

A Critique of San Francisco's Mission Yuppie Eradication Project

The artist formerly known as Nestor Makhno

December 11, 2013

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A re-examination of an anti-capitalist effort against the gentrification of San Francisco in the late 1990's.

“SEE THE BREAKING GLASS, BENEATH THE UNDERPASS...”

By the end of the 20th century the Mission District was one of the last working class neighborhoods in San Francisco. From the 1840's onward the Mission had been a low-income prole quarter; the people with money always wanted to live on the hills. The neighborhood was predominantly Irish until the early 1960's, it became a mostly Latino and Spanish-speaking area after that, and the wars in Central America in the 1980's led many people to relocate to the Mission from El Salvador and Nicaragua. The Mission is a flat basin surrounded by hills on three sides, and San Francisco's unique weather system of microclimates makes it the warmest and sunniest part of town; the sky is often blue here when the rest of SF is under the fog.

I moved to the Mission in 1988. The Mission was as far away from suburban shopping mall America as I could get without leaving the United States altogether. As long as I have to live in this country I can't imagine living anywhere else. I have an intense personal stake in the survival of the place I call home.

Unfortunately when white *déclassés* like me move into a mostly non-white prole area, upwardly mobile wannabe bohos tag along in our wake. This process accelerated with the the 1990's information technology revolution and the metastatic expansion of internet companies in the San Francisco Bay Area. Expensive restaurants rapidly colonized the former light industrial corridor along the Mission's Valencia Street. Internet start-ups opened offices in the middle of residential blocks and in old warehouse spaces. Luxury housing complexes called 'live work' lofts popped up all over the neighborhood. With aggressive help from the police, numerous Latino working men's drinking joints were converted into retro-style ultra-caucasian hipster cocktail lounges.

The internet boom led to a Bay Area-wide real estate boom, and that was bad news in a big way for the rental housing needs of the city's wage-earning class. The Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco estimated that by October 1998 evictions city-wide had doubled over the previous two years. Vacancy rates fell to below 1%. Rents went up an average of 30% in '98. At a time when the minimum wage was \$5.75 an hour, studio apartments in the Mission were going for \$1,000 a month, one bedroom apartments went for \$1,200 a month and up and the prices were climbing. Owner move-in evictions were up 300%, displacing more than 1,300 households per year; a third of those evicted were elderly people. In this internet-spawned city-wide housing crisis the relatively low rent Mission District became a key target of real estate speculators, the dot-com industry, the Chamber of Commerce, the police department and City Hall.

Everyone I knew was talking about what was happening, my friends and neighbors, strangers I ran into at random on the street and at work downtown, people at the hippie collective natural foods store, people at cafes, taquerias and bars. Most had a similar gloomy assessment; the Mission was doomed. San Francisco was being remade as a Disneyland for the cyber-bourgeoisie – it was well on the way to becoming the first 100% gentrified city in the US. Everyone making less than sixty grand a year was going to be driven out of town.

And one very in-your-face symptom of all this was an influx of numerous expensive late model automobiles taking up parking space in our formerly rough tough neighborhood.

In a de-politicized culture rampaging market forces can't be confronted effectively with conventional political language. So a logical first step in an effort to foment resistance was to cover the walls of the Mission with a thousand photocopied posters calling for working people to resist the bourgeois invasion by vandalizing yuppie cars.

The Mission Yuppie Eradication Project began in the summer of 1998. I'd get a small group of people together and we'd spend two or three hours hanging several hundred posters with wallpaper paste. It took only three or four nights of meticulous effort to get the message out to roughly 60,000 people, 60% of whom are renters, in this one square mile neighborhood. These posters go torn down more frequently than other posters some of us had done in the past, so I kept going back and hanging more, again and again, until it was apparent that the first part of the message had reached a saturation point.

The posters communicated an extremist message in clear, simple language, avoiding Marxist or anarchist buzz-words. I described the process of gentrification without using the word "gentrification." And these posters had a much greater impact than any other effort I've been involved in because they targeted cars. Targeting cars drew attention to the problem of displacement like nothing else could because nothing is more important to an American's sense of who they are in the world than their car.

I hate cars. I hate their noise and their smell. Cars poison and deform everything. The private automobile has been central to the rise of global consumer capitalism. Automobile urbanism has led to the wholesale destruction of community, particularly working class community, and to the resulting pervasive atomization and anomie of modern life. And cars aren't just an obnoxious nuisance and a socially-imposed necessity; the automobile is one of the most murderous social constructs of all time, "...a pandemic cataclysm institutionalized in all industrial societies that kills hundreds of thousand of people each year and injures millions" (J.G. Ballard, introduction to 'Crash.')

In a fight over social space the trashing of flash cars can have a lot in common with spontaneous sabotage in the workplace:

"Since these acts are outside the boundaries of all economic planning, they are also outside the boundaries of "reason." Newspapers have repeatedly defined them as "anti-social" and "mad": the danger appears important enough for society to try to suppress it...In the silence of the proletariat, sabotage appears as the first stammer of human speech."

(Gilles Dauve, 'Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement.')

Between June 1998 and early 1999 a revolving small group of people put up roughly 1100 of these first anti-yuppie car posters. Based on conversations I took part in and overheard, statements by people at public meetings on gentrification and growing news media coverage it was clear that the posters were being read, and that they were beginning to provoke a response.

I used copies of the first newspaper articles and copies of the first poster to contact a criminal defense attorney who agreed to represent me pro bono in any future difficulties I might have with the law.

This is extremely important: get a politically reliable defense attorney, an individual who you can trust and who will be energetic in going to bat for you, before you get into trouble...

SOON TO BE PICTURESQUE RUINS

The second yuppie eradication project poster was a series of caustic anti-restaurant reviews of four then-new yuppie magnets attracting settlers to the 'hood. The title of the poster is lifted from Situationist graffiti on the walls of the stock exchange in Paris during the revolt in May 1968.

The first poster was only in English. That was a major drawback for trying to communicate in a predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood, although it was clear that the predominantly English-speaking yuppies, realtors, landlords and cops were reading them. 'Soon to be Picturesque Ruins' was in both Spanish and English.

I wallpaper-pasted about 750 of these second posters on three nights in April and May 1999 and got arrested shortly before dawn on the last night of postering. While I was in custody SFPD cops executed a search warrant on the apartment I shared with my girlfriend and seized my computer, camera equipment, file cabinets, a tape recorder, a mountaineering axe, materials for a 16mm. film I was working on — they took everything I'd written, photographed or filmed. They seized more than 80 books, mostly on political themes. For some reason the police were especially interested in everything in the apartment related in any way to France, not just anarchist and ultra-left publications, but a photocopy of an essay about Stendhal, two copies of Malraux's novel 'Man's Fate' and my French 101 workbook. They even confiscated a picture of Patrick McGoohan as 'The Prisoner.'

The cops also got my girlfriend fired from her temp job downtown.

The following article was characteristic of much of that summer and fall's subsequent media coverage:

San Francisco Examiner, Friday May 21, 1999

POLICE ARREST MISSION'S ANTI-YUPPIE CRUSADER

They say they found books on bomb-making

Police investigating a Mission District man who has been posting flyers around the neighborhood urging people to vandalize so-called yuppie vehicles and upscale restaurants said they found bomb-making manuals in his apartment.

But the man says he is innocent and his supporters say he is being targeted because of his political beliefs.

The suspect, whose last name is Keating, was arrested last Friday while he was pasting up the latest in a series of flyers by the Mission Yuppie Eradication Project, which Keating describes as an underground anarchist organization, Mission Station police Capt. Greg Suhr said. Keating was charged with making terrorist threats, but the charges have been dropped pending further investigation, police said.

Neither police nor Keating, who goes by the pseudonym Nestor Makhno, would disclose Keating's full name.

Keating was released from jail on Saturday. He said in a telephone interview that he is innocent.

"My attorneys know if we go to court we will completely trounce them," he said.

Suhr said police are going through “boxes and boxes and boxes” of evidence from Keating’s apartment, including the recipe for making an acid bomb, as well as Keating’s computer.

Anti-yuppie posters by the Yuppie Eradication Project began appearing in the Mission late last year. The latest posters, seen on various telephone polls, mailboxes and utility boxes around the Mission over the past two or three weeks, call for the destruction of four Mission District bars and restaurants.

“During the next major urban riots, we must attack and destroy the following yuppie bars and restaurants in the Mission,” the flyer reads, in caustic but intelligent prose. It lists the Beauty Bar — described as “neighborhood enemy number one,” Tokyo Go-Go, Blowfish Sushi and Circadia, a Starbucks coffee shop.

“Be creative. Take action. Don’t get caught,” the flyers advise.

“That really made me nervous, because people can kind of take that to heart and really do s- -,” said Aaron Buhrz, co-owner of the Beauty Bar, a seven-month-old bar at Mission and 19th streets with a beauty salon theme that offers manicures and professional make-overs along with drinks.

“In this neighborhood, they can and they will,” he said.

Earlier posters urged people to vandalize “yuppie” cars, such as sport utility vehicles, by keying them and slashing their tires — letting their owners know they aren’t welcome in the Mission.

In the two or three weeks since the latest posters appeared, none of the four targeted restaurants has been harmed, although all experienced vandalism in the months prior to that, their owners said. Buhrz, 28, said the Beauty Bar was tagged some time ago with graffiti that read, “Leave the Mission or else.” Ken Lowe, owner of Tokyo Go-Go, said his restaurant was plastered several months ago with about two dozen signs that read, “Target the yuppies,” with a picture of a bull’s eye. None understood why their restaurants — which they view as a plus for the neighborhood — would be seen as a threat. “All these merchants down here are normal people, and for people to say negative things about us without knowing who we are — I was bummed,” Lowe, 35, said.

Blowfish Sushi is described in the anti-yuppie posters as a place that “brings rich pigs to the Mission and offers nothing to working and poor people here.”

Its owner, Jason Teplitsky, said he viewed the flyers as a prank by “a few loose cannons.”

“It obviously makes you angry that people so misunderstand what is happening in the world that they would think that actions such as the ones they’re proposing would solve any of the problems or would even be relevant to the cause that they’re perpetrating,” said Teplitsky, a native of the Ukraine — the same region the original Nestor Makhno, an anarchist, lived earlier this century.

“Just because people have money does not necessarily mean they are evil,” said Teplitsky, 30, who insists he had no intention of abandoning his location.

Keating's supporters said he would not make bombs, would not harm people and is being targeted because of his anarchist beliefs.

"(The police) took all his books," said James Tracy of the Mission-based Eviction Defense Network, who has known Keating for 10 years. The man he calls a friend is a "passionate, caring individual" who has gone on record saying that he does not advocate hurting people, Tracy said. "He's going after the property, not the people."

But the real issue is not Keating, Tracy said.

"The Mission Yuppie Eradication Project's efforts are a symbol of a lot of long-term residents' frustration with the parasitic institutions, and the fear that goes along with knowing that you and your loved ones are being pushed from the neighborhood," said Tracy, whose organization works to help tenants displaced through mass evictions or hotel fires.

"The issue is the fact that people under a certain income level are not going to be able to live in The City after too long. Poor people and the working class are just going to be out."

In the weeks to come there was a phenomenal, and for me, wholly unanticipated amount of news media coverage; print, radio and TV, local, national and international. After my arrest both of San Francisco's daily newspapers ran editorials on the same day denouncing the Yuppie Eradication Project, with the San Francisco Chronicle demanding "a stiff jail term" for the person or persons behind the poster campaign and the accompanying wave of property destruction. But I didn't end up doing any real jail time for this, and the melodramatic raid on our apartment and the police accusing me of being a terrorist helped draw attention on my terms to the market-driven housing crisis in San Francisco. Before I put those posters up the mood among local people was a typically American one of total resignation in the face of market forces, as if all the bad news around us was an act of God or a function of the laws of physics. As the posters hit the walls working people started fighting back. The posters were an important part of this process. I base that not only on my own wishful thinking but on what many people told me, including people who were quite hostile to my perspectives. The following summer and fall we had demonstrations, public meetings, a few largely symbolic occupations of places where evictions were taking place, and a fair amount of after dark direct action. And I used the global news media attention focused on the gentrification of the Mission as a soapbox for a larger anti-capitalist perspective. My message had struck home.

I think the police response to the Yuppie Eradication Project was a measure of how that first anti-car poster really did frighten and piss off bourgeois types who were moving in on the Mission and cashing in on the dot-com crisis. The United States bourgeoisie is very arrogant — but they also scare easy. They aren't accustomed to encountering any opposition at all, let alone the spectre of one with claws. And the second poster was more aggressive than the first; more mocking, combative and funny. An article about the housing crisis and the Yuppie Eradication Project in the London UK 'Independent' grudgingly praised the 'mordant wit' displayed in the second poster. Humor can be a formidable weapon in the revolutionary struggle! If you can elicit laughs you might not change a person's mind, but that person will be much, much more likely to remember your message.

FUTURE SQUATS OF SAN FRANCISCO!

Several groups of people got together in June 2000 and we put up many copies of these anti-condo posters. With the help of some co-workers I got the text for the poster translated into Spanish and Tagalog. That was the first time I produced ultra-left propaganda in a language of the Phillipines.

HERE ARE A FEW WAYS TO WELCOME RICH PEOPLE TO THE MISSION...

The graphics for this poster were lifted from the famous CIA Nicaraguan Contra sabotage manuel of the 1980's. I replaced the images of Sandinista military vehicles with posh cars. The original CIA version was more crazy and violent; the ice pick blade was the length of a dueling foil, and the CIA suggested using the ice pick to puncture gas tanks, which doesn't seem like such a bright idea, so I used white-out to crop it.

Part of my reason for writing about these posters is to offer them as a template for uncompromising anti-gentrification action in other cities and towns. This poster has nothing Mission-specific to it, so it can be easily taken and applied elsewhere.

VOTING CHANGES NOTHING

A friend and I put up several hundred of these in Spanish and English along the route of the Mission District's annual Cinco de Mayo parade the night before the parade in May 2001.

The Mission Yuppie Eradication Project posters were effective because they were shocking. The first poster delivered its message on a visceral level that opened the door to an increasingly complex message in the subsequent posters. I think the Yuppie Eradication Project succeeded in a small way in tapping into a deep and spreading discontentment with life in commodity society. The posters succeeded on the basic level that anti-capitalist agitprop efforts should aim at; they helped define a contemporary social problem in clear class conflict terms, and tried to move the fight away from the atomization and powerlessness of the democratic process toward some kind of large-scale direct action. Exactly what form that large-scale direct action would take wasn't clear to me — (more on that in a moment...)

My poster campaign elicited a hostile response from work-within-the-system housing activists who were pissed off that I was poaching on their turf. Bay Area housing activists have a decades-long track record of doggedly pursuing losing strategies, and they obviously felt at home with this in the face of the dot-com fueled crisis of the late 1990's, a crisis they were incapable of analyzing, let alone responding effectively to.

Organizations like the San Francisco Tenants Union provide useful info and assistance on an individual level, for example in eviction fights. Some activists give lip service to an awareness that capitalist social relations are the source of the housing crisis — homelessness is first and foremost a function of commodity relations — but a strategy based on uncompromising antagonism to the market economy is always lacking. For them effective action amounts to an occasional harmless and easily ignored demonstration, a lawsuit here or there, and hustling working people into voting.

In portraying voting as a valid form of collective action, ostensible radicals play capital's game on capital's terms. They always lose. And when they lose they reinforce the idea among hard-pressed proles that all forms of collective action are a waste of time, that the way society is organized can't be changed, and that wage-earners shouldn't waste their limited time and energy trying to fight back.

Housing organizations that advocate or claim to advocate on behalf of tenants in San Francisco rely on the city government and/or foundation grants for their funding. This funding pays the rent on their office space, and sometimes pays the wages for one or two staff members or organizers. They would be out of operation without this funding. This constricts their range of action and inevitably defines what they do and what they are all about.

In the face of many decades of failure of a work-within-the-system perspective, and it's inability to deliver the goods in both small ways and large, the field is wide open for a wholly different kind of autonomous direct action response, outside of and against the conventional, legitimate decision-making structures of democratic capitalism.

MAJOR LIMITS OF THE YUPPIE ERADICATION PROJECT...

With a small revolving circle of people, I succeeded in broadcasting an anti-capitalist message in a big way against a market-generated housing and social space crisis in one neighborhood in one city. The fundamental methods of communication used here were sound and they can be a point of departure for better efforts in the future.

1. My use of language and my sense of timing were spot-on. I think I said the right thing at the right time for the effort to have the strongest initial impact that it could. But there was no follow through.

When you initiate a subversive action it may or may not be necessary to have a well-worked out plan for where you hope your efforts will go. Spontaneity is important, but it has its limits. You cannot create an enduring presence for a radically new way of seeing things without a sustained commitment. You have to publicly and vocally fight for what you believe in — and demonstrate staying power in this. Aggressively asserting your antagonism to the present state of things doesn't make you a recuperator or a Leninist. Don't be shy. False modesty is counter-revolutionary.

I started by targetting the material possessions of the bourgeois invaders; their cars, the entertainment spots that drew them to the Mission District, then their luxury housing complexes. Given the mass psychology of contemporary consumer society this was exactly the right place to begin; waving the red flag of property destruction put the ball in play quickly and dramatically. As the posters became notorious I should have supplemented the poster campaign with a strategy for further action. I didn't do this. I didn't have a clear idea of where to go next, and I didn't develop one as events unfolded. Getting arrested briefly clipped my wings, but it doesn't explain my lack of a follow through, and it points to another problem.

2. I was a minority of one. The Mission Yuppie Eradication Project ended up being me and me alone. Friends who I was involved with in earlier similiar efforts had already been driven out of the city by the skyrocketing cost of rental housing. Other folks helped out here and there, hanging posters with me once or twice but almost never more than twice, and this left me the only active individual on the extreme wing of the anti-gentrification fight. I was totally outnumbered by the work-within-the-system, electoral politics crowd. A group of committed, inventive and energetic extremists might have been able to come up with better ideas than I did.

3. The poster with the most visceral and primitive message, the first one, the anti-car one, got the biggest reaction. As the message grew more complex the impact faded.

4. My focus was too narrow. I concentrated solely on the Mission District. My anti-gentrification effort happened at the high point of my love affair with the neighborhood I live in, and my passion blinded me to opportunities I might have otherwise taken advantage of. I should have exploited media coverage that came my way to get out more of a city-wide message against rent and landlords and the larger issue of housing as a commodity.

Under the best circumstances a subversive effort can have a “bleed-through” effect. What starts in one collective conflict between wage slaves and capital can spread or cross-pollinate into other everyday life situations, even ones that don’t appear to be related to the initial issue.

5. The Yuppie Eradication Project drew a surprising amount of news media attention to the dot-com, displacement and social space conflict in the Mission. At first I had some qualms about dealing with journalists, but I got over them quickly. Whenever I talked to journalists I drove home the fact that the real estate bonanza resulting from the dot-com boom was wrecking many people’s lives and ruining our neighborhood. I said that elected officials, the police department and city planners were tools of the real estate industry. I repeatedly emphasized that market relations were the source of the problem, that market forces cannot be resisted by voting and that direct action involving widespread property destruction was the way to go.

Authentic enemies of capitalism are usually against having anything to do with the news media, for obvious good reasons. But like it or not if you do something that gets noticed in the larger society around you the bourgeois media are going to turn their attention on your acts — and on you. We can endlessly debate the morality of this but there is no escaping it. If actions you are involved in draw attention from journalists you can simply ignore them, and in effect pretend the news media doesn’t exist. You will be the only one doing this, and your enemies will take full advantage of it. Or you can try to do a judo throw on them and use the capitalist disinformation apparatus to help you get your message out. There’s no iron law on avoiding the media versus trying to use them to get your message out. It might work, and it might blow up in your face. I took a chance. It worked out okay this time.

After those first anti-car posters came out news reports mentioning the posters appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, the SF Examiner, and for some reason in the Washington Post as well. A columnist at one of SF’s two free weekly tabloids, Laurel Wellman, wrote five or six articles and interviewed me once or twice before the second posters appeared. Laurel’s reporting helped to draw subsequent widespread media attention to the crisis in the Mission.

On a smaller note, before my arrest with Laurel and other journalists I used the pseudonym Nestor Makhno. This was an obvious choice, and as they say in fiction writing workshops my handle did double-duty, keeping me anonymous and drawing attention instead to a undeservedly obscure revolutionary hero and killer of landlords. I also admired the anonymity practiced by Amadeo Bordiga in refusing to sign his name to the articles he wrote for publications of the Italian communist left. Bordiga was adamant that the revolutionary effort should be a collective endeavor of anonymous equals, and that’s what I was hoping for in this little anti-gentro fight.

In pre-arrest interviews when journalists asked how many of us there were I said the yuppie eradication project was made up of “more than one, less than one hundred.” I did that to keep real estate speculators and cops guessing as to how big and bad we were, and keep them wondering just how far we alleged terrorists were willing to go. I also wanted to avoid getting hassled and still remain employable at the restaurants and temp agencies I had to deal with. After I got nabbed it was out of the hat as to what my real name is, and I’ve never used a nom de plume since.

6. Some concrete ideas for action that could have been pursued were:

– targeting individual speculators, bankers, realtors and landlords with “Unwanted” posters. This means getting mug shot or portrait-type photos of these individuals with a good telephoto lens, then hanging posters all over town with the photos, their home addresses and any other useful damaging information;

– some kind of combative neighborhood-wide tenants/renter’s action group, to get together various sorts of ad hoc anti-landlord and anti-eviction efforts;

– a big tenants/renters public assembly to get a tenants action group together;

– The Financial District is the economic center of San Francisco. So it might have been a good idea to get together a disruptive demo, or maybe a series of demos, blocking traffic in the Financial District at the beginning of rush hour on a Monday morning. Office proles would probably rather be kept from getting to work instead of delayed when trying to go home. Most people working in SF’s Financial District are renters or non-wealthy homeowners paying half or more of their wages to keep a roof over their heads, and this overwhelming burden points to another new idea, more important than any other –

– when I was on TV and radio I should have called for a city-wide general rent strike at the beginning of November – instead of voting.

Throughout the city anger at skyrocketing rents had reached a boiling point. If a call for a city-wide rent strike had been broadcast in June or July there would have been three or four months for the idea to spread before the November election. If this took off it could have opened a new path for dealing with the housing problem under capitalism. Now, at that time the chances of a city-wide general rent strike were small, let alone what would have been in effect an anti-voting rent strike. But with the microphones in front of me there was nothing to lose by putting out the word for it in a big way. If it had gone nowhere we would have lost nothing; we’d be exactly where we are now. And it might have planted the seed of a good idea in many minds, and been a significant first step toward something bigger and bolder in the future.

The first substantial radical activity I’d ever engaged in was organizing a rent strike of more than 60 units across the bay in Berkeley, 19 years earlier, from the end of 1980 to May 1981. It was the biggest ongoing rent strike in Berkeley at that time. With this in my past the idea of a city-wide rent strike should have been obvious. But the thought only occurred to me long after the opportunity to exploit the notoriety of the Yuppie Eradication Project had passed. I think this may have been a real missed chance.

With Laurel at the Weekly, and a lesser degree with other reporters, I presented my extremist perspectives with a dashing and romantic Robin Hood-meets-the-Situationists air. An engaging story conveys the communist perspective like no dry polemic will. The obvious drawback in this was that the effort became too closely identified with me as an individual. Again, what was needed was a collective subversive effort – not college-boy Marxists sitting around philosophizing while peeling damp labels off beer bottles, but a band of dedicated, energetic, sophisticated troublemakers spoiling for action. A group of people acting together is almost always going to be more effective than a single individual acting alone. (There are exceptions to this, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area.)

Sometime in the summer or fall of 1999, new posters appeared all over the Mission District, crying out, “Never Mind the Politicians! Build a Housing Movement!” It was a call for a demo on

the steps of City Hall. The comic cluelessness of this call to ignore politicians by holding a rally at City Hall summed up the limits of anti-gentrification perspectives in San Francisco at the end of the 20th century. There was a pervasive awareness that the current set-up had failed wage-earners, tenants and low income people, but no notion of where to go from there, other than the usual mock militance in demanding that elected officials be more responsive to our needs.

Ultimately a rag-bag of sad sack housing activists, small business owners and left-liberal hustlers channeled opposition to gentrification into a big get out the vote drive. A key force in this was an outfit called Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition, usually referred to by its acronym, MAC. MAC avoided speaking in terms of class conflict and antagonism to market relations, instead going for a multi-cultural Frank Capra movie take on reality — the idealistic little guy against the big boys at City Hall. “Mack” is old-school lingo for the game a pimp runs on a woman when he turns her out as a prostitute, and that’s what MAC and its fellow travellers did to many working people in the Mission, successfully macking on them for “independent” candidates in the November 1999 election.

After that election public opposition to gentrification tapered off. Apologists for electoral politics pointed to the much slower pace of gentrification since the end of 2000 as evidence of the success of their strategy. In doing this they were either lying or surprisingly naive, even by the normal standards of the work-within-the-system crowd. The market-driven housing crisis was propelled by the Silicon Valley economic boom of the late 1990’s, and the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the accompanying recession and loss of millions of jobs in 2000 and 2001 deserve most of the credit for the suddenly slower pace of Mission gentrification. Nearly a decade after the dot-com boom and bust the Mission District is still a predominantly working class area. This is due to fluctuations in the economy, and not to playing the game the way The Man wants it played, or to large-scale collective resistance, either.

FROM SMALL THINGS BIG THINGS GROW...

This story is about San Francisco. And it’s about more than San Francisco; it’s about how to intervene in a potential widespread conflict between exploited people and the capitalist organization of social life, the things that can be taken from the past and the things that need to be re-tooled or discarded, the limits of acting alone, how you can learn from your mistakes, and most importantly how to use language; how to communicate a clear and uncompromising message among today’s disengaged and de-politicized consumer culture proletariat.

One of capital’s key weapons is its near total monopoly of control over information. A free market regime generates a totalitarian mass culture that colonizes and erodes all aspects of public life. But 20th century history repeatedly demonstrated that repressive societies become unstable — and the United States will not be an exception. This society is now more vulnerable than at any previous point in its history. Faced with an accelerating environmental and energy crisis, an economic meltdown, or the wars that it can’t win or walk away from, our arrogant, fearful and short-sighted rulers may suddenly find themselves at the end of their historical rope. We can make a positive contribution to this process by broadcasting a subversive message in a new way, using simple and straightforward techniques to do an end-run around the lies and mystifications of the democratic capitalist order.

Contemporary capitalism is offering its enemies unprecedented opportunities because capitalism no longer offers most wage earners a stake in the perpetuation of this society. The days of the welfare state and well-paid union jobs are long behind us. A healthy business climate now means ever increasing amounts of work, poverty and fear; a barren future in a poisoned world. In times like these a new kind of combative praxis in social conflicts can be tremendously appealing to large numbers of working people, since it isn't based on abstractions, but on tangible immediate needs.

Revolutionary action is all about communication. Little efforts like the Mission Yuppie Eradication Project are necessarily improvised and provisional, and there is at least as much to learn from their limits as from their high points. But with efforts like these, intelligent and aggressive individuals who hate this society can contribute to the creation of a new culture of direct action in the everyday life struggles of an increasingly impoverished 21st century wage-earning class.

Energetic people with vision and nerve can make all the difference in the world. Revolutionaries aren't passive commentators, or wannabe leaders or followers. We act with other exploited people as equals in what will someday become a powerful global movement, the most powerful force on Earth.

Signed, the artist formerly known as Nestor Makhno

Anarchist library
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