# Dropping Out

**A Revolutionary Vindication of Refusal, Marginality and Subculture**

CrimethInc.

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# Contents

us behind the grocery stores and barricades—there are more than enough bagels to go around, and more than enough bricks. Of course, dropping out may look different for you than it looks for us—from each according to his means, right? All that really matters is that we all do what it takes to regain control of our lives and the limitless potential we share.

With our lives in our hands and weapons if need be,

your faithful ex-workers


*Dropouts, one more effort to be revolutionaries!*

At this moment…

an employee in a grocery store is setting out genetically engineered produce rather than tending the garden in her own yard;

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

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

an advertising executive is composing jingles for laundry detergent rather than making up bedtime stories for his nieces;

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

a child is being dropped off there to be cared for by strangers rather than those who know and love him;

a sociology student is doing an ethnographic study of squatters rather than actually participating in the activities that interest her;

an activist, tired from a hard day's work, is putting on a Hollywood movie for entertainment;

a man who could be exploring his sexuality with a partner is masturbating to internet pornography;

a demonstrator who has unique perspectives and reasons to protest is carrying a prefabricated sign issued by a bureaucratic organization;

and a would-be revolutionary who left behind everything he knew to pursue an engaged, beautiful, meaningful life is making references to television programs with his fellow dropouts in utter boredom and dejection.

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The system runs on the blood and sweat of our hijacked lives. The more we invest ourselves in surviving according to its terms, the more difficult it is to do otherwise. Seizing back

our time and energy from its jaws is the essence of and the precondition for any real resistance.

The paralyzing common sense notion that everyone, even the most radical, plays a role in the status quo hides the subversive possibility that all of us - even radicals - can refuse our roles. Dropping out means refusing to play our parts, removing ourselves from the circuitry and reclaiming our lives.

If you are a student, it means rejecting institutional instruction in favor of self-education.

If you are an employee, it means refusing to take orders, ceasing to sell your time and labor and conscience for a wage, and developing projects of your own, instead.

If you are a tenant, it means not fattening the pockets of landlords, but inventing new ways to secure and use space.

If you are a consumer, it means ceasing to make purchases, reducing your needs, and finding other sources for what you require.

If you are a producer, it means seizing the means of production, and applying - or not applying - them outside the logic of capitalism.

If you are a traveller, it means going off the beaten path.

If you are an artist, it means living creatively, not creating commodities in place of life.

If you are a girl or boy, it means becoming inscrutable to the gender binary system, a living counterexample to the equation All ___s are ___.

If you are a lover, it means refusing the expectations and obligations of conventional romance.

If you have white skin, it means challenging the racist structures that make this an advantage.

In a hierarchical society, it means refusing to command or obey.

In legal terms, it means ceasing to recognize the authority of judges, courts, and police, sorting out conflicts without re-

Direct actions that provide for the needs of the participants can be seen as self-interested, but the majority of people are looking to first solve their own problems, and find the selflessness associated with activists in this country impractical if not insane. If we show that we can provide for our needs in a way others can easily see themselves doing, this will come across as a strength rather than a weakness.

Arguing that direct action should sustain our communities does not mean eschewing militant *tactics—on the contrary. A century ago, many anarchist projects—newspapers, social clubs, even schools—were funded by bank robberies and wage heists. Perhaps those particular tactics are no longer effective, but there must be other forms of participatory low-intensity warfare that could accomplish the same thing today. If anarchists in this country can discover and popularize militant tactics that provide for their needs and those of their communities, these will almost certainly result in a renaissance of anarchist activity and organizing.

## Throwing in your Lot with the Escapees

Dropping out is a gamble, that's for sure. In investing yourself in the alternate universe of the anarchist revolution, most of which has not yet come into existence, you risk throwing your life away for nothing. Who knows, you might be better off throwing your life away installing drywall for some construction magnate, or designing webpages for software companies, or reading books by Hardt and Negri in an ivory tower somewhere, watching the internet for news of the social upheavals you desire. You might end up installing drywall anyway, and regret not cashing in your privilege for a degree and a cushy office job—that is, if you have the choice in the first place.

On the other hand, if you relish a challenge and the ambiguous blessings of an unpredictable life, there's still time to join

rarely used to acquire resources here. When squatters in Europe win a battle, they secure a physical space in which to develop their culture of resistance, from which they can stage further assaults on private property and capitalism in general. Militant direct action in this country, by contrast, tends to consist of symbolic interruptions of business as usual. Aside from notoriety and the potential future participants it might draw, these do little to provide resources for the movement, while costing a great deal in terms of effort and legal repercussions. This may explain why the militant direct action movement in the United States has such a hard time maintaining momentum between short bursts of activity.

Even if it is sustainable, this doesn't seem to be a recipe for nurturing and expanding communities that practice direct action. We have to have resources to share with others if they are to scale back their current means of providing for themselves enough to join us in our projects. The more direct action puts food on the table, the more widely people will take it up.

There are examples of direct action securing resources in this country, though by and large this takes place on a smaller scale: dumpstering, file sharing, shoplifting and employee theft, even trainhopping. One could make the argument that over the past fifteen years, most of the well-known examples of anarchist activity have been made possible by such sustaining forms of direct action: the spread of Food Not Bombs can be attributed to the popularization of dumpstering, just as the heyday of the 'zine revolution was a direct result of the prevalence of photocopying scams; likewise, the period of 1999 to 2001, during which anti-summit mobilizations reached a peak, was characterized by a proliferation of return scams, shoplifting, and other forms of anti-corporate crime that provided for the needs of many who joined in these mobilizations. These humble examples highlight how important it is to develop sustaining forms of direct action.

course to armed strangers or impersonal institutions and defending yourself and your community against their incursions.

In moral terms, it means rejecting the authority of any code beyond the dictates of your own conscience, becoming a law unto yourself.

In aesthetic terms, it means shunning conventional norms in order to develop new standards and values.

In political terms, it means refusing to be represented or to represent others, finding ways to wield political power outside the established channels.

In terms of socialization, it means unlearning your conditioning so that you neither accept your prescribed role nor impose such roles upon others.

In terms of ambition, it means redefining success.

**And if you are already a dropout, it means finding ways to reconnect to others on your own terms.**

## Take it from us…

…dropping out is controversial. At the risk of stating the obvious, the publishers and editors of this magazine, not to mention many of the contributors, are hard-core dropouts; we don't hold jobs, we don't go shopping, we don't hang out in bars. We've rejected the rat race of diplomas, promotions, and retirement plans in hopes of building a new world of our own. The cultural norms portrayed on prime time television are not our cultural norms; the values of aspiring homeowners and dutiful patriots are not our values. Hoping to abolish wage slavery, patriarchy, and alienation in general, we have begun by doing our best to abolish them in our own lives, hoping thus to set a precedent of following up words with action. Rather than asking whether the conditions are ripe for revolution, we accept that we may never know, so this is as good a time as any to find out.

This decision puts us in the margins of this society - and those margins are much maligned, not only by conservatives[1] but also by our fellow would-be revolutionaries[2]. The very idea that one might seek to change society by abandoning it sounds contradictory to some ears. Many have assumed that we and others like us are not, in fact, revolutionaries, but mere hedonists - that our efforts to survive outside the system are simply a private solution to the problems of capitalism, offering nothing to the billions who still suffer in its clutches.

Some fellow dropouts have even made the same error, misunderstanding our exhortations to self-liberation as alibis for selfish liberation, thinking - insanely that they can somehow free themselves from global capitalism without coming to blows with it or finding common cause with others.

On the contrary, we have no illusions that we can lead the lives we wish to lead while others are oppressed and the world is ruled by greed and violence. Dropping out, for us, is first and foremost a strategy for revolutionary struggle against all the structures of domination; it is the most effective starting place we see for ourselves and others like us to take on the powers that be. In refusing to participate in the system, we're trying to overthrow the government, abolish all hierarchies, and topple Western civilization. In the following pages, we explore

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[1] No matter if all the ways to participate in this society are utterly meaningless, oppressive, and environmentally destructive—you have to pay your own way, even if that means doing so at everyone else's expense! Dropping out is irresponsible, self-destructive, a sin against God, a betrayal of your poor parents, a slap in the face of those poor bastards who have to work, and a violation of the terms of your probation—and besides, no other way of life is possible, so how dare you even daydream?

[2] Over the past decade, the CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective has been target number one for the defenders of employment; we've endured enough slander and ridicule to shame even the notoriously vicious radical community into sympathy, and been subjected to every conceivable argument against our refusals of work and consumerism. Oddly enough, none of this has inspired any of us to go back to our jobs washing dishes and delivering pizza.

hide. Let us wager that it is not the actual content of our ideas that alienates people from us—otherwise, revolution is a long shot indeed—so often as it is the defensiveness and insecurity we must overcome in ourselves. In unabashedly calling things as we see them, we can reframe discussions and open up new territory on the political spectrum; likewise, by fighting injustice wherever we see it, we force oppressive powers to reveal themselves for what they are. We need not gather everyone together under our banner; all we have to do is make explicit the fault lines dividing our society, inspire people to take sides according to their hearts' desires, and call for a final showdown.

## Sustainability and Direct Action

Dropout communities must sustain themselves somehow. Unlearning the constructed needs of capitalist society is the fastest way out of poverty—but if such communities are to be more than ghettoes for failures and ascetics, they still need access to concrete resources. These can be acquired by conventional means—gardening, buying land collectively, cottage industries, part-time labor—or they can be acquired by crime. The former approach is practical enough, but has the disadvantage of tending to promote a certain complacency; the latter is often not so practical, but it can give us an advantage we otherwise wouldn't have in the market. Say what you will about capitalists being willing to sell us the rope with which to hang them—they certainly won't sell it at a price we can afford at the wages they pay us! Entering into open conflict with a more powerful opponent is always risky, but the premise of revolutionary activity is that these risks can be worthwhile—and anarchists who practice militant direct action are already taking them, anyway.

The direct action movement in the United States differs from its counterparts overseas in that militant tactics are

til that appears possible those of us who can should get things started by declaring the General Strike on an individual basis.

Starting in the 1960s, dropouts have been increasingly important in social upheavals. This, too, is not a coincidence. The increasing mobility of the workforce and meaninglessness of work itself are inconvenient for traditional labor organizers, but they are great strengths for a movement building international networks of dropout communities. If we hope to succeed in fomenting revolution, we need strategies that are appropriate to the times; dropping out is an idea whose time has come.

## Without Fear of Extremism

Rather than seeking to assemble a mass at the center of society, the dropout strategy for revolution aims to polarize society—in the words of one famous déclassé, to precipitate an open break between all who want the world the way it is and all who do not.

The powers that be currently derive a great part of their apparent invulnerability from the impression that no one seriously opposes them. Most leftists share an unnatural fear of being branded extremist; in recent years, this has rendered them politically impotent. Shifting their platforms closer and closer to those of their opponents in order to give the impression that they represent the political "center," they have ceded the initiative to the right wing, losing more and more ground to them by the year. Right wing conservatives have come out of this appearing principled, self-assured, and dynamic; ideas that seemed absurdly reactionary a decade ago are now taken for granted as premises of political discourse.

Radicals should not make the same mistake. We must articulate and act upon our beliefs calmly, confidently, and as openly as possible; the perception that we are extremists cannot undo us as decisively as the impression that we have something to

how social change can be effected from the margins of society, attempt to distinguish this approach from other strategies for social change, and offer constructive criticism to those with whom we share this project.

## Choose Your Paradox

In using the expression "dropping out", we're not just talking about leaving school or quitting a job; for us, the expression designates a shift in the center of gravity of one's activities and values. You can hold a job and a lease and still be engaged in the project of dropping out - it's a question of where you invest the bulk of your energy and which social currents you contribute to.

Likewise, let's make it clear that we're not trying to establish a new moral code. Christian moralism, centered as it is on obedience to divine ordinances, is all about keeping your hands clean regardless of whether or not that makes the world a better place. Ethical systems descended from Christianity tend to be absolutist, demanding categorical rejections of certain kinds of behavior without any reference to their effects in the real world; pacifism is a good example of this, forbidding violence even when that means tolerating worse violence. We're not arguing that if you want to be a revolutionary you can't earn money, buy groceries, or pay rent. We're proposing a general strategy to be applied to whatever extent it proves useful, not a standard of judgement.

It's not possible to keep one's hands clean nowadays, anyway; under global capitalism, everything is a compromise. Employment means giving up one's time and energy to a destructive, oppressive economy, but unemployment means going without resources that could be used to undermine that economy and being separated from workers with whom one could join forces. Paying rent means supporting the system

of private property and the landlords who benefit from it, but in this country squatting rarely offers the stability necessary for a collective living space or community center. Using the internet promotes an alienating medium that replaces face-to-face human interaction, but refusing to do so means passing up the chance to be accessible to many.

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*The question of what kind of revolution we want to make will also dictate which social and psychological currents we celebrate and draw upon. Are we partisans of the social, or the antisocial? The common, or the uncommon? Do we frame revolution as the culmination of prevalent social values[3], or their annihilation?*

*Likewise, which individuals do we want for comrades? Which social classes? Do we keep company with college professors, or high school dropouts? Do we identify with the charity of liberals, or the resentment of the ghetto? Do we side with the union management, the orderly rank and file, or the workers who hate unions and bosses alike?*

*Do we speak like this -*

*We need a movement-building coalition that coordinates and supports the work of existing groups as well as builds linkages and solidarity where none or little exist*

*- or like this -*

*FUCK ALL THIS, HERE WE GO!*

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[3] In Marx's time, for example, communism was portrayed as the ultimate realization of Western science, history, and politics.

## An Idea Whose Time Has Come

In a social context in which the idea of revolution is itself marginal, it's probably inevitable that revolutionary struggle can only be waged from the fringes. However much theorists of class war might like to see themselves as the voice of the common people, nowadays they are a more obscure demographic than the dropouts they despise.

This is not a coincidence. As production jobs shift overseas, the working class in the United States is suffering a painful transition from a production-oriented economy to a service-oriented one. Workers who once would have worked all their lives at one factory, developing strong relationships and trading strategies for wielding proletarian power, now work more transitory jobs in strip malls and shopping centers. The ranks of their fellow employees rotate constantly; often, they must move from one city to another, leaving behind whatever communities they had begun to form. All this, combined with the demoralization resulting from more and more pointless tasks, serves to undermine the effectiveness of traditional workplace organizing.

Revolutionary momentum has to proceed from some social continuum. If today's workplaces are not opportune sites for forging the necessary social bonds and ambitions, we must mobilize ourselves from alternate sites. If people can't connect as workers and seize control of the workplace, maybe workers can connect as people who despise work and seize control of their lives outside the workplace. This is not to say that workplace organizing is totally obsolete, or that revolutionaries should not make every effort to support radical labor organizing; it is merely to argue that, for some of us, it may make the most sense to do so from outside the workplace. The drawbacks of defecting one by one, without control of the means of production, are obvious—of course it would be easier if we could all just occupy the factories at once and be done with it—but un-

States is the middle class of the world, benefiting from the unrestricted exploitation of workers elsewhere on the planet. In another sense, it is an illusion: thanks to the credit industry, workers are able to maintain the appearance of middle class lifestyles at the expense of being even more at the mercy of the owning class.

Other workers know they are not middle class, but are appeased by the idea that they can achieve middle class status if they work hard enough. In a society with some economic mobility, the desire for greater wealth rarely mobilizes people to fight for major social change; if their goal is mere wealth, simply outcompeting their fellow workers offers better odds than the long shot of revolution. Only riches capitalism cannot provide, such as liberty, dignity, and a sustainable relationship with the natural environment, can motivate a revolutionary struggle in this context.

When so many people's hearts have been colonized by middle class materialism and competitiveness, the first step towards revolt is the subversion of those values. All that is dysfunctional, wretched, and offensive about middle class culture and ideals must be brought to light for all to see. A dropout resistance has a lot to offer here. By acting according to different values, dropouts undermine the assumption that avarice and self-interest are innate aspects of human nature, and show the virtues of other ways of life. It might be that "dropping out" and "mobilizing the working class" are not opposite revolutionary strategies, after all—so long as dropout communities stay humble and connected to other sectors of society, they can contribute to a feedback loop of revolutionary ambitions and tactics. History bears this out: from the train-hopping hobos of the Industrial Workers of the World to the Italian Autonomia struggles of the 1970s, successful revolutionary labor organizing has been tied to revolts against work and class themselves.

If everyting is a compromise, then the only question is which compromises are most effective for achieving your goals. If the social change you desire is essentially institutional, then you'd better get a degree and do your best to advance in the institutions; if the hierarchy of privilege and power essential to those institutions doesn't sit well with you, you might be better off working outside them. If your ideal world features factories and paychecks, it's sensible enough to work towards it from the shop floor; if you hope to build a society without exchange economics or industrial pollution, the first step is probably to limit the ways you participate in those.

As dropouts, we wager that we can do more with our time and ingenuity than we could with anything for which we could trade them on the market. This is an essentially anticapitalist value judgment, prioritizing freedom over property and status, unifying means and ends. We risk isolating ourselves from the rest of humanity, without whom we cannot lead the rich lives we desire or make the revolutionary changes we aspire to; but this risk strikes us as no more dangerous than the risks we would run by remaining within the gears of the system, fighting to survive on its terms without being colonized by its values.

None of this is to argue that only dropouts can be revolutionaries. Suffice it to say that dropouts, like others, can engage in revolutionary struggle, and that this struggle will likely have a different character than the struggles of those in other sectors of society. Ideally, our efforts should complement the efforts of those who fight the system from within - as their efforts should complement ours.

## Revolution: From the Center, or the Fringes?

Much of the criticism leveled at those who believe dropping out can be part of a revolutionary strategy seems to proceed from unconscious assumptions about revolution itself. It may be that critics of this approach are still under the spell of the Marxist model of revolution. According to this model, a single idea was to take hold of the working masses, who would organize themselves along class lines to seize the infrastructure and institutions of their society. For this model to work, radicals had to be integrated into those masses, living and thinking and speaking like them so as to wield influence, and people couldn't desert the factories and offices - otherwise, how would those run once The People had taken power?

Even in its day, this strategy was hardly a recipe for the liberation most of us long for. It prized numbers abouve individuality, and unity above diversity; it engaged with people according to the roles they played in existing society, rather than the dreams and desires that beckoned them beyond it. Those who wished to apply this strategy had to compete with one another for a monopoly on revolutionary thought and organization the same way corporations compete to dominate the market. And ironocially, though it was intended to build the ultimate inclusive mass movement, this approach often left individuals feeling marginalized: their unique perspectives and experiences seemed extraneous, their needs eclipsed by the imperatives of The Struggle, their lives dwarfed by the grand narrative of History.

The masses of Marx's theory live on today as the mainstream of modern society, an even murkier abstraction. Conventional wisdom dictates that those who would foment social change must appeal to this mainstream, and that this is only possible from within its ranks. Following this logic, it would

who, fleeing a land wracked by plague, bear the disease with them everywhere they run.

Let's not forget that North America was colonized by dropouts: in seeking to escape an oppressive society without fully understanding their role in it, European immigrants ended up building an identical society upon the corpses of peoples who had enjoyed the freedoms they sought. Today, the same process takes place on a smaller scale with gentrification: seeking affordable rent, dropouts from the white middle class are often the first wave of outsiders to move into vibrant neighborhoods inhabited by poor people of color; this makes those areas more attractive to corporate developers, driving up housing costs and driving out the original residents. The questions gentrification raises are the questions confronting dropouts in microcosm: how can we do more to undermine capitalism than we do to perpetuate it? How can we build symbiotic relationships with people from other walks of life when everything is set up for us to be dangerous to one another? And seriously, where are we supposed to live?

If dropouts do more to alienate others from radical ideas than to enable them to explore alternate ways of life, they are not revolutionaries at all, but defenders of the status quo in an unlikely guise. Dropping out is a point of departure for revolutionary struggle, not a destination.

## Undermining Middle Class Values

In the United States today, we rarely see exploited workers organizing as a class against their oppressors. For this to be possible, workers have to see themselves as working class—but many here see themselves as middle class, identifying with those who profit from the hierarchical distribution of wealth rather than with each other. In some ways, this isn't much of a stretch: one could argue that the working class of the United

In accounts of why individual bubbles fail to expand, there is often a tension between concerns that they are too different from the rest of society and contentions that they are not different enough. Some might claim that the idiosyncratic terminology and protocol of a given radical demographic are alienating to potential participants; others might argue that these are necessary to address the sexism and racism the subculture has inherited from the world around it, which are even more alienating. Such debates seem to be predicated on the assumption that the most important thing for bubbles is expansion. For revolutionaries who seek the kind of multiform revolution described above, there are more important questions. Is the culture within the bubble liberating for those who participate in it? Can those within the bubble establish common cause with others outside it?

Subcultural spaces can be ideal for meeting the needs of a specific demographic, but for that same reason their usefulness is limited; it makes more sense to focus on linking them together than expanding them. To see their potential, we can look at them not as expandable bubbles, but as individual tribes that, together and with others, could form a revolutionary federation.

## Ruinous Refugees

Never let it be said that dropouts can do no wrong. Just because we're not operating the machinery of capitalism doesn't mean we're off the hook—as long as that machinery goes on chewing up everything in sight, we're as responsible as everyone else for stopping it. To do our part, we need an explicitly revolutionary program and a nuanced awareness of our part in the dynamics that maintain the status quo. Otherwise, we risk unknowingly forming the front lines of its assaults—like those

seem that the first duty of the revolutionary is to seem as much like everyone else as possible. By dropping out of society, radicals relinquish the possibility of influencing others, selfishly choosing their own freedom over noble stewardship of The Revolution.

But let us hypothesize that there is another way to work towards revolution: rather than starting in the purported center of society, revolutionaries begin at the so-called fringes, openly refusing to participate, and popularizng entirely different ways of life[4]. In demonstrating the advantages of these ways of life, they draw more and more participants, thus becoming more and more visible and capable of challenging the dominant order. These different ways of living need not be uniform, like the thinking of Marxist revolutionaries; on the contrary, they can be endlessly diverse - the more widely varied the options are, the more likely it is that additional participants will be able to find something that resonates with them. The only essential thing is that they offer ways of solving the problems of existence that are fundamentally different from those of the old order - let's say anticapitalist and non-hierarchical, as a minimum definition - and that they are easily accessible to others.

This latter strategy can still culminate in the revolutionary seizure of the means of production and the abolition of class, privilege, and state power; however, these won't be carried out by a homogenous mass under ideological leadership, but rather by autonomous groups acting according their own desires and cooperating where possible. Better yet, there won't be a big

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[4] This isn't easy, by any means—the capitalist system thrives precisely because it conspires to make any other way of life impossible, whether that be of indigenous peoples or independent farmers—but that's what the black masks, legal support collectives, and international solidarity are for, you know. As for whether it's possible, that's one of those questions we have to answer by trying it —but orthodox class-struggle revolutionists who doubt it's possible for small groups to transform their lives in any meaningful way can hardly argue that transforming our entire society at once is easier.

mess when the revolution begins and everyone suddenly has to adapt to brand new ways of living and relating - that revolution will have been going on for quite some time already.

## Dispelling the Specter of the Mainstream Once and for All

Let's return to the notion that there is a mainstream to which revolutionaries must appeal. Who, exactly, constitutes this mainstream? Every family that has 1.6 children? Everyone who voted for the winner of the last presidential election? Everyone with a car, a credit card, and - be honest about the image that comes to mind here - white skin?

Who - one might beter ask - has the most power to designate what is main- stream, and who benefits from the way this is framed? Beyond a doubt, the answer to the first question is the corporate media. They, more than any other force today, represent people to each other. What they portray as common and normal becomes the common idea of what is common, the norm for what is normal. If that is so, the answer to the second question must be the corporate power structure, which the corporate media exist to serve. That is to say: the very notion that there is a mainstream is corporate propaganda. It serves to popularize products (we have to "keep up with the Joneses"), to keep us busy trying to learn about each other from opinion polls instead of neighborhood potlucks, above all to maintain the unsettling feeling that each of us is outnumbered by a homogeneous mass of "normal" people.

Mainstream is not a freestanding term, but half of a dichotomy. The opposite of "mainstream" is "subcultural" - when critics dismiss the potential of dropout communities, one of their arguments is that these are merely subcultural. Most of the dichotomies presented to us in the capitalist media are false dichotomies - soldier/terrorist, for example,

limited to single issues; within a bubble, on the other hand, it is possible for people to effect a total transformation of their social relationships, if not their whole lives. This gives birth to a host of possibilities that were previously unthinkable. Imagination and desire are produced socially; people need to experience another world firsthand to be able to conceive of it, let alone fight for it.

At the same time, this model has disadvantages. In some ways, it is essentially conservative: in claiming a fragment of the social spectrum as home territory, it implicitly prioritizes the defense of this space over other concerns. The demands of maintaining this territory can occupy those who would otherwise take on more ambitious projects; worse, internal deviations are often perceived to be as dangerous as external enemies. At its worst, the squatting movement spoken so highly of elsewhere in this issue can exhibit these tendencies, degenerating from a movement for total liberation into a rearguard battle to save a few historic properties for an elitist in-group.

This conservative atmosphere can make radical subcultures off-putting for others. Those who are put off are not necessarily closed-minded or faint of heart: it might also be that, feeling constrained by the limitations of their own subculture, they are unlikely to be attracted to another subculture that also seems static and constraining. A mohawk looks a lot less appealing to a woman fed up with having to do her hair for the office every day than it does to a teenager who experiences fashion as one of the only aspects of his life he can control; unless it is clear that the mohawk is entirely incidental to his critique of capitalism, you can hardly blame her for not listening closely. Often, the less orthodox the culture of a bubble is the more appealing it is likely to be across subcultural lines.

By the same token, radicals should never conflate offering paths to liberation with promoting their own subcultures. It should never appear that, like those who speak of converting the masses, our goal is to assimilate everyone else.

their own kind; on the contrary, sharing these with people who are not part of your clique can provide surprising results. It's not necessary to go door to door soliciting strangers to join The Movement; all we need to do is connect the people already in our lives to the radical projects in which we're already involved - and vice versa.

To this end, it is paramount that dropouts find ways of meeting their needs in which others can participate. Frameworks that put the resources available to us at the disposal of all, such as Food Not Bombs and the more recent Really Really Free Market model, have demonstrated the potential of this. At their best, the transcend the limits of individual subcultures, offering models of what life could be that are instantly comprehensible to all.

## The "Expandable Bubble" Model

Just as critics of dropout strategies hold unconscious assumptions that color their assessments of those strategies, dropouts themselves often hold unconscious ideas about social change. Many seem to be working from a vision of revolution we'll call the "expandable bubble" model. In this approach, a single subcultural space is transformed from within, becoming a bubble on which revolutionaries pin their hopes. The participants think of themselves as living against the grain of society; others, looking on from other subcultures, may interpret that opposition personally. This complicates matters, as the linchpin of this approach is that the bubble must expand to include more and more people: "A thousand people came to last year's conference—this year we're expecting two thousand. We're really getting somewhere!"

The essential advantage of the bubble model is that it focuses a lot of energy on a limited space. Approaches intended to address a broad range of demographics at once tend to be

or politics/economics. Could mainstream/subculture also be a false dichotomy?

To return to the mainstream media for an analogy, one thinks of the newscasters on television as having no accent - an accent is what those people down the road have, because they're not like "everyone else", even if everyone in the county except the newscasters speaks just like they do. But an outside observer - say, a visitor from New Zealand - could tell you that the newscaster accent is an accent just as sure as the local country accent is; the newscaster accent just seems normal because it gets more airtime.

Likewise, all the characteristics thought of as mainstream in this society are subcultural, as sure as the Rainbow Gathering is subcultural. Following professional football is subcultural, using the internet is subcultural, Protestant Christianity is subcultural no less than Krishna Consciousness is. The people we think of as possessing mainstream qualities aren't even necessarily any more numerous than those of any other subculture: there are more young people in prison in this country than there are in the Young Republicans and the Young Democrats combined.

Instead of accepting the corporate media portrayal of society as a mainstream surrounded by a lunatic fringe, we might do better to envision it as an interlaced web of overlapping subcultures. Everyone is part of several subcultures at once: long-distance truck drivers, for example, share common experiences, language, and other reference points, and thus could be said to constitute a subculture; but each also participates in other communities according to ethnicity, hometown, religion, musical taste, and so on. This way of looking at society is all the more useful today as North America becomes more and more multicultural and multiethnic, and new possibilities for long-distance travel and communication enable people to build new social circles around leisure interests.

There are characteristics that the vast majority of the population does have in common, but these are obscured by the notion of a mainstream, not revealed by it. Most everybody has to sell their labor to survive, and resents this on some level as an infringement on their personal autonomy. Most everybody is subject to laws, both judicial and economic, that they had no say in devising. And, as noted above, most everybody has the alienating experience of living in a society in which the corporate media represent us to each other, setting the standards for what is normal without reference to our real lives or longings. This is what we share in modern capitalist society: not a uniform culture but the imposition of a false uniformity.

So, as it turns out, there are common qualities revolutionaries can draw upon to foment resistance, after all, but these are the opposite of those thought to characterize the mainstream; and radicals who seek to take advantage of them can do so not by acting like "everyone else", but by dispelling the notion that anyone has to.

## Invisible Monsters

In a society based on standardized norms, everybody is an outsider[5], in secret if not overtly. Privately, even the most supposedly typical member of this society knows she isn't like "everyone else" - otherwise she wouldn't have so many emotional problems, or have to remove all that unsightly body hair, or have to worry about how to pass drug tests - but keeps it to herself out of fear and shame. Because people hide these dissonances, when they look at each other they see a "mainstream": a standardized mass of humanity.

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[5] Even those who claim to believe in the firm and impersonal rule of law know that personally they are the exceptions to the rule—this explains the ubiquity of traffic violations, for example.

This is analogous to the escalation of tactics in militant resistance: if you escalate your tactics alone, you can be isolated and defeated; if you escalate tactics as a community with the support of other communities, you can gain momentum and shift the balance of power. In dropping out individually, we have to find common cause with each other, or else risk starving to death alone with all our potential wasted.

All too often, dropouts in North America sever the constraints of their former lives and go into a kind of free fall, drifting from one thing to the next without investing themselves anywhere. This is typical of our society in general: starting life without a firm foundation, people tend to hold off on commitment, waiting for the perfect opportunity to come along - when in fact it is commitment that makes things possible in the first place. Instead of wasting our lives wandering aimlessly in search of a prefabricated utopia, we'd better get started building the things we want right now - the whole idea behind dropping out is to use our time and creativity constructively, right?

In the opposite extreme, dropouts can settle comfortably into a new way of life that seems to provide for all their needs without actually challenging the status quo. Setting out to live sustainably in an unsustainable civilization is quixotic at best; those who turn their backs on everyone else in going "back to the land" cheat themselves as well as the rest of us out of the world we could make together. Make no mistake about it, the polluters and developers are coming for every last acre sooner or later - until capitalism is smashed, no organic farm is safe, no matter how permacultural. When dropouts, individually and as communities, find themselves isolated, it is not usually because they have no oportunities to connect with others so much as it is that they are not taking advantage of the opportunities they do have. Between local and regional communities, family ties, and subcultural circles, everyone in this society participates in several different continuums at once. Too often, dropouts assume that they should keep their crazy ideas and projects to

they do not deviate far enough from capitalist social relations. When they do so, however, the results can be explosive.

There are plenty of examples of this - punk rock has been notorious for incubating generations of anarchist troublemakers, just as pagan circles have fostered a network of older anticapitalist activists. Critics charge that these examples not only are limited by their subcultural nature, but somehow, simply by being subcultural, limit the potential of the anarchist movement in general. But perhaps that analysis gets it backwards: what if they are effective precisely because they are explicitly subcultural, and the entire anarchist movement could benefit from taking note of this?

In fact, much of the impetus behind the best-known anarchist projects of the past four decades has been distinctly subcultural - it hardly makes sense to discount everyting accomplished by self-professed hippies, yippies, punks, and ravers[6], let alone by those from subcultures associated with ethnicity and gender. If we accept that being openly subcultural can be a strength rather than a weakness, not only for ethnic groups but for predominantly white dropout communities as well, we can move on from bewailing our successes to honing a strategy that addresses the actual pitfalls of dropping out.

## Abandon Without Desertion

The essential problem with dropping out is that it immediately deprives you of one way of life without necessarily providing another. It cannot be emphasized enough that we're not just talking about a few people giving notice at work, but the development of an entire network of dropout communities.

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[6] Residents of North America may be surprised to see the rave subculture associated with anything besides drugs and dancing, but in Great Britain it has intersected with radical politics to such an extent that the words "raver" and "activist" have been practically interchangeable in some circles.

A strategy that encourages open marginality strives to find resonance with the secret, unique parts of people that do not correspond to imposed norms - it gambles on the idea that people will come out of the masses to be, openly, the unique individuals they already are. In contrast to the patronizing notion that the masses must be infiltrated and converted, such an approach respects the autonomy, individuality, and intelligence of those with whom it seeks common cause.

## Not Waiting for a Seat at the Table, Not Asking for a Piece of the Pie

Of course, the privilege of even appearing normal is unattainable for a great many of us, for the same norms that are associated with the mainstream underlie racism and patriarchy. A man born into the white middle class has a different relationship to those norms than a woman born into a family of Haitian immigrants - even if he experiences them as alienating and constraining, he still benefits from them in ways she never can. Both, however, whether marginalized more by choice or by force, can embrace their position as outsiders at odds with an unjust society.

This possibility is a nightmare for conservatives and liberals alike, since both are invested in the capitalist system, and know everyone else must be as well, for it to go on working. Liberal reformers, to offset this danger, propose to extend some of the advantages of the privileged classes to "under-privileged minorities" without altering the structures that maintain hierarchical privilege. Communities that are already marginal can invest in that strategy, aspiring to a little privilege of their own, or reject and struggle against the entire system. Often it's necessary to do both at once, just to survive - but does the annual Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco really need to be sponsored by a corporate beer manufacturer?

By itself, merely being without privilege does nothing to contest the way privilege is distributed. Norms are maintained by everyone, not just those to whom they give advantages. In India, most billboard advertisements feature light-skinned models, and women apply "fairness cream" to lighten their complexions; neither the ones who produce the makeup nor the ones who consume it can ever be white, but they participate in glorifying whiteness all the same. In this sense, the least privileged can drop out as surely as the most privileged, insofar as they too can refuse to compete according to the values of the hierarchical system - indeed, the system cannot be overthrown unless they do so. There you have it: practiced as a revolutionary strategy, dropping out is not an expression of privileged selfishness, but a universally applicable method of struggle against privilege itself.

Communities of willful dropouts should make every effort to connect with other outsiders. In nurturing solidarity between all dropouts and outgroups, we can share resources - ensuring they get into the powerful hands of those who would not otherwise have access to them; likewise, with the perspective of those who experience privilege differently, we can start to remove the blinders that come with privilege.

## Insurgent Communities

If there is no such thing as the mainstream, no Comman Man to appeal to, and standardized norms are inherently repressive, then the approach to seeking radical social change described above as the Marxist model faces major challenges. The alternative approach, on the other hand, looks more promising than ever. If our society is made up of a wide range of subcultures, explicitly subcultural resistance might be the most effective stragegy - think of it as a diffuse guerrilla war, rather than a head-on army-to-army confrontation. Radicals can begin wher-

ever they are, in whatever social context, and transform these one by one: women suffering mid-life crises can turn their cloistered suburban homes into collective houses, urban gangs can reinvent themselves as anticapitalist organizations, musicians and listeners can organize netowrks of venues outside the corporate market. This is dropping out - not as individuals, but as communities.

It is easier to cultivate the kind of dialogue that makes revolutionary aspirations and struggles possible within a subculture than it is to do so in a society at large. This is perhaps easiest to discern in the way currents of resistance have developed in ethnic, religious, and gender-based subcultures: for example, the Black Panthers and many groups like them emerged out of urban black communities, just as the Stonewall riots would have been unthinkable without the queer underground of New York City. In both these cases, it wasn't oppression alone that produced resistance, but also the existence of social structures in which it could flourish: that's why the forces of racist capitalism conspired to disperse or destabilize urban black neighborhoods after the 1960s, so there could be no more Watts riots or militant-organized breakfast programs.

In a society in which race and gender are considered fixed and essential qualities, predominantly white subcultures are seen as voluntary. It's interesting to note that they are often referred to derisively as ghettos; this seems to imply that the subcultural segregation of ethnic groups is inevitable, but that for white or middle class people to deliberately distinguish themselves is senseless.

Could it be that this derision hides - perhaps even is intended to hide - the subversive possibility that these subcultures can also develop into sites of resistance? If this is so, social groups such as the punk rock scene and the pagan milieu are not evolutionary dead-ends, but potential starting places for more serious departures from this society. The problem is not that they deviate from mainstream culture, but that often