Give Up Activism

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ways of doing things it has made clear the ties that still bind
us to the past. The criticisms of activism that I have expressed
above do not all apply to June 18th. However there is a cer-
tain paradigm of activism which at its worst includes all that I
have outlined above and June 18th shared in this paradigm to
a certain extent. To exactly what extent is for you to decide.

Activism is a form partly forced upon us by weakness. Like
the joint action taken by Reclaim the Streets and the Liverpool
dockers — we find ourselves in times in which radical politics
is often the product of mutual weakness and isolation. If this
is the case, it may not even be within our power to break out
of the role of activists. It may be that in times of a downturn
in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution
become marginalised and come to be seen (and to see them-
selves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that
this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in
struggle when we won’t be weirdos and freaks any more but
will seem simply to be stating what is on everybody’s minds.
However, to work to escalate the struggle it will be necessary
to break with the role of activists to whatever extent is possible
— to constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations
and constraints.

Historically, those movements that have come the closest to
dе-stabilising or removing or going beyond capitalism have not
at all taken the form of activism. Activism is essentially a polit-
cal form and a method of operating suited to liberal reformism
that is being pushed beyond its own limits and used for revolu-
tionary purposes. The activist role in itself must be problematic
for those who desire social revolution.

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an interior/exterior division between the group and the class. We come to think of ourselves as being activists and therefore as being separate from and having different interests from the mass of working class people.

Our activity should be the immediate expression of a real struggle, not the affirmation of the separateness and distinctness of a particular group. In Marxist groups the possession of ‘theory’ is the all-important thing determining power — it’s different in the activist milieu, but not that different — the possession of the relevant ‘social capital’ — knowledge, experience, contacts, equipment etc. is the primary thing determining power.

Activism reproduces the structure of this society in its operations: “When the rebel begins to believe that he is fighting for a higher good, the authoritarian principle gets a filip.”14 This is no trivial matter, but is at the basis of capitalist social relations. Capital is a social relation between people mediated by things — the basic principle of alienation is that we live our lives in the service of some thing that we ourselves have created. If we reproduce this structure in the name of politics that declares itself anti-capitalist, we have lost before we have begun. You cannot fight alienation by alienated means.

A Modest Proposal

This is a modest proposal that we should develop ways of operating that are adequate to our radical ideas. This task will not be easy and the writer of this short piece has no clearer insight into how we should go about this than anyone else. I am not arguing that June 18th should have been abandoned or attacked, indeed it was a valiant attempt to get beyond our limitations and to create something better than what we have at present. However, in its attempts to break with antique and formulaic

14Op. Cit. 2, p. 110
Jacques Camatte in his essay ‘On Organization’ (1969) makes the astute point that political groupings often end up as “gangs” defining themselves by exclusion — the group member’s first loyalty becomes to the group rather than to the struggle. His critique applies especially to the myriad of Left sects and groupuscules at which it was directed but it applies also to a lesser extent to the activist mentality.

The political group or party substitutes itself for the proletariat and its own survival and reproduction become paramount — revolutionary activity becomes synonymous with ‘building the party’ and recruiting members. The group takes itself to have a unique grasp on truth and everyone outside the group is treated like an idiot in need of education by this vanguard. Instead of an equal debate between comrades we get instead the separation of theory and propaganda, where the group has its own theory, which is almost kept secret in the belief that the inherently less mentally able punters must be lured in the organisation with some strategy of populism before the politics are sprung on them by surprise. This dishonest method of dealing with those outside of the group is similar to a religious cult — they will never tell you upfront what they are about.

We can see here some similarities with activism, in the way that the activist milieu acts like a leftist sect. Activism as a whole has some of the characteristics of a “gang”. Activist gangs can often end up being cross-class alliances, including all sorts of liberal reformists because they too are ‘activists’. People think of themselves primarily as activists and their primary loyalty becomes to the community of activists and not to the struggle as such. The “gang” is illusory community, distracting us from creating a wider community of resistance. The essence of Camatte’s critique is an attack on the creation of

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13Jacques Camatte — ‘On Organization’ (1969) in This World We Must Leave and Other Essays (New York, Autonomedia, 1995)
perts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts
jealously guard and mystify the skills they have. This keeps
people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchi-
cal class society.

A division of labour implies that one person takes on a role
on behalf of many others who relinquish this responsibility.
A separation of tasks means that other people will grow your
food and make your clothes and supply your electricity while
you get on with achieving social change. The activist, being
an expert in social change, assumes that other people aren’t
doing anything to change their lives and so feels a duty or a
responsibility to do it on their behalf. Activists think they are
compensating for the lack of activity by others. Defining our-
selves as activists means defining our actions as the ones which
will bring about social change, thus disregarding the activity of
thousands upon thousands of other non-activists. Activism is
based on this misconception that it is only activists who do so-
cial change — whereas of course class struggle is happening all
the time.

Form and Content

The tension between the form of ‘activism’ in which our po-
litical activity appears and its increasingly radical content has
only been growing over the last few years. The background of a
lot of the people involved in June 18th is of being ‘activists’ who
‘campaign’ on an ‘issue’. The political progress that has been
made in the activist scene over the last few years has resulted
in a situation where many people have moved beyond single
issue campaigns against specific companies or developments
to a rather ill-defined yet nonetheless promising anti-capitalist
perspective. Yet although the content of the campaigning ac-
tivity has altered, the form of activism has not. So instead of
taking on Monsanto and going to their headquarters and occu-

ative activity they squander on handing out leaflets, putting up posters, demonstrating or heckling local politicians. They become militants, fetishising action because others are doing their thinking for them.\textsuperscript{10}

This resounds with us — particularly the thing about the fetishising of action — in left groups the militants are left free to engage in endless busywork because the group leader or guru has the ‘theory’ down pat, which is just accepted and lapped up — the ‘party line’. With direct action activists it’s slightly different — action is fetishised, but more out of an aversion to any theory whatsoever.

Although it is present, that element of the activist role which relies on self-sacrifice and duty was not so significant in June 18\textsuperscript{th}. What is more of an issue for us is the feeling of separateness from ‘ordinary people’ that activism implies. People identify with some weird sub-culture or clique as being ‘us’ as opposed to the ‘them’ of everyone else in the world.

**Isolation**

The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different. People tend to think of their own first person plural (who are you referring to when you say ‘we’?) as referring to some community of activists, rather than a class. For example, for some time now in the activist milieu it has been popular to argue for ‘no more single issues’ and for the importance of ‘making links’. However, many people’s conception of what this involved was to ‘make links’ with other activists and other campaign groups. June 18\textsuperscript{th} demonstrated this quite well, the whole idea being to get all the representatives of all

\textsuperscript{10}Op. Cit. 2, p. 109

\textsuperscript{1}Squaring up to the Square Mile: A Rough Guide to the City of London (J18 Publications (UK), 1999) p. 8
ket forces, by forcing out the companies that are weakest and least able to cope. Protest-bashing consultant Amanda Webster says: “The advent of the protest movement will actually provide market advantages to those contractors who can handle it effectively.” Again activism can bring down a business or stop a road but capitalism carries merrily on, if anything stronger than before.

These things are surely an indication, if one were needed, that tackling capitalism will require not only a quantitative change (more actions, more activists) but a qualitative one (we need to discover some more effective form of operating). It seems we have very little idea of what it might actually require to bring down capitalism. As if all it needed was some sort of critical mass of activists occupying offices to be reached and then we’d have a revolution...

The form of activism has been preserved even while the content of this activity has moved beyond the form that contains it. We still think in terms of being ‘activists’ doing a ‘campaign’ on an ‘issue’, and because we are ‘direct action’ activists we will go and ‘do an action’ against our target. The method of campaigning against specific developments or single companies has been carried over into this new thing of taking on capitalism. We’re attempting to take on capitalism and conceptualising what we’re doing in completely inappropriate terms, utilising a method of operating appropriate to liberal reformism. So we have the bizarre spectacle of ‘doing an action’ against capitalism — an utterly inadequate practice.

Roles

The role of the ‘activist’ is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest — a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others. The ‘activist’

\footnote{2}see ‘Direct Action: Six Years Down the Road’ in Do or Die No. 7, p. 3

experienced in the theogony of suffering. Their subordination of themselves goes hand in hand with their subordination of others — all enslaved to ‘the cause’. Self-sacrificing politicos stunt their own lives and their own will to live — this generates a bitterness and an antipathy to life which is then turned outwards to wither everything else. They are “great despisers of life... the partisans of absolute self-sacrifice... their lives twisted by their monstrous asceticism.” We can see this in our own movement, for example on site, in the antagonism between the desire to sit around and have a good time versus the guilt-tripping build/fortify/barricade work ethic and in the sometimes excessive passion with which ‘lunchouts’ are denounced. The self-sacrificing martyr is offended and outraged when she sees others that are not sacrificing themselves. Like when the ‘honest worker’ attacks the scrounger or the layabout with such vitriol, we know it is actually because she hates her job and the martyrdom she has made of her life and therefore hates to see anyone escape this fate, hates to see anyone enjoying themselves while she is suffering — she must drag everyone down into the muck with her — an equality of self-sacrifice.

In the old religious cosmology, the successful martyr went to heaven. In the modern worldview, successful martyrs can look forwards to going down in history. The greatest self-sacrifice, the greatest success in creating a role (or even better, in devising a whole new one for people to emulate — e.g. the eco-warrior) wins a reward in history — the bourgeois heaven.

The old left was quite open in its call for heroic sacrifice: “Sacrifice yourselves joyfully, brothers and sisters! For the Cause, for the Established Order, for the Party, for Unity, for Meat and Potatoes!” But these days it is much more veiled: Vaneigem accuses “young leftist radicals” of “enter[ing] the service of a Cause — the ‘best’ of all Causes. The time they have for cre-

\footnote{Op. Cit. 2, p. 109}
\footnote{Op. Cit. 2, p. 108}
can recognise this within our own movement will give us an indication of how much work there is still to be done.

The activist makes politics dull and sterile and drives people away from it, but playing the role also fucks up the activist herself. The role of the activist creates a separation between ends and means: self-sacrifice means creating a division between the revolution as love and joy in the future but duty and routine now. The worldview of activism is dominated by guilt and duty because the activist is not fighting for herself but for a separate cause: “All causes are equally inhuman.”

As an activist you have to deny your own desires because your political activity is defined such that these things do not count as ‘politics’. You put ‘politics’ in a separate box to the rest of your life — it’s like a job... you do ‘politics’ 9–5 and then go home and do something else. Because it is in this separate box, ‘politics’ exists unhampered by any real-world practical considerations of effectiveness. The activist feels obliged to keep plugging away at the same old routine unthinkingly, unable to stop or consider, the main thing being that the activist is kept busy and assuages her guilt by banging her head against a brick wall if necessary.

Part of being revolutionary might be knowing when to stop and wait. It might be important to know how and when to strike for maximum effectiveness and also how and when NOT to strike. Activists have this ‘We must do something NOW!’ attitude that seems fuelled by guilt. This is completely untactical.

The self-sacrifice of the militant or the activist is mirrored in their power over others as an expert — like a religion there is a kind of hierarchy of suffering and self-righteousness. The activist assumes power over others by virtue of her greater degree of suffering (‘non-hierarchical’ activist groups in fact form a ‘dictatorship of the most committed’). The activist uses moral coercion and guilt to wield power over others less ex-

is a specialist or an expert in social change — yet the harder we cling to this role and notion of what we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire. A real revolution will involve the breaking out of all preconceived roles and the destruction of all specialism — the reclamation of our lives. The seizing control over our own destinies which is the act of revolution will involve the creation of new selves and new forms of interaction and community. ‘Experts’ in anything can only hinder this.

The Situationist International developed a stringent critique of roles and particularly the role of ‘the militant’. Their criticism was mainly directed against leftist and social-democratic ideologies because that was mainly what they encountered. Although these forms of alienation still exist and are plain to be seen, in our particular milieu it is the liberal activist we encounter more often than the leftist militant. Nevertheless, they share many features in common (which of course is not surprising).

The Situationist Raoul Vaneigem defined roles like this: “Stereotypes are the dominant images of a period... The stereotype is the model of the role; the role is a model form of behaviour. The repetition of an attitude creates a role.” To play a role is to cultivate an appearance to the neglect of everything authentic: “we succumb to the seduction of borrowed attitudes.” As role-players we dwell in inauthenticity — reducing our lives to a string of clichés — “breaking [our] day down into a series of poses chosen more or less unconsciously from the range of dominant stereotypes.”

countercultural aspect of the protests. Initially this was by no means the predominant element — there was a large group of ramblers at the eviction for example. But people attracted to Twyford by the media coverage thought every single person there had dreadlocks. The media coverage had the effect of making ‘ordinary’ people stay away and more dreadlocked countercultural types turned up — decreasing the diversity of the protests. More recently, a similar thing has happened in the way in which people drawn to protest sites by the coverage of Swampy they had seen on TV began to replicate in their own lives the attitudes presented by the media as characteristic of the role of the ‘eco-warrior’.

"Just as the passivity of the consumer is an active passivity, so the passivity of the spectator lies in his ability to assimilate roles and play them according to official norms. The repetition of images and stereotypes offers a set of models from which everyone is supposed to choose a role." The role of the militant or activist is just one of these roles, and therein, despite all the revolutionary rhetoric that goes with the role, lies its ultimate conservatism.

The supposedly revolutionary activity of the activist is a dull and sterile routine — a constant repetition of a few actions with no potential for change. Activists would probably resist change if it came because it would disrupt the easy certainties of their role and the nice little niche they’ve carved out for themselves. Like union bosses, activists are eternal representatives and mediators. In the same way as union leaders would be against their workers actually succeeding in their struggle because this would put them out of a job, the role of the activist is threatened by change. Indeed, revolution, or even any real moves in that direction, would profoundly upset activists by depriving them of their role. If everyone is becoming revolutionary then you’re not so special anymore, are you?

So why do we behave like activists? Simply because it’s the easy cowards’ option? It is easy to fall into playing the activist role because it fits into this society and doesn’t challenge it — activism is an accepted form of dissent. Even if as activists we are doing things which are not accepted and are illegal, the form of activism itself the way it is like a job — means that it fits in with our psychology and our upbringing. It has a certain attraction precisely because it is not revolutionary.

We Don’t Need Any More Martyrs

The key to understanding both the role of the militant and the activist is self-sacrifice — the sacrifice of the self to ‘the cause’ which is seen as being separate from the self. This of course has nothing to do with real revolutionary activity which is the seizing of the self. Revolutionary martyrdom goes together with the identification of some cause separate from one’s own life — an action against capitalism which identifies capitalism as ‘out there’ in the City is fundamentally mistaken — the real power of capital is right here in our everyday lives — we re-create its power every day because capital is not a thing but a social relation between people (and hence classes) mediated by things.

Of course I am not suggesting that everyone who was involved in June 18th shares in the adoption of this role and the self-sacrifice that goes with it to an equal extent. As I said above, the problem of activism was made particularly apparent by June 18th precisely because it was an attempt to break from these roles and our normal ways of operating. Much of what is outlined here is a ‘worst case scenario’ of what playing the role of an activist can lead to. The extent to which we

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1 see ‘The Day they Drove Twyford Down’ in Do or Die No. 1, p. 11
2 see ‘Personality Politics: The Spectacularisation of Fairmile’ in Do or Die No. 7, p. 35
3 Op. Cit. 2, p. 128