

# Insurrectionary Practice and Capitalist Transformation

A discussion between The Batko Group and Sasha K

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This conversation began as an attempt from our side to fill in some of the blanks that the other texts in this issue of *Dissident* doesn't cover completely, and to exchange ideas with one of the editors of *Killing King Abacus*<sup>1</sup>, which was a prominent journal of modern insurrectionary anarchism—Sasha K.

In this discussion we talk about what our relationship with the left and politics should be, how the changing form of capitalism and the class struggle affects revolutionaries, as well as some theoretical influences. The greatest merit of this discussion is that it approaches the meaning and consequences of the real subsumption for anti-political and insurrectionary struggle. This is also where we disagree the most, and in the discussion two perspectives crystalizes: People from The Batko Group stress the need to historicize the different organizational forms, while Sasha points out the need to see the continuity of the anti-political struggle, and to see the real subsumption as an ongoing process. We are both against strict periodizations, but we approach the problem in different ways. These are very complex questions which needs to be discussed more intricate than we have space for in this issue. Thats why the discussion in this issue may feel incomplete. The discussion—which is still going on elsewhere—will continuously be published on our website.

We feel that this discussion, although incomplete and perhaps unfulfilling, is important to include in this issue of *Dissident*. We also hope that this discussion and the problem it highlights will continue elsewhere in society and among revolutionaries.

We also believe that this conversation can function as a bridge to more and deeper discussions on what capitalism really is, how the class struggle has changed, etc—Issues which we will continue to confront in next issue of *Dissident* (but also elsewhere, off course).

It should also be noted that Sasha isn't representing anyone but himself, or that everyone in The Batko Group necessarily agree with everything we as individuals express in this conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Killing King Abacus*: A now discontinued American magazine that Sasha did together with Leila and Wolfi. Published two issues 2000–2001. The magazine is downloadable on their homepage: [http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/)

The Batko Group: Our first contact with American insurrectionary anarchism was through Killing King Abacus and Hot Tide<sup>2</sup> on the web. And it was after that the word “insurrectionary” began to be used as a label for a specific theoretical current in Sweden. It would be very interesting to get a short history and evaluation of that project—the theoretical background and the discussion that preceded it, what movement it grew out of, your initial aims and what you later accomplished, its impact, and last but not least, why it ended.

Sasha: Well, calling it a “movement” is a bit of a stretch. I’ll primarily speak for myself here and say what KKA was for me, but I will say that the three of us who did KKA, Leila, Wolfi<sup>3</sup> and myself, all were involved in the anti-civ<sup>4</sup>, anarchist milieu in the US. For me, at the time, I found the debate in the US anarchist scene somewhat stale. It was increasingly turning into a debate between primitivists and syndicalists, with primitivists claiming that syndicalists did not really step outside of our present society. This was true enough as far as it went. Yet the debate did not really talk that much on how we would actually move forward and act.

The anti-civ milieu that we came out of was influenced by the likes of Camatte, Perlman<sup>5</sup>, the Situationists<sup>6</sup>, Surrealists, and anti-state communists. In the debates with syndicalists the critique of work, the link between the material form of society and social relations, and the critique of the ideology of progress were important. But, I increasingly felt the anti-civ milieu was getting more closed and fixed in its ideas and, in the process of debating with syndicalists and the such, rejecting the importance of class completely. At the same time, largely because of the Marini Trial<sup>7</sup> and Wolfi’s correspondence Italian anarchists, we became more aware of the Italian insurrectionary anarchists. It was on a trip to Europe that we decided to do KKA.

The practice and writings of various insurrectionary anarchists seemed to offer a way out of some of the problems of the US anarchist scene. Instead of debating the neutrality to technology or the origin of alienation, the insurrectionary anarchists drew on their own experience of practice on how to act and organize. This was a discussion that didn’t seem to be happening to a large extent in the US at the time. So we wanted to reintroduce some of the writings of the insurrectionary anarchists into the US. We also wanted to get away from a rather weak debate on class, which seemed to be caught between, on the one side, a reduced understanding of class and capitalism, which lacked a critique of work as separate from life and of the link between pro-

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<sup>2</sup> Hot Tide Discussion Bulletin: A smaller bulletin with a more frequent publication that was a compliment to KKA. However, only three issues were published. Are downloadable at their homepage: [http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/)

<sup>3</sup> Wolfi Landstreicher: American anarchist. He is the editor of the anarchist journal Willful Disobedience and runs the Venomous Butterfly Anarchist Distribution. He previously published under the pen name “Feral Faun”.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-civ: Short for “anti-civilization”. A wide concept, used by everyone from primitivists to Camatte. Examples of typical anti-civ perspectives include the arguments that workers cannot just take over the capitalist mode of production and manage it democratically, and that technical development is not class-neutral.

<sup>5</sup> Freddy Perlman (1934–1985): An American Marxist who stressed the importance of the fetishism of commodities in Marx’s theories. Married to Lorraine Perlman. His book “Against His-story, Against Leviathan!” has become a big inspiration for primitivists.

<sup>6</sup> Situationists: The Situationist International developed, through their paper Internationale Situationniste (Paris, 1958–1969), a new reading of Marxism during the 1960s, which came to inspire a big part of the 68-radicalisation and a new found interest in Council Communism. Best-known names and books: Guy Debord “Society of the spectacle”, Rebel Press, 2005. Raoul Vaneigem: “The Revolution of Everyday Life”. Rebel Press; Reprint edition, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> The Marini Trial: A huge process in Italy a couple of years ago, where the State tried to crush the anarchist movement and divide the Left by charging about 50 anarchists for being double-organized in a underground terror network. Bonanno and Weir, for example, were sentenced to prison.

ductive forms and social relations while celebrating worker self-management, and, on the other side, a rejection of class struggle. Primitivism has ended up trying so hard to stress that capitalism is just the latest stage of civilization that it has washed out an understanding of capitalism as a specific social form. Another dichotomy within the US milieu that we wanted to move out of was the one that saw individualism and communism as in contradiction. So into this situation we wanted to inject more energy into the discussion of struggles themselves and how we act.

After two issues we had succeeded better than we could have imagined. Yet we had also fallen into a rather long debate with various primitivists as well, which have not really been that useful. It is probably time to move on to other projects. For me, in terms of text projects, this has meant starting the anti-politics.net website, which is trying to bring people together in terms of how they relate to struggle and to further a thorough critique of capitalism and unfree social relations.

The Batko Group: You say: “After two issues we had succeeded better than we could have imagined.” How so? Tell us a little more about that.

Sasha: Well, what I mean is that we generated more discussion than we thought we would. And the ideas and concepts we were translating in from Italy have been quite widely discussed. In turn, several articles from KKA were then translated into other languages as well. And this discussion has brought some people together in interesting ways. The anti-politics.net forum is one example.

The Batko Group: You refer a lot to the Primitivist and “anti-civ” movement, partly as a problem/opposition but also as a part of your background. Here in Sweden (and we believe in the whole of Europe) this current is a more or less non-existing phenomenon, or at least very marginal and unheard of in any debates. Do you have an analysis on why this current has gained so much influence in the USA? The consensus over here (across the whole spectra of anarchists and left-wing commies) is that they—generally speaking—just are confused nut heads. Camatte and the Situationists, on the other hand, seems like unlikely influences if that is the case. And there are apparent connections between early writings of Zerzan<sup>8</sup> and the US school of Autonomous Marxism, like Harry Cleaver<sup>9</sup> and Midnight Notes<sup>10</sup>.

Sasha: First off, I want to be clear that for me and many others, anti-civ and primitivist are not the same thing. I would say there are a couple of reasons why primitivism might attract more people here in the US than in Europe. First, America actually has more of a wilderness to try to defend, and there was a pretty radical environmental movement here. Secondly, I think that American anti-communism (as in being against anything communist even anti-state communism) is a very big influence on the American scene. I think the influence of primitivism is actually waning now in America. More and more people, while possibly initially interested in the critique, are finding primitivism to be too rigid of an ideology. So I wouldn’t say that Primitivism has that wide a following at all. But those that do consider themselves Primitivists are very dedicated to what they are doing.

Camatte has definitely been an influence on the anti-civ critique, especially on Perlman. And Perlman was an influence on KKA. But in the US only a small number of Camatte’s articles have

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<sup>8</sup> John Zerzan (born 1943): American primitivist. See for example “Elements of Refusal” (1988), “Future Primitive” (1994), “Against Civilization: A Reader” (1998) and “Running on Emptiness” (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Harry Cleaver: American Marxist who coined the concept “Autonomous Marxism”. Most known for his book “Reading Capital Politically”, AK Press/AntiTheses, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Midnight Notes: An Autonomous Marxist magazine in America. The magazine Zerowork from the 1970s was a precursor to Midnight Notes.

been translated into English, mostly only his newest stuff. In Europe, you might have a bit of a different view of Camatte because of that. The Situationists were an influence on Perlman, but not really on Primitivism. In fact, I think they could use a good dose of reading the situationists once in a while. The Primitivists like to name everybody else as a leftist, but they don't seem to understand what the left is other than that it is bad. Reading the situationists could be good for them in that sense, but I doubt that is really on their agenda.

The Batko Group: This discussion was not supposed to develop into a discussion about primitivists. It's really not that interesting. But, after we sent you the question "Do you have an analysis on why this current has gained so much influence in the USA?," some of us discussed the issue and came up with a theory of our own:

Sooner or later all struggles become recuperated. But depending on their history and the current hegemony, the recuperation takes different forms. In Europe we have a long tradition of social-democratic and Leninist dominance within the formal workers-movement and also in the capitalist state. So in Europe almost every struggle or movement in one form or another gets recuperated by these gigantic "left-wing" institutions and/or their ideology. In the USA on the other hand (as you point out) you have an extreme anti-communist tradition, and you don't have the same traditions of an institutionalized workers-movement in power, so as a result the recuperation takes other forms as well.

The environmental movement over here probably emerged more or less in the same way as on your continent (and the amount of wilderness to defend is probably not a big factor) with one reformist wing, from the start just in it for the mediation and building of green-parties and so on, and one radical wing more in line with a direct-action movement. But the difference is (we think) that over here the radical wing got recuperated mainly into the existing Leninist perspectives and more or less disappeared from the map. In the USA there was no existing "alternative" perspective big enough to suck up the environmental movement and (which is important) other struggles connected to it. So it kept the shape of an environmental movement and adapted a straight up liberal ideology, much in the same way as parts of the revolutionary workers-movement already had done in Europe.

This theory is a simplification, but the point is that primitivism, even though it seems like it, isn't a unique phenomenon at all, it's just a different expression of recuperated struggles. Basically it fills the exact same role as Leninism and social-democracy within the "activist-movement" over here. And just as all Leninist-influenced projects and theories is not all bad, there is a gray-scale within your "activist-movement" but more across the environmental axis than the left/right axis.

Sasha: Well, I don't think that is quite the way I'd put it. I don't really see primitivists as acting as a recuperator for capitalism. But I do see it as a rather ideological take on the present. It seems to mix an activist ideology with essentialism in terms of human nature, or "primal nature." But I think they play a different role than the leftists in Leninist or social democratic parties do. But enough on primitivism.

The Batko Group: Our main sources for self labeled instructional anarchist theory has been Bonanno texts, the English magazine *Insurrection*<sup>11</sup>, publications from Elephant Editions<sup>12</sup> and

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<sup>11</sup> *Insurrection*: See "About Insurrectionary Organization" in this issue of *Dissident*.

<sup>12</sup> Elephant Editions: Anarchist publisher that has, for example, published English translations of Bonanno. See their homepage: [http://www.geocities.com/elephant\\_editions/](http://www.geocities.com/elephant_editions/)

Bratach Dubh<sup>13</sup> and stuff from KKA. But of course there is also a lot of non-anarchist theory with an insurrectional content. For example different kinds of “alternative” Marxism, like the situationists and the autonomous theories from Italy or the French ultra left. The consensus in Sweden seems to be (among the few that read him) that Bonanno is more of historical interest (as the “father” of this current) than an actual theoretical must-read. What are your theoretical influences (both anarchist and non anarchist), and what historical movements/events do you think your theoretical roots grew out of? How have your theoretical discussion developed over time, and where do you stand now? Here in Sweden the latest input of new insurrectionary theory was the publication of a Gilles Dauvé anthology last year.

Sasha: I actually found several of Bonanno’s texts and concepts very important and an inspiration. *Diavolo in Corpo*<sup>14</sup> and *Canenero*<sup>15</sup> were also very important inspirations for us. For us in KKA, I would say that Bonanno’s reading of individualism and communism as not in contradiction was very useful; for example, thinking of communism as equal access to the conditions of our existence, an overcoming of the separations that have been imposed upon us, instead of as a celebration of a naturalized conception of working class culture and life, is important. I personally found Bonanno’s *The Anarchist Tension*<sup>16</sup> very interesting in the way it defines anarchism as a tension. But even more important has been the idea of practice that developed out of the Italian experience: the centrality of attack instead of compromise (a critique of politics, therefore, and representation), informal organization, organization as growing out of struggle and affinity instead of producing struggle (which seems to be the US way of understanding organization), permanent conflictuality, revolutionary solidarity, etc.. Bonanno and others have all written about these practices. Other influences for us are varied: we were all influenced by the situationists, Freddy and Lorraine Perlman (especially *Letters of Insurgence*<sup>17</sup>), and by surrealism<sup>18</sup>. Wolfi, like Bonanno and others in Italy, is a reader of Stirner<sup>19</sup>. I would say Dauvé and some other anti-state communists were important for me: Dauvé’s *When Insurrections Die*<sup>20</sup> influenced me a lot. It was one of the first texts we put on our original website.

As to recent developments: with the primitivists seeming to completely reject class struggle these days, we have less and less in common. I would say that their critique of class struggle (as we can see in the latest issue of the *US Green Anarchy*<sup>21</sup>) is still stuck in a critique of the weak class politics of syndicalists, instead of taking class and class struggle seriously. So I am interested in continuing to look at class struggle in a more thorough way instead of just rejecting a weak

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<sup>13</sup> Bratach Dubh: Precursor to Elephant Editions that mostly published pamphlets at first.

<sup>14</sup> *Diavolo in Corpo*: An Italian insurrectionalist magazine.

<sup>15</sup> *Canenero*: An Italian insurrectionalist magazine.

<sup>16</sup> Alfredo Bonanno: “*The Anarchist Tension*”. Elephant Editions, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Probably referring to Freddy Perlman: “*Letters of Insurgents*”. Black & Red, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Surrealism is a cultural, artistic, and intellectual movement which is described by its founder André Breton as “[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” Together with Dadaism, it was one of the primary artistic and critical movements that influenced the Situationists.

<sup>19</sup> Max Stirner (1806–1856): German left Hegelian. He was of major importance to Marx’ development of historical materialism. He also inspired Nietzsche. Most famous work: “*The Ego and Its Own*”, Rebel Press, 1993. So-called “individualist anarchism” has Stirner as a key philosopher, but Stirner never called himself “anarchist”.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Dauvé: “*When Insurrections Die*”, Antagonism Press, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> *Green Anarchy*: The most prominent “anarcho-primitivist” magazine, from Oregon—USA. One of the editors is John Zerzan.

version of it, to push class struggle as the struggle to end all classes, for the self-abolition of the dispossessed, the auto-destruction of the proletariat. I have been living on and off in China and the sharpening conflicts here have helped me in this respect. Sure there are a lot of contradictions within these struggles, but we can't just step outside of them and find some pure subject to attack totality, some pure human nature untouched by society's contradictions. It doesn't exist; it never has. Struggle begins within our contradictions. Struggle is a process in which people develop deeper understandings of what they confront and how to confront it. And in this process we also learn from the struggle of others. Through this process struggle can spread and deepen. But none of this is determined; it is a very contingent process.

The Batko Group: What do insurrectionalists do? As we understand it, insurrectionary anarchists try to point out the social character of class struggle, and that anarchist shouldn't organize as a political organization separated from the class. Anarchist ought to organize and fight foremost as exploited/excluded. The question "what do insurrectionalists do?" might at first therefore seem quite strange, but still there are political anarchist groups calling themselves insurrectionalist around. So, what do these insurrectionalist groups you know about do? What ought to be their purpose vs. do any of them live up to this?

Sasha: They do many different things, of course. But the main point I would make is that insurrectionaries try to act from where they stand, instead of focusing on organizing others to act. We don't stand outside of the exploited and excluded, the dispossessed, we act as members of the dispossessed. Yet I would stress that we recognize that, while struggle begins with our own desires it expands from there through revolutionary solidarity: thus insurrectionaries often act in solidarity with others who seem to share our desires and struggles. Insurrectionary anarchists also pay close attention to how struggles spread. Thus they tend to support small actions that can be easily reproduced by others, such as acts of sabotage—although we shouldn't fetishize sabotage either—for it is these types of actions that we spread in an uncontrollable way. It is uncontrollability, and not their formally organized character, that will make struggles strong.

In the struggle against the high speed railway in Italy, insurrectionary anarchists intervened with acts against the railway, and soon a huge number of acts of sabotage against the railway spread socially well beyond the anarchist milieu. It is clear that anarchists will never be the main force within revolutionary moments, so if acts don't generalize socially and uncontrollably beyond the anarchist milieu then the struggle will fail. So the key is not to organize everyone who struggles into anarchist organizations or federations, but to intervene in ways that can help the social spread and deepening of uncontrollable revolt. And it is through becoming uncontrollable that individuals and groups will be creating new social relations beyond capitalism and the state. The targets of such struggles are all over the place. Insurrectionary anarchists have intervened in struggles over the building of railways, new factories and mines, in wildcat strikes, in solidarity with interned immigrants, against war and the building of military bases, in occupying spaces, and many more areas.

The Batko Group: You seem to have had quite a lot of contact with Italian anarchists. Can you tell us something about your view on the origin and development of the insurrectionary theory in Italy, and its status and practices today? (Due to the language barrier we sadly have almost no knowledge about the anarchist debate and contemporary theories in either Italy, Greece or even Spain.)

Sasha: Most of the contact I have in Italy were made through Wolfi. He is also the one that knows that situation the best. So maybe you should talk to him about this question. I speak

Chinese but no Italian or Greek. I did spend some time there. (There is an article in *Do or Die* that touches on the development of insurrectionary anarchism in Italy that you could look at.<sup>22</sup>) As it says, we in the US were interested in the insurrectionary anarchist critique of the movements of the 1970s. Much of the Italian insurrectionary anarchist critique of the movements of the '70s focused on the forms of organization that shaped the forces of struggle and out of this a more developed idea of informal organization grew. A critique of the authoritarian organizations of the 70s, whose members often believed they were in a privileged position to struggle as compared to the proletariat as a whole, was further refined in the struggles of the '80s, such as the early-'80s struggle against a military base that was to house nuclear weapons in Comiso, Sicily.

Anarchists were very active in that struggle, which was organized into self-managed leagues. These ad hoc, autonomous leagues took three general principles to guide the organization of struggle: permanent conflict, self-management and attack. Permanent conflict meant that the struggle would remain in conflict with the construction of the base until it was defeated without mediating or negotiating. The leagues were self-generated and self-managed: they refused permanent delegation of representatives and the professionalization of struggle. The leagues were organizations of attack on the construction of the base, not the defense of the interests of this or that group. This style of organization allowed groups to take the actions they saw as most effective while still being able to coordinate attack when useful, thus keeping open the potential of struggle to spread. It also kept the focus of organization on the goal of ending the construction of the base instead of the building of permanent organizations, for which mediating with state institutions for a share of power usually becomes the focus and limiting the autonomy of struggle the means.

As the anarchists involved in the Comiso struggle understood, one of the central reasons that social struggles are kept from developing in a positive direction is the prevalence of forms of organization that cut us off from our own power to act and close off the potential of insurrection: these are permanent organizations, those that synthesize all struggle within a single organization, and organizations that mediate struggles with the institutions of domination.

One of the things we were doing was to develop this critique into a critique of activism. In the 1990s and even more so in the last 5 years (since Seattle in 1999), US activists have loudly celebrated their role and identity as activists. This is something that we wanted to be critical of. I recognize that capitalist society pushes us into the role of the activist and organizer, but to be revolutionary means to always try to break with that role and not celebrate it and become fully identified by it, placed, controlled. Such identification is part of a process of closing the potential of uncontrollability. I would say that this is one of the most important cleavages in the US scene: between those who celebrate the role of the activist and organizer and those that try to break with it.<sup>23</sup> I feel that the insurrectionary anarchist critique and practice that was developed in Italy was a good way to discuss this problem and to think of ways to break from it. Of course, the situationists were influential on this as well. One of the main points of insurrectionary anarchism is that insurrection is a process of becoming uncontrollable—the insurrection is the moment when the state begins to lose control and also its own coherence. The whole activist dichotomy of organizer/organized, of course, fights against that process.

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<sup>22</sup> See "Insurrectionary Anarchy!" in *Do or Die* issue 10.

<sup>23</sup> For more reading we recommend the article "The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism" by J. Kellstadt (can be found on the internet).

The Batko Group: Do you think Bonanno's analysis of "post-industrial" capitalism is accurate? The social outbursts in the early nineteenths, with the L.A. riots<sup>24</sup>, Poll tax in the UK<sup>25</sup>, the street protests in France<sup>26</sup> and so on, seemed to confirm the thesis of the excluded, but what about today? Did these riots, social outbursts and insurrections in your opinion fail to communicate or spread?

Sasha: I would say that Bonanno captured some aspects of the changes going on within capitalism. Class relations changed a lot beginning in the late 1970s. The shift from a Fordist regime of accumulation to neoliberal or flexible accumulation did mean that a lot more people came to be socially and economically excluded, expelled from the normal operations of capitalism. And the excluded often are more likely to take part in rebellious activity. Also, in *From Riot to Insurrection*<sup>27</sup> I think Bonanno is right to pay attention to the role that technology plays in the disciplining of the work force in this shift. Workers today are not only excluded from the benefits of capitalist restructuring, but it is harder and harder for people to understand how society even operates, as they have been excluded from the technical knowledge that constructs production, workers have been deskilled again. This is linked to the increased atomization of both our daily lives, we split from each other, and of the production process. All of this can make it harder to imagine a different world. Yet I think Bonanno also overestimated the ability of capitalism to expel the worker—remembering that this text was produced something like 20 years ago.

Other than Bonanno, who was looking at this shift rather early in the process, not many anarchists have tried to think about what this shift in capitalism means for anti-capitalist rebellion; instead, they simply suggest we need to do more of the same, applying organizational forms from a different era, when the relationship between the dispossessed and capital was very different. An organizational structure that attempts to synthesize the struggles of the excluded into a single organization, organizations that often take the factory as their model, will fail. We will find that the struggles of the dispossessed, when they are active, will always be ahead of such organizations.

Instead of trying to synthesize struggles into a permanent anarchist organization or attempt to have the organization produce struggle, we need to see how struggles grow organization. This makes us ask what class struggle is for us. To me, class struggle is not, as it is for many leftists, about the proletariat taking power and managing the affairs of society; it is not a celebration of proletarian culture, such as we had in the USSR. Class struggle, for me, is the struggle for the auto-destruction, the self-abolition, of the dispossessed class; it is the struggle to end the existence of all classes as such.

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<sup>24</sup> The LA Riots: The 1992 Los Angeles riots, also known as the LA riots, the Rodney King uprising or the Rodney King riots, were sparked on April 29, 1992 when a mostly white jury acquitted four police officers accused in the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King. The riot continued for three days and were crushed by a massive police and military operation. See "The Rebellion in Los Angeles: The Context of a Proletarian Uprising" in *Aufheben* issue 1.

<sup>25</sup> Poll Tax Riots: riots in London 1990 which started when the cops attacked a big demonstration against the so-called "Poll Tax," an attempted tax reform introduced by Margaret Thatcher. The tax said that "all shall pay equal" which was the Thatcherist way of redistributing wealth—the rich pay less, the poor pay more. A little comparison: the duke of Westminster paid £10 255 in taxes before and £417 after the Poll Tax. His probably underpaid gardener was also obligated to pay £417. The Poll Tax's official name was the Community Charge, but it was renamed Poll Tax after a tax reform in 1381 which led to a peasant rebellion. See Danny Burns: "Poll tax rebellion". AK Press, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Street protests in France 1996 against the Neoliberal restructuring. See "The Class Struggles in France" in *Aufheben* issue 5.

<sup>27</sup> Alfredo Bonanno: "From Riot to Insurrection". Elephant Editions, 1998.



So the question of how a riot of the excluded, of which we have seen a lot over the last decade, turns into an insurrection is very important. Living in China for several year out of the last decade has allowed me to watch this shift happen in another social and political context; this same process is happening as they shift from their state capitalist version of Fordism to a more flexible regime of accumulation and a lot of people, especially rural residents, are being excluded. Increasingly there are riots taking place, and they are growing in size as well—some up towards 100,000 participants and continuing for several days. People active in these events are beginning to communicate with each other—this is an important activity that we can take part in. Methods of struggle are spreading between areas both through direct communication and through imitation. Some of these struggles seem to be developing more intermediate aim. The anti-neoliberal-capitalist riots in Latin America also spread and deepened. In the 1990s in Europe and the US there was a large amount of circulation between these riots. And this process is not over, even if things in the west seem to have quieted down somewhat at the moment. None of this, of course, happens without a response from capital, and we can see neo-conservatism in the US as a response to the contradictions of neo-liberalism.

How do pro-revolutionaries such as ourselves take part in these struggles, in the insurrectionary process? We can neither replace the struggle of the dispossessed (for we will always be a minority within the dispossessed) nor can we stand outside of it to organize it or synthesize the struggle into our organizations. This is the difficult position we are in. So we have to find ways of acting within the struggles of the dispossessed, of communicating methods we feel are appropriate—both through action and words—of pushing struggles forwards in an insurrectionary direction. Certain types of organizational forms and practices block this process, and we need to be critical of them. And we can note that these organizational forms and practices are often linked up to a perspective that does not fully leave capitalism behind—this is no accident. Leftist and activists practices are really part of the left wing of capitalism—seeking, in the end, to self-manage capitalism in a more human and organized fashion. And this often involves a nostalgia for Fordist capitalism.

The Batko Group: Even if Bonanno is correct in his analysis (about the spread of struggle in the social terrain and so on) isn't it also possible to argue that the shift of battleground from the workplace to the streets was a result of us (as a global working class) being pushed back to a much more defensive position as result of the capitalist restructuring? What do you think about the argument that in order to regain momentum in the class-struggle we must find a way back to the workplace? Not because of any romanticism about "real workers" or anything like that, but because that is the place were we are. That's our reality were we (consciously or unconsciously) are struggling with our comrades every day, and as long as the revolutionary struggle is fought separate from the point of exploitation (as in the globalisation-movement) we can't really make an impact as revolutionaries. We just reinforce the division between politics (as something you do in your spare time) and what we perceive as "real life" (work).

Sasha: Well, I don't think that is the only place that we are. But I do agree that a split between politics as something one does in there spare time (or worse, what one does for a living) separate from everyday life is a big problem. This is, of course, one of the points of anti-politics. Work, however, is also a separated activity. We need to overcome both, and to do that is part of the insurrectionary or revolutionary process itself. I also do agree that anti-globalization globe trotting is a problem—again it becomes either a vacation or a job. I think the idea of struggle spreading across the social terrain is exactly a critique of these positions. It is when it become a separated

activity, separated from everyday life, that it become weak and more controllable. And that is also one of the roots of activism.

The Batko Group: You write that “[l]eftist and activists practices are really part of the left wing of capitalism—seeking, in the end, to self-manage capitalism in a more human and organized fashion. And this often involves a nostalgia for Fordist capitalism.” We agree with that. But both your projects and ours, started as projects WITHIN and FOR this left-wing of capitalism. Now we and other groups are moving away from activism and leftism, out from the bubble, in to reality. But it isn’t the working class, or the dispossessed, that reads our papers and discuss our theories. So how do we spread our theories to the working class? And do we need to? One idea some of us have is that perhaps we do not need to further the political project, meaning not develop the political organization, but focusing on development of the class struggle per se.

Sasha: Yes, we all begin within capitalism. We are trying to break out. But we are also of the dispossessed. At the same time, you are right that the working class in general don’t read our papers. The point of journals like KKA was not, however, propaganda. It was more to find like minded people, people we had a certain degree of affinity with, and communicate with them, make connections with them, and maybe move onto project with them. We aren’t taking the role of waking up the working class. That said, I’m not sure I understand your last statement: what does “focusing on the development of the class struggle per se” mean? If I hear more from you on this perhaps we can discuss this point further.

The Batko Group: We think that the real subsumption of labor under capital is a central issue here. If the capital-relation has colonized the entire social organism and made all social activities productive, that requires of us as communists to deepen our critique of synthesis. In that sense the insurrectional perspective makes perfect sense and becomes an essential tool. The organization of attack, the unification of organizational form and direct action, is the direct assault on value. This, then, means that political organization has come to an end. The point now is to dissolve (capitals) organization (of life). So, instead of furthering the political project, which has come to an end with the real subsumption and insurrectionary organization of attack, the focus should be on the class struggle, the attacks on value. However, while these attacks become more “lethal” to capital and operates as negations we know that these negations will either be recuperated and lead to reforms or they’ll get overcome by capital. As we already know, capitals limit is capital itself, which is class struggle. So, as the real subsumption and organizations of attack increases the blows against capital, the (temporary) negations, we now need to develop the class struggle, or rather, to transcend class struggle. Attack and with-draw, in order to constitute communist relations. We see this as a way to go beyond the negation/affirmation dichotomy.

Sasha: Ok. I hope I am reading you right here. If not, certainly correct me. This seems somewhat influenced by Negri and Hardt’s thesis in *Empire*. And I am pretty suspect of some key aspects of it. With Negri there is the idea that the political project of Leninism made sense until the 1970s when everything changed and now we are in a new period. And what you have said above seems to mirror this sentiment. “The political project ... has come to an end,” you say. But I would ask if it ever made any sense at all. I would say that the political project was always a recuperative project. That goes for Leninism, Maoism, Trotskyism and any form of leftism, including, unfortunately, much of anarchism.

I do agree, however, that things have changed since the 1970s. Capitalism certainly has moved from formal to real subsumption for the most part—a shift from extensive capture to intensification, a social deepening of capital. Although there are increasing numbers of people who are

excluded from this process and pushed into the human warehouses in the form of slums or rural poverty. But I don't see this as meaning a shift from political to anti-political struggle. I feel anti-political struggle always made more sense for those trying to end the domination (formal or real) of capitalism than political struggle. Political struggle, of course, always was an attempt to moderate capitalism—it was always and is always a struggle to control the development of capitalism and control it's the distribution of its benefits. I would say, therefore, that we should have been developing the class struggle of the proletariat to autodestruct from the beginning of capitalism. In fact, I believe that anarchy and communism has always been possible, even before the existence of capitalism.

I do think that attack on capitalism is different in the period of real as compared to formal subsumption. During the period of formal subsumption, struggles were often split between anti-imperialist struggles and anti-capitalist struggles in countries that were under real subsumption. This is really no longer true. I feel this opens the potential for greater connections around the globe. Struggles can become global much quicker under the present conditions. Revolutionary solidarity attacks more directly the heart of capitalism under these conditions. I would like to hear more by what you mean about overcoming the negation/affirmation dichotomy and more on what you think has changed with the global shift to real subsumption.

The Batko Group: When we define capitalism we include primitive accumulation, formal subsumption, real subsumption and so on. So when we talk about real subsumption we do not talk about it as a strict periodization. All these historical tendencies within capitalism are just tendencies. We do, as you say, have tendencies of primitive accumulation and formal subsumption today, even though it's real subsumption that is most dominant. The political projects, such as platformism and so on, are products of the formal subsumption. It's natural when the capital-relation is forced upon us, and doesn't seem to occupy all aspects of social life, to try to establish autonomous areas and fight capitalism as something intrusive. Sure, it can be argued that this wasn't the "right" solution, but we have to consider the material conditions which within these political projects evolved. Otherwise we fall into voluntarism. It was the political projects of the formal subsumption that pushed capitalism into real subsumption; hence, the political project has now come to an end.

Political struggles were always struggles for power. While the Marxists saw the state as something to be conquered, the anarchists saw it as the biggest enemy. Today, however, state and capital cannot so easily be separated anymore, and this is also a result of the real subsumption. Political struggles makes no sense. The material conditions for political struggle is no more. So, we don't justify Leninism, or platformism, or any thing like that, we are not interested in moral considerations on contra-factual statements. What we are saying is that anti-political struggle is the only thing that makes sense today. We think it's important to point this out. Otherwise we easily fall into voluntarism.

We see the anti-political, insurrectionary project as potentially overcoming the negation/affirmation-dichotomy for two reasons. First off, the perspective of permanent conflictuality negates the capital-relation constantly through faceless resistance and non-mediating organization (with affinity groups formed in struggle). But we know that negation isn't enough. However, with the unification of direct action and organizational form (the organization of attack) unmediated affinity is formed between people, but a temporary and fleeing, you could call it "rhizomatic," affinity. We see this as a constituting communistic activity. It attacks and with-draws from capi-

talism. We act in a cramped space, trying to make the impossible possible. It isn't a new ideal to be realized because it isn't satisfying desires, but rather constantly producing new desires.

Sasha: I see much better now what your argument is, although we still have points of disagreement. Also, I know platformism is something that you are grappling with, but for me it isn't something I dwell too much upon. I would say that there is still very much a material basis for the political project you talk of even under real subsumption or domination. First, I don't see that platformism was really ever a product of being outside of the real domination of capital. Its material basis was always inside and always political. In other words, I don't see that political project as a project of formal domination versus real domination. The specific political project you talk of was always of real domination in the first place. I would say it was always operating within a society in which the labor process was transformed and fully dominated by capital.

Second, the material basis for the political project, of whatever type, is always there under capitalism—there will always be managers of revolt ready and willing to represent us and then call due their benefits, to, in the end, save capitalism. Platformism, of course, has never really had the chance to play much of a role, political or otherwise; and we don't know what would happen if platformists or platformist organizations had such a chance. Perhaps their organizations of representation and management would dissolve into a general social insurrection; perhaps they would attempt to tighten the reins of management. But there is just as much a basis for that today as there was in the past—assuming we reached a more revolutionary moment.

Anyhow, political recuperation of struggle is not the cause of the weakness of revolutionary tendencies so much as a sign of the weakness itself. Recuperation works exactly because our revolution is manageable, controllable. Becoming uncontrollable is the insurrectionary force. And this is, of course, the problem with specialization, especially militant or military specialization and its spectacularization—it is so much more controllable. What we need instead is social generalization. Again, Spain is an example of this problem.

The way you say that “political struggles make no sense” under the conditions of real subsumption seems to carry within it a judgment upon the political struggles of the past as if they made same sense. You may not want to get into such a historical argument but I think your words do seem to contain it. And I think it isn't something we should avoid. Is that voluntarism? I don't think so. Anyhow, I think we should be very critical of determinism as it is (we don't really have time to get into the problematics of that dichotomy—perhaps some future time!). You say that now that formal domination is mostly complete “anti-political struggle is the only thing that makes sense...” My point is that from a revolutionary perspective anti-political struggle is all that ever made sense. Political struggle simply never was revolutionary in the sense of moving towards a world without a state, wage labor, work, classes, capitalism, etc. We can see that as clearly in the moment of Russia as in Spain.

What seems to be happening in your above schema, is that you see the political project as being “progressive” (thus the critique of “voluntarism”?) during a certain era, but no longer; it has become regressive now. Or at least I think you imply that—correct me if I am wrong. I, however, don't see the negation of capitalism in such a progressive, teleological schema. Instead, I see it as a radical break, as ending the progressive trajectory itself. During the era when platformism came into existence, I would argue, there was as much of a material basis for this break (a break from the political project which is also a break from capitalism and all that it entails) as there is now.

I would say that the state was never as autonomous as you seem to be implying it was, say a century ago. And the case of Russia and Leninism illustrates this quite well. So the state is not something we can use in the revolutionary project; it isn't now and it wasn't then. Certainly its integration was different than today, but autonomous, never. The conquering of the state links up with a progressivist view. The state is used to develop the forces of production in the place of the market and individual capitalists—looking at Russia or China, we have seen very clearly where that leads. Delinking is a form of developmentalism, whether Maoist or Leninist or Stalinist or nationalist.

The Batko Group: What would you say is the biggest strengths and weaknesses of insurrectionalist theories? Our impression from this talk and your writings in *Killing King Abacus* is that you seem to have a broad range of influences. Are there any particular theories you consider to be of special interest? Apart from the anarchist insurrectionalists our biggest influence is Dauvé and Camatte. One reason is because they relate the need for insurrectionary organizing (even though they don't use the same concepts) to the real subsumption. This has also led us to realize that we need to reread Marx. In this sense insurrectionalist theories sometimes feel "incomplete" and need to be complemented. What aspects in insurrectionalist theories would you say we need to be critical of, and what needs to be developed in your opinion?

I certainly read Dauvé and Camatte as well. Dauvé's newer writings have been an influence in particular. I think what some people miss in insurrectionary writings is the strategic take on our present situation. Insurrectionary writings focus on the present and on revolt. There is less on an understanding of our changing circumstances. This allows some to view insurrection in a very a-historic way. And people tend to just chase after insurrections wherever they occur, without any understanding of a general condition of these uprisings.

Although, Bonanno has done some writing that push against this tendency, as we have already discussed. More thinking on our present conditions and how they affect our attack and its organization would be useful, yes. This does seem to be something that people within the anti-political/insurrectionary milieu are doing. But I would be wary of arguments that say that everything had changed at some certain point in time, such as the 1970s. Real subsumption is important, but it doesn't change everything. That, too, is a rather a-historical perspective.

Also, I would say that there really isn't anything called "insurrectionalist theory" per se. Insurrection is a process of becoming uncontrollable, not a branch of theory. Insurrectionary anarchism, if such a thing exists, is a tendency that discusses this process and takes part in its practice in a way that attempts to consciously push things further. People like Bonanno have been very useful in this discussion, but so have countless others who are unnamed or not named "insurrectionary anarchists," at least.

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