

Give Up Activism

Andrew X

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Editor's Note from *Do or Die*

In 1999, in the aftermath of the June 18th global day of action, a pamphlet called *Reflections on June 18th* was produced by some people in London, as an open-access collection of “contributions on the politics behind the events that occurred in the City of London on June 18, 1999.” Contained in this collection was an article called ‘Give up Activism’ which has generated quite a lot of discussion and debate both in the UK and internationally, being translated into several languages and reproduced in several different publications.¹ Here we republish the article together with a new postscript by the author addressing some comments and criticisms received since the original publication.

Give up Activism

One problem apparent in the June 18th day of action was the adoption of an activist mentality. This problem became particularly obvious with June 18th precisely because the people involved in organising it and the people involved on the day tried to push beyond these limitations. This piece is no criticism of anyone involved – rather an attempt to inspire some thought on the challenges that confront us if we are really serious in our intention of doing away with the capitalist mode of production.

Experts

By ‘an activist mentality’ what I mean is that people think of themselves primarily as activists and as belonging to some wider community of activists. The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career. In the same way some people will identify with their job as a doctor or a teacher, and instead of it being something they just happen to be doing, it becomes an essential part of their self-image. The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change.

To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change.

Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour – it is a specialised separate task. The division of labour is the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour. The division of labour operates, for example, in medicine or education – instead of healing and bringing up kids being common knowledge and tasks that everyone has a hand in, this knowledge becomes the specialised property of doctors and teachers – experts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts jealously guard and mystify

¹ To my knowledge the article has been translated into French and published in *Je sais tout* (Association des 26-Cantons, 8, rue Lissignol CH-1201 Geneve, Suisse) and in *changes* No. 93 (BP 241, 75866 Paris Cedex 18, France). It has been translated into Spanish and published in *Ekintza Zuzena* (Ediciones E.Z., Apdo. 235, 48080 Bilbo (Bizkaia), Spanish State). It has been republished in America in *Collective Action Notes* No. 16–17 (CAN, POB 22962, Baltimore, MD 21203, USA) and in the UK in *Organise!* No. 54 (AF, c/o 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX, UK). It is also available on-line at: http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_rts1.html#give_up and <http://tierra.ucsd.edu/~acf/online/j18/reflec1.html#GIVE> If anyone knows of any other places it has been reproduced or critiqued, I would be grateful to hear of them, via *Do or Die*.

the skills they have. This keeps people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchical 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 ourselves 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 social change – whereas of course class struggle is happening all the time.

Form and Content

The tension between the form of 'activism' in which our political 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 anticapitalist perspective. Yet although the content of the campaigning activity has altered, the form of activism has not. So instead of taking on Monsanto and going to their headquarters and occupying it, we have now seen beyond the single facet of capital represented by Monsanto and so develop a 'campaign' against capitalism. And where better to go and occupy than what is perceived as being the headquarters of capitalism – the City?

Our methods of operating are still the same as if we were taking on a specific corporation or development, despite the fact that capitalism is not at all the same sort of thing and the ways in which one might bring down a particular company are not at all the same as the ways in which you might bring down capitalism. For example, vigorous campaigning by animal rights activists has succeeded in wrecking both Consort dog breeders and Hillgrove Farm cat breeders. The businesses were ruined and went into receivership. Similarly the campaign waged against arch-vivisectionists Huntingdon Life Sciences succeeded in reducing their share price by 33%, but the company just about managed to survive by running a desperate PR campaign in the City to pick up prices.² Activism can very successfully accomplish bringing down a business, yet to bring down capitalism a lot more will be required than to simply extend this sort of activity to every business in every sector. Similarly with the targeting of butcher's shops by animal rights activists, the net result is probably only to aid the supermarkets in closing down all the small butcher's shops, thus assisting the process of competition and the 'natural selection' of the marketplace. Thus activists often succeed in destroying one small business while strengthening capital overall.

A similar thing applies with anti-roads activism. Wide-scale anti-roads protests have created opportunities for a whole new sector of capitalism – security, surveillance, tunnellers, climbers,

² *Squaring up to the Square Mile: A Rough Guide to the City of London* (J18 Publications (UK), 1999) p.8

experts and consultants. We are now one 'market risk' among others to be taken into account when bidding for a roads contract. We may have actually assisted the rule of market 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."³ 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' 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

³ 'Direct Action: Six Years Down the Road' in *Do or Die* No. 7, p.3

stereotypes.”⁴ This process has been at work since the early days of the anti-roads movement. At Twyford Down after Yellow Wednesday in December 92, press and media coverage focused on the Dongas Tribe and the dreadlocked countercultural aspect of the protests. Initially this was by no means the predominant element — there was a large group of rambblers at the eviction for example.⁵ 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’.⁶

“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.”⁷ 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

⁴ Raoul Vaneigem — *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Left Bank Books/Rebel Press, 1994) — first published 1967, pp.131–3

⁵ ‘The Day they Drove Twyford Down’ in *Do or Die* No. 1, p.11

⁶ ‘Personality Politics: The Spectacularisation of Fairmile’ in *Do or Die* No. 7, p.35

⁷ Op. Cit. 4, p.128

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 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."⁸

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' 95 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 experienced in the theology of suffering. Their subordination of themselves goes hand in hand with their subordination of others — all enslaved to 'the cause'. Self-sacrificing politicians 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."⁹ 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

⁸ Op. Cit. 4, p.107

⁹ Op. Cit. 4, p.109

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 forward 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!”¹⁰ 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 creative 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.”¹¹

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 18th. What is more of an issue for us is the feeling of separateness from ‘ordinary people’ that activism implies. People identify with some weird subculture 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 18th demonstrated this quite well, the whole idea being to get all the representatives of all the various different causes or issues in one place at one time, voluntarily relegating ourselves to the ghetto of good causes.

Similarly, the various networking forums that have recently sprung up around the country — the Rebel Alliance in Brighton, NASA in Nottingham, Riotous Assembly in Manchester, the London Underground etc. have a similar goal — to get all the activist groups in the area talking to each other. I’m not knocking this — it is an essential pre-requisite for any further action, but it should be recognised for the extremely limited form of ‘making links’ that it is. It is also interesting in that what the groups attending these meetings have in common is that they are activist groups — what they are actually concerned with seems to be a secondary consideration.

¹⁰ Op. Cit. 4, p.108

¹¹ Op. Cit. 4, p.109

It is not enough merely to seek to link together all the activists in the world, neither is it enough to seek to transform more people into activists. Contrary to what some people may think, we will not be any closer to a revolution if lots and lots of people become activists. Some people seem to have the strange idea that what is needed is for everyone to be somehow persuaded into becoming activists like us and then we'll have a revolution. Vaneigem says: "Revolution is made everyday despite, and in opposition to, the specialists of revolution."¹²

The militant or activist is a specialist in social change or revolution. The specialist recruits others to her own tiny area of specialism in order to increase her own power and thus dispel the realisation of her own powerlessness. "The specialist... enrolls himself in order to enroll others."¹³ Like a pyramid selling scheme, the hierarchy is self-replicating — you are recruited and in order not to be at the bottom of the pyramid, you have to recruit more people to be under you, who then do exactly the same. The reproduction of the alienated society of roles is accomplished through specialists.

Jacques Camatte in his essay 'On Organization'¹⁴ 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 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

¹² Op. Cit. 4, p.111

¹³ Op. Cit. 4, p.143

¹⁴ Jacques Camatte — 'On Organization' (1969) in *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (New York, Autonomedia, 1995)

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 fillip.”¹⁵ 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 *something* 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 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 certain 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 themselves) 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 de-stabilising or removing or going beyond capitalism have not at all taken the form of activism. Activism is essentially a political form and a method of operating suited to liberal reformism that is being pushed beyond its own limits and used for revolutionary purposes. The activist role in itself must be problematic for those who desire social revolution.

Andrew X

You can contact the author of this piece via:
SDEF! c/o Prior House, Tilbury Place, Brighton BN2 2GY, UK

¹⁵ Op. Cit. 4, p.110

Give up activism — Postscript

Many of the articles printed in the Reflections on June 18th pamphlet repeated almost to the onset of tedium that capitalism is a social relation and isn't just to do with big banks, corporations or international financial institutions. It's an important point and worth making, but 'Give up Activism' had other fish to fry.

Therefore the conclusion reached by these other articles was the point of departure for this one — if it is true that capitalism is a social relation based in production and in the relations between classes then what implications does this have for our activity and for our method of attacking it? The basic kernel of the piece and the initial idea that inspired the writing of it is the 'Form and Content' section. It had occurred to many people that there was something a little odd about a 'day of action against capitalism'. The original inspiration behind the article was an attempt to pin down what it was that made the idea appear a little odd, incongruous, contradictory.

It seemed there was a similarity between the way we were carrying on acting like liberal activists campaigning against capitalism as if it was another single issue, another 'cause', and Vaneigem's critique of the leftist militant, whose politics consist of a set of duties carried out on behalf of an external 'cause'. It is true that the activist and the militant share this common factor, but it is about all they have in common. I made the mistake of carrying over all the other characteristics attributed by Vaneigem to 'the militant' and assigning them also to the activist, when they largely weren't appropriate. As a result, large sections of 'Give up Activism' come across as far too harsh and as an inaccurate representation of the direct action movement. The Situationists' characteristic bile was perhaps more appropriate when directed at leftist party hacks than as a description of the sort of politics involved around June 18th. The self-sacrifice, the martyrdom and guilt that Vaneigem identified as central to the politics of 'the militant' is much less a feature of direct action politics, which to the contrary is more usually criticised for the opposite failing of lifestylism.

As has been very neatly drawn out by an excellent critique in the American publication *The Bad Days Will End!*,¹⁶ the original idea that motivated the writing of the article and this rehashing of Vaneigem, translating the critique of the leftist 'militant' into that of the liberal 'activist', are incongruously roped together to produce an article which is an unwieldy amalgam of the objective (What social situation are we in? What forms of action are appropriate?) and the subjective (Why do we feel like activists? Why do we have this mentality? Can we change the way we feel about ourselves?). It is not so much that the subjective aspect of activism is emphasised over the objective, but rather more that the very real problems that are identified with acting as activists come to be seen to be mere products of having this 'activist mentality'. 'Give up Activism' can then be read such that it seems to reverse cause and effect and to imply that if we simply 'give up' this mental role then the objective conditions will change too:

“[Give up Activism's] greatest weakness is this one-sided emphasis on the 'subjective' side of the social phenomenon of activism. The emphasis points to an obvious conclusion implicit throughout [the] argument: If activism is a mental attitude or 'role', it may be changed, as one changes one's mind, or thrown off, like a mask or a

¹⁶ 'The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism', *The Bad Days Will End!*, No. 3. p.4. I highly recommend this article, and the magazine contains some other good stuff too. Send \$3 to: Merrymount Publications, PO Box 441597, Somerville, MA 02144, USA. Email: bronterre@earthlink.net

costume... The implication is clear: cease to cling, let go of the role, ‘give up activism’, and a significant impediment to the desired change will be removed.”¹⁷

The article was of course never proposing that we could simply think ourselves out of the problem. It was intended merely to suggest that we might be able to remove an impediment and an illusion about our situation as one step towards challenging that situation, and from that point that we might start to discover a more effective and more appropriate way of acting.

It is now clear that the slipshod hitching of Vaneigem to a enquiry into what it was that was incongruous and odd in having a one-day action against capitalism was an error, prompted by an over-hasty appropriation of Situationist ideas, without considering how much of a connection there really was between them and the original idea behind the piece. The theory of roles is perhaps the weakest part of Vaneigem’s ideas and in his ‘Critique of the Situationist International’, Gilles Dauvé even goes so far as to say: “Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses.”¹⁸ This is probably a little harsh. But nevertheless, the sort of degeneration that Situationist ideas underwent after the post-1968 disintegration of the SI took the worst elements of Vaneigem’s “radical subjectivity” as their starting point, in the poorest examples effectively degenerating into bourgeois individualism.¹⁹ That it is this element of Situationist thought that has proven the most easily recuperable should give us pause for thought before too-readily taking it on board.

Revolution in Your Head

This over-emphasis in ‘Give up Activism’ on the theory of roles and on the subjective side of things has led some people to fail to recognise the original impetus behind the piece. This starting point and presupposition was perhaps not made clear enough, because some people seem to have assumed that the purpose of the article was to make some kind of point concerning individual psychological health. ‘Give up Activism’ was not intended to be an article about or an exercise in radical therapy. The main intention of the article, however inexpertly executed, was always to think about our collective activity — what we are doing and how we might do it better.

However, there was a point to the ‘subjectivism’ of the main part of the article. The reason why ‘Give up Activism’ was so concerned with our ideas and our mental image of ourselves is not because I thought that if we change our ideas then everything will be alright, but because I had nothing to say about our activity. This was very clearly a critique written from the inside and thus also a self-critique and I am still very much involved in ‘activist’ politics. As I made plain, I have not necessarily got any clearer idea than anyone else of how to go about developing new forms of action more appropriate to an ‘anti-capitalist’ perspective. June 18th was a valiant attempt to do just this, and ‘Give up Activism’ was not a criticism of the action on June 18th as such. I certainly couldn’t have come up with anything much better myself.

Although the piece is called ‘Give up Activism’, I did not want to suggest at all that people stop trashing GM crops, smashing up the City and disrupting the gatherings of the rich and powerful, or any of the other myriad acts of resistance that ‘activists’ engage in. It was more the way we do these things and what we think we are doing when we do them that I was seeking to question.

¹⁷ The Bad Days Will End!, p.5

¹⁸ Gilles Dauvé (Jean Barrot) — ‘Critique of the Situationist International’

¹⁹ See ‘Whatever happened to the Situationists?’, *Aufheben* No. 6, p.45

Because 'Give up Activism' had little or nothing to recommend in terms of objective practical activity, the emphasis on the subjective made it seem like I thought these problems existed only in our heads.

Of course, thinking of ourselves as activists and as belonging to a community of activists is no more than a recognition of the truth, and there is nothing pathological in that. The problem I was trying to make clear was the identification with the activist role — being happy as a radical minority. I intended to question the role, to make people dissatisfied with the role, even while they remained within it. It is only in this way that we stand a chance of escaping it.

Obviously we are constrained within our specific circumstances. During an ebb in the class struggle, revolutionaries are in even more of a minority than they are in any case. We probably don't have any choice about appearing as a strange subculture. But we do have a choice about our attitude to this situation, and if we come to ditch the mental identification with the role then we may discover that there is actually some room for manoeuvre within our activist role so that we can try and break from activist practice as far as we are able. The point is that challenging the 'subjective' element — our activist self-image — will at least be a step towards moving beyond the role in its 'objective' element also. As I said in 'Give up Activism', only with a general escalation of the class struggle will activists be able to completely ditch their role, but in the meantime: "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." Which was precisely the point of the article.

For if we cannot even think beyond the role now, then what hope have we of ever escaping it? We should at the very least be dissatisfied with our position as a radical minority and be trying to generalise the struggle and make the necessary upturn happen. Doing away with the activist mentality is necessary but not sufficient for doing away with the role in practice.

Up the Workers!

Although 'Give up Activism' neglected to recommend any actual change in behaviour outside of saying that we needed one, perhaps now it would be appropriate to say something about this. How can we bring 'politics' out of its separate box, as an external cause to which we dedicate ourselves?

Many of the criticisms of the direct action movement revolve around similar points. Capitalism is based on work; our struggles against it are not based on our work but quite the opposite, they are something we do outside whatever work we may do. Our struggles are not based on our direct needs (as for example, going on strike for higher wages); they seem disconnected, arbitrary. Our 'days of action' and so forth have no connection to any wider on-going struggle in society. We treat capitalism as if it was something external, ignoring our own relation to it. These points are repeated again and again in criticisms of the direct action movement (including 'Give up Activism' but also in many other places).

The problem is not necessarily that people don't understand that capital is a social relation and that it's to do with production as well as just banks and stock exchanges, here as well as in the Third World or that capital is a relation between classes. The point is that even when all of this is understood our attitude to this is still as outsiders looking in, deciding at what point to attack this system. Our struggle against capitalism is not based on our relation to value-creation, to work. On the whole the people who make up the direct action movement occupy marginal

positions within society as the unemployed, as students or working in various temporary and transitory jobs. We do not really inhabit the world of production, but exist largely in the realm of consumption and circulation. What unity the direct action movement possesses does not come from all working in the same occupation or living in the same area. It is a unity based on intellectual commitment to a set of ideas.

To a certain extent ‘Give up Activism’ was being disingenuous (as were many of the other critiques making similar points) in providing all these hints but never spelling out exactly where they led, which left the door open for them to be misunderstood. The author of the critique in *The Bad Days Will End!* was right to point out what the article was indicating but shied away from actually mentioning: the basic thing that’s wrong with activism is that it isn’t collective mass struggle by the working class at the point of production, which is the way that revolutions are supposed to happen.

The sort of activity that meets the criteria of all the criticisms — that is based on immediate needs, in a mass on-going struggle, in direct connection to our everyday lives and that does not treat capital as something external to us, is this working class struggle. It seems a little unfair to criticise the direct action movement for not being something that it cannot be and has never claimed to be, but nevertheless, if we want to move forward we’ve got to know what we’re lacking.

The reason that this sort of working class struggle is the obvious answer to what we are lacking is that this is THE model of revolution that the last hundred years or so has handed down to us that we have to draw upon. However, the shadow of the failure of the workers’ movement still hangs over us. And if this is not the model of how a revolution might happen, then what is? And no one has any very convincing answers to that question.

A Vociferous Minority

So we are stuck with the question — what do we do as a radical minority that wants to create revolution in non-revolutionary times? The way I see it at the moment, we basically have two options. The first is to recognise that as a small scene of radicals we can have relatively little influence on the overall picture and that if and when an upsurge in the class struggle occurs it probably won’t have much to do with us. Therefore until the mythical day arrives the best thing we can do is to continue to take radical action, to pursue politics that push things in the right direction and to try and drag along as many other people as possible, but basically to resign ourselves to that fact that we are going to continue to be a minority. So until the point when some sort of upturn in the class struggle occurs it’s basically a holding operation. We can try and stop things getting worse, have a finger in the dam, try and strategically target weak points in the system where we think we can hit and have some effect, develop our theory, live our lives in as radical a way as possible, build a sustainable counter culture that can carry on doing these things in the long term... and hopefully when one day, events out of our control lead to a general radicalisation of society and an upturn in the class struggle we will be there ready to play some part and to contribute what things we have learnt and what skills we have developed as a radical subculture.

The flaw in this sort of approach is that it appears almost like another sort of ‘automatic Marxism’ — a term used to poke fun at those Marxists who thought that a revolution would happen when the contradictions between the forces and the relations of production had matured suf-

ficiently, when the objective conditions were right, so that revolution almost seemed to be a process that happened without the need for any human involvement and you could just sit back and wait for it to happen. This sort of idea is a flaw carried over into ultra-left thinking. As is explained in *The Bad Days Will End!*, many ultra-left groups have recognised that in periods of downturn, they are necessarily going to be minorities and have argued against compensating for this with any kind of party-building or attempts to substitute their group for the struggle of the proletariat as a whole. Some ultra-left groups have taken this line of thinking to its logical conclusion and have ended up turning doing nothing into a political principle. Of course our response would not be to do nothing, but nevertheless, the point remains that if everyone similarly just waited for an upsurge to happen then it certainly never would. Effectively by just waiting for it to happen we are assuming that someone else will do it for us and maintaining a division between us and the ‘ordinary’ workers who will make this happen.

The alternative to this scenario is to stop thinking of the ebb and flow of the class struggle as like some force of nature that just comes and goes without us being able to effect it at all, and to start thinking about how to build class power and how to end the current disorganised and atomised state of workers in this country. The problem is that over the last twenty or so years, the social landscape of the country has changed so fast and so rapidly that it has caught us on the hop. Restructuring and relocation have fractured and divided people. We could try and help re-compose a new unity, instead of just being content with doing our bit and waiting for the upturn, to try and make this upturn happen. We will probably still be acting as activists, but to a lesser extent, and at least we will be making it more possible for us to abolish activism altogether in the future.

One way of doing this is suggested in the critique in *The Bad Days Will End!*:

“Perhaps, then, the first steps towards a genuine anti-activism would be to turn towards these specific, everyday, ongoing struggles. How are the so-called ‘ordinary’ workers resisting capitalism at this time? What opportunities are already there in their ongoing struggles? What networks are already being built through their own efforts?”²⁰

A current example of exactly this sort of thing is the investigation into call centres initiated by the German group Kolinko, which is mentioned in *The Bad Days Will End!* and was also contributed to in the recent *Undercurrent* No. 8.²¹ The idea of this project is that call centres represent the ‘new sweatshops’ of the information economy and that if a new cycle of workers’ resistance is to emerge anywhere then this might just be the place.

It is perhaps also worth considering that changing circumstances might work to our advantage – the restructuring of the welfare state is forcing more and more activists into work. For example the call centre enquiry project mentioned above could represent a good opportunity for us as call centres are exactly the sort of places where people forced off the dole end up working and exactly the sort of temporary and transient jobs in which those involved in the direct action movement end up working also. This certainly could help make the connection between capitalism and our own immediate needs, and perhaps might allow us to better participate in developing new fronts in the class struggle. Or the increased imposition of work could just end up with us even more

²⁰ *The Bad Days Will End!*, p.6

²¹ The Kolinko proposal was recently published in *Collective Action Notes* No. 16–17.

fucked over than we are at present, which is obviously what the government are hoping. They are attempting to both have their cake and eat it – trying to turn the clock back and return to days of austerity and privation while gambling that the working class is so atomised and divided by twenty years of attacks that this will not provoke a return of the struggle that originally brought about the introduction of these amelioration measures in the first place. Only time will tell whether they are to be successful in their endeavour or whether we are to be successful in ours.

In conclusion, perhaps the best thing would be to try and adopt both of the above methods. We need to maintain our radicalism and commitment to direct action, not being afraid to take action as a minority. But equally, we can't just resign ourselves to remaining a small radical subculture and treading water while we wait for everyone else to make the revolutionary wave for us. We should also perhaps look at the potential for making our direct action complement whatever practical contribution to current workers' struggles we may feel able to make. In both the possible scenarios outlined above we continue to act more or less within the activist role. But hopefully in both of these different scenarios we would be able to reject the mental identification with the role of activism and actively try to go beyond our status as activists to whatever extent is possible.

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