

Capitalist Temporality

Understanding the Trap of Linear Time
and Exploring Radical Alternatives

– anonymous



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This zine is the adapted version of a lecture that was given in April, 2023.
Redistribute, adapt, shorten, and improve this text however you want.

Goals and Intent

My goal for this zine is to allow space to investigate and reflect upon concepts that I rarely see discussed within leftist spaces. I do not aim to bog us down with theories and abstract, intellectual rigor. Rather, I hope to encourage readers to absorb, evaluate and utilize the concepts I present today for themselves.

This text is by no means a complete exploration of this subject. There are also viewpoints I neglected to mention (ie. Black Futurism, spirituality, Buddhist presentism, accelerationism, longtermism) in favor of maintaining brevity to the best of my ability. I also tried to take my own social position into account while choosing topics to discuss in this zine. However, to the extent that a neutral viewpoint is even possible, know that this information will undoubtedly be presented with bias: both understood and implicit. I am, of course, far from perfect and open to receiving any criticism that may arise.

Also, I will say at the outset that I have approached the topics in this zine primarily through an anarchist lens. That framework just so happens to be what's most appealing to me, so don't be surprised when you see me mention The State™ throughout these pages. Regardless, my hope is that you walk away from this text with curiosity—not confusion, nor certainty. Finally, I hope that this zine is as entertaining to my readers as it was for me to write.

Content Warning

- resistance and repression within Nazi concentration camps
- colonization of the so-called Americas
 - mention of genocide and enslavement of indigenous people
- mention of suicide

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I. PHILOSOPHIES OF TIME

Plautus and His Hatred of Sundials

The first philosophy of time that I want to take a look at is a rather silly one. But I wanted to introduce the general topic of this zine with some silly moments, because there is some very serious and unfunny content later on; I figured I might as well lighten the mood a bit to start.

This particular philosophy comes from Plautus, who was a comedic playwright in Ancient Rome. Basically, the philosophy Plautus held towards time in 200 BC was that dividing the day into incremental sections was just a silly thing to do, and time management was unnecessary regimentation of his natural bodily functions. So, he was

pretty upset about sundials back in the day, so much so that he decided to write a poem detailing the fact that, not only is he a little hungry boy, but he doesn't like it when people tell him when he should eat dinner. The poem reads as follows:

*The gods confound the man who first found out
How to distinguish hours! Confound him, too,
Who in this place set up a sun-dial,
To cut and hack my days so wretchedly
Into small portions. When I was a boy
My belly was my sun-dial; one more sure,
Truer, and more exact than any of them.
This dial told me when 'twas proper time
To go to dinner, when I had aught to eat.
But now-a-days, why, even when I have,
I can't fall-to, unless the sun give leave.
The town's so full of these confounded dials,
The greatest part of its inhabitants,
Shrunk up with hunger, creep along the streets.*

Defining Linear Time

Linear time can be loosely defined as a steady, sequential progression of moments that bring us from past to future and from before to after.

Einstein's Eternalism

Einstein's block universe theory proposes that time is the fourth dimension of the universe. The theory supposes that all of the ways we think about time are wrong. Time does not actually pass, nor is it a linear process. Rather, the passage of time from past, to present, and to future is nothing but an illusion. The distinction between them is essentially meaningless. Einstein proposed that entities in the past and the future are equally real and have physical locations in spacetime. This means that the version of you that was tucked warmly into bed at 6 am this morning still exists somewhere in the universe. That version of you is equally real as the version of you that is reading this right now. And what about the version of me that is sleeping like a bug in a rug tonight? Yes, dear reader, that version of you is equally real as well. That version of you is experiencing sleepy coziness as we speak. To reiterate: that version is NOT something that doesn't exist yet.

As a fun side note, eternalism gives way to the possibility of time travel, but I will refrain from getting into that today.

Marx and Engels' Historical Materialism

I must admit at the outset of this section that I am not nearly as well read on Marx and Engels as I probably should be. I am also not very confident in my ability to accurately represent the work of Marx and Engels, so I apologize in advance if I get anything wrong. My goal here is to lay out a rather bare foundation, perhaps common knowledge to some, regarding the idea of historical materialism as I think it is relevant to the ideas I am presenting in this zine.

Historical materialism can be defined as “the idea that history and society develop based on material, economic conditions. Therefore all development, that of ideas and that of institutions, is based on conflicts and interactions in the material world.”[1]

Marx and Engels identified historical materialism as the driving force of social change throughout history. According to historical materialism, social conflict is entirely driven by and dependent on economic factors. History flows forward in stages; the primary motivating factor for the movement from one stage of history to the next is class struggle. Certain readings of the work of Marx and Engels interpret this philosophy as economic determinism, wherein the contradictions innate to capitalistic economics results in the inevitable “end of history” once communism is achieved. Some critics of this interpretation deny that historical materialism implies economic determinism. Other such critics *agree* with a reading that implies this sort of deterministic metaphysics, but critique determinism for its evident denial of free will to those who engage in class struggle in the first place.

An Indigenous Perspective

“We live the future of a past that is not our own. It is a history of utopian fantasies and apocalyptic idealization. It is a pathogenic global social order of imagined futures, built upon genocide, enslavement, ecocide, and total ruination. These are the gifts of infesting manifest destinies; this is that futured imaginary our captors would have us perpetuate and be a part. The merciless imposition of this dead world was driven by an idealized utopia as [mass grave], it was “for our own good” an act of “civilization.” Killing the “Indian”; killing our past and with it our future. “Saving the man”; imposing another past and with it another future.”[2]

This article from Indigenous Action argues that an investment in progressivism and social progress is an investment in the continued rule of the colonial state. In this article, we can find a central focus on the negation of the current social order, rather than the allowance of its continuation. If futurism is starry-eyed anticipation of the future of humanity, indigenous anti-futurism is the recognition that our future has been hijacked, spoiled, and tainted by colonizers and, thus, is not deserving of reverence and reformist optimism.

“Capitalists and colonizers will not lead us out of their dead futures. Apocalyptic idealization is a self fulfilling prophecy. It is the linear world ending from within. Apocalyptic logic exists within a spiritual, mental, and emotional dead zone that also cannibalizes itself. It is the dead risen to consume all life... This way of being could not be reasoned or negotiated with. Colonialism is a plague, capitalism is pandemic. These systems are anti-life, they will not be compelled to cure themselves. We will not allow these corrupted sickened systems to recuperate. We will spread. We are the antibodies.”[2]

For now, we’re going to move on from this anti-futurist perspective and look into a critique of Marx’s historical materialism from a theorist named Walter Benjamin.

Angelus Novus



Walter Benjamin was a Jewish, German sociologist, philosopher, and Marxist who attempted to flee from Nazi-occupied Paris to Spain in 1940. After an extremely grueling journey, he finally arrived safely in Spain. Once there, Benjamin and the rest of the group were informed by Spanish authorities that they would be deported back to France the next morning due to the illegal nature of their immigration. Knowing that Nazi capture was inevitable in Paris, Benjamin committed suicide in his hotel room later that same night.

“Earlier that same year, Benjamin wrote his last text called the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” where he lamented the almost religious aspect of Marxists’ historical materialism, “which seeks to keep its adherents waiting for the proper moment for change, or rupture, which will happen when the material circumstances are perfect. For someone awaiting certain doom by Nazi capture, this was a hopeless vision, as it is a hopeless vision for the millions of people who have perished and anguished due to systems built on white supremacy and colonialism. The idea that “progress is on the way, you just have to be patient and calm down” continues to be invoked in various liberal and leftist iterations.

Benjamin went further with his critique and said the problem of historical materialists is viewing the past as something that remains linear after each moment passes by, and in doing so, they view the past as a series of events which continue to improve the conditions of humanity: a history of progress. Instead, Benjamin invoked

the painting *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee as a metaphor to explain how history ought to be viewed.”[3]

Here is Benjamin’s statement on the painting:

“His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.”[4]

Walter Benjamin’s Messianic Time

“When the monotonous rhythms of society’s clocks have ceased and the death march of progress has been brought to a halt, messianic time is the space where new forms of life can be birthed.”[5]

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin puts forward two opposing conceptions of time. The first is what he calls “empty, homogenous time” and the second is messianic time. According to Benjamin, empty, homogenous time is, in essence, time that is insignificant except when it’s colonized by capitalist processes. It is time that is thought to be external to human life, yet capable of extreme order and regimentation. It is the time that is measured with clocks and chronological calendars. It is unchanging; that is to say—each day, hour, and minute are equivalent and always will be. Empty, homogenous time is time that is meant to pass; time that is meaningless and boring in the absence of something to fill it.

“Benjamin’s theory also resonates with Marx’s discussions of the importance of labor-time in commodity-production. Labour and commodities are only exchangeable because they can be treated as equivalent – and they can only be treated as equivalent because units of time are treated as identical. [In this way,] commodity fetishism depends on empty, homogeneous time.”[6]

To contrast this, Benjamin sets out to describe a theory of messianic time. Messianic time can be seen in fleeting moments of societal rupture. It is time that is still left untouched by capitalism, time that can be reclaimed and used to further revolutionary dreams. It does not follow the same, monotonous linearity that the state and industrial capitalism have urged us to rely on for social progress. In fact, messianic time is intended to negate this very idea of linearity. Messianic time exists in the cracks of the present social order. It spurs us into action. When we are able to momentarily free

ourselves from the despondency of the present and our faith in the false hope of social progress under capitalism, messianic time can be found in abundance.

In my opinion, messianic time is best explained using examples, as opposed to with descriptions. However, I hope this section gave you a vague glimpse into the mode of time that Benjamin theorized about. For now, we will continue on into the next chapter and revisit messianic time in just a bit.

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II. HOW LINEAR TIME CAME TO BE

Colonial Imposition of Linear Time

The imposition of our current conception of time as a steady process that flows from past, to present, and to future can be viewed as an attempt by the modern state to constitute itself as a legitimate authority on the passage of time and to establish itself as the arbiter of truth on historical events. “To define political time, the State must describe itself as timeless such that without the State there is no temporality: nothing exists before the State nor beyond it. In this construction of political time, the State centers itself as the defining, dominant, authority on spacetime. The State produces its own superficial and fictitious accounts by drawing up a linear and causal narrative to make it seem as if history were the product of a progression of moments. The State then denies any role in this construction and defers to essentially tautological [reasoning]: it is because it is.”[7] By making itself appear as if it were an *immutable* characteristic of humanity, this imposition of linear time and the retelling of its history effectively delegitimizes non-linear indigenous societies and modes of being.

In an article titled, Time and the Colonial State, writer Arfaoui posits that, “[claiming] colonization is a part of history is to give it constructive value. In actuality, colonization is not a moment in history but a process of destruction. It is the permanent negation of all that is pre-existing.”[7] We can think back to the section on indigenous anti-futurism to understand how this imposition of linear time leaves no room for any actual rediscovery of indigenous ways of living. Rather, the pseudo neutrality of linear time denies that alternatives to its dominion even existed in the first place.

So, we’ve gone over how the state forwards its concept of linear time as a politically-constructed neutrality. Now, we’re going to think about how our language use shapes how we think about this neutrality and how we think about work.

Western Chronemics

Chronemics is the study of the role of time in communication and language. The purpose of mentioning chronemics in this text is to aid in our examination of how our particular language use permeates our understanding of everything around us.

“Western society’s globalization and cultural narratives rely on strict time constructs to control the populace on a wide scale. In North American culture, time is money, time marches on, and time is spent. Life is scheduled right down to what people do on their time off. How people and cultures are valued is entwined in this measure. Groups and individuals who don’t fall in line with these constructs may be marginalized.”[8]

As it is currently understood, time is something that can be highly regimented and planned out, wasted, spent, saved, raced against, bought and sold, donated, used (in)efficiently, and so on. Time is also widely conceptualized as a form of punishment as well via incarceration; i.e. the framework of retributive “justice” and the idea of “doing time.”

English historian E. P. Thompson writes: “...We are now at a point where sociologists are discussing the “problem” of leisure. And a part of the problem is: how did it come to be a problem?” Capitalism has convinced us that there is such a thing as “down time” or “free time.” We are made to believe that leisure, vacation, and so-called free time is a generous gift given to us by the benevolent capitalist class. Instead, we might reimagine free time as time that hasn’t been infringed upon by the expectation of labor. What is telling about the distinction between work and leisure is that time spent at work lacks any significant label. Perhaps we can begin to break down this normalization of time spent working by subverting this distinction between work and leisure. That is to say, we should refuse to take for granted the time we spend at work and distinguish it as time that is *taken* from us. Moreover, think about time spent *outside* of work as something unquestionable—something that is so obviously necessary to our lives that it should not require a label to be taken seriously.

Lastly, let’s finish off this section with a quote from a text called *Against the Gendered Nightmare*: “Those who live in a world of work can only understand the activity of others as work. Work is a historically determined institution, and yet our civilized metaphysics operates to naturalize this institution; to obscure the violence of our domestication into it. The implications of this operation are all the more sinister, as we live in a world where more and more non-waged activities are subsumed into the world of work. In a sense, domestication functions as a linear enforcement of the world of work, colonizing our past as it does our future.”[9]

E. P. Thompson's Time Discipline

In 1967, socialist and historian E. P. Thompson published an article called *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*. In this article, he attempted to illustrate how the imposition and subsequent normalization of publicly-displayed clocks in common spaces accelerated industrialization and enabled employers to hold their employees to even stricter standards. It began with the introduction of highly visible clocks in town squares, then the addition of grandfather clocks to places of worship, then in factories, then the supposed convenience of pocket watches, and culminated with the total internalization of the clock. This normalization of the clock made it clear that linear time demanded our attention.

Along with this new mechanical manifestation of time came a shift away from task-orientation and instead towards time-orientation. To demonstrate this change, let's think about the act of cooking a meal for yourself. Thinking about this action with the framework of task-orientation would stress the value of the action itself. Whereas, a framework of time-orientation would stress the value of cooking the meal as quickly as possible.

"... in mature capitalist society all time must be consumed, marketed, put to *use*; it is offensive for the labour force merely to 'pass the time'"[10] As time-orientation became the norm, time itself came to be viewed as something that could be *instrumentalized*. This means that the goal not only of your labor, but arguably of your entire life as well, is to maximize the efficiency of your time spent doing things. This is exemplified by the fact that even when we are enjoying times of leisure, we are often ridden with guilt over the idea that we are somehow "wasting time" by being unproductive. This feeling of guilt brings us to the idea of time-thrift. Time-thrift can be defined as such: based on criteria that is determined by employers and subsequently reproduced by social and cultural forces, time that is spent "improperly" is time that is wasted.

Thompson argued that "time-thrift" existed in the public psyche as a way to instill in workers the idea that time is money. As Colette Shade puts it: "time is money is work is virtue."[11] Now, time-thrift is similar to what we would now call "time theft." That is to say, time spent in a less-than-productive manner was and is still considered a grave offense by the person that owns your time. Using time-thrift as an accusation was intended not only to completely drain productivity from workers, but to emphasize the idea that work is utterly essential to your fulfillment as a human being. Eventually, this hyper-emphasis on the clock reoriented workers to value punctuality and deference to authority above individual desire and autonomy.

"Mature industrial societies of all varieties are marked by time-thrift and by a clear demarcation between *work* and *life*."[10] In essence, commitment to work was proposed to be infinitely more valuable than having free time to spend doing what you love.

Capitalist Temporality as Repression and Control

David Graeber was an anthropologist and anarchist writer and professor and I want to include a quote from his book called *Bullshit Jobs* to serve as an example of the way capitalism affects chronemics. This is an excerpt of Graeber commenting on the phrase “if you have time to lean, you have time to clean.”

“[The] underlying message is not that you *should* be working but that you *shouldn't* be doing anything else... [One] can find occasional warnings by nineteenth-century plantation owners in the American South or the Caribbean that it's better to keep slaves busy even at made-up tasks than to allow them to idle about in the off-season; the reason given always being that if slaves were left with time on their hands, they were likely to start plotting to flee or revolt.”[12]

I think this is a pretty poignant note about how time came to be understood as something that can be owned by someone else. This is particularly evidenced by slave-owners and modern day bosses, the latter of which we might similarly call *wage-slave-owners*.

I also want to read a quote by Estelle Ellison from her article titled Mapping the Rupture of Reality: “The normal configuration of the work week was deliberately engineered to restrict our free time to the point that we are unable to thoroughly process the experiences we accumulate under capitalism. We have only enough time to reproduce ourselves for the next work week. This restrictive position makes it difficult for us to develop and defend strong boundaries about the kind of treatment we are willing to tolerate. In many ways, we cannot afford to object to our conditions.”[13]

This very concept of “not being able to afford to object to our conditions”, for me at least, is one of the biggest sources of hopelessness when it comes to thinking about radical social change. The US working class lives in such abject conditions working paycheck to paycheck that we aren't even allowed to express our supposed “fundamental right to protest.” And it's not like I subscribe to a rights-based framework in the first place let alone the US constitution, but it really is just absurd to me that we have such limited control over the boundaries of what we can do with our lives, yet so many people still readily cling to the idea that significant material change is a mere vote away. These huge contradictions relative to the rights we are supposedly granted just don't exist to the majority of the people living in this country.

Yet, at the same time, we can look back on the George Floyd uprising and realize that even under the crushing weight of one of the most hyper-capitalistic police states in the world, and while living through a pandemic, we still have it in us to rebel. Even when we can't afford to object as Estelle Ellison claims, we somehow still can and *do* in the most dire of circumstances—such as in 2020. All that to say, all is not lost.

But I do want to shift the conversation again just a little bit, and bring us back to some more, hopefully temporary, frustration. And to do that, I'm going to talk about liberalism's approach to societal progress.

Liberalism's Approach to Societal Progress

In the so-called United States, the institutions that police both our collective and individual behaviors are conservative. Liberals themselves are conservative in their policy preferences, despite how tirelessly they claim otherwise. Both political parties in this country are hyper-capitalist and allow wealth accumulation to remain at the top of their agendas. And both parties implicitly understand that linear time is one of the cornerstones of American democracy. Without the widespread devotion to the work week that ensures the economy maintains a trajectory of infinite growth, the whole illusion collapses. As Juan Durán candidly states in his thesis on Linear Time vs. Now Time, "capitalism cannot function without a linear conception of time." [14] Thus, liberals and conservatives alike—in other words, capitalists—attempt to legitimize, strengthen, and preserve our current institutions whenever possible. This makes our situation as radicals all the more precarious.

One of the central liberal fantasies surrounding societal progress rests on the idea that representative democracy will save us and that team politics is the best shot we have. I don't want to get too invested in trying to make a case for why this approach is, at best, misguided and, at worst, actively harmful to folks most marginalized by the status quo. But I *do* want to quickly examine some of the ways liberal politics hinders systemic change.

One of the main sources of this hindrance is a fervent reliance on electoral democracy. There exists a very optimistic notion in the liberal worldview that certain members of the elite capitalist class can have their opinions swayed in the marketplace of ideas. Accordingly, they claim that change can only occur within the confines of the ballot. Meanwhile, attempts to break free of the cycle of civil complacency that the State presents to us in the form of representative democracy (for instance the uprisings of 2020) are generally construed as far too radical and idealist to be taken seriously. Spontaneity and direct action are off the table. Addressing root causes of oppression, such as institutional white supremacy and sexism, is off the table too. To liberals, it simply does not matter how much oppression the status quo creates. If you want something to change, the ideal choice to make is to just shut up, keep working hard, and hope that the "good guys" in power will decide to address your struggles when it's convenient for them to do so. At best, you can hope for a watered down reform to subdue your anger. And, with any luck, the limited reforms and platitudes that wind up in actual policy might not get overturned for a few decades! In my experience, the most radical position you might hear a liberal adopt on the topic of electoralism is a critique of the electoral college.

Another tactic liberals frequently employ is downplaying the oppressive conditions that create the very calls for change that they condemn. And if they don't downplay the *conditions*, they are sure to downplay the proposed solutions. For instance, calls to abolish the police were quickly recaptured by the liberal imagination and the goalposts were shifted to a new goal of *defunding* the police. Once the uprising sputtered out, the democratic party quickly returned to their law and order agenda and high-profile democrats can frequently be found advocating for increases in police budgets across the country.

Basically, the TLDR of this section is to remind you that liberals are not on our side. They do not care to listen to critical evaluations of capitalism, nor are they likely to riot alongside us when the time comes.

To further understand the hindrance liberal politics poses to radical movements, we're going to look into Estelle Ellison's idea of Time Foreclosure.

Ellison's Time Foreclosure

Estelle Ellison is a black transfem anarchist who writes about a wide range of topics related and adjacent to black futurism, police abolition, collective power, and—most importantly for this zine—the role time plays in continuing cycles of oppression. I want to shout out some of her work because it has been extremely influential in the development of my politics and she writes about topics that frequently lack broad leftist critique, such as, for instance, the topic of capitalist time. Basically—big shout out to Estelle; I highly recommend that you check her out on Instagram @abolish_time!

With that out of the way, I want to read an excerpt from her article titled “Time Foreclosure During Fascism: On Liberation, Care, and Accessibility”:

“We are being told that our lives depend on the limited reforms the state chooses to implement only to ensure that the forces of capitalism and fascism will go uncontested further and further into the future. We might describe this fascist pattern of criminalizing spontaneous liberatory acts of self-defense while framing reform as our only chance of survival as Time Foreclosure. To foreclose time is to take time away. In this sense, taking time away is a restriction of agency. It is a means of limiting the number of conceivable actions available to us in response to oppressive power that is exerted upon us. By design, capitalism already does this—it enforces an order of time and it monetizes the intervals of time we give to the ruling class.”

And another brief quote from later on in the same article:

“It is a pattern of inaction that asks the state to act on our liberatory aspirations

for us. Time Foreclosure reassures people that it is okay to do as we have always done, that this is noble, good, and even “revolutionary.” But the state *does* act for us. It oversees our oppression.”[15]

Learning from the George Floyd Uprising

I think one of the biggest takeaways relative to the George Floyd uprising and the topic of this zine is to remember that a moment of rupture can happen when we least expect it. The conditions may never be perfect for revolution, especially in the United States, but another instance of mass mobilization like the one we saw in 2020 might just be closer than we think. I will personally admit that I never expected to witness such widespread, grassroots resistance in this country in my lifetime, and yet a few years ago, I was proven wrong.

“In crisis lies possibility. Our time has been upended. COVID-19 and the George Floyd Rebellion form a wedge bending the continuum of time at the present. These simultaneous events are a wellspring, where the sad legacy of the racial nightmare and the tradition of incomplete revolutions rise to the surface. The uprising proves that normalcy is far more lethal than the pandemic. The lockdown interruption of the economy has exposed everyone to just how cruel the system is. Those forced to stop working realize just how unnecessary work is. Those forced to keep working realize just how expendable they are.”[16]

That quote can be found in the collection of writings called *The George Floyd Uprising*, published by Vortex Group in January of this year; I highly recommend you check it out if you get the chance.

The Relationship Between Linear Time and Heaven

There exist many parallels between the liberal notion of a natural, democratic trend towards social progress and the Christian, theological notion that one can transcend their suffering through the process of death. Both of these approaches require adherents to wait patiently for their salvation. It is said that the good times will come, that efforts will be rewarded if we continue to wait patiently.

Now this is just my personal opinion, but if it is *indeed* the case that there is an all powerful god watching over us, I find it hard to believe that such an entity would consider capitalism the *peak* of human experience. Surely a being with infinite knowledge knows perfectly well that there are plenty of opportunities to find meaning in human mortality besides wealth accumulation.

Where do we go from here? Well, I don’t feel comfortable making the claim that suffering is de facto bad, nor will I claim that suffering is inseparable from and innate to

conscious experience as a Buddhist might claim. What I will say, though, is that you could quite easily conceive of socialist politics as a deliberate effort to reduce the amount of suffering promulgated by economic forces. That being said, I think it's fair to say that the romantic Christian vision of heaven is the epitome of existence without suffering.

I am certainly not the first one to think about the process of communization in this way, but perhaps we can make a collective attempt to create heaven on earth. In spite of those who attempt to categorize socialist politics as frivolous utopianism, perhaps we can take some inspiration from the idea that—somewhere out there—there exists a place where basic necessities need not be worried about; where money and markets are nonexistent; where private property is no longer sacred; where individual liberty and autonomy of all beings is respected without question; and where love and community care can flourish.

In some readings of the bible, such as the various interpretations forwarded by liberation theologians, recognizing and overcoming oppression is central to Jesus' teachings and the Christian project overall. And, instead of viewing this process of communization as inevitable under the right material circumstances, we can understand that overcoming oppression will take active effort on our part to spawn into existence. As I will touch on in a few sections, we need not wait for some idealized critical mass or hyper-masculine vanguards or militias to begin this project.

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III. CRITICAL ALTERNATIVES TO LINEAR TIME

Nihilist Anti-Politics

Anarcho-nihilist theory typically begins with the assertion of a rather bold and provocative claim:

“We are fucked... [The] current manifestation of human society is beyond salvation, and so our response to it should be one of unmitigated hostility. There are no demands to be made, no utopic visions to be upheld, no political programs to be followed—the path of resistance is one of pure negation.”[5]

It supposes that “the conditions in the [existing] social order are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake, independent of any constructive program or possibility.”[17] As Walter Benjamin puts it: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train... to activate the emergency break.”[4]

Thus, “there is no need to know what is happening tomorrow to destroy a today that makes you bleed.”[18] Here, we find our way back to the idea of messianic time. A post-left anti-political worldview such as anarcho-nihilism does not expect things to naturally get better with time. Nor does it expect there to be a moment where the material conditions are perfectly ripe for revolution as a classical Marxist might think. An anarcho-nihilist is encouraged by the idea that the best time to act is now. Within this nihilistic worldview, the choice to defer resistance to a later date accomplishes nothing except the naturalization and continuation of capitalism’s oppressive and monotonous linearity.

“We anarcho-nihilists ...don’t talk about ‘transformation of social relations’ towards a more liberated view, we promulgate their total destruction and absolute annihilation. Only through total destruction of the current world of power... will it be possible to build something new. The deeper we destroy, the more freely we will be able to build.”[5]

Another central idea commonly found within the anarcho-nihilist tendency is that of *jouissance*, which I will define in the next section.

Jouissance, Spontaneity, and Negation

Jouissance is a French word utilized most frequently in Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist theory. In some contexts, *jouissance* is defined as a feeling of orgasmic pleasure and ecstasy. However, in the context that we’re using it in today, this definition is not perfect, so we’re going to add a little bit of radicalism to it. “*Jouissance* is an ecstatic energy, felt but never captured, that pushes us away from any form of domination, representation, or restraint, and compels us towards fierce wildness and unmitigated recalcitrance.”[5] As defined in the first volume of the journal *Baedan*, *jouissance* “is the process that momentarily sets us free from our fear of death and which manifests as a blissful enjoyment of the present, or a joy which we cannot name.”[19] In short, *jouissance* encourages us to find joy in spontaneous resistance—even in societal conditions that seemingly allow no room for material progress.

Real quick: let me try to connect this idea of *jouissance* that we just went over with Walter Benjamin’s idea of messianic time. “Messianic time is the chronological awareness in which *jouissance* can flourish. Rather than deferring our rage to the future, we can finally realize that now is the time we’ve been waiting for.”[5] *Jouissance*, in this context, is joy that comes from spontaneous resistance and it can be found when we realize and harness the power of messianic time. *Jouissance* and messianic time fit quite neatly together in this way; you could conceptualize *jouissance* as an emotional byproduct of messianic time.

Radical nihilism emphasizes a path of “pure negation,” whereby jouissance is the proposed means of our revolutionary ends. Negation as a strategy invites us to question the extent of our reliance on the status quo. For instance, Food Not Bombs chapters rely on the continuation of poverty and homelessness to maintain their purpose. Their purpose being to freely redistribute recovered food to those in need. A nihilist critique of a project like Food Not Bombs might reject the idea that we can rely on the continued existence of capitalism to create poverty and food insecurity—even if these are problems that we will address through grassroots organizational efforts. So, the nihilist might posit that, by allowing capitalism to continue in order to provide band-aid solutions to its ills, we are simultaneously allowing that very suffering to continue unabated.

We could expand this critique by thinking of poverty as a form of state-sanctioned violence. Within this framework, we might ask: what is left for us to do in the midst of this continued violence? Should we accept that this violence is inevitable and an immutable fact of our current society, or should we challenge this social order with urgency in an effort to stop this cycle in its tracks? Those who favor tactics of negation would likely suggest the latter approach. Anarchists tend to view rebellion of this nature as a form of self-defense against the domination of state and capital.

To wrap up this illustration of the relationship between spontaneity, jouissance, and negation, I want to provide an excerpt from *Blessed is the Flame*:

“Though we have inherited a great many ideas about how to confront domination, we know that nothing is set in stone. From the shattered tools and bones of our predecessors, we craft our own weapons. Nothing is guaranteed to work, yet we attack regardless. We do so naked, having shed the rags of morality, ideology, and politics that had accumulated over time. We confront this world raw, in all its horrifying glory. We negate every truth and rule and we proceed with a spirit of incendiary experimentation. We dream big, expect little, and celebrate every moment of rupture. We take every opportunity to ensure that those in power lose sleep and that their functionaries have miserable jobs. We set our lives to ripping up the [flower beds] that line the extermination camp paths, pissing in the gears of society’s machinery, and when all else fails, we will follow in the footsteps of those who spent their final minutes in the gas chambers singing and fucking. May jouissance be the blessed flame that guides us into the void.”[5]

Blessed is the Flame

Blessed is the Flame, written by an anonymous author under the pseudonym Serafinski, was one of my main motivations for writing this zine. It’s only 60 pages or so, although the content is quite depressing and serious and requires a lot of mental energy to get

through. The main goal of the text is to examine resistance and revolt within Nazi concentration camps. In particular, Serafinski analyzes the uprisings that tend to be viewed as unsuccessful and futile—which, in the case of Nazi concentration camps, tends to be most of the actions that took place. Instead, the author reframes these actions in such a way as to argue that a mere *attempt* to free oneself—successful or otherwise—is a virtue in and of itself. More broadly, the text tries to understand the implication of this reframing for leftist approaches to political resistance under oppressive conditions. *Blessed is the Flame* is widely considered to be an important introductory text to the anarcho-nihilist tendency within the anarchist milieu.

Due to the nature of its content, it would be an extremely arduous task to summarize this text, so I will refrain from attempting to do so here. Instead, I want to take some time to present a brief excerpt and an example of resistance that might help to elucidate the thesis of *Blessed is the Flame*. Before I do that though, I want to again stress the content warning for this section. Here is an excerpt summarizing the nature of resistance in Nazi concentration camps:

“Everything could be treated as resistance because everything was prohibited. Any activity which created the impression that the prisoner had retained some of his former personality and individuality was an act of resistance. Activities such as mutual aid, individual escape, charity, friendship, medical aid, cultural contributions (religious gatherings, education, sports, music, etc.), refusal of work, saving lives, and communication with the outside world all represent invaluable acts of resistance in a situation that fostered selfishness and subjugation.”[5]

And an example of the aforementioned resistance:

“In late 1942 at Treblinka, a transport of around 2000 Jews refused to enter the gas chamber. Those who yelled out invocations of resistance were beaten, but the call was heard and no one budged. At one point some of them rushed the SS, and, fighting with knives and bottles, injured three guards. Somehow during this scuffle, a hand grenade exploded that also injured a guard. The entire transport was shot.

...[A moment like this reflects] a shattering of illusion, a fierce visceral reaction to oppression, a desperate act in a totally hopeless situation. Liberation in these moments was not necessarily a material gain, but a fleeting lived experience; an existential reorientation from a relationship of domination to one of recalcitrance. Pure jouissance. Some of these attacks resonated widely outside of their perimeter and punctured holes in the Nazi facade of invulnerability, perhaps even inspiring others to fight back. Other attacks simply dissipated in a

hail of gunfire. Regardless, each of them seem to defy any notion of hope or strategy, and the very fact that each story ends with a mass slaughter gestures towards a spirit of resistance that prioritized lived revolt over futurity.”[5]

Lastly, I should note that I have my fair share of criticisms of this text (though I haven’t included them here in this zine), and I wouldn’t, by any stretch of the imagination, consider myself an anarcho-nihilist. However, I think this book encourages readers to expand the ways in which they analyze concepts like resistance, progress, and the passage of time. If nothing else, I would therefore recommend *Blessed is the Flame* to anyone who is interested in the perspective that it offers.

Notes on Queer Nihilism

Queer nihilism, rather than formulating itself on the claim that society as a *whole* is beyond saving, theorizes that institutionalized gender, and perhaps sex as well, cannot be reformed and must be abolished and left behind altogether. This topic is somewhat tangential to capitalist temporality, so I’m not going to spend too much time on this topic and I’ll instead stick to a very brief introduction.

One of the main contributions to the sphere of queer nihilism comes from a volume of journals called Baedan, which is a collection of writings from various anti-civilization, anti-futurist, and post-gender theorists. Various writings from Walter Benjamin are used throughout the volume. Another central work from Baedan is called “Against the Gendered Nightmare.” Here is a quote from that text:

“History is the narration of perpetual decomposition... Any attempt to systematize the episodic explosions of revolt [into the story of history] only rationalizes its defeat, reducing it to just another triumph in the perpetual motion of the decomposing beast.”[9]

Yet another proponent of queer nihilism is a Marxist transfem philosopher by the name of Alyson Escalante. Escalante, in her article titled “Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto” writes:

“We are radicals who have had enough with attempts to salvage gender. We do not believe we can make it work for us. We look at the transmisogyny we have faced in our own lives, the gendered violence that our comrades, both trans and cis have faced, and we realize that the apparatus itself makes such violence inevitable. We have had enough. We are not looking to create a better system, for we are not interested in positive politics at all. All we demand in the present is a relentless attack on gender and the modes of social meaning and intelligibility it creates. At the core of... gender nihilism lies... antihumanism as foundation and

cornerstone, gender abolition as a demand, and radical negativity as method.”[20]

Through this quote, we can clearly notice similarities between the approach to politics put forward by queer nihilists and by anarcho-nihilism more broadly. The core ideas central to both of these ideologies, or anti-ideologies if you will, are: firstly, reform and progress in the liberal sense of the word is not an attractive goal, secondly, progressivism should not be the catalyst of our radicalism, and lastly, negation is the best and perhaps only path forward from here.

Positive Projects

Adjacent, and occasionally contrary, to the idea of a negative political project is that of a *positive* political project. Food Not Bombs, as mentioned previously, would be a fairly convenient example of a positive project. Another example that comes to mind is that of an autonomous zone, wherein a patch of land is reclaimed as stateless—generally for a short period of time before it is once again recuperated by governmental forces.

These examples remind us of one of the central tenets of positive politics, which is the idea of prefiguration. Prefiguration can be loosely defined as the need to build alternative systems of organization and distribution in the present that could eventually replace the hierarchical institutions that the state and capitalism currently employ. Prefiguration boils down to the idea that we ought to rather immediately model the society we would like to see so that we are not caught off guard if economic rupture occurs when we aren’t expecting it. As far as I can tell, the terms “prefiguration” and “dual power” are largely interchangeable within an anarchist context.

Some conceptions of prefiguration emphasize projects both of negation and of dual power. Such a conception is exemplified with the quote “a truly active negation is simultaneously constructive and destructive.”[21] To further illustrate this, we can also return to the latter half of the quote from a few sections previous, which claims: “the deeper we destroy, the more freely we can build.”

To conclude this section as well as this text, we are going to end on some open-ended questions that might help us reflect further on the difference, or lack thereof, between positive and negative projects.

Pessimism and Hope

Somewhat ironically, by positing that “we are fucked,” the anarcho-nihilist envisions a dystopic future and naturalizes it as the backbone of their ideology. Thus, the same critique that nihilists frequently levy against those engaged in future-oriented political projects could theoretically be levied against themselves.

Rather than assume the worst or hope for the best about the future, might we instead recognize that the future cannot be accurately predicted one way or another? Are we able to adopt and combine strategies both of negation and positive alternative-building? Is the distinction between radical positivity and negativity a false dichotomy? If it is in fact a genuine distinction, is it helpful or useful to anti-capitalist movements globally? What might we accomplish, if anything, from abandoning hope in favor of so-called “post-left” positions such as anarcho-nihilism?

Mark Fisher posits that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”[22] If this is true, as the anarcho-nihilist proposes, and it’s unlikely that capitalism will ever cease to be the dominant system, shouldn’t we focus on unifying the marginal population that opposes capitalism, rather than dividing that resistance into more subcategories?

I realize that ending with all of these open-ended questions might not be the most satisfying conclusion to this zine, but I unfortunately do *not* have all the answers, nor will I ever claim to have them. I want this text to serve as a jumping off point for thinking about the ways time relates to our political movement.

Finally, I want to close out this zine with a quote from Pyotr Kropotkin’s text called *The Spirit of Revolt*:

“...soon it became apparent that the established order had not the force one had supposed. One courageous act has sufficed to upset in a few days the entire governmental machinery, to make the colossus tremble; another revolt has stirred a whole province into turmoil, and the army, till now always so imposing, has retreated before a handful of peasants armed with sticks and stones. The people observe that the monster is not so terrible as they thought they begin dimly to perceive that a few energetic efforts will be sufficient to throw it down. Hope is born in their hearts, and let us remember that if exasperation often drives men to revolt, it is always hope, the hope of victory, which makes revolutions.”[23]

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