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Breaking With Consensus Reality

From the Politics of Consent to the Seduction of
Revolution

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strategic to live lives that push to the outermost edges of what's possible.

The stakes are high. From consent discourse, we retain the prioritization of caring for others and paying attention to their needs. We must never disregard the well-being of those we invite into zones of transformation; yet neither can we play it safe and allow consensus reality to dictate our range of possible dreams and actions. We cannot promise safety, but we can share in the danger of the unknown, in its pleasures and its risks.

desires, but contests between different desires playing out between people as well as within individuals. The failure of an unpopular action doesn't stem from the fact that it failed to *meet* the desires of participants or bystanders. Rather, the action failed to *enable* subversive desires to arise or flow into new hosts. Critics who frame their objections in consent discourse may not be fundamentally opposed to the tactics in question after all; they may simply not feel that they had the chance to become protagonists in their own stories of rebellion.

Into the Unknown

What are anarchists good for? We don't see ourselves as "the" revolutionary subject, nor its vanguard or representative. But that doesn't mean we're irrelevant to the struggles and upheavals around us. We up the ante and rep the anti; we call bluffs and take dares; we discover lines of flight out of consensus reality. We take risks to induce others to share them with us; we take care of each other so we can be dangerous together.

Ultimately, the politics of seduction don't rely on rational argumentation to influence people. We dive headlong into the terrifying fires of transformation, allowing strange passions to seize us. It's not that these desires are "ours"; rather, we are theirs. We become lightning rods that crackle with flows of charged desire.

Let's not forget the importance of seducing *ourselves* with our actions. It's frighteningly easy for activism to ossify into dreary, repetitive routines. Actions that don't emerge out of our own desires are unlikely to seduce us or anyone else. Sure, some kids will be radicalized by the Food Not Bombs run by four burnt-out punks who resent every Sunday they spend in the kitchen. But we forge our deepest relationships of struggle in collectively experiencing the new, the exciting, the terrifying. It's not only beautiful but

We who fight to create a freer world face a fundamental contradiction. On one hand, we don't want to become a vanguard, "leading" or imposing our will on others, as that would run counter to our anti-authoritarian values. On the other hand, we believe with good justification that our political goals—including the destruction of capitalism, the state, and hierarchy—can't be accomplished without strategies that are currently unpalatable to most of our fellow citizens. The impoverishment of millions and the destruction of our ecosystems demand that we act decisively. What criteria will equip us to challenge these systems without resorting to the authoritarian means we condemn?

Some of us have developed a practice of prioritizing *consent* as a provisional answer to this dilemma. This discourse comes to us through educators who promote it as a tool for fostering mutually respectful sexuality in the midst of a rape culture. Applying this model in our intimate relationships and beyond, we seek to respect others' autonomy by not subjecting them to actions that violate their consent—that is, by staying within the boundaries of others' desires as they determine and articulate them. We reject coercion of any form, whether physical, verbal, economic, or otherwise, and assert our self-determination to participate in or abstain from whatever we choose.

Yet outside of the sexual realm, consent discourse doesn't always offer a sufficient framework with which to evaluate direct action tactics and strategy. Knowing whether an action is consensual may not suffice to indicate whether it is effective or worthwhile. Aware that most people oppose some of our tactics, we don't plan our actions on the basis of consent, yet we don't aspire to become a vanguard, either. Furthermore, since we can only desire on the basis of what we know, we're unlikely to achieve liberation from simply fulfilling the desires we have now without changing the conditions that produced them. So how else might we conceive of our political project, if not through the lens of consent?

A close examination of our activities reveals that in setting out to foment insurrection and transform society, we appear to be operating according to a logic of *seduction*. Are we prepared to accept the implications of this reframing? Let's begin by examining the politics of consent and their limitations.

Is Consent Enough?

At first glance, the notion of basing our political practice on a theory of consent makes intuitive sense. What's our critique of the state? It's a body that wields power over us even to the point of life and death, and yet no one ever asked us if we wanted to be governed. Elections don't even begin to offer us the meaningful alternatives true consent would require. It's been said before: our desires will never fit in their ballot boxes. We promote the principle of voluntary association—the freedom to form whatever groups and collectives we want without being compelled to participate in any. We never had the chance to say no to capitalism, to government, to police, to all the systems of hierarchy that impose their rule—so clearly those can't be consensual in any meaningful way. As we do away with the coercive systems that dominate our lives, we can reconstruct new social relations based on consent: a world in which no one controls anyone else, in which we can determine our own destinies.

It makes sense ... doesn't it? Certainly, this discourse of consent offers a compelling way to imagine the world we want to live in. But how does it serve as a strategy for dislodging this one? It's difficult to envision a political practice that stringently respects the consent of all people while simultaneously destroying the fabric of our hierarchical society. If we insist on the unity of means and ends, we have to dismantle coercive institutions and social relationships through non-coercive processes to build a non-coercive society. Abandoning this vision could undermine the very basis of

variety of circumstances, attitudes that prove infectious. *Contagion* ensures that rebellion isn't restricted to activists, scenesters, or any other particular group. Only when revolt spreads so widely that it can no longer be quarantined to a specific demographic will anarchy move permanently beyond the anarchists. We succeed when others emerge from the spaces we create feeling more powerful. We win when the ruptures of possibility we open prove impossible to close.

When Seduction Fails

Unfortunately, our actions don't always achieve these goals. Sometimes we try to cast spells of transformation and they fail.

One way our efforts can go awry is when they position the organizing cabal as the protagonists rather than the invitees we hope to seduce into participation. In these cases, our actions don't spread, but remain the province of a distinct group. For partisans of transformation, what counts is the circulation and contagion of subversive ideas and practices, not the power of a specific social body—be it anarchists or the Party.

Sometimes when our seductions fail, those we've attempted to invite feel used rather than seduced. Over the years, this has proved one of the primary causes of the unpopularity of unilateral militant activity. It's flattering to be offered a role as a protagonist in an exciting story, but it isn't so pleasant to feel that others are trying to take advantage of you. When people speak with frustration in a debriefing conversation about the lack of consent implicit in how an action played out, we must understand that as a failure of seduction. When they speak of consent, they're describing their reaction to the actions that took place; our analysis of seduction treats the *desires* underlying these as the center of gravity.

Perhaps we can best understand such conflicts by reframing them: they are not merely contests between people with different

purpose. Disobedience is crucial to transformation; nothing opens up a sense of possibility like literally breaking the rules. But our behavior is constrained by far more than traffic laws and zoning regulations; social norms, gender roles, and innumerable other systems shape how we act, and each way we're constrained provides new terrain for transformation. The key lies in challenging what's taken for granted in a way that opens up the possibility to act differently, and to imagine how the world would be different if those rules and borders were no longer fixed.

Invitation requires neither persuasion via rational discourse nor imposition by force. Here we maintain the spirit of consent discourse, asserting our respect for the wishes of others and opposition to coercion. We aspire to a world based on voluntary association, in which participation is based on our own free choice rather than force or manipulation, and thus we aim to prefigure that world through our methods of creative resistance.

This can take many forms: leaving the doors open in the occupied building, modeling mutual aid at public Really Really Free Markets, offering black bandanas and cans of paint as the march leaves the show. Of course, we can't literally invite others to participate in many actions beforehand, either because they have to be organized clandestinely or because we honestly don't know what will happen. But we can shape our actions to maximize the agency of potential participants.

Seduction casts the invitee as the protagonist, the one whose agency counts—in contrast to consent discourse, which merely seeks *permission*. The whole point is for people to discover new desires, to want to do something they didn't want before; they have to be in the driver's seat for that to be possible. In this sense, we are using seduction to mean the opposite of its traditional negative connotation of trying to get something from people against their will or at their expense.

Finally, we aspire to invite others into practices that will prove *contagious*: ideas that self-replicate, models that can be applied in a

our anarchism. Yet if we don't succeed in dislodging capitalism and the state, the bases of economic and political coercion, we'll never arrive at a society in which a consent-based framework could actually be tenable.

How can we resolve these dilemmas? Let's look more closely at what we mean by consent, and how it operates in our society and in our movements.

Consensus Reality, Nonviolence, Liberal Consent

Power and consent are critically intertwined. Power imbalances make it difficult or impossible to give consent freely. Can a much older person have consensual sex with a very young person? Can someone who is subjected to another's economic control freely consent to that person's desires? For consent to be meaningful, it must be possible to say no, any time and for any reason, on one's own terms. When the state monopolizes the use of force and the economy controls access to our very means of survival, we cannot meaningfully choose. We call the boundaries enclosing our ability to consent under these conditions *consensus reality*.

Consensus reality is the range of possible thought and action within a system of power relations. It is enforced not only through traditional institutions of control—such as mass media, religion, and the family—but also through the innumerable subtle norms manifested in common sense, civil discourse, and day-to-day life. It isn't simply the aggregate of all our desires, melded together in a great compromise that allows us all to get along, as democratic mythology would have it. Consensus reality constitutes the ruling class's coordinated attempt to uphold their dominance and our exploitation as efficiently as possible. Capitalist democracy secures that efficiency; it is the system that currently provides the largest number of people with incentive to participate in their own ex-

ploitation. It offers us a series of meaningless options to disguise a profound lack of agency over our lives. The trump card of capitalist democracy is the idea that everyone's consent is respected in a marketplace of ideas within which desires can be freely expressed and influenced.

We can argue that this marketplace isn't truly free—corporations control the mass media, some views get more airtime than others, thus the consent is not fully informed—but this doesn't get at the heart of things. Obviously, equal access to means of influence on a level playing field is impossible in capitalist society. But it is the systems of *power*, not just speech, that determine the framework within which we experience reality. All political systems—whether anarchist, fascist, or democratic—produce particular patterns of social relations. Mere discussion of these systems does not; it cannot transcend the framework in which it occurs.¹ Free speech discourse offers each of us our own box of colored chalk to decorate the cement blocks around our feet, and calls that freedom; whether we can walk away doesn't even enter into the picture. Our experience of what we are and aren't able to do determines our sense of what is possible far more than our ideas and discourses. To shift the boundaries of our imagination and desires, we have to find ways to make new experiences possible beyond the bounds of consensus reality.

Take, for example, the debates about violence and nonviolence that rage in every organizing coalition and Occupy movement. What is violence? At first glance, the term seems to have no more coherence than the Supreme Court definition of obscenity: *I can't*

¹ For instance, within capitalist democracy, the very ability to speak "freely" seems to offer proof of the system's justice by virtue of the state ensuring "free speech." In anarchic social relations, our ability to speak freely justifies itself, needing no state to "protect" it or define its limits. When we frame expressing our desires as "exercising a right," we define our legitimacy to act in terms of our relationship to the state, rather than asserting that our desires are inherently valid.

Now, I'd participated in polite permitted marches before. If you'd asked me if I desired to go on a feisty unpermitted midnight march, I probably would have thought it sounded cool. But I didn't actively desire it beforehand; if I'd been forthrightly invited, I might have declined out of anxiousness or indifference. The desire was generated by the context, the mystery, and the experience itself. I suspect that the key was that it was unexpected and illicit: it took me beyond myself, opening some door of desire that couldn't be shut. Had someone asked me in advance whether I would consent to participate, that might have undermined the very sense of liberation I experienced.

Trust me, I'm as uncomfortable with the implications of this as you are. But we need to look honestly at the transformative experiences that opened the door for us into radical politics and think about how we can construct and open those types of doors for others. If we're not going to be a vanguard and we're not going to convince everyone to join us through mere rational discourse, this might be what we've got to work with.

Transformation, Invitation, Contagion

How does seduction work? We hypothesize that seduction unfolds via three processes: *transformation*, *invitation*, and *contagion*. We *transform* circumstances, creating space for new possibilities and thus new desires to flourish; we *invite* others to participate in these new situations, to experiment with different modes of action and desire; and we *infect* others with curiosity, an insatiable desire for freedom, and the means to experiment towards it.

We strive for *transformation* because if we desire on the basis of what we know, we can only induce new desires that exceed the confines of our current reality by shifting the conditions in which we live. Sometimes it can be as simple as doing things in the street without permits, or using a park or building for an entirely new

As anarchists, our greatest strength lies not in the coherence and reason of our ideology, but in the passionate actions we undertake and the ungovernable lives we lead. Let's not try to convert people to anarchism; let's set out, with mischievous glee, to infect everyone around us with the anarchy that flows in our veins. Let's produce situations in which anarchy is possible, even likely—even *desirable* to those who might not feel any inclination towards it today.

How did you become an anarchist? Did you emerge from the womb in a black hoodie? Did you “always know” you were going to crave riots, stale bagels, and photocopy scams? If not, chances are you had some sort of experience that opened you to a sense of possibility you hadn't previously been able to imagine. For me, it came at age 18, during the height of the anti-Iraq war protests, when I heard a vague rumor that I should show up at a certain concert. I did, and lo and behold, when it ended a group of maniacs appeared with drums and banners, and before I knew it I'd joined 200 others marching in the street, permits be damned. We were unstoppable. The blood boiled in my veins and I howled ecstatically until I lost my voice. Things were never the same again.

different configurations of desire are constantly at war. Ad firms don't just create specific desires, they enforce a mode of desiring that can be routed through the consumer economy. Propaganda, subliminal messaging, induced addiction, outright violence: these comprise a brutal arsenal aimed at us every moment of the day. Around the globe, the military clears the path for neoliberal pillaging, while NGOs get into the business of inducing people to want to be successful at generating currencies that can be exchanged on the global market. Ought we not be suspicious of a project framed in such transparently manipulative terms? As grim as it looks, this vista reveals that if we are not partisans of certain modes of desiring, we will remain objects rather than subjects within these desiring wars. We cannot retreat into essentialist notions of unearthing our “true” desires from some internal vault, nor a pseudo-Buddhist project of extinguishing desire on an individual level while the world burns. What sets us apart is that we strive to create a world in which every person can realize her unique potential on her own terms, rather than simply pushing for this or that option within the current conditions.

define it, but I know it when I see it. This makes it an especially dangerous tool when wielded by liberals to control group norms. But recalling that violence springs from the same root as *violation* helps us get at the meaning behind how the word is used. What is called violence is any violation of norms about legitimate use of force, norms dictated by the state and incorporated into our consensus reality. The debate about violence is really a coded discourse in which nonviolence stands in for consent; when we attempt to make space for autonomy and diversity of tactics, our opponents perceive us as disregarding consent simply for opposing the terms of consensus reality.

Observe how an anxious liberal from our local Occupy movement, dismayed by an illegal building occupation undertaken by autonomous occupiers, strives to distance the Occupy group from the occupation. He says to a reporter: “Our movement is nonviolent, it is peaceful, and it does not break the law.” The building occupation involved no physical violence, nor damage to property, nor anything that could be construed as violent even within his own definition, whereas the eviction by rifle-wielding thugs was violent enough to shock people across the political spectrum. How can we make sense of this seeming contradiction?

It seems that the meaningful sense of *violence* here is a rupture of consensus reality. This liberal wishes to communicate that the building occupation felt like a violation of his consent. Why? Because it was related to a current in which he felt invested, yet he had not been invited to participate in decision-making, and it involved actions that he personally disdained. Of course, we undertook the occupation autonomously precisely for that reason: we knew we could never achieve consensus in the public general assemblies to do something that so dramatically challenged consensus reality. Whether or not the occupation hurt anyone was beside the point: its “violence” had less to do with its literal effects than its challenge to consensus reality. To him, such a challenge constituted a violation of collective consent.

Let's call this *liberal consent*: the notion that we must adhere tactically to the most conservative common denominator or else violate others' consent. We all have to put up with this system, so the logic goes, whether we chose it or not, because any violation would put us all at risk. This goes beyond a critique of representation—you shouldn't carry out an action on my behalf without my consent—to a critique of autonomy, since literally any action that presumes affinity with others is subject to the boundaries dictated by consensus reality.

This is the risk of embracing a framework of political consent. Within this logic, the most moderate elements of any group or coalition will dominate by virtue of their alignment with consensus reality. What's OK for anybody is based on what's OK for everybody, which makes our strategies for changing this world look suspiciously similar to the world we're trying to change. If we do in fact desire a radical break with what exists, let's not trap ourselves in a framework aligned with the systems we want to destroy.

Nonviolence is the only ideology that can comprehensively protect consensus reality against the antagonism of all who would transform it. By preemptively condemning anything that exceeds the parameters of civil discourse, it ensures that any resistance will ultimately strengthen the underlying framework of authority, and even passes responsibility for policing on to the loyal opposition. Liberal complicity with violent systems of control can be "nonviolent" according to this logic, because they accept the boundaries of legitimacy decreed by consensus reality. Just as every pacifist condemns armed struggle and insurrection against the state, the gains of every "nonviolent" movement and revolution they cite, from Dr. King to Gandhi, rested on a foundation of explicit or threatened state violence. We shake our heads at liberal reluctance to acknowledge that the state is fundamentally rather than incidentally violent, but that violence is woven so seamlessly into consensus reality that it simply doesn't register.

in considering the problems of desire and consensus reality on the political level.

When we *seduce*, we present someone who ostensibly doesn't want something with a new situation in which they may want it after all. Whereas consent focuses on obtaining the go-ahead for an external action—"Is this OK?"—seduction focuses internally, on desire: "Could you *want* this?" Our practices of seduction don't aim to induce others to do things they don't want to do, but to induce others to *want to* do them, in the most meaningful sense: to want to take on all the risks and pleasures they entail.

Again, we don't believe that we can persuade everyone to consent to our dreams of anarchist revolution; not only is the deck stacked against us, but the dealer, the table, and the whole house. We don't buy into the idea that our goals are what everybody "really" wants, nor do we assume that everyone would adopt our views if only they had access to all the right information. We don't claim to represent anyone beyond ourselves, nor to stand in for any silent majority; in that sense, anarchist revolution is not a *democratic* project. Nor do we, despairing of those things, decide that to be true to our principles we must give up on transforming society altogether and retreat into isolation among the few comrades with whom we can establish meaningful self-determined consensus. We don't think it's hopeless to resist in the face of the stranglehold of consensus reality. We want a different path forward, one that doesn't assume desire to be fixed, that doesn't rely on liberal consent.

We neither wish to impose our will on others by force, nor to disregard their desires. Instead, we want to perform a kind of magic, an alchemical operation. We want to *induce* desires, not simply *fulfill* them.⁵

⁵ Wait, there's nothing liberating about attempting to induce desires in others. That's the function of the advertising industry, the lever of demand that has driven capitalism over the past century. Democracy purports to be a marketplace of ideas where we can all talk about what we want and then decide;

exploitation. Even amid contradictions and chaos, the range of what it is possible to desire rarely escapes the confines of consensus reality. Who really imagines that in a free world, we'd dream of ergonomic chairs for our cubicles, more TV channels and brands of detergent, longer chains and softer cages? This is not to demean the struggles of those who fight for better conditions within this system. It's just to say that we would be paltry revolutionaries indeed if we based our programs merely on the consensus desires of groups whose allies we want to be.

The task of the revolutionary is not the task of the ally. We are not here to make the dreams of the proletariat come true. The proletariat is produced by capitalism, which we want to destroy. The task of the revolutionary is to shift our collective sense of the possible, so that our desires and the realities they drive us to create can shift in turn. We are here to transform reality beyond where our notions of consent can lead us. We need a different discourse to imagine the transformations that can open pathways out of consensus reality.

Introducing Seduction

There's another framework that seems to be implied by our current practice, whether or not we acknowledge it. That framework is *seduction*.

What is seduction? It's a rather unsavory concept, bringing to mind manipulative attempts to induce others to let themselves to be used for one's own ends. In a sexual context, it can imply either a romantic, charismatic, persuasive use of charm to propose a sexual encounter, or a way to trick someone into succumbing to one's advances. The connotations are discomfiting, but the salient factor is the implication that the seducer *creates* a desire, rather than simply unearthing it. It is this sense that we find most interesting

The violence so anxiously opposed by liberals is, by definition, that which ruptures consensus reality. And this is precisely why we consider that violence *necessary*: framing resistance as registering our "dissent" does not attack consensus reality but merely identifies our position within it. There are not opposing partisans *within* consensus reality—Republicans and Democrats, activists and reactionaries—but only partisans *of* consensus reality and partisans *against* it.

In short, the liberal notion of consent is a barrier to revolution. By definition, breaking consensus reality cannot be consensual. We have to move beyond political consent discourse to imagine liberating strategies for transforming reality.

Can We Rescue the Political Discourse of Consent?

So liberal consent is a tool for defending consensus reality, useless to our project of liberation. But that doesn't necessarily mean we have to give up on the discourse of consent itself. Are there ways to respond to these objections within a consent-based framework? Let's explore some of the possible responses to liberal consent rhetoric.

Decision-making should be weighted to prioritize the most affected. According to this principle, the greater the impact a decision will have on a person, the more leverage he or she should have in the decision-making process. For instance, the opinions of a poor neighborhood's long-term residents should count for more than those of developers or wealthier newcomers when determining whether to build new condominiums. Thus, how consensual an action is depends not on whether every citizen, equal under the law, would check yes or no about it on a ballot; rather, individuals' feelings are weighted proportionally according to how the consequences will impact them.

This sidesteps some of the problems of negotiating political consent across power differentials; it looks attractive as a way to navigate conflicting priorities in a society based on values beyond the profit motive. But does this principle offer us useful guidance on how to get there? We can't easily determine who will be most affected by strategies intended to create unpredictable situations so as to open up the horizon for transformation. Some activists see those most *vulnerable* to the potential consequences of militant tactics as the most *impacted* by any escalation beyond the confines of consensus reality politics. In practice, this concern can function to impose a tactical conservatism, reproducing the effect of liberal consensus and creating a dichotomy between resisting effectively and prioritizing others' safety.²

On the other hand, in trying to legitimize our efforts according to this principle, we sometimes fall into the trap of using the example of a few individuals who support an action to stand in for an entire imagined demographic. We ascribe a mythical authenticity to specific local, working-class, indigenous, or other people who express enthusiasm for our activities, implicitly writing off those who don't. We make such supporters into a sort of prosthe-

² This has happened again and again, from the post-inauguration march through Adams Morgan in Washington DC in 2005 to the Oscar Grant riots, any time collective action isn't peaceful, legal, and fully pacified. People who are more vulnerable to state violence or other potential consequences of escalation—and, more often, self-appointed spokespeople whose privilege enables them to feel entitled to represent others—speak out against militant tactics. Since many anarchist agitators are shielded in part by the privileges of white skin, a male body, no children, and legal citizenship, it is held to be irresponsible to raise the stakes without the input of more vulnerable people who may be affected. Anarchists often counter that those shielded by privilege are precisely the ones who should put their bodies on the line. But in large mixed crowds with a potential for explosive conflict, the question of consent inevitably rears its head. Self-righteous leftists assume that the purpose of massing in the streets is simply to “speak truth to power,” but the rest of us have to grapple with how to precipitate conflict in ways that don't reinforce the wedges our enemies would drive between us “bad protestors” and our potential comrades.

How can we conceive of desire and selfhood as they relate to consent and political action? The existing consent discourse presupposes static notions of self and desire. It presumes that desire is monolithic, composed of a single thrust rather than multiple pulls in different directions. When we have multiple desires, the desire that garners the plurality in our internal electoral process is assumed to be the only one that counts. Consent discourse presumes that what we want is knowable and can be articulated within the framework of our shared reality.

In reality, the desires we experience are not fixed or unitary. They shift constantly based on our experiences and contexts. They are multiple, contradictory, and divergent, surprising us with their diversity, frustrating us with their mutability. They resist our attempts to confine or domesticate them. They simply can't fit into a two-dimensional binary model of consent, wherein we either want something or we don't. This realization is terrifying, but it opens up new ways of understanding the revolutionary project in relation to the consensus reality arrayed against us.

The nature of desire is complex and centrifugal, in contrast to the simplifying and centripetal nature of *interests*. The traditional approach of the left is for organizers to assist constituencies in winning victories that build power, which will presumably be deployed towards increasingly radical ends. The goals of these victories are generally framed in terms of the *interests* of the constituency, not their *desires*. This is a clever trick: as interests appear to be an objective rather than subjective matter, it is easier for an outside managerial class to get away with defining and representing them. Interests can be framed as unitary, coherent, and integrative, whereas desires are multiple, inchoate, contradictory. Identity groups share interests; friends and lovers share desires. Interests are composed of calcified blocks of desire standardized to make sense within consensus reality.

Not only is desire far more complex and unstable than our discourses allow, it's also shaped by the conditions of our misery and

been sufficient to transcend the self-defeating dichotomy between either respecting consent to such an extent that we can't overthrow capitalism or disregarding it entirely. The point is to come up with a framework that solves those problems, not to throw out what gains we've made already.⁴

In fact, our basis for opposing capitalism and hierarchy goes far beyond the claim that these systems operate without our consent. Ultimately, we fight for new worlds out of *desire*, and in order to move beyond the limitations of political consent discourse we have to look more closely at what desire is.

Desire, Consent, and Politics

What is desire? Let's conceive of desires not as internal elements emanating from within individuals, but as autonomous forces that flow through them. Individuals don't desire things; whole societies produce and circulate desires, even if those desires remain submerged in most people. The fundamental unit of our analysis is not the individual human being, but the desire, with humans as the medium.

⁴ Also, what does this imply in the realm of sexuality? Remember, our goal in acknowledging the limitations of consent discourse is not to discard it entirely but to determine where it can take us and where else we need to go. Consent provides us with crucial tools for treating each other with care in sexual interactions. At the same time, we can challenge simplistic notions of desire: some of our most deeply erotic moments occur not when we finally achieve a desire previously fixed within us, but when we experience unexpected and unprecedented forms of pleasure. Perhaps insights from our discourse of political seduction can offer perspective on our sexuality, but we maintain our allegiance to consent discourse in sex. Our critique of political consent discourse isn't abstract, but based on its *tactical* shortcomings, the limitations of what it allows us to do and imagine. By contrast, sexual consent discourse has proven its utility in our daily lives, inducing us to examine our desires and transform how we relate to each other erotically.

sis for ourselves that entitles us to act against the ostensible majority, imagining our chosen comrades to represent the most affected. Every activist has a preferred imaginary friend, whether the workers favored by IWW organizers, the West Virginia locals courted by opponents of mountaintop removal, or the extras in hip hop videos that insurrectionists hope will join them in the streets.

This is not only tokenizing, but dangerous, as it can lead us to overestimate popular support for our actions. Yet it is supported by a variety of rationalizations: just because we don't see public support doesn't mean it isn't there; the people who are most marginalized—who, we assume, are most likely to support our unpopular actions—are the least free to express that support publicly; and so on. There is some truth in these arguments. But when we gamble on this imaginary-friend fantasy as an effort to weigh by proxy the consent of the unrepresented—now represented by our presumed affinity with them—we're just deluding ourselves.

Decision-making must be broadened to include all the people impacted. Often, many of those who will be impacted by supposedly consensual decisions do not have appropriate leverage on them. For instance, the university's board of governors can decide by consensus to raise tuition, but what kind of consensus is that without the participation of the students who'll be paying it? If decisions included all stakeholders and elites couldn't impose them by force, wouldn't there be hope for a politics of consent?

Unfortunately, this framework is more useful for preventing actions or challenging their validity after the fact than for initiating them. The impacts of our actions ripple out far beyond our ability to trace them or the range of lives they will touch. We cannot even hope to be aware of every person who would be impacted by a decision, much less solicit meaningful input from each of them to confirm or deny consensus. In practical terms, expanding the participation in decision-making to everyone affected would either require resorting to majority-rule democracy—not a consent-

based framework—or accepting the impossibility of ever making decisions.

Here we have to confront the reality that broad consensus on many issues will never exist. We might be able to agree about what to cook for dinner, but on the real questions about how to organize society and distribute resources, no consensus is possible today. In a class society stratified by white supremacy and patriarchy, our interests are fundamentally in conflict. Certainly we share many interests in common, and we can imagine worlds in which people aren't pitted against one another in contests for status and survival. But we will not be able to desert this world by consensus.³

We're acting in self-defense. As this reasoning goes, the operation of oppressive institutions constitutes an attack on us, and we don't need the consent of our attackers to defend ourselves. This harm isn't always on a literal, direct, individual level, as in *that specific Starbucks window makes my individual life increasingly precarious and impossible*. In a hopelessly complex global economy that masks the root causes of the harm it creates, nearly any attempt to launch a defensive counterattack will seem either symbolic or misdirected. Still, in this sense, direct action can be framed as defending ourselves against violations of our consent by state and capital.

But the rhetoric of direct action as self-defense doesn't offer us much guidance for how to move forward. In this model, state and capital are the protagonists, and the various formulations of *we* that we self-defend the mere objects of their actions. We can only

³ One of the implications of this analysis is that we must unflinchingly recognize conflict as a reality. The vision we're putting forward aims not *just* to create a world in which all is consensual. We strive to prioritize each other's consent as much as possible, while recognizing that sometimes we really are in conflict, and we have to acknowledge conflicts rather than sweeping them under the rug of an imposed consensus. Our ideal is not a world without conflict, but a world in which conflicts don't produce hierarchies and oppression. We envision associations that can come together and break apart according to our desires; unlike the state, these would require no imposed consensus.

react, not strategize new initiatives. Furthermore, the framework of self-defense is based in the terms of liberal individualism, with our private personal rights beginning where those of another end. What is it that we're defending? Our role in society as defined under capitalism and patriarchy? Our rights as dictated by the democratic state? To get free, we should be fighting to *destroy* our selves! Not our bodies and lives, of course, but our selfhood as it's constituted by state and capital.

If selfhood extends as far as the bank windows, if our selves overlap so extensively, we need another framework—we're not just defending *ourselves*. At best, self-defense is a justification, not a praxis; at worst, it's a disingenuous smokescreen that leaves us without a framework to evaluate our effectiveness.

Consent has to be informed. In all consent-based ethical systems, medical, sexual, and otherwise, authentic consent requires full knowledge of the implications of a decision. On the political level, this criticism goes, if we all had access to complete information, we would make decisions differently. This is the basic hypothesis of liberalism: the best of all possible worlds will result when people have access to all relevant information and the means to discuss it openly in order to make rational decisions.

The fatal flaw in this reasoning is that it fails to take power dynamics into account. When access to money and property determines our ability to act, under the rule of a state that reserves the sole right to employ violence, knowledge is not in fact power. Furthermore, it seems to demand a politics of total transparency, which would either preclude illegal activity or consign us all to the certainty of prison. An informed consent framework neither enables us to imagine how to achieve a consensus for revolution nor suffices to determine how much information to share with whom about the actions we take to fight for it.

In concluding that the consent framework can't accommodate our political needs, we're not endorsing the violation of consent. Rather, we're acknowledging that the consent framework has not