he'd need to get home to make dinner for his kids, ages seven, ten, and twelve. Genuinely thinking she was being helpful, the senior vice president suggested, "Can't you just have a pizza delivered?"

Another phenomenon I noticed was that the further up the organizational hierarchy a person rose, the more and more limited the things he could do to effect change became. The most basic limitation concerned direct human interaction. When you go from directing a group of ten people to directing a hundred and then a thousand, it becomes impossible to have meaningful contact with everyone. You end up doing "road shows" or town hall meetings, and rely more and more on email messages to influence individuals.

The one big move you can make at that level is the classic corporate reorganization. Structural rearrangements are often accompanied by job eliminations, which not only save the company money but also create chaos and divert attention. One CIO I worked for, when asked about a reorganization that would return the structure to what it had been six years earlier, explained, "It's like when you clean out a closet. You take everything out, you put almost everything back, but because you've rearranged things, it gives you a chance to see it differently. The particular structure you use ends up being less important than the fact that you gave everyone a way of seeing things differently."

Ironically, this leader was actually very well liked, in part for a decision he made in his first few weeks. As the first step in downsizing, he eliminated the entire managerial layer immediately below him. The select few that had clawed their way within a step of the top were all let go. No one felt sorry for them—they all got golden parachutes—and it endeared him to everyone further below. He benefited from that goodwill over the next three years as he relocated or laid off another 30 percent of the workforce.

All this hints at the cognitive dissonance in managers' attitudes to their employees. They love them, nurture them, and reward them—scheming all the while to get rid of their positions.

What motivated these leaders? How did they sleep at night? The simple answer is that they were true believers in capitalism. "When we raise the water level, all boats rise"—they embraced this idea to justify the flow of money to the wealthy. They subscribed to trickle-down theories and just about any practice that kept money flowing, especially up and laterally. Their own life experiences reinforced those beliefs. The workers in their organizations often felt the same way, or hoped to. Only when the economy entered free fall did some of my colleagues entertain questions about the system itself; even then, their range of thought remained myopic.

I remember when one vice president sent a note to her organization of about 350 technical support employees. Her message was meant to reassure workers fearing for their jobs as waves of downsizings loomed. She explained how, in her career, she always did certain things to prepare just in case her own job was eliminated—things like paying off her credit cards, selling her vacation homes, and the like. She was married with no children; she'd recently bragged about spending thousands of dollars for one of Bon Jovi's guitars during a trip to the East Coast. Her recommendation that workers "prepare financially and emotionally" resonated the way you might expect.

Ironically, after years of helping execute corporate downsizings and relocating employees' jobs to less expensive locales, I was finally made redundant myself during the 2008 crisis. I knew all about the process—it had been my job to explain company policy to those we were letting go—but I was surprised what a gut shock it was to be on the other side of it: "We're not getting rid of everyone, but we're getting rid of *you*."

For years I'd thought about working for a non-profit company, but the crisis was the worst time to be cut loose. There weren't any jobs available, and the higher your salary is the longer it takes to find a new position. At long last I landed a job with a non-profit healthcare provider.

It didn't turn out to be much different from the for-profit sector. In fact, they were hiring a lot of people from the finance industry—professionals like me who had overseen the streamlining of our corporations and then been downsized ourselves—so they could become more competitive. Now they're restructuring and dismissing employees, too.

A few weeks ago I was in the elevator with a manager who has worked there for years. She was practically giddy about the layoffs: she said they'd make the non-profit more efficient, which would enable it to fulfill its mission statement more effectively. Here it was again, the mantra of shareholder value in a new form. As long as organizations serve abstract ends rather than flesh-and-blood people, it doesn't matter whether those abstractions represent stockholders, customers, or even the common good.

TESTIMONY II: PRODUCTION

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I worked in a forty-two acre greenhouse complex at the heart of North America's tomato industry.

The environment inside the greenhouse was entirely computer-controlled, heated with steam and hot water from an immense system of boilers and pipes and cooled by fans and mechanized louvers. The tomato vines grew unnaturally long, sustained by complicated life-support systems. They were automatically watered by tubes, rooted in "Horticultural Rock Wool," doused in chemicals, stretched and swollen by fertilizers, strung up on strings, pruned of leaves, and pollinated by bees that lived in cardboard hives stacked here and there like miniature condominium developments. The hives inevitably emptied out as the bees succumbed to the pesticides; they were periodically replaced by new cardboard condominiums.

We used round magnetic "keys" to enter and leave the warehouse; a piercing alarm sounded whenever a door stayed open too long. Every employee was given a plastic timecard with which to swipe in and out at the beginning and end of every workday. A sign beside the time box warned us: NO PUNCH NO PAY.

We were all issued palm pilots sealed in aqua packs. We wore them on strings attached to our belts or slung over our shoulders, and as we worked we recorded everything we did on them. Every morning I entered my employee number, my task, and the greenhouse and row number. The palm pilot

would start timing me; it continued until I told it I'd finished the row, or taken a break, or switched to something else. Then, if I was picking, I would enter how many crates I'd picked. Crate by crate, row by row, every minute of the day was precisely accounted for.

After work each day we lined up to place our palm pilots on metal pads in front of the office, from which the data we'd generated was automatically uploaded to some giant database. Our machines—that's what we called them, *nuestras maquinas*—then gave us an "efficiency rating" expressed as a percentage. "109," my machine would blip at the end of a particularly hard day, indicating that I'd performed 109 percent of what some English-speaker in a business suit had determined to be an acceptable day's work.

When the "machines" were first introduced, the supervisor told us that whoever had the best efficiency rating each week would get a paid day off. It's hard to convey how profoundly this threatened our culture of solidarity. In the vines, everyone moved at more or less the same pace. The faster workers slowed down to help the slower ones with their rows, and everyone emerged almost simultaneously, their crates full of tomatoes. With the threat of being sent back to Mexico hanging in the air, the last thing anyone wanted was to draw attention to himself by standing out as faster or slower than the rest.

But under the new palm pilot regime, the protective anonymity of moving at an even pace was temporarily fractured, as each worker ran himself ragged to improve his percentage while resenting the others who risked making him look bad by doing the same thing. Finally, everyone got together and refused to use the palm pilots at all. An uneasy truce reigned for a few days until the management retaliated by sending six suspected leaders back to Mexico and revoking the prize for the fastest worker. The workers who were sent home were replaced with contract workers

from Jamaica—a blatant divide-and-conquer tactic. Everyone else caved in and began using the palm pilots again.

The palm pilots were so effective that we barely ever saw the English-speaking white folks in charge. Human supervision was almost irrelevant. Control was seamless and practically invisible—a corporate Human Resources department's ideal. The boss didn't have to watch us with a whip: he was hanging around our necks, he was inside our heads.

It's been a long time since I worked at the greenhouse, but I keep thinking about the palm pilots. They give me a different perspective on the technologies everybody takes for granted these days. Many of these are part of our off-the-clock lives—they really are "our" machines—but that just gives them more access to us.

Whenever my friends send text messages, I imagine duplicates appearing instantly in federal and corporate databases. When they update their online profiles, I wonder how long it will be before employers and landlords use the same system to track us, setting our wages and security deposits accordingly. What if our workplace productivity, our credit rating, how many "friends" we have, and how many hits our videos get could all be correlated into a master "efficiency rating" indicating our total economic worth? What if *nuestras maquinas* could be connected directly to the stock market so stockbrokers could buy and sell shares in real time as these ratings changed? What if we all got shares in that stock—not just financially, but also in attention and social status? Would it be possible to distinguish ourselves from our economic roles then?

Maybe I shouldn't be so suspicious. In Egypt, people just used the same technologies to coordinate a massive uprising—although as soon as it got off the ground, the government pulled the plug. Could we do something like that here, or are we too busy constructing our virtual personas? Would they pull the plug on us, too—or will they never have to?

TESTIMONY III: RETAIL

THIS IS A TALE OF TWO CITIES. Both are nominally suburbs of the same Rust Belt metropolis, but large enough to be major cities themselves. They share the same local bus system and the same daily newspaper. What separates them is ten miles of suburban sprawl and a tremendous chasm of class privilege.

This is a tale of two cities. Both are suburbs of the same Rust Belt metropolis; they share the same local bus system and the same daily newspaper. But they are separated by ten miles of suburban sprawl and a tremendous chasm of class privilege.

The first city, let's call it Huffmanville, is the quintessential suburb. Mansions with chemical-green lawns dot miles of winding lanes without sidewalks. The central business district is promoted throughout the greater metropolitan area as a "shopping destination," and the town itself is consistently ranked as a desirable place to live and own property. Historic buildings, in which generations-old businesses were long ago forced out by high rents, now house high-end clothing retailers, specialty wine shops, and a corporate bookstore. Trendy and expensive restaurants rival those of the metropolis. Attractive white people can be seen jogging on a network of recreational bike trails, spandex on their buttocks and electronics on their heads.

The other city, let's call it New Stolp, is what demographers call a "satellite city" rather than a true suburb. It used to be a separate city before the expanding suburbs caught up with it, and still has a large urban core. If you're on the East Coast, think Newark or Paterson; if you're on the West Coast, think San Bernardino.

This urban part of New Stolp is mainly working class, and includes a large Mexican immigrant population. The

billboards in town are in Spanish, and the main drag is lined with *carnicerías*, liquor stores, pawnshops, and predatory "payday loan" vendors. The Latin Kings are active there, and high-school students at New Stolp East are subjected to metal detector searches every morning. Police prowl neighborhoods to keep an eye on the residents rather than on possible intruders, and routinely flush vagrants from the bus station and the parks. In the downtown area, the old buildings are mostly vacant. Business leaders have been clamoring about "revitalization" for years, and gentrification has only recently begun along the river's edge.

A few years ago, I was a commuter across this gap between worlds: I lived and worked in the urban part of New Stolp and attended a private liberal-arts college with a leafy campus in Huffmanville. Tuition was expensive, and it wasn't the kind of place that gave out a lot of financial aid. But I was determined not to go into debt to pay for it—I already knew that debt makes you a slave. I decided before I enrolled that I wouldn't take out loans: I would only go to school if I could pay for it in cash.

So for a long time I only took one three-credit course per semester; that was all I could afford. I rode the bus into Huffmanville on the days I had class, and worked all the days I didn't. It was demoralizing. If things had gone on that way, I might have graduated in ten years or so. But that was unacceptable to me. *Why should that pretty, leafy campus be accessible only to the children of rich Huffmanville parents?* I fumed. If I wanted to graduate any time soon I was going to have to do something else. I would have to *make my own financial aid*.

Within a year, I successfully embezzled over twenty-five thousand dollars from my place of employment, a hardware store owned by two Huffmanville businessmen at which I worked as a cashier. I graduated from college a year later.



The store was part of a regional chain of about a dozen, all based around a flagship store in Huffmanville. Not a mom-and-pop operation, but not Wal-Mart, either. If it had been a lot smaller, I would have felt guilty about stealing from them—things are already tough for the little guy. If it had been a multinational corporation, there might have been too many security measures for me to pull it off.

As it was, the chain was owned by a father-and-son team, both big shots in the local Huffmanville business elite. A building at my college was even named after them. The father had started the chain and the son was now president. I knew exactly who I was stealing from—I had *looked them both in the eye* when they had dropped by our store for a surprise inspection.

The store I worked in was probably the best suited to my project. It was the only one in New Stolp, on the edge the city's poorest neighborhood. It received the least attention from the owners, since it made the least money. The standard wage for grunts like me was seven dollars per hour—just enough over the minimum wage to buy our loyalty, the managers must have thought.

When I started working there, they had me cleaning the bathrooms and stocking merchandise—that kind of thing. But when the managers saw how proficient I was at running the cash register, they made me a permanent cashier, and gave me a considerable degree of autonomy in doing my job. Eventually, I was basically running the front of the store for them single-handedly. They liked the fact that I didn't need supervision, and I was happy not to have it. I taught myself how to troubleshoot the computer system; I made snap judgments and took care of problems with customers on my own without having to radio the manager for help.

Fortunately, they never considered that this problem-solving ability could be put to other uses.



By this time, I'd had a while to develop my political views; I considered my interests to be fundamentally opposed to those of the owners. I wanted to inflict as many losses on them as I could get away with, even in ways that didn't benefit me.

One of the ways I did this was by undercharging customers for their purchases. Like I said, I was good at my job—and as anyone who has ever worked as a cashier knows, all this really means is that I was good at getting customers through the line *quickly*. Sometimes my hands moved items over the counter and into bags so fast that half of them didn't scan, and customers got an unexpected discount. Other times an item wouldn't scan, so I'd make up a low price for it or just drop it into a bag and shrug. Is that belt sander coming up in the computer as invalid? Just ring it up as \$2.00 under "miscellaneous" and you're good to go!

Some items in the store—such as nuts and bolts—didn't have barcodes, so we relied on customers to write the price on the bag. This was ridiculous, not least because the sign telling them to do so was only in English while most of our customers spoke Spanish as their first language. If customers wrote down the prices, I had to charge what they wrote, but when they didn't, I was free to charge whatever I wanted. Most customers were all too happy to accept the new prices I offered them.

It was always important for me to maintain the *appearance* of doing my job accurately and correctly. I'd always be very careful if there were other people in line. Why certain people feel they have to protect the interests of owners at the expense of themselves, the employees, and everyone else is beyond me, but some do.

My fellow employees soon figured out that I'd turn a blind eye to almost anything that could be carried out the front door. Likewise, when I noticed customers who looked

like they were trying to shoplift, I would step away from the register and pretend to be busy doing something else so they could “sneak past” without my noticing. I took what I needed, too—paint, tools, light bulbs, and so on—but I didn’t sell them. To get the money, I had to use other tactics.

In the primitive computer program that the cash registers used, it took only a single keystroke to turn a sale into a refund. All of the signs on the prices instantaneously flipped from positive to negative, meaning that the computer expected money to be removed from the drawer rather than added. If the cashier wanted the amount of cash in the drawer to stay the same as the amount on the sales summary at the end of the day, he or she had to take the proper amount out of the drawer and stick it in a pocket.

A simple concept, but difficult to execute repeatedly without getting caught. How did I manage to pilfer twenty-five grand this way? The answer lies in the principle of sustainability: knowing when enough is enough. Other cashiers stole money this way too—I wasn’t the first to think of it—but they were too greedy, or too obvious, or too impatient. Some emptied half their drawers in a shift and got busted. I was able to skim over a hundred dollars a day off the top while maintaining the appearance of a diligent worker and arousing no suspicion.

During this period, the store was robbed. The robbers were smart: they hit the store at closing time on the biggest shopping day of the Christmas season, when the safe was as full of cash as it would ever be. I wasn’t there that night, and the owners didn’t disclose how much was taken, but it couldn’t have been more than five or six thousand dollars. It still brings a smile to my face to know that I got away with far more loot than those robbers ever did. True, it took longer—but I didn’t have to scare anyone or run the risk of somebody getting hurt.

I felt bad for the assistant manager who had a gun stuck in

her face. To my knowledge she never received any acknowledgement from the owners that she had her life threatened because of *their* money. She even had to open the next day.



As far as I know, none of the managers ever discovered what I was up to. Anyone familiar with hourly-wage workplace dynamics knows that even the weakest circumstantial evidence is enough to fire an employee. If they had suspected anything, they’d have done *something* about it. Realistically, they probably assumed I engaged in some minor theft—try finding an employee who doesn’t, especially in a place like New Stolp—but had no inkling of the scale.

It’s ironic that when I stopped working at the store it was because I had achieved my goal: I was finally a full-time student in my senior year, thanks to the money I’d stolen. But the *really* ironic part is that I now regret what I did—not stealing money, but spending it on college tuition. I dream about all the *other* things I could have done with twenty-five thousand dollars besides handing it over for a degree I now consider next to worthless. I could have bought a house and started a collective; I could have opened a community center with a reading library; I could have given the money to a struggling free clinic. I should have done something with it to connect with other people like me rather than trying to get ahead by myself.

Today I’m still on the job market. People in New Stolp are still doing landscaping and housecleaning for people in Huffmanville. I may have pulled one over on my employer, but the bursar’s office got the last laugh.

The economists promised us endless growth. Everyone would have his own property, his own investments—everyone would be a capitalist. We took out loans to get degrees for jobs that didn't exist, took on mortgages we couldn't afford, racked up credit card bills pretending that we, too, were middle class.

Now it's clear there's no room for us at the top. Capitalism is a pyramid scheme that has run out of ways to expand. People are rioting in Greece, striking in Quebec, overthrowing governments in North Africa. Revolt is ricocheting back and forth across the world as the effects of the recession sink in. This wave of uprisings will reach the US last of all, but it's on its way. The ruling order will seem unshakable until the day before it collapses.

II. The Resistance

Italy, December 2010



USA, right now

We don't have to live like this.

Some social conventions, such as private property, create imbalances in power and access to resources. Others don't. There are ways to meet our needs without buying and selling. There are ways to relate to others without trying to profit at their expense.

This is hard to believe now that capitalism has colonized nearly every aspect of our lives. But there are still countless examples of other ways to do things. For production, think of barn-raising events, in which communities come together for a day to build structures that would otherwise take months, or open-source software, in which programs are created and refined cooperatively by all who use them. For distribution, think of libraries, which can stock a lot more than books, or file-sharing, in which those who need a file self-organize its circulation. For relationships, think of healthy friendships and family ties, in which everyone is invested in everyone else's welfare, or parties and festivals in which even strangers enjoy each other's participation.

None of these models promotes selfishness or discourages effort. All of them undermine the notion of scarcity: the more people participate, the more everyone benefits. There must be ways to extend such formats into other spheres of life.

Of course, the idea of reorganizing our whole society is daunting. From this standpoint, we can't imagine what it will entail or what the outcome will look like. But we can *begin*.

Abolishing private property surely involves challenges and drawbacks of its own, but these could hardly be worse than the effects of global capitalism. We've all heard of the so-called tragedy of the commons, the idea that people can't be trusted to take care of resources for which all are equally responsible. There is a grain of truth to this: the real tragedy was that the commons were privatized, that people failed to protect them against the ones who snatched them up. If we want to do away with capitalism, we have to learn how to defend ourselves from those who would impose the *tragedy of property*.

So much of the world has been taken from us that it would be disorienting to find ourselves suddenly sharing it all again. We can get a hint of what this might be like by looking at recent uprisings in which people created autonomous zones outside capitalism: Oaxaca 2006, Athens 2008, Cairo 2011. The exhilaration of taking over and repurposing spaces, of acting spontaneously en masse, has very little in common with day-to-day life in capitalist society. Dismantling capitalism doesn't just mean holding material goods in common, but rediscovering each other and ourselves—embracing a totally different way of being in the world.





Capitalism is headed for catastrophe.

However stable things may seem in some parts of the world, we're entering a new era of crisis and uncertainty.

Capitalism has never been as pervasive as it is now. The previous generation experienced *alienation*, suffering from the dissonance between their roles in production and their sense of themselves; the current generation is characterized by *identification* with economic roles that are diffusing into every sphere of life. Yet at the moment of its triumph, capitalism is more precarious than ever.

All the peace treaties of the 20th century have expired. The higher wages Henry Ford offered his workers have vanished with the jobs themselves; unions have been outflanked by globalization; the socialist nations of the East have transitioned to free-market capitalism while the social democracies of the West are being dismantled. But those compromises weren't just ways to avoid confrontation—they also served to perpetuate capitalism. Ford's wage increases enabled his employees to buy products and keep the pyramid scheme expanding; unions prevented capitalists from impoverishing their consumer base. Now that capitalists have abandoned their former means of co-optation and *self-perpetuation*, the future is up for grabs. The old alternatives have been discredited, but new revolutionary ideas are bound to come to the fore.

Madison, February 2011

Capitalism is predicated on the endless accumulation of profit, but this profit has to come from somewhere. Once you bleed workers dry, the rate of profit falls, causing the market to stagnate. Until recently, it was possible to solve this problem by constantly drawing in new resources and populations. Now capitalism has spread across the entire world, connecting everyone and rendering any crisis truly global. At the same time, industrial production is reaching its ecological limits, while technological progress has rendered much of the workforce redundant, creating an increasingly restless surplus population.

Capitalism has been on the brink of crisis for decades now. Extending credit to a broader and broader range of the exploited has been a way of keeping up consumption while the workforce gets poorer. Investors have shifted their wealth into financial markets, hoping to profit on speculation now that profits from material production have plateaued. The vast majority of innovation has centered in new *immaterial* markets: information, branding, social networking. All this has only succeeded in delaying the day of reckoning.

The financial downturn of 2008 wasn't a fluke, but a sign of things to come. It's not simply a matter of waiting until things return to normal. The next phase of the crisis might not hit the US for years or decades, but it's on its way. Already, the capitalist economy is barely able to offer people decent jobs, let alone meaningful lives; even measured by its own materialistic criteria, it isn't working.

Likewise, it's no coincidence that you're reading this book right now. Insofar as the economy is the concrete manifestation of the values and hierarchies of our society, a financial crisis heralds a crisis of faith in the system itself. A new wave of unrest is bound to arise.

In periods of turmoil, people reevaluate their assumptions and values. Of course, we can't be sure what the outcome will be; even if capitalism collapses, what comes next could

be *even worse*. Right now it's extremely important to set positive examples of what it means to resist and what the alternatives to capitalism might be. During social upheavals, people's notion of what is *possible* can shift very quickly, but their notion of what is *desirable* usually changes more slowly. This explains why grassroots uprisings often settle for demands that are much less radical than the forms adopted by the uprisings themselves: it takes a long time for our imaginations to catch up with reality.

If it's quiet right now where you live, that doesn't mean it always will be. Think ahead to the upheavals on the horizon: when they arrive, what will you wish you had done to prepare? How can you maximize the likelihood that they will turn out for the best?

We don't offer the only road out of capitalism, but we believe ours is the most inviting one. We don't propose corporate feudalism, ethnic warfare, concentration camps, ecological collapse, global famine, or nuclear war. A few decades of pitched social conflict are nothing compared to the catastrophes that will ensue if we don't take the initiative. Make no mistake, the world is going to change. It's up to us whether it will change for better or worse.

We're not peddling a utopia. We simply want to learn from the practices that worked to keep our species a healthy part of the ecosystem for the last million years, in hopes that we might survive at least a few thousand more. This humble aspiration places us in direct conflict with the current social order.



Half measures won't save us.

What could end the tyranny of the market? We don't have any easy answers, but we're convinced this is the most important question. Half measures are seductive because they seem more feasible than structural change; in fact, it would be easier to overthrow capitalism altogether than to alter its effects while leaving the causes intact. To get started, we can identify some approaches that don't work, then advance hypotheses about what might.

Charity won't solve the problems created by capitalism; neither will volunteer work or single-issue campaigns. We could spend our entire lives treating the symptoms one by one without making any progress towards a cure.

Painting capitalism "green" won't make it sustainable. Neither will limiting our consumption. When the economy rewards destructive behavior, accepting voluntary limitations just means ceding power to less scrupulous competitors. Likewise, as long as those incentives remain, only the most autocratic government could prevent people from pursuing them. Ecological collapse or ecological fascism—there must be another choice.

Unions won't rescue us from capitalism. When corporations can move jobs around the planet at will, it's no longer effective to resist one workplace at a time, or even one country at a time. Even if we could protect the rights of workers in a

Canada, June 2010

particular industry, that would simply give them an advantage to defend against others among the exploited and excluded; we need structures for dismantling the pyramid itself, not for protecting the interests of specific groups inside it.

New technologies won't render capitalism obsolete. Filesharing, free software, and social networking don't change the material inequalities at the base. As long as the economy dominates our lives, participatory formats will just integrate us into it more seamlessly.

There's no way to escape capitalism on an individual basis; there's no outside to withdraw to. Crime can offer an advantage to the exploited and excluded, but it doesn't point beyond the logic of the system; successful hackers and scam artists often end up working for security corporations or the FBI.

So long as they don't confront capitalism itself, identity-based liberation movements won't put an end to injustice and inequality. Being exploited by people like yourself is hardly an improvement on being exploited by people different from you. Even if we could all experience equal opportunity within capitalism—even if domination and exploitation could be distributed without reference to race, gender, or any other axis of oppression—capitalism itself would still be oppressive.

Government reforms won't cure capitalism. They might temporarily offset its effects, but the property-owning class always has an advantage when it comes to using the structures of the state. Even if anticapitalists took over and established a brand new government, the most they could do would be to control capital themselves, becoming a new capitalist class. Communists already did that in the 20th century with catastrophic results. At best, government solutions could strive towards the ideal of everyone sharing control of capital through the coercive apparatus of the state; but even if that were possible, it would only be a new sort of hell: an authoritarian system without authorities.

Self-management and “direct democracy” won't suffice to convey us beyond capitalism. Even without bosses or rulers, capitalist institutions will go on producing the same effects if we keep using them for their intended purposes—the same way the state apparatus continues *ruling* even without monarchs. If we take over our workplaces but go on *working* in them, if we still have to go through the economy for everything we need, we will continue suffering the same disconnection from ourselves and the world around us.

Even in the midst of catastrophe, there's no guarantee capitalism will fall on its own. For over a century and a half, Marxists have promised that capitalism would collapse once the “material conditions” ripened sufficiently; but every crisis has left capitalism stabler than ever. Next time it's in danger of breaking down, we have to seize the opportunity to interpose a different way of life.

There's no way around it—if we want fundamental change, we have to abolish private ownership of capital. This is not just an economic and political transformation, but also a social and cultural one. It cannot be imposed from above, but must be carried out by a critical mass prepared to defend themselves.

We can't know whether capitalism will fall in our lifetime, but we know it will fall. In the meantime, we can establish anticapitalism in the popular imagination as the opposition to the present order, so people don't gravitate to reformist or reactionary programs. We can also shake faith in the capitalist system, showing that it is neither the best way of structuring our lives, nor the only one possible, nor even stable or reliable. Capitalism is a spell: it can be broken.



Egypt, February 2011

Keep updating your strategies and tactics.

To recapitulate: starting early in the industrial revolution, people initiated resistance on the basis of common roles in production, organizing unions in their workplaces and forging subversive relationships in their neighborhoods. After the labor compromises of the early 20th century, the front lines of resistance shifted to the terrain of consumption, as the alienation of mass-produced society gave rise to mass unrest. As consumer markets diversified, the latter became more and more subculturally specific.

Today we're fragmented spatially, socially, and culturally, but we're also more interconnected than ever before. Whatever the advantages of the previous formats for struggle, they've reached their limits; they may still be useful, but they're unlikely to produce anything new. We shouldn't evaluate new formats according to the criteria of the old ones, but rather according to how effectively they make use of new opportunities.

For example, at the end of the 20th century, an international movement arose around protesting at the summits of trade organizations such as the International Monetary Fund. Dubbed the "anti-globalization movement" by pundits loath to say *anticapitalism*, this movement attempted to block a new wave of capitalist deregulation. Anticapitalist critics contended that such "summit-hopping" failed to build

long-term local struggles; this was true, but in an era of cosmopolitanism and transience international mobilizations took advantage of what people were already doing, while local organizing had to pull against the current. Insofar as they inhibited corporations from imposing worse conditions on workers, summit protests filled a role that unions no longer could on their own.

The same goes for the critique that subculturally-based outreach confines resistance to narrow social groups. Once again, this is obviously true, but it doesn't account for why these efforts have recently been so effective compared to other forms of organizing. Explicitly anticapitalist unions may still play an important role in resistance, but if people come to them through subcultural channels as often as through workplace organizing, we have to analyze this and strategize accordingly. The point is not to return to the strengths of the old tactics, but to transcend the shortcomings of the new ones.

In the US, it seems that production and consumption no longer create massive social bodies likely to conceive of their interests outside of capitalism. On the contrary, both have been structured so as not to constitute coherent social bodies at all. This is not necessarily for the worst: if we want to abolish capitalism, it might be better not to conceptualize ourselves according to our roles within it. But how else can people come together to resist?

It seems likely that the next phase of struggles will center around the terrain of *information*. Just as the factory system mass-produced an entire social structure alongside material goods, the new social formations are shaped by the ways we are informed. Now that much of the human race is extraneous to production, the main thing that binds us to the current social order is the way it structures our interactions and our notions of what is possible. The new participatory media serve to keep a redundant population



busy competing for *attention* inside a capitalist framework, a process that subtly dictates what we can imagine.

Fighting on the terrain of information doesn't just mean blocking websites, as the decentralized group Anonymous did in retaliation for the crackdown on Wikileaks. This terrain extends beyond the internet and cell phones to all the other structures via which people jointly construct their conception of reality. The languages and frameworks through which our species attributes meaning are now at stake: we have to create new connections between people, new networks through which information can flow and people can respond to the world around them. The further offline these networks extend, the more likely they are to remain under our control.

This might appear to be a rearguard struggle: capitalism has already conquered the entire planet and now we're fighting in our very last redoubt, our own mental spaces and social relationships. But in every struggle, the entirety of the capitalist system comes back into question. This is especially true now that new forms of self-organization can

spread almost instantaneously. In this context, sparks of resistance can transcend the limits of activism and subculture to catalyze full-scale revolts.

As we were completing this book, rebellions broke out throughout Tunisia, Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East. A new generation, impoverished and uprooted yet linked by new technologies, initiated a wave of leaderless revolt. This began at the margins, yet as soon as it became clear that it had any hope of success, the rest of the population swiftly joined in. The Egyptian government shut down the internet and cell phone networks in response, but this only enraged the population further. This uprising has yet to assume anticapitalist forms, but it offers a glimpse of what an anticapitalist revolution might entail; more specifically, it underscores how central communications technologies and social networks will be to any major uprising to come.

In the future we'll probably see governments attempt to shape the architecture of communication so that it's unnecessary to shut down the internet. Corporations like Google will subtly direct the flow of attention, promoting certain forms of protest and suppressing others. The extent to which we can keep channels open for free communication will determine the prospects for liberation.

Fight where you stand.

Whatever your position on the pyramid—whether you're a high school student, a temp worker, a stagehand with union benefits, a lawyer, or homeless and unemployed—you can fight where you are. You're most likely to be effective when you confront the outrages you experience personally on the terrain you know best.

Insofar as our lives are colonized, we have to take the roles that are forced on us as our first point of departure for resistance. It's easy to confine resistance to our leisure time, to make it something *additional*—a meeting packed in at the end of the workday, a bumper sticker. This corresponds with a tendency to fight for causes outside our day-to-day lives. The advantage of the union model is that it takes the daily regimen imposed on workers and turns it into a site for organizing and confrontation. If a conventional union isn't appropriate in your context, you may have to experiment with other formats: a self-defense league, a thieves' ring, a secret society for revolutionary consciousness.

Capitalism isn't just what happens at work. We can also resist in the rest of our daily lives—defending our neighborhoods against gentrification, occupying foreclosed homes, draining our creditors to the limit and declaring bankruptcy. Collective forms of resistance can be more difficult in consumption than production, but they're possible: take over spaces and use them for public events, go to an expensive affair en masse and force your way in without paying, go to the grocery store and do the same thing on the way out. The more our livelihoods depend on resistance rather than submission, the more fiercely we'll fight.



Being excluded is also a role that can be refused. You don't have to have a *job* operating the means of production to be entitled to seize them, any more than you have to live in a shopping district to be entitled to loot it. As more and more people are forced to the margins, the role the marginalized must play in resistance becomes more and more central.

As they say on the basketball court, *play your position*. Redirect resources and information to those who can use them more effectively than you can. When people “get serious” about fighting capitalism, they often tend to remove themselves from their previous position within it—quitting jobs, dropping out of school, ceasing to participate in processes rather than *interrupting* them. This serves capitalists just fine—one of the functions of the surplus population is to contain all who would cause trouble if they could. It's better to go on the offensive. Don't quit your job—wait until the boss is most vulnerable and go on strike, inviting everyone to join you. Don't drop out of school and ship off to some activist campaign—organize walkouts and teach-ins, put together a student group that can channel funds off campus, try to carry out an occupation. When they fire or expel you, you'll be entitled to move on with your life.

There's no moral high ground in capitalism: it's not more ethical to be further down the pyramid. Trying to appease your conscience isn't likely to do anyone else a lot of good. Likewise, let others play their positions—don't waste energy judging them. Even lawyers and professors can play an important role if they can get over themselves. We don't gain anything from moralistic one-upmanship; the point isn't to be *right*, but to be *dangerous*. When we split into rival factions, we save capitalists the trouble of dividing and distracting us.

Every position on the pyramid is a compromise—but choose your compromise carefully. Where you're located will determine what you experience and whom you identify with, inevitably shaping your interests. How you acquire

resources will frame your values and your conception of human nature. If you manage to secure a high-paying job to raise funds for projects, for example, you may eventually lose touch with others in less advantageous positions—or simply lose faith that they know how to “get anything done.”

Fight alongside others with their best interests at heart, but don't approach resistance as a sort of volunteer work you carry out on their behalf. Forget about trying to identify “the most revolutionary class” or finding someone worse off than yourself to be an “ally” to. If you don't experience others' struggles *as your own struggle*, you'll probably be an erratic ally. The best assistance you can provide to anyone is to threaten the power structure, showing that everyone has a stake in fighting for themselves.

Not that you should take your privileges for granted; on the contrary, refusing your role means rejecting these as well. For example, white protesters aren't *really* interrupting the functioning of capitalism until they force the police to treat them the way delinquents of color are treated. But you'll be most effective enabling others like yourself to revolt, not acting as a foot soldier in someone else's campaign. Whatever it was that pushed you over the edge, make sure that happens to everyone like you.

The point of all this isn't just to get a little revenge or gain advantages you wouldn't have in the economy otherwise, but above all to make connections, to broaden your ties and deepen your skillsets. Start out with a few friends, people that you trust. Get used to coming up with a plan and carrying it out, to reacting to things that anger or sadden you, to *disobeying*. As you find others doing the same thing, you'll build up networks that can swing into action together.

As soon as people see that *something else* really is possible, they find themselves making decisions in a different context. Between upheavals, we can set an example of what it looks like to resist; when things heat up, it'll catch on.





UK, November 2010

Spread narratives that legitimize revolt.

Everyone wants things to be different, but nobody's sure what to do. Even those who have resolved themselves to open warfare aren't sure where to start or how to be sure others will join in with them.

This is why it's so important when something occurs that gives people a common rallying point. When Alexis Grigoropoulos was murdered by policemen in December 2008, all Greece erupted in revolt. In November 2010, tens of thousands rallied against a new law that would raise tuition in the UK. In both of these cases, radicals finally had a narrative that the general population found convincing across cultural and political lines, legitimizing forms of resistance that many people had never imagined themselves participating in.

Usually, these rallying points are reactive, responding to some new injustice that exceeds even the level of abuse people have come to take for granted. It can be easy for people to agree that they oppose new outrages, but difficult for them to imagine a positive alternative. Legitimacy itself is socially constructed so as to be out of reach of those who would resist; for example, the excluded can claim no "legitimate territory" on which to defend their rights. You can counter these limitations by propagating narratives that go deeper than police misconduct or unfair legislation, offering more fundamental critiques and more transformative visions.

Make a practice of *acting* on these narratives: ideas lack force until people see others behaving as if they are *real*.

Look for vulnerabilities and fault lines in the current configurations of power. Power is distributed unevenly now, but it's also distributed in different currencies—money, attention, social clout—that aren't perfectly interchangeable and don't behave according to the same laws. In the coming conflicts, some of the fault lines—and some of the advantages we can gain—will probably open up around the tensions between these different currencies.

Find ways of fighting that spread.

How does one form of resistance spread or contribute to other forms of resistance? This will determine how effective it can ultimately be. The most decisive aspect of each act of defiance is its relationship to other such acts.

Those who struggle against the constraints of capitalism must come to identify with everyone else who struggles. If they do not, even if they are effective, capitalists will neutralize them by granting their demands at others' expense; at most, they could simply replace the previous ruling class without transforming the system itself.

You can't measure the strength of a revolt the way you would measure the strength of a police department. The force of insurrection is social, not military: the question is how infectious it is, how far it extends into the general population, how much it transforms relationships. Popular uprisings can triumph over much better equipped armies if they retain their popular character. Once the sides become fixed and the scope of the uprising is determined, however, it becomes safe for rulers to rely on brute force once more.

Therefore don't let your foes isolate you from others like yourself, don't get quarantined in subcultural niches, don't let radicals impose obscure points of reference on you that will just make it harder to communicate with society at large. It isn't movements themselves that make social change, but rather *contagious examples of transformation*. That means that



New York, December 2011

people actually in the midst of transformation have more to offer to the project of revolution than partisans of revolution who have not changed in thirty years. The former may not have thought through all their politics and tactics yet, but their inconsistency and awkwardness are balanced out by flexibility, momentum, and optimism, not to mention the relationships they have with people who haven't yet chosen a side. Once their new identities as radicals have crystallized, the roles they can play in social upheavals will be less and less dynamic. They can still fight, of course, perhaps with increasing expertise, but only from a fixed position.



Greece, December 2008

Find ways of fighting that create access to resources outside capitalism.

When it comes to evaluating a tactic or strategy, one of the most important questions is whether it secures more opportunities and resources. Sometimes it can be worth taking a loss to accomplish a particular goal, but once you overextend it can be very difficult to recover. Many projects ultimately founder because they fail to recoup the resources invested in them: you can't carry on an exhausting struggle indefinitely without deriving the wherewithal for it from somewhere.

But if a way of fighting does secure resources, it's just as important to ask *how* it makes them available, how they will circulate. If we don't want to reproduce capitalist property relations, we have to provide for material needs in ways that create other relationships to goods. Resistance is only *anticapitalist* insofar as it immediately establishes these relationships. If the resources we seize still function inside the framework of private property, we can expect the same dynamics to arise inside our own circles that we see in the capitalist economy.

On the other hand, in building new infrastructures, we can demonstrate another way of life, giving people reason to invest themselves in fighting for it. It's challenging to do this when there is so much pressure to privatize everything, but in times when capitalist control breaks down it becomes much easier. We should be ready to seize any opportunity to establish forms of wealth that can be held in common.

Piracy was so effective four centuries ago because in the relative safety of the high seas, it was easy enough for sailors to depose their commanders and take over their ships. The ship represented society in miniature, beyond the reach of the armed forces that maintained the delicate balance of power on land. As soon as sailors mutinied, their first order of business was to draw up new terms of agreement, collectivizing everything on board before setting out to make war on the old order. This form of revolt could spread by cellular division, when a crew split up into two groups; by viral attack, when pirates seized another vessel and liberated the crew; by contagion, when a sailor who had been a pirate signed on with a new vessel; and by rumor, when sailors heard about other pirate revolts and resolved to try it themselves. What sites could serve as the pirate ships of our era? What spaces and resources could be seized and turned against a society based on private ownership?

In addition to collectivizing access to resources immediately, we need ways of fighting that redistribute power itself. To defend themselves against external foes and internal power grabs, insurgent communities need to establish multiple power structures that can counterbalance each other and continuously undermine new hierarchies. There are no shortcuts to freedom; political parties and leaders can't obtain it for us, but only take it from us. If we aren't careful, we could overthrow all the governments of the world and occupy all its workplaces without getting any closer to assuming control of our own destinies.

In the long run, the point is not to make sure *things* are distributed equally, but to establish a relationship to material goods that enables all of us to realize our potential as we see fit. We have to stop engaging with ourselves and each other according to our roles in capitalist society and create new conceptions of what life could be.



**SHOW THEM
WHO'S BOSS:
NO ONE**





Mexico, November 2006

Be ready for a long struggle.

It may not be apparent when things are about to change. The more precarious the old order becomes, the more aggressively it will assert its permanence. A regime that can't afford to show its weakness will avoid compromise at any cost.

In this context, it might not be possible to achieve intermediary goals. Resistance may seem more and more divorced from effectiveness, more and more “irrational,” until it finally reaches a critical point.

This makes it more important to focus on the *content* of resistance than on its immediate efficacy. Does it create new relationships between people, new ways of relating to material goods? Does it demonstrate values that point beyond capitalism? Forget about whether it achieves its ostensible demands—does it give rise to new struggles, to new *unruliness*?

As work becomes at once more temporary and more invasive, shifting swiftly around the world and extending into every aspect of life, labor struggles may involve fighting in spaces we think of as far from the workplace. This doesn't mean we should abandon workplace struggle itself, though we may have to reconceptualize what we're trying to achieve with it and how we evaluate its effectiveness so it can play a role in the new forms of conflict.

Every time we invent a new way of fighting, we change the terrain, opening up unforeseen possibilities. We may

ultimately lose the battle, but we produce a new social current that can give rise to more fighters and future innovations. We should be prepared to fight over years and decades without growing disheartened. We also need to be prepared to stay the course in the face of sudden changes of context, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001 or the election of Obama; the defenders of capitalism will surely spring their most confusing surprises on us when the war enters its final rounds.

Even when a sudden upheaval finally takes us by surprise, it will only open a new phase of struggle that will surely last the rest of our lives. Shifting from capitalism to other frameworks is bound to be a difficult and protracted process.



Mexico, September 2006



Mexico, November 2006

Change must go to the roots.

When one power structure collapses, the fragments of old hierarchies that remained within it can reconstitute themselves. For example, immediately after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, a mix of off-duty police officers and vigilantes ran the streets; if one of the tasks of the police is to control the movements of black and brown people, vigilantes can maintain this function even when the entire legal apparatus breaks down.

Alongside every institution, currency, or form of hierarchy, there are the subtle values and practices that enable it to function. Just as nothing could serve as capital without the convention of private property, police departments would be impossible without the conventions of *authority* and *duty*. These aren't just abstractions, but concrete relationships people participate in throughout their lives—this is why people experience them as *real* even though they are socially constructed. Police set a model for what it means to wield power: children grow up playing with action figures, adults *police* each other in a thousand different ways. This shapes our imaginations so that even when we set out to liberate ourselves we often take on familiar oppressive roles.

Just as individuals can be interchangeable within institutions, institutions can be interchangeable in fulfilling certain *functions*. Beside policing we could identify many other functions, less obviously oppressive but no less central to the

workings of capitalism. If we want to transform our society, we must not only overturn institutions but also identify the functions they serve, lest we end up taking on these roles ourselves. Even without capital or police, entirely new currencies might arise to impose oppression and alienation.

There's no reason to believe the downfall of capitalism will automatically bring about a free world. That part is up to us.

Recommended Reading

David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*

The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*

Derrick Jensen, *Endgame*

prole.info, *Abolish Restaurants*

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*

We also direct readers to the original full-length version of this book, along with other books we have published including *Expect Resistance*; *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*; and *Days of War, Nights of Love*. In addition, our free primer *Fighting for Our Lives* offers a good introduction to anarchist ideas. All of these, and a great deal more, are available via crimethinc.com.



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