

We Are All Very Anxious

Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It

Institute for Precarious Consciousness

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We Are All Very Anxious: Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It¹

¹ The discussion here is not fully relevant to the global South. The specific condition of the South is that dominant capitalist social forms are layered onto earlier stages of capitalism or pre-capitalist systems, rather than displacing them entirely. Struggles along the axes of misery and boredom are therefore more effective in the South. The South has experienced a particular variety of precarity distinct from earlier periods: the massive forced delinking of huge swathes of the world from global capitalism (especially in Africa), and the correspondingly massive growth of the informal sector, which now eclipses the formal sector almost everywhere. The informal sector provides fertile terrain for autonomous politics, as is clear from cases such as the city of El Alto (a self-organised city of shanty-towns which is central to social movements in Bolivia), the Zapatista revolt (leading to autonomous indigenous communities in Chiapas), and movements such as Abahlali baseMjondolo (an autonomous movement of informal settlement residents in South Africa). However, it is often subject to a kind of collectivised precarity, as the state might (for instance) bulldoze shanty-towns, dispossess street traders, or crack down on illicit activities – and periodically does so. Revealingly, it was the self-immolation of a street trader subject to this kind of state dispossession which triggered the revolt in Sidi Bouzid, which later expanded into the Arab Spring. Massive unrest for similar reasons is also becoming increasingly common in China. It is also common for this sector to be dominated by hierarchical gangs or by the networked wings of authoritarian parties (such as the Muslim Brotherhood).

1: Each phase of capitalism has its own dominant reactive affect.¹

Each phase of capitalism has a particular affect which holds it together. This is not a static situation. The prevalence of a particular dominant affect² is sustainable only *until strategies of resistance able to break down this particular affect and /or its social sources are formulated*. Hence, capitalism constantly comes into crisis and recomposes around newly dominant affects.

One aspect of every phase's dominant affect is that it is a public secret, something that everyone knows, but nobody admits, or talks about. As long as the dominant affect is a public secret, it remains effective, and strategies against it will not emerge.

Public secrets are typically personalised. The problem is only visible at an individual, psychological level; the social causes of the problem are concealed. **Each phase blames the system's victims for the suffering that the system causes.** And it portrays a fundamental part of its functional logic as a contingent and localised problem.

In the modern era (until the post-war settlement), the dominant affect was misery. In the nineteenth century, the dominant narrative was that capitalism leads to general enrichment. The public secret of this narrative was the misery of the working class. The exposure of this misery was carried out by revolutionaries. The first wave of modern social movements in the nineteenth century was a machine for fighting misery. Tactics such as strikes, wage struggles, political organisation, mutual aid, co-operatives and strike funds were effective ways to defeat the power of misery by ensuring a certain social minimum. Some of these strategies still work when fighting misery.

When misery stopped working as a control strategy, capitalism switched to boredom. In the mid twentieth century, the dominant public narrative was that the standard of living – which widened access to consumption, healthcare and education – was rising. Everyone in the rich countries was happy, and the poor countries were on their way to development. The public secret was that everyone was bored. This was an effect of the Fordist system which was prevalent until the 1980s – a system based on full-time jobs for life, guaranteed welfare, mass consumerism, mass culture, and the co-optation of the labour movement which had been built to fight misery. Job security and welfare provision reduced anxiety and misery, but jobs were boring, made up of simple, repetitive tasks. Mid-century capitalism gave everything needed for survival, but no opportunities for life; it was a system based on force-feeding survival to saturation point.

Of course, not all workers under Fordism actually had stable jobs or security – but this was the core model of work, around which the larger system was arranged. There were really three deals

¹ **Affect:** emotion, bodily disposition, way of relating

² When using the term *dominant* affect, this is not to say that this is the only reactive affect in operation. The new dominant affect can relate dynamically with other affects: a call-centre worker is bored and miserably paid, but anxiety is what keeps her/him in this condition, preventing the use of old strategies such as unionisation, sabotage and dropping out.

in this phase, with the B-worker deal – boredom for security – being the most exemplary of the Fordism-boredom conjuncture. Today, the B-worker deal has largely been eliminated, leaving a gulf between the A- and C-workers (the consumer society insiders, and the autonomy and insecurity of the most marginal).

2: Contemporary resistance is born of the 1960s wave, in response to the dominant affect of *boredom*.

If each stage of the dominant system has a dominant affect, then each stage of resistance needs strategies to defeat or dissolve this affect. If the first wave of social movements were a machine for fighting misery, the second wave (of the 1960s-70s, or more broadly (and thinly) 1960s-90s) were a machine for fighting boredom. This is the wave of which our own movements were born, which continues to inflect most of our theories and practices.

Most tactics of this era were/are ways to escape the work-consume-die cycle. The Situationists pioneered a whole series of tactics directed against boredom, declaring that “We do not want a world in which the guarantee that we will not die of starvation is bought by accepting the risk of dying of boredom”. Autonomia fought boredom by refusing work, both within work (using sabotage and go-slows) and against it (slacking off and dropping out). These protest forms were associated with a wider social process of countercultural exodus from the dominant forms of boring work and boring social roles.

In the feminist movement, the “housewife malaise” was theorised as systemic in the 1960s. Later, further dissatisfactions were revealed through consciousness raising, and the texts and actions (from “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” to the Redstockings abortion speak-out) which stemmed from it. Similar tendencies can be seen in the Theatre of the Oppressed, critical pedagogy, the main direct-action styles (carnavalesque, militant, and pacifist), and in movements as late as the 1990s, such as the free party movement, Reclaim the Streets, DIY culture, and hacker culture.

The mid-century reorientation from misery to boredom was crucial to the emergence of a new wave of revolt. We are the tail end of this wave. Just as the tactics of the first wave still work when fighting misery, so the tactics of the second wave still work when fighting boredom. The difficulty is that we are less often facing boredom as the main enemy. This is why militant resistance is caught in its current impasse.

3: Capitalism has largely absorbed the struggle against boredom.

There has been a partial recuperation of the struggle against boredom. Capitalism pursued the exodus into spaces beyond work, creating the *social factory* – a field in which the whole society is organised like a workplace. Precarity is used to force people back to work within an expanded field of labour now including the whole of the social factory.

Many instances of this pursuit can be enumerated. Companies have adopted flattened management models inciting employees to not only manage, but invest their souls in, their work. Consumer society now provides a wider range of niche products and constant distraction which is not determined by mass tastes to the same degree as before. New products, such as video-games and social media, involve heightened levels of active individual involvement and desocialised stimulation. Workplace experiences are diversified by means of micro-differentials and performance management, as well as the multiplication of casual and semi-self-employed work situations on the margins of capitalism. Capitalism has encouraged the growth of mediatised secondary identities – the self portrayed through social media, visible consumption, and lifelong learning – which have to be obsessively maintained. Various forms of resistance of the earlier period have been recuperated, or revived in captured form once the original is extinguished: for instance, the corporate nightclub and music festival replace the rave.

4: In contemporary capitalism, the dominant reactive affect is *anxiety*.

Today's public secret is that everyone is anxious. Anxiety has spread from its previous localised locations (such as sexuality) to the whole of the social field. All forms of intensity, self-expression, emotional connection, immediacy, and enjoyment are now laced with anxiety. It has become the linchpin of subordination.

One major part of the social underpinning of anxiety is the multi-faceted omnipresent web of *surveillance*. The NSA, CCTV, performance management reviews, the Job Centre, the privileges system in the prisons, the constant examination and classification of the youngest schoolchildren. But this obvious web is only the outer carapace. We need to think about the ways in which a neoliberal idea of success inculcates these surveillance mechanisms inside the subjectivities and life-stories of most of the population.

We need to think about how people's deliberate and ostensibly voluntary self-exposure, through social media, visible consumption and choice of positions within the field of opinions, also assumes a performance in the field of the perpetual gaze of virtual others. We need to think about the ways in which this gaze inflects how we find, measure and know one another, as co-actors in an infinitely watched perpetual performance. Our success in this performance in turn affects everything from our ability to access human warmth to our ability to access means of subsistence, not just in the form of the wage but also in the form of credit. Outsides to the field of mediatised surveillance are increasingly closed off, as public space is bureaucratised and privatised, and a widening range of human activity is criminalised on the grounds of risk, security, nuisance, quality of life, or anti-social behaviour.

In this increasingly securitised and visible field, we are commanded to communicate. The incommunicable is excluded. Since everyone is disposable, the system holds the threat of forcibly delinking anyone at any time, in a context where alternatives are foreclosed in advance, so that forcible delinking entails desocialisation – leading to an absurd non-choice between desocialised inclusion and desocialised exclusion. This threat is manifested in small ways in today's disciplinary practices – from “time-outs” and Internet bans, to firings and benefit sanctions – culminating in the draconian forms of solitary confinement found in prisons. Such regimes are the zero degree of control-by-anxiety: the breakdown of all the coordinates of connectedness in a setting of constant danger, in order to produce a collapse of personality.

The present dominant affect of anxiety is also known as precarity. Precarity is a type of insecurity which treats people as disposable so as to impose control. Precarity differs from misery in that the necessities of life are not simply absent. They are available, but withheld conditionally.

Precarity leads to generalised hopelessness; a constant bodily excitation without release. Growing proportions of young people are living at home. Substantial portions of the population – over 10% in the UK – are taking antidepressants. The birth rate is declining, as insecurity makes people reluctant to start families. In Japan, millions of young people never leave their homes (the

hikikomori), while others literally work themselves to death on an epidemic scale. Surveys reveal half the population of the UK are experiencing income insecurity. Economically, aspects of the system of anxiety include “lean” production, financialisation and resultant debt slavery, rapid communication and financial outflows, and the globalisation of production. Workplaces like call centres are increasingly common, where everyone watches themselves, tries to maintain the required “service orientation,” and is constantly subject to re-testing and potential failure both by quantitative requirements on numbers of calls, and a process which denies most workers a stable job (they have to work six months to even receive a job, as opposed to a learning place). Image management means that the gap between the official rules and what really happens is greater than ever. And the post-911 climate channels this widespread anxiety into global politics.

5: Anxiety is a public secret.

Excessive anxiety and stress are a public secret. When discussed at all, they are understood as individual psychological problems, often blamed on faulty thought patterns or poor adaptation.

Indeed, the dominant public narrative suggests that we need more stress, so as to keep us “safe” (through securitisation) and “competitive” (through performance management). Each moral panic, each new crackdown or new round of repressive laws, adds to the cumulative weight of anxiety and stress arising from general over-regulation. Real, human insecurity is channelled into fuelling securitisation. This is a vicious circle, because securitisation increases the very conditions (disposability, surveillance, intensive regulation) which cause the initial anxiety. In effect, the security of the Homeland is used as a vicarious substitute for security of the Self. Again, this has precedents: the use of national greatness as vicarious compensation for misery, and the use of global war as a channel for frustration arising from boredom.

Anxiety is also channelled downwards. People’s lack of control over their lives leads to an obsessive struggle to reclaim control by micro-managing whatever one can control. Parental management techniques, for example, are advertised as ways to reduce parents’ anxiety by providing a definite script they can follow. On a wider, social level, latent anxieties arising from precarity fuel obsessive projects of social regulation and social control. This latent anxiety is increasingly projected onto minorities.

Anxiety is personalised in a number of ways – from New Right discourses blaming the poor for poverty, to contemporary therapies which treat anxiety as a neurological imbalance or a dysfunctional thinking style. A hundred varieties of “management” discourse – time management, anger management, parental management, self-branding, gamification – offer anxious subjects an illusion of control in return for ever-greater conformity to the capitalist model of subjectivity. And many more discourses of scapegoating and criminalisation treat precarity as a matter of personal deviance, irresponsibility, or pathological self-exclusion. Many of these discourses seek to maintain the superstructure of Fordism (nationalism, social integration) without its infrastructure (a national economy, welfare, jobs for all). Doctrines of individual responsibility are central to this backlash, reinforcing vulnerability and disposability. Then there’s the self-esteem industry, the massive outpouring of media telling people how to achieve success through positive thinking – as if the sources of anxiety and frustration are simply illusory. These are indicative of the tendency to privatise problems, both those relating to work, and those relating to psychology.

Earlier we argued that people have to be socially isolated in order for a public secret to work. This is true of the current situation, in which authentic communication is increasingly rare. Communication is more pervasive than ever, but increasingly, communication happens only through paths mediated by the system. Hence, in many ways, people are prevented from actually communicating, even while the system demands that everyone be connected and communicable. People both conform to the demand to communicate rather than expressing themselves, and self-censor within mediated spaces. Similarly, affective labour does not alleviate anxiety; it compounds work-

ers' suffering while simply distracting consumers (researchers have found that requirements on workers to feign happiness actually cause serious health problems).

The volume of communication is irrelevant. The recomposition – reconnection – of liberatory social forces will not happen unless there are channels through which the public secret itself can be spoken. In this sense, people are fundamentally more alone than ever. It is difficult for most people (including many radicals) to acknowledge the reality of what they experience and feel. Something has to be quantified or mediated (broadcast virtually), or, for us, to be already recognised as political, to be validated as real. The public secret does not meet these criteria, and so it remains invisible.

6: Current tactics and theories aren't working. We need new tactics and theories to combat anxiety.

During periods of mobilisation and effective social change, people feel a sense of empowerment, the ability to express themselves, a sense of authenticity and de-repression or dis-alienation which can act as an effective treatment for depression and psychological problems; a kind of peak experience. It is what sustains political activity.

Such experiences have become far rarer in recent years.

We might here focus on two related developments: pre-emption, and punishment by process. Pre-emptive tactics are those which stop protests before they start, or before they can achieve anything. Kettling, mass arrests, stop-and-search, lockdowns, house raids and pre-emptive arrests are examples of these kinds of tactics. Punishment by process entails keeping people in a situation of fear, pain, or vulnerability through the abuse of procedures designed for other purposes – such as keeping people on pre-charge or pre-trial bail conditions which disrupt their everyday activity, using no-fly and border-stop lists to harass known dissidents, carrying out violent dawn raids, needlessly putting people's photographs in the press, arresting people on suspicion (sometimes in accord with quotas), using pain-compliance holds, or quietly making known that someone is under surveillance. Once fear of state interference is instilled, it is reinforced by the web of visible surveillance that is gridded across public space, and which acts as strategically placed triggers of trauma and anxiety.

Anecdotal evidence has provided many horror stories about the effects of such tactics – people left a nervous wreck after years awaiting a trial on charges for which they were acquitted, committing suicide after months out of touch with their friends and family, or afraid to go out after incidents of abuse. The effects are just as real as if the state was killing or disappearing people, but they are rendered largely invisible. In addition, many radicals are also on the receiving end of precarious employment and punitive benefit regimes. We are failing to escape the generalised production of anxiety.

If the first wave provided a machine for fighting misery, and the second wave a machine for fighting boredom, **what we now need is a machine for fighting anxiety** – and this is something we do not yet have. If we see from within anxiety, we haven't yet performed the "reversal of perspective" as the Situationists called it – seeing from the standpoint of desire instead of power. Today's main forms of resistance still arise from the struggle against boredom, and, since boredom's replacement by anxiety, have ceased to be effective.

Current militant resistance does not and cannot combat anxiety. It often involves deliberate exposure to high-anxiety situations. Insurrectionists overcome anxiety by turning negative affects into anger, and acting on this anger through a projectile affect of attack. In many ways, this provides an alternative to anxiety. However, it is difficult for people to pass from anxiety to

anger, and it is easy for people to be pushed back the other way, due to trauma. We've noticed a certain tendency for insurrectionists to refuse to take seriously the existence of psychological barriers to militant action. Their response tends to be, "Just do it!" But anxiety is a real, material force – not simply a spook. To be sure, its sources are often rooted in spooks, but the question of overcoming the grip of a spook is rarely as simple as consciously rejecting it. There's a whole series of psychological blockages underlying the spook's illusory power, which is ultimately an effect of reactive affect. Saying "Just do it" is like saying to someone with a broken leg, "Just walk!"

The situation feels hopeless and inescapable, but it isn't. It feels this way because of effects of precarity – constant over-stress, the contraction of time into an eternal present, the vulnerability of each separated (or systemically mediated) individual, the system's dominance of all aspects of social space. Structurally, the system is vulnerable. The reliance on anxiety is a desperate measure, used in the absence of stronger forms of conformity. The system's attempt to keep running by keeping people feeling powerless leaves it open to sudden ruptures, outbreaks of revolt. So how do we get to the point where we stop feeling powerless?

7: A new style of precarity-focused consciousness raising is needed.

In order to formulate new responses to anxiety, we need to return to the drawing board. We need to construct a new set of knowledges and theories from the bottom up. To this end, we need to create a profusion of discussions which produce dense intersections between experiences of the current situation and theories of transformation. We need to start such processes throughout the excluded and oppressed strata – but there is no reason we shouldn't start with ourselves.

In exploring the possibilities for such a practice, the Institute has looked into previous cases of similar practices. From an examination of accounts of feminist consciousness raising in the 1960s/70s, we have summarised the following central features:

- **Producing new grounded theory relating to experience.** We need to reconnect with our experiences now – rather than theories from past phases. The idea here is that our own perceptions of our situation are blocked or cramped by dominant assumptions, and need to be made explicit. The focus should be on those experiences which relate to the public secret. These experiences need to be recounted and pooled – firstly within groups, and then publicly.
- **Recognising the reality, and the systemic nature, of our experiences.** The validation of our experiences' reality of experiences is an important part of this. We need to affirm that our pain is really pain, that what we see and feel is real, and that our problems are not only personal. Sometimes this entails bringing up experiences we have discounted or repressed. Sometimes it entails challenging the personalisation of problems.
- **Transformation of emotions.** People are paralysed by unnameable emotions, and a general sense of feeling like shit. These emotions need to be transformed into a sense of injustice, a type of anger which is less resentful and more focused, a move towards self-expression, and a reactivation of resistance.
- **Creating or expressing voice.** The culture of silence surrounding the public secret needs to be overthrown. Existing assumptions need to be denaturalised and challenged, and cops in the head expelled. The exercise of voice moves the reference of truth and reality from the system to the speaker, contributing to the reversal of perspective – seeing the world through one's own perspective and desires, rather than the system's. The weaving together of different experiences and stories is an important way of reclaiming voice. The process is an articulation as well as an expression.
- **Constructing a disalienated space.** Social separation is reduced by the existence of such a space. The space provides critical distance on one's life, and a kind of emotional safety

net to attempt transformations, dissolving fears. This should not simply be a self-help measure, used to sustain existing activities, but instead, a space for reconstructing a radical perspective.

- **Analysing and theorising structural sources based on similarities in experience.** The point is not simply to recount experiences but to transform and restructure them through their theorisation. Participants change the dominant meaning of their experience by mapping it with different assumptions. This is often done by finding patterns in experiences which are related to liberatory theory, and seeing personal problems and small injustices as symptoms of wider structural problems. It leads to a new perspective, a vocabulary of motives; an anti-anti-political horizon.

The goal is to produce the *click* – the moment at which the structural source of problems suddenly makes sense in relation to experiences. This click is which focuses and transforms anger. Greater understanding may in turn relieve psychological pressures, and make it easier to respond with anger instead of depression or anxiety. It might even be possible to encourage people into such groups by promoting them as a form of self-help – even though they reject the adjustment orientation of therapeutic and self-esteem building processes.

The result is a kind of affinity group, but oriented to perspective and analysis, rather than action. It should be widely recognised, however, that this new awareness needs to turn into some kind of action; otherwise it is just frustratingly introspective.

This strategy will help our practice in a number of ways. Firstly, these groups can provide a pool of potential accomplices. Secondly, they can prime people for future moments of revolt. Thirdly, they create the potential to shift the general field of so-called public opinion in ways which create an easier context for action. Groups would also function as a life-support system and as a space to step back from immersion in the present. They would provide a kind of fluency in radical and dissident concepts which most people lack today.

Anxiety is reinforced by the fact that it is never clear what “the market” wants from us, that the demand for conformity is connected to a vague set of criteria which cannot be established in advance. Even the most conformist people are disposable nowadays, as new technologies of management or production are introduced. One of the functions of small-group discussions and consciousness raising is to construct a perspective from which one can interpret the situation

One major problem will be maintaining regular time commitments in a context of constant time and attentive pressure. The process has a slower pace and a more human scale than is culturally acceptable today. However, the fact that groups offer a respite from daily struggle, and perhaps a quieter style of interacting and listening which relieves attentive pressure, may also be attractive. Participants would need to learn to speak with a self-expressive voice (rather than a neoliberal performance derived from the compulsion to share banal information), and to listen and analyse.

Another problem is the complexity of experiences. Personal experiences are intensely differentiated by the nuanced discriminations built into the semicapitalist code. This makes the analytical part of the process particularly important.

Above all, the process should establish new propositions about the sources of anxiety. These propositions can form a basis for new forms of struggle, new tactics, and the revival of active force from its current repression: a machine for fighting anxiety.

Afterword: Cause and Affect

Reflections from one study group within the CrimethInc. Workers' Collective

When we understand capitalism as affective—as producing and being sustained by certain feelings, attitudes, and ways of relating—many things come into focus. These affects are not simply the effects of economic relations; they are essential to the relations themselves. The ostensibly material needs that drive the economy are socially produced, just as the obedience and dissociation it demands are culturally conditioned. The individualism of modern workers and consumers, our estrangement from other living things, our sense that finance is real while ecology is abstract, above all the ways we are accustomed to private property and authority—without these, the market that seems so timeless and unassailable would collapse. Attempting to understand the economy by following the stock market rather than starting from our lived experiences is symptomatic of the same disconnect that drives capitalism in the first place. Private sentiments and personal relations are no less fundamental than material conditions. We need language with which to discuss the affective conditions.

Considering capitalist relations through this lens clarifies, among other things, how protest activity that doesn't succeed in redressing the grievances it opposes can still leave its participants feeling fulfilled—sometimes more so than if the object of their immediate demands had simply been granted outright. We treasure the nights in the square together telling stories, the times we held our ground, more than the meager concessions we sometimes win. Until now, this phenomenon has usually been explained somewhat glibly in terms of the “dignity” of standing up for ourselves. But when we conceptualize our conditions under capitalism as affective, we can see why forms of resistance that transform the affective conditions could be fulfilling in and of themselves, not just as a means to fuller bellies and higher thermostats. As Occupy and other movements have shown, many would gladly eat sandy beans and sleep on bare bricks if only they could break with misery, with boredom, with anxiety! Likewise, framing the problems we face as affective can help us to avoid pursuing or accepting apparent solutions that do not change how we feel and relate.

This text from the Institute for Precarious Consciousness goes a long way towards posing the question of affective anti-capitalist strategy. Perhaps it is a little pat to impose discrete periods on history,¹ but we must understand such generalizations chiefly as a way to formulate hypotheses about which tactics will succeed here and now.

¹ If only the Yippies had lived to see their pranks described as “a machine for fighting boredom”! If we must use industrial metaphors, it would be more historically accurate to speak of machines in reference to what the authors describe as the era of misery, and assembly lines for the era of boredom. Accusing the poor Yippies of creating “an assembly line for fighting boredom” makes the irony of this line of thinking clear enough. Matching metaphors to our current era, we would call for “a global network for fighting anxiety,” and indeed we are still so deeply entrenched in this era that such a monstrosity sounds perfectly sensible. Yet if we are to take the authors at their word, machinery produces misery, assembly lines produce boredom, and global networks produce anxiety—so the Marxist industrial metaphors have got to go. One does not fight misery with machines—as history shows, one fights machines with sabots, assembly lines with wildcats, and global networks with what certain Francophiles call “human strike.”

What could actually counter anxiety? Do we have to beat security guards, insurance policies, religious communities, and antidepressants at their own game, somehow making people feel safe in a hostile and hazardous world? Trying to allay anxiety as a separate project from abolishing the conditions that create it is surely doomed. Should we accept the worst-case scenario as a foregone conclusion and hurry forth to meet it, transforming our anxiety into a weapon? If anxiety is the omnipresent guardian of the prevailing order, it presents the perfect point of departure for resistance—but this does not answer how those already immobilized by it could perform such alchemy. Perhaps, in the course of taking on the ruling order, we could create something together that inspires confidence, grounding ourselves in a shared sense of reality that no market or military could take from us.

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