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[zinelibrary@riseup.net](mailto:zinelibrary@riseup.net)

# Confronting Empire:



**Analysis of contemporary capitalism and ways  
to fight it in the U.S.**

**Indyrad@riseup.net**

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*“Capitalism is not just a social system that exploits people through work, so that we can think about ending the exploitation and keeping the work, it is a social system which subordinates all of life to work and by doing so alienates those it forces to work and prevents them from developing their own paths of self-realization. For example, for those who are waged during each day of our usual working week we not only find most of our waking hours taken up by working directly for capital on the job, but we also find that much of our supposedly "free" time, or "leisure" time is taken up preparing for work, getting to work, getting home from work, recuperating from work, doing what is necessary so that we can go to work the next day, and so on. For those who are not waged, e.g. the unwaged in the home (usually housewives but often children and sometimes men), "leisure" time turns out to be mostly dedicated to house "work", which in turn is not just the crafting and reproduction of domestic life but involves the work of turning children into workers and reproducing workers as workers. In other words, women have children but then they (along with husbands sometimes) must rear them to take orders, to curb their desires and spontaneity and to learn to*

*do as they are told (the same work that teachers undertake in schools). Children, thus, are not left free to discover life on their own but are put to work, the work of turning themselves into workers as well as that of reproducing their parents as such. Similarly, women qua housewives do not merely work for/with their husbands, their work reproduces their husbands as labor power on a daily and weekly basis through feeding them, cleaning their clothes, maintaining their environment, providing sexual and psychological services that make it possible for them to return to work each day without shooting the boss, or themselves. Parallel analyses can be made of the "free" time on weekends and vacations. In short, what I'm arguing is not merely that capital has extended its mechanisms of domination beyond the factory (as the critical theorists have long argued) but that what those mechanisms involve is the imposition of work, including the imposition of the work of reproducing life as work."*

-Harry Cleaver, 1993

Here in the U.S., it often seems impossible to confront the social relationship described above by Cleaver. This relationship is not just that between partners or between workers and bosses. Capitalism is the very essence of which relations are formed. As Cleaver notes, it is no longer enough to dominate individuals strictly in their labor. The development of capitalism has meant expanding control farther and farther across the functionality of society. This elusiveness,

this invisible omnipresence, is the product of hundreds of years of rebellions, strikes, and struggles against more jackbooted forms of exploitation.

### **The cubicle worker exists because the peasant revolted.**

Deep in the heart of the empire, activists and revolutionaries march for peace, for choice, as if there is anything revolutionary about this. *“The role of the ‘activist’ is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest- a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others. “* So says Andrew X, in a critique which doubts the effectiveness of activism when it has become a specialized role which is unrelatable for most people.

Capital must be understood as the force of all forces to be reckoned with. There is no existing party or union which can take on capitalism, nor a universal strategy. Instead, we must be versatile players in this pragmatic system, understanding its totality and searching for weak points. Furthermore, the quest for personal liberation from capital must depend on attempting to collectively tear a hole in the geographic continuity of capitalism.

There are certain attributes of capitalism which must be articulated. First, it is necessary to understand a basic understanding of capitalism, as this understanding has evolved in post-Marxist thought.

Capitalism as an **international logic** began as sovereignty was transformed during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Isolated class conflict emerged

**Reification** – The conversion of a material or idea into a product which can be produced and consumed within the capitalist system.

**Reproduction** – The pattern of capitalism and its subjectivities in which the multitude constantly works to create the conditions of society over and over again in place of a proletariat producing goods. Goods are still produced, but the end product is the recreation of capitalism. Many of the ‘goods’ being produced by individual groups of workers are abstractions which are only identifiable in the larger process of reproduction.

## Glossary of Terms

**[Capitalist or Primitive] Accumulation** – The creation of the conditions for capitalist development, including **enclosure** and extension of state sovereignty. Silvia Federici's expansive definition includes:

*"The development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the workforce [and] the exclusion of women from waged work..."* (Federici 12).

**Dis-enclosure** – The removal of state power, and the abolition of private property, wage relations, and hierarchical institutions.

**Enclosure** – The process by which the state conquers new territory for capitalism. Communal lands are seized and parceled out into private property, and wage relations are created, enforced, and made necessary by taxation backed by state power.

**International Logic** – The occurrence within capitalism wherein successful strategies for development and class conflict management appear to be reproduced naturally throughout the world.

**Multitude** – A term used to describe the collective identities and movements of producers/subjects of capitalism. This abstract concept essentially describes what the proletariat has evolved/diffused into in a society of **reproduction**.

between the pre-capitalist proletariat and the Church, the feudal lords, and the urban bourgeoisie, depending upon the situation. Demands were varied, but basically communist in nature.

*"Ultimately, the mounting class conflict brought about a new alliance between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, without which proletarian revolts may not have been defeated...If they were defeated, it was because all the forces of feudal power-the nobility, the Church, and the bourgeoisie- moved against them united, despite their traditional divisions, by their fear of proletarian rebellion... Thus, it was the urban bourgeoisie, after two centuries of struggles waged in order to gain full sovereignty within the walls of its communes, who reinstated the power of the nobility, by voluntarily submitting to the rule of the Prince, the first step on the road to the absolute state."* (Federici 49)

This was followed by the creation of the wage relation; the proletariat could now earn a wage and own some land and goods, instead of being exploited purely for labor and existing as the clearly exploited class. This new relation both distorted the exploitation and allowed capitalists to sow conflict among the proletariat by stagnating wages, especially based on race, nationality, or gender (if women could receive wages at all).

### **The Evolution of Capital and Conflict**

As the state became the most prominent form of sovereignty across the globe, a second primary evolution followed: the emergence of

industrialization and mass production in place of cottage industries. This required that the **enclosures** and wage relation become the absolute law of all land under the sovereignty of capitalist states.

Enclosure is the abolition of communal land, often the social center and community's heart and soul. Land that was formerly of cultural and social importance was closed off and divided up as private property. At times this was accomplished through military force, tax code creation and manipulation, or other coercive means advocated by the ruling class. The specific example from which the term derives is the Enclosures Acts of Britain which "*broke up some six million acres of common fields and common lands from 1760 onwards, transformed them into private holdings, and numerous less formal arrangements supplemented them*" (Hobsbawn 153).

From the industrialization period, capital's history is complicated and non-linear. In the end globalization has become complete, and capital is absolute relative to all of existence. A few principles of this period (the transition from modern to post-modern capitalism) should be laid down:

1) The state's primary roles are to manage class conflict and to mediate disagreement between capitalist entities.

2) The sovereignty of the state is far superceded by the logic of capital and the global financial institutions which plan and manage it.

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Recreating Iraq in the U.S. is by no means desirable.

Attacks on capital must be based on an understanding of the current rules. Capital is dependent on the state as conflict mediation between individual capitalists and as a defense against class antagonism. If the state's mechanisms of control and mediation can be temporarily shut down, so will its ability to enforce the laws of capital. This is, of course, if people are able to stop enforcing capital's authority within themselves.

The rent strike is a perfect example of such an assault. All organized tenants' rent is invested in a collective legal fund, which can accumulate rapidly and be used to clog the court system, preventing the landlords from retaliating legally without sustaining a loss. Coupled with demands, this is an effective way to tilt the balance of power while building community solidarity. In a situation wherein revolutionary community support is maximized, a rent strike can be made permanent and defensible. Furthermore, land occupations and squats are dis-enclosures which should be counted as small-scale successes.

Let us be the last generation to believe in a revolution that never happens. Even at its strongest, capitalism is weak and contradictory. Its strength is in the illusion, the spectacle, and the replication. If its end was ever in sight it will always be in sight, it is only a matter of realization.

3) Capital is no longer dependent on outward expansion, the disappearance of frontier means that expansion must occur within capitalism, increasing the intensity and density of **reification** (think 'thingification')

4) The primary site of production is not the factory; it is the society itself which is both producer and product.

From this brief examination several means of revolt which have been repeatedly attempted by leftists and post-leftist movements and non-movements should be discounted as possibilities:

First, we should dismiss the notion that attempting to flee to the margins, to live free of this world is possible. We cannot escape the totality and infiniteness of capitalism simply by minimizing our participation within it. To try and cheat the system for subsistence is not in itself damaging.

Second, we should dismiss the possibility of basing revolt solely in industry, at least while we are deep in the heart of the empire. Old leftist models are largely built on concepts of the mass worker or the trade worker, two identities which are rapidly disappearing due not only to outsourcing, but to the evolved form of capital wherein the *society of work's* product is the reproduction of society itself:

*"The lines of production and those of representation cross and mix in the same linguistic and productive realm. In this context the distinctions that define the central categories of political economy tend to blur.*

*Production becomes indistinguishable from reproduction; productive forces merge with relations of production...Social subjects are at the same time producers and products of this unitary machine. In this new historical formation it is thus no longer possible to identify a sign, a subject, a value, or a practice that is 'outside'." (Hardt & Negri 385)*

In this evolved form of capital, it is rare that American workers would be able to threaten with revolutionary struggle if it were not part of a wider social demand. In a system which uses the entirety of the human experience to generate itself, a revolt against it could not be created nor carried out by workers alone, for waged labor is only a fraction of the labor which maintains capital. Further, to revolt in these limited means is to allow capital to set the terms of the struggle.

Alfredo Bonnano in *Armed Joy* argues against the syndicalist worker-fetish in revolutionary politics: *"Capitalism and those fighting it will sit alongside each other on the producer's corpse, but production must go on"* (Bonnano 4).

The entire society of production and consumption must be in revolt, and this revolt will not be against the state of the wage alone but against work as well as entertainment and all reified human emotions and experiences.

If any vision of the world outside of the corporatist dystopia is to exist, it is dependent on the ability of people around the world to find the weaknesses in the regime of capital where they live *and* work and

## In Closing

As a final note on violence, it is notable that the Iraqi insurgency, lacking in any clear coalition or unifying ideology beyond having a common occupier, has proven that the US military is brutal and relentless yet combatable. It is interesting to note that despite having successfully created a media blackout, waging total war by destroying hospitals and basic infrastructure, deploying illegal chemical weapons, and violently suppressing labor unrest, the US has been unable to achieve many of its post-war goals. The Oil Minister's statement in early January that sabotage had cost \$8 billion in oil revenue demonstrated that the leftist-consensed mission of oil theft has failed. Instability has prevented the climate for investment and IMF intervention from developing, whilst despite nearly 25 years of continuous war the Iraqi working class somehow emerges as an antagonistic force.

The insurgency reveals the possibility of waging armed struggle against the Empire when popular support, even only on a local level, permits. The conditions in Iraq have allowed the US to play most of its cards, whereas the situation would be quite different within its own borders. This is not to advocate armed struggle as a path to revolution, but to recognize its possibility, as revolutionary movements must ultimately endure a trial by fire. The state will throw its full weight against the rule-breakers of capital, and the perpetual crisis of capital necessitates discussion on all aspects of its defeat, including movement building, militarizing, and envisioning the result.

Anthropologically speaking, contemporary capitalist societies are unique in that their populaces are disarmed. In the U.S., much of the rural population has inherited a culture of self-defense from their settler-state origins. For the most part, however, capitalist societies lack the ability to defend themselves in ways which previous populations were able to. This is a consequence of dependence on the state and a deeply-rooted division of labor. Self-armament was one of the prime weapons of class conflict in pre-capitalist society, and contributed largely to the demise of the slave system of labor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Anarchists have expended substantial effort distinguishing violence against property from violence against living things. Violence is an abstract concept, and if the concern is violence against life, then every day that capitalism is allowed to exist is an act of profound genocide. Anarchists should not be trying to distinguish their form of violence as gentle and digestible to suburbia. Instead, anarchists should seek an understanding of how to confront the global systemic violence and reclaim the concept as a means to a desirable end. As long as anarchists rely on a holier-than-thou moral high ground as the basis of revolutionary politics they will be in for some terrible surprises if by chance they are able to jeopardize capitalism. The proselytizing of anarchist nonviolence and morality is eerily colonialist, as if we must re-civilize the savage masses barbarianized by capital.

to organize an attack. As a general rule, crossing the country for a march will in no way contribute directly to the revolution. Let us return again to capitalism's nature.

From capitalism's early beginnings, the demise of the feudal system in the face of rising class conflict in Europe, it has been built primarily on **accumulation** and expansion. As the state emerged to unify ruling class interest and enforce the laws of capital, some states emerged as colonizing states, ever-pushing the frontiers of capital's territory (and thereby accelerating and coordinating capitalist accumulation). The physical act of capitalist expansion brings new resources to appropriate, new territories in which to create fixed capital (through first agriculture, then industrialization, possibly followed by informationization), [possibly] new markets, and a safety valve with which to relieve the internal pressure of class conflict (migration/expulsion of the proletariat). But the age of frontiers is past, as capitalism has spread across the entire globe and stabilized itself through the consolidation of global economic power.

In order to continue the necessary growth, postmodern capitalism is dependent on expansion within itself. This takes the form of ever-more efficient and complex networks of communication and rapidly evolving technology. The expansion occurring in the contemporary age is based on capital's ability to expand, reproduce, and elaborate itself within civilization, so that nothing can possibly exist outside of it. There is no longer an

“outside”, a frontier, and we are meant to be persuaded that there no longer can be one.

This means, then, that capital as both the **social relationship reproduced infinitely** and the fabric of all human interaction must be attacked. The game is the same but the rules have changed. It no longer makes sense to attempt to attack capital based on common labor interests. The fruits of victory in labor organizing have already been tasted, and capital's retaliation has been bittersweet. The assembly line which once acted in solidarity is now dispersed across the globe. The surplus value of the workers' labor, through communication networks and the new mobility of capital, is extracted efficiently and facelessly.

## Women

Before discussing revolutionary theory any further, it is important to examine the nature of gender relations as they have been manipulated under capitalism. There is not space here to adequately document this evolution, nor the struggles of other oppressed groups under Western capital. However, the manipulation of male/female relations is at the heart of capitalism's destruction of community.

The nuclear family is a sexual division of labor which allocates power and wages to the male, modeled after the state and designed to preserve it. The male [under industrial capitalism] was the worker, protector, provider, and unassailable authority. The woman was charged with performing unwaged labor in maintaining this worker and in producing

that American anarchists are dealt with through intimidation rather than being given the brute force treatment is by no means testament to our success. It suggests multiple shortcomings of the movement:

- 1) The majority of the movement is not yet threatening to capital
- 2) Privilege remains largely unchallenged in both our tactics and our efforts to build class solidarity
- 3) Given that many U.S. anarchists are white and/or privileged, the state is still counting on recirculating us in the system of social reproduction (if we have escaped it).

The aforementioned points are all connected, and suggest that overall there is a lack of revolutionary activity within the U.S. on the part of the anarchist-activists. The movement has functioned on this level for so long, limited to the safe revolting found at major American demonstrations. American anarchists will never conceive of a truly revolutionary strategy as long as our actions and our dreams are divided by self-denial about the confrontation that awaits revolutionary movements.

Our perceptions of violence have been fully conquered by capital. We have accepted the division of labor- that the state is the first and only line of self-defense, wherein only soldiers and police need to know how to fight. This statism has fully infiltrated leftist thought, and found its way into the hearts and minds of too many American anarchists.

gradually extending outward. In the face of brutal state repression, what erupted was an all-inclusive social movement whose 11 principles include:  
"5. Never use the movement for partisan ends...  
7. Never accept a political position in an institution of power  
9. Give the movement national scope" (Firestarter 13)

The movement's universal rejection of state authority in favor of a federated commune system has created a 4-year old dis-enclosure which appears to be growing.

Kabylia, Chiapas, and the prospects of BPP and AIM organizing provide outlines for how the geographic continuity of capital can be disrupted. Argentina is excluded as an example because capital took itself beyond the point of crisis. In all other examples, the multitude forced the confrontation.

## **Violence and Revolt**

In reality any organizers who are violently and "illegally" suppressed by police forces should be examined. The state submerged in capital will use force as a last resort, being that while murder and incarceration are highly effective at destroying movements, they are also expensive, create poor publicity, and galvanize other radicals.

Most revolutionary activity is defeated abstractly before it is begun. The social methods of control and class fracturing have effectively dealt with class solidarity before it becomes a possibility. The fact

the next generation of workers with authority derived from the male. Not only did this model of authority reinforce the relationship of the state to the individual, with the state's authority derived from god (and the female authority over the children derived from the male), the state often physically reinforced this relationship. As Nancy Kurshan writes in *Women & Imprisonment in the U.S.*, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century "more than half [of women incarcerated] were imprisoned because of 'sexual misconduct'. Women were incarcerated in reformatories primarily for various public disorder offenses or so-called 'moral' offenses" (Kurshan 12).

From the Suffrage movement to 80s feminism, women have mobilized in attempts to break down various aspects of the social relationships imposed upon them. Though there have been many victories, capital has succeeded in turning many of these against women. Women in the US often now have to perform waged labor in addition to their unwaged labor in order to maintain a comparative level of affluence. This new development tragically falls short of addressing the sovereignty of both males and the state over women. Another side effect of this development is the fracturing of the female identity as an oppressed class, as women are pressured to identify with their socio-economic status rather than with the centuries-old exploitative and subservient relation impressed upon them.

Perhaps Silvia Federici summarizes the sexual division of labor best:  
*"The power-difference between women and men and the concealment of women's unpaid-labor*

*under the cover of natural inferiority, have enabled capitalism to immensely expand the 'unpaid part of the working day,' and use the (male) wage to accumulate women's labor; in many cases, they have also served to deflect class antagonism into an antagonism between men and women. Thus, primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves"* (Federici 115).

The architecture of America reflects the division of society into productive cells of nuclear families. In these single-family houses and apartments, society becomes predictable, marketable, consumable. The streamlined reproduction of society acts as a guiding light for capital to mine deeper into the human experience. The nuclear family, or even the non-nuclear family, will express discontent through the channels of capital. For the golden rule of capital, "It's either you or them," rings ever more clear when one's wages and family are on the line and community is replaced by enterprise.

### **Searching For American Revolutionary Theory**

But within this architecture, this endlessly sprawling monstrosity, there is always room for struggle. Workers have always found ways to retaliate against their bosses both before and after a union was organized, and regardless of whether one ever was. The same should hold true for us, the **multitude**, as producers and reproducers of capitalism.

Capital can determine who our neighbors are based on class, giving an advantage to revolutionaries. The logic in this form of social organization is the assumption that the state will regulate education, social services, and police presence as a failsafe against flaws in social reproduction.

There is logic to the slogan 'Think Globally, Act Locally'. Notions of federated nation-wide simultaneous revolt as the staging point for revolution should be rejected. Of course, a revolutionary movement springing up in the middle of the U.S. is ideal, but is far less realistic or sustainable unless the basis is in localized mass movement. Besides, the U.S. government is highly prepared to dismantle organizations of scale.

Mass is important not in the tired old socialist notion of *the masses*, but rather as the scientific term, as the premise that we should strive for revolutionary communities and population density rather than cells. Revolutionary neighborhoods (urban or rural) are ideal for the realization of mutual aid societies, the creation of true democracy, and the defense of such a society. What must be manifest is nothing less than a demand of dis-enclosure, both for ourselves and as a universal demand for all people.

Challenges to state power can be defined as dis-enclosure if they displace state power with self-organization and the absence of financial and military power. An example is the current revolt in Algeria, spreading from the Tizi-Ouzou neighborhood to the entire Kabylia region and

The Vietnam era slogan "Bring the War Home" is a statement of privilege which should not be made here. Even Michael Moore in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is astute enough to observe that in de-industrialized Flint, Michigan no one is asking to bring the war home. It's already here.

### **Dis-enclosure**

Beginning in the early 1970s, the American Indian Movement pressed all levels of U.S. government with demands of "*real self-government/self-determination for the Indian nations, and called for the reassertion of Indian rights to full national sovereignty*" (Redhawk). This universal demand was nationalist in character yet anti-statist and anti-capitalist in practice. AIM demanded that a hole be carved out within capitalism and that autonomous sovereignty be allotted to the various tribes in whatever federated or non-federated way the American Indians saw fit.

The struggle of Indigenous peoples around the world represents a global demand for "dis-enclosure", or removal from the capitalist web in which they have been snared. Dis-enclosure is the breaking down of the state's authority, and thus of private property and wage relations. The demands of AIM are nothing short of revolutionary, and if realized would force a major retreat of capital.

There is one social relationship that is both indestructible and the foundation for revolutionary activity and post-revolutionary society. This relationship is that of proximity, our neighbors.

If the original power of the worker was in its ability to disrupt capitalist production, it is possible that this logic can be carried to the evolved form of capitalism which currently exists. If the role of the waged and unwaged laborers now is to reproduce society itself, shouldn't we have strength in our ability to organize and disrupt the totality of capitalism?

Though anti-capitalism does not constitute a mass movement in the U.S., what exists currently should be encouraging. Every autonomous space, every Food Not Bombs, every liberated animal, when added together serves as a momentary glimpse of the world which is possible. This collective resistance is **definitely not** limited only to the activities carried out by the activist persona. It is likely that the majority of actions which assault the infinite social cancer are invisible to those who actively seek its overthrow. Would the most revolutionary politics even appear as politics at all?

The Black Panthers provide at least a conceptual framework for the pitfalls and successes of modern U.S. revolutionary struggle. The realization of this project, with its hierarchies, public hybrid of legal and illegal activity during the rise to prominence, and party politics, is not ideal.

However, they should be commended for their success in transforming a landscape of social disconnection into a revolutionary movement. The Panthers persuaded gangs to organize politically and filled the gap left by the rise of neoliberalism and a legacy of systematic racism and violence.

Further, they reached out to bridge the chasm between black, white, Latino, and Native groups in order to truly build a revolutionary movement.

The Panthers, American Indian Movement, and other US revolutionary groups of the 60s and 70s demonstrated to the state holes were appearing in capital's logic. These revolutionaries, as they attempted to punch holes in the continuity, could not be pacified by capital's omnipresence. By refusing to reproduce capitalist relations, they presented a threat which could only be dealt with by force.

The question was what to do about resistance in the heart of the empire, where it is imperative that capital be reproduced? COINTELPRO was the answer developed to sow disarray in conjunction with bombings, absurd trials, and assassinations. Raw force was used where social controls failed, and an additional program had to be deployed by the state.

A year before Eldridge Cleaver's death he reflected on the tumultuous history of the Panthers, noting that the U.S. government "*chopped the head off [of the black liberation movement] and left the body there armed. That's why all these young bloods are out there now, they've got the rhetoric but are without the political direction... and they've got the guns.*"

Though this is not the place to deeply analyze the history of the BPP, there is certainly truth to Cleaver's words. Once the power of a revolutionary movement is solely paramilitary, the revolution has

been defeated. Armed struggle must defend and symbolize the rebellion against reproduction. As the base of revolutionary activity, armed struggle is doomed to failure, or rather prolonged dissipation. This is part of a long list of lessons that the Weathermen, an attempted revolutionary organization which was predominantly middle-class, failed to understand.

The Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas emerges as a similar model for revolt, as another rebellion based on organizing communities to tear a rift in the fabric of capitalism and defend it. Eleven years after its emergence, and experiencing tragedy and success, the Chiapan revolt has at least demonstrated that autonomy can be established and can spread from within the borders of capitalism. The Zapatistas quickly learned that the media and international solidarity are some of their best weapons.

The intent here is not to embrace anarchist Eurocentrism by over-emphasizing the importance of revolutionary movements in the U.S., however successful revolt for any sustained period could reverberate across the globe as a demonstration of constant vulnerability of the present order. If nothing else, it is likely that anarchists and revolutionaries in the US would receive more international solidarity than they have shown to movements elsewhere. Also, the U.S.'s ability to enforce the laws of capital regionally and globally are unmatched; to force a crisis within the U.S. would relieve some of the pressure on the rest of the world.