

Breaking Class Segregation In The Bay Area

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So last Sunday in the midst of a second wave of blockades of tech company buses in San Francisco and Oakland, a bus window was broken by some anarchist activists and the action immediately sailed to the top of countless news sites. Activists had been trying to draw attention to how the buses (collectively termed “Google Buses”) are subsidized by public infrastructure for free, but the real issue here is the starkly heightening class conflict between techies and those less wealthy in the Bay Area. This crisis is primarily a housing issue, but it has been amplified by the extreme insularity of the upper class tech community, and the private, tinted buses are naturally ground zero for symbolic actions. Vandalism is a venerable means of protest, but many people took exception to the targets this time and I thought I should explain my refusal to condemn the action.

Gentrification has always been a complex issue for anarchists. Neighborhood mutations and migrations can be quite natural. Obviously the very notion of a neighborhood collectively determining exactly who can and can't move in down the street would be a problematic one at best were there no other power dynamics at play. Regional exclusion, tribalism and collective insularity are the foundation of states and such team sports attitudes are critically at play in virtually every oppression. In response anarchist ethics have always been oriented around respect for the results of free association between individuals. But of course we do not live in a remotely free society and the aggregate historical effects of extreme violence have built a world of vast and cancerous wealth concentrations as well as institutional racial inequities. The means by which the subsidy of state violence arrives at our doorstep are often quite indirect although those on the receiving end of the punch tend to feel it pretty clearly. In a world where the vast majority of people place a premium on housing stability a sudden increase of rents by 300% and the mass expulsion of a city's former populace is a pretty strong indicator something's gone horribly wrong.

Without a doubt the primary contributor to the current housing crisis in San Francisco are the city government's utterly repugnant zoning laws and regulations. Much ink has been spilled tracing the paternalism and preexisting liberal elitist hostility to the poor that left the city incapable of responding to the influx of the last two decades. Let us be absolutely clear: those callous regulations that placed a premium on aesthetics and bourgeois sensibilities over human decency should be overturned immediately, openly violated, and those responsible publicly reviled. The

human misery and indeed deaths they are responsible for deserves tribunals and commissions, not idle dinner party tut-tutting.

Yet local tenant advocacy groups are correct, even if there had been no zoning laws the influxes have been much faster than the regional build capacity, people would still have probably been displaced en masse without rent control (coercion based, market distorting, and damage causing though such measures are).

It's true that sometimes it's better to just bite the bullet of severe industry, population and cultural changes. If for example the military industrial complex was defunded or our borders opened we'd certainly see massive population shifts. But in this case the shockingly fast influx and the sheer degree of attendant wealth is the result of the United States' economic dependence on censorship in the form of intellectual property. While the last two decades have seen an explosion of legitimately wonderful developments, without artificial scarcities in knowledge and violent enclosures in the realm of information few innovations would be capable of reaping payoffs of such unnatural scale as to enter the realm of diminishing motivational returns. Further, without the wild subsidies federal, state, and local governments have given tech behemoths the economies of scale on display today would surely be scaled down. A world where open source developers and software-as-a-service tailoring were the dominant market forms would be far more diffuse and responsive. The spasms of ego less realistically threatening and every component necessary for the "Google Buses" simply non-existent.

Would that we lived in such a world.

Instead Bay Area residents find ourselves in a vicious class divide. A divide calcified in no small part by naive narratives of elitism and justified privilege that have become relatively endemic among the tech yuppies. (Full disclosure: Even though I grew up in homelessness and poverty I now work as a developer in an Oakland tech cooperative.)

The recent tirade of cartoonish CEO villain / human excrement Greg Gopman isn't even that rare a slip up:

"The difference is in other cosmopolitan cities, the lower part of society keep to themselves. They sell small trinkets, beg coyly, stay quiet, and generally stay out of your way. They realize it's a privilege to be in the civilized part of town and view themselves as guests. ...there is an area of town for degenerates and an area of town for the working class. There is nothing positive gained from having them so close to us."

Aneurysm inducing to be sure, but I've heard programmers at a Twitter dinner party seriously agreeing that *if chattel slavery existed today they'd defend it*. And I've lost count of self-identified "progressive" tech yuppies with different versions of the same rant about how if Occupy activists were going to focus on the plights of anyone below the middle class they were enemies of civilized company. Even in some of the most famously radical spaces and organizations can you find techies sneering at the homeless and poor. One feels like it's only a matter a time before Google Glass is replaced by Google Monocle.

This shit is, as they say, all fucked up and bullshit.

I want to be clear though: Against my class background I actually have deep sympathies for the tech yuppies in the bay as a whole. Despite many of them missing a ton and some being straight up evil, the average tech worker certainly isn't a Victorian-era monster or fratboy version of American Psycho plus energy drink, but a passive, politely privileged default-liberal who

only breaks slightly more conservative or authoritarian than the average person when their sense of entitlement is challenged. More importantly I think the best hallmarks of techie identity and industry—geeky analytic inquiry, creativity, entrepreneurial audacity, and mathematical inclinations—matter immeasurably in building a better, freer, more empathic and egalitarian world. And the populist sniping at them often tends in a direction I find horrifying. Opportunistic rhetorical overreactions are happening that risk blinding us to real potentials, losing productive conversations, and deepening insularities. Wealth is not the only power dynamic that matters and while this generation of techies are infamous for ignorant privilege and douchebaggery on a variety of fronts, anti-intellectualism is still a defining characteristic of our society.

Those who have lucked out to grow up in contexts conducive to analytic cognitive strategies, higher default confidence, and access to educational opportunities do not necessarily also avoid being alienated. The problem is when many first reach the inevitable frustration with “why are people around me so slow on this, why don’t they get what I get, why won’t they come play with me with these toys” rather than actually doing the work necessary to tease out the real and complicated answers through empathy and intellectual vigilance, they encounter prepackaged frameworks of “race/gender/class/etc realism” and then decide to accept it because such stark defenses of oppression appear “iconoclastic” in this era and thus fit their self-model.

Stir in the aforementioned unnatural market conditions and these notions of superiority can successfully detangle themselves from all recourse with reality. How much consideration do you really have to give other people’s experiences when you can ride over the rest of society in a sled made of money? It might be an amusing foible if that money didn’t translate into political power and first class status, but it very much does. Images of Gopman hanging with the Mayor aside, the Bay economy has grown so dependent upon tech yuppie wealth that their spams of poorly considered opinions and near total disregard for the humanity of outsiders inherently swing around the gun of the state. If and when homelessness, poverty, and displacement register as issues they will be “solved” on a HackerNews thread to the satisfaction of the tech yuppies alone. First-hand experience explicitly not welcome.

Many residents of the Bay rightfully view this insularity as an existential risk.

And in this context theatrically busting a Google Bus window is pretty sensible. When a group with power starts denying or ignoring your humanity that constitutes a danger to you, and sometimes the best way to bring them to the table is a punch to the face. Screaming isn’t polite, it’s not a model of the social relationships we’d like to build, but when someone is hurting you or placing you in danger you need to get their attention. When someone doesn’t even feel a need to consider your existence, when your screams are silenced behind slick black windows or bemusement, a reevaluation from “nothing” to “threat” is a significant step towards productive engagement. Even if the “threat” is just mildly inconveniencing them with a slight delay to work and some angry halfsheets.

Is us versus them posturing ultimately a path in and of itself to a resolution? Absolutely not. Quite the opposite, the collectivist tribalism it reinforces is dangerous as hell and certainly not a vision of a better world. However in the immediate term, as a tactic, these sorts of confrontations can obviously be a net benefit. We do all at least on a certain level take the side of the Palestinians when they chuck rocks. If the situation was more explicit, where the state was more directly paying upper middle class kids from far off extraordinary sums to move to and live in a region, with such sharp differences in money as to parallel the settlers in the West Bank, where they can afford to wall themselves off, take the occasional potshot and smugly lobby the government to do

more to get rid of the rabble below their tower, who on earth besides the most vile of conservative sociopaths would condemn the smashing of a window?

Is a broken “Google Bus” window the most efficient means of breaking the peace, of shaking the apathy and distance out of the powerful in this growing class conflict? I don’t know. It behooves us to keep a critical eye on aggressive protest tactics and I’m more bored and disappointed than super enthused, but I have limited sympathy for the outrage this has engendered. If you’re not in risk of losing your job for being late, fuck your goddamn commute. People are dying. The state violence that feeds your bank account and secures the disneyland of Valencia has disrupted the hell out of people’s lives. It’s not the end of the world if a couple activists disrupt your bus ride to work.

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