

# **The Fate of Composition**

decompositions

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# Preface

Communism seems a dim prospect today. The concept of surplus humanity has achieved a dreadful clarity in the present assault on Gaza. Yet, despite becoming a flashpoint for unprecedented waves of global solidarity actions, the situation in Gaza reveals not the unification of revolutionary activity, but its necessarily fragmented character. On many other shores, the popular blockade has returned in the form of protests by small farmers who seek to defend their livelihoods (and property) against the diminishing possibilities of social reproduction. This is in part conditioned by realities of climate change, and in part conditioned by state planning for a “green transition.”<sup>1</sup> Ecological crisis is a harbinger of reaction and social disaster, rather than a unifying force of social upheaval.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, in the long retreat from the George Floyd Rebellion, new ostensible unities present themselves in contestations over the future of humanity, over competing visions of crisis and disaster response that are entirely incompatible. The paradigmatic case remains the struggle to Stop Cop City (SCC) and Defend the Atlanta Forest (DFA). This is not simply because so many continue to constantly assert its paradigmatic status, but because it has become a real representation of strategic possibilities and outcomes in our era of uncertainty and utter bewilderment. This seems an unfair burden, given the rather specific character and conditions from which the initial movement spread. But as plans for “cop cities” are supposedly cropping up everywhere,<sup>3</sup> and with them organizational forms that must confront the inheritance of SCC/DFA and its strategic offerings, it seems prescient to review the core elements, concepts, and presuppositions that have percolated through the messiness of struggle, repression, and polemics. To this end, we must *abstract* from SCC/DFA proper to examine what we believe has become the organizing principle of many “non-movements” today, particularly in periods of general reaction and degeneration: the problem of composition.

As we shall see, in the context of struggle, “composition” has several distinct meanings, which can generally be divided into two overlapping, but not identical usages. One sense of composition is primarily descriptive. The other is primarily prescriptive. While the former has its origins in a materialist accounting of the conditions from which struggle proceeds, today much social antagonism seems to be prosecuted from the latter understanding, sometimes under the heading of a “strategy of composition.” In this usage, composition is something to be done, the bringing together of disparate social forces for common objectives. The riddle of history solved by will and good conscience. Against the one-sidedness of this approach, we argue that the task is to elaborate how, when, and under what conditions such an objective solution can and will present itself. This is the real historical purchase of “composition” as a category of analysis. Our argument

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<sup>1</sup> On the class composition of the farmer’s protests, see Artifices. 2024. “CHACUN Sa PLACE À L’OMBRE.” [https://artifices.blog/2024/02/07/chacun-sa-place-a-lombre/#\\_ftnref1](https://artifices.blog/2024/02/07/chacun-sa-place-a-lombre/#_ftnref1); for English translation, see Artifices. 2024. “No Man’s Land.” Endnotes. <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/artifices-no-mans-land>

<sup>2</sup> Antithesi. 2024. “The Ecological Crisis and the Rise of Post-Fascism.” *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/antithesi>

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous. 2024. “Stopping the Cop Cities Countrywide.” *Crimethinc*. <https://crimethinc.com/2024/02/07/stopping-the-cop-cities-countrywide-with-a-report-from-lacey-washington>

is simple: composition is a fate, a condition of constraint and possibility, that gives any strategic intervention its practical reality. Yet it is an uneven fate, which makes generalizing solutions, forms of struggle, and outcomes exceedingly difficult. The paradox of prescriptive composition is that claims to overcome this very unevenness without however proceeding from these limiting conditions. This essay is an effort at parsing out the various meanings of “composition,” paring it down to something more historically coherent, and developing the concept to better account for the crises of capitalist reproduction today and the necessarily ecological and territorial character that the production of communism must take.

As regards class struggle, the concept of “composition” seems to be experiencing a bit of a resurgence. This is true more generally of Marxian concepts and categories of analysis since the crisis and recession of 2007–9. But it is also true more specifically of “class composition,” a term popularized in the writings of Italian *operaismo* (workerism) and the post-*operaist autonomia*. The decline in conceptual precision around the composition of class in relation to the composition of capital evinced the turn from the factory to the “social factory” as the object of derision and locus of a new history.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, a flurry of neo-workerist writings, publications, study groups, and inquiries seem to be forcing a reversal of this trend.<sup>5</sup> Yet, on the activist left, “composition” had already been re-entering the lexicon in a quite different sense. This usage dates at least to the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes. Within the framework of this struggle, “composition” began to refer to a particular strategy of organization that reflected problems of territorial defense, including competing claims of interest and class positions of various stakeholders. It would take a few years before this sense of the concept of “composition” would be exported from the Francophone radical world and muddle the already disastrous politics of the US American communist and anarchists scenes. Still, in a practical way, the Anglophone left had been grappling with the problems of coalition building since the heyday of the united or popular front. At the turn of the century, these problems took the painfully tedious forms of the activist campaign, with its coalition building, spokes-councils, affinity groups, clusters, and general assemblies. For territorial struggle, especially in the settler colonies and evacuated hinterlands of capital, the “composition” of efforts to defend space and place was itself a site of struggle. Indigenous struggles to defend or reassert a particular mode of social reproduction and concrete relation to place are, for instance, quite distinct from forest defense campaigns carried out largely by urban settler environmentalists with no real ties to the land beyond ideological affinity, “primitive” skill-sharing, or reactionary preparation for the “collapse of civilization.” It is notable that it was a model developed in England, during the mid-1990s anti-roads movement, which attempted to distinguish itself from this tendency of radical environmental conflicts in the US by circumventing this contradiction between place and subjectivity, territory and class, that should go on to inspire the ZAD. This latter story is the supposed inheritance of the “strategy of composition,” as it is presented to us today, a novel solution to the problems of decomposition and coordination that weds class conflict to territorial defense.<sup>6</sup>

That is a truncated story at best, but one that suffices as a guide to the intellectual trajectories and legacies of struggle that have become entangled in the coarseness of “composition” as it is deployed today. It is little surprise that this popular use of “composition” has also been met

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<sup>4</sup> We will have more to say about *operaismo* and “class composition” below.

<sup>5</sup> Paramount here would be the work of *Angry Workers of the World*, *Viewpoint*, and *Notes from Below*.

<sup>6</sup> See Hugh Farrell. 2023. “The Strategy of Composition.” *Ill Will Editions*. We discuss at length below.

by sustained scrutiny over the last year. That is, at least in the northern bloc settler colonies of the United States and Canada. It appears groupuscules from Atlanta to Montreal to Chicago are in a cycle of critique and polemics that once concerned European anarchist and anti-state communist milieus over recent decades, but have quieted in recent years, particularly since the fall of the ZAD. In the fallout of the George Floyd Rebellion, the great collapse of generalized militancy and the tenuous stabilization of the post-pandemic recovery period seems to have led many radicals on a desperate search for threads of possible antagonism on which to hitch their identities. Inevitably, we find the resuscitation of old debates in new forms (e.g., whether and how to engage “liberals” and avoid “cooptation”), but there is also an earnest search for practice in times of great uncertainty and social flux.

In the most insipid of these recent exchanges, the object of concern is less a particular political strategy, and more a vague allegiance to particular theoretical tendencies, proximate moral positions, and political pedigrees. The specter has gone by several names, but readers might be most familiar with the terms *appelism* or *tiqqunism* that have graced recent report-backs and communiques, principally those orbiting around the struggle to Stop Cop City and Defend the Atlanta Forest. While this may be of necessity a conjecture, we would assert that, on the global scale, the journal *Tiqqun*, the text *The Call* (*L'Appel* in the original French, from which the terms *appelism* and *appelists* derive), and the various works attributed to Le Comité Invisible/The Invisible Committee, bear little weight on the minds of the living. It is after all the nightmare of daily life under capital and colony that confronts and contours the struggles of the dispossessed, not opaque French and Italian theories of postmodernity, a ‘post-left’ secular theology that finds comfort in the words of Martin Heidegger or Carl Schmitt. Critiques of this tendency, if it is coherent enough to be called one, are as old as the tendency itself.<sup>7</sup> No, that is not what interests us here. What has caught our attention, particularly over the last year of struggle over the fate of the Weelaunee forest, is the swiftness with which the *strategy* of “composition,” its merits and limits, has become entangled with the struggle itself. This hazy mixture of territorial struggle, paradigmatically the ZAD, NoTAV, and now SCC/DFA, with the terms such as “composition,” “logistics,” “infrastructure,” or even “commune” and “blockade” has only added to the confusion about the relation between conditions and strategy, history and subjectivity, limits and generative possibilities. It is in this confounding form that “composition” appears on the lips or fingertips of “radicals,” campaigners, activists, anarchists, dripping wet in anticipation of either its defense or critique. All this, however, without any real investigation into its content.

The real problem of a “strategy of composition” is not its formal association to one philosophical dead-end or another, but that, as fashionable parlance, *it has no real historical content*. This is as true for the detractors of “composition” as it is for its advocates.<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps this vacuousness that makes it attractive for the conceptual arsenal in an era of profound suppression, stagnation, and drift amid the chaos and crisis of the economy and all its lurid ornaments. “Composition,” with all its imprecision and sanguine gestures of possibility, acts a structure of feeling when confronted with the everyday banalities of decomposition. This sleight-of-hand seems to provide a resolution to the constraints of history. It suggests action over passivity, autonomy over

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<sup>7</sup> For the interested, we think the best include Leon de Mattis. 2012. “Reflections on the Call.” <https://libcom.org/library/reflections-call-l%C3%A9-de-mattis>; and Anonymous. 2020. “Another Word for Settle: A Response to *Reattachments*” [another-word-for-settle-a-response-to-rattachements-and-inhabit/](https://another-word-for-settle-a-response-to-rattachements-and-inhabit/)

<sup>8</sup> Spend an afternoon skimming the last year of tit-for-tat criticisms published on the *Scenes from the Atlanta Forest* blog, and this should become quite clear.

determination, coordination over disorientation, strategy over disaffection. In short, it offers a verb in place of noun, and becomes something quite tactile in an otherwise alienated world.<sup>9</sup> It is not that this is merely ideological, utopian, or vulgar. Among other things, the “strategy of composition” names a real practice of confronting and opposing development projects and infrastructure. The limits that these efforts tend to run up against are quite real as well. The problem is that presenting “composition” as a strategy, as a verb, obscures the reality that it is also a noun, a history, a constraint—a limit. This one-sidedness with which the debate around “composition” has unfolded indexes a real problem of our era. In the constant searching for a plan of action, composing struggle out of the ether of inertia, that illusory and addictive feeling of being unfettered comes crashing down in a torrent of familiar waves—repression, recuperation, despair. Sent scrambling back to the drawing board by the next wave of crises, we return with the same tired hopes of “autonomous” proliferation, just dressed in new finery. “Composition” is but the latest in this series of theoretical garments meant to characterize that repeated feeling of banging your head against the wall.

If we remain cautious of the obfuscations surrounding this renewed interest in the “strategy of composition,” must we abandon “composition” as a conceptual category for communist strategy? Does it merely provide a theoretical cover for the “vanguardism” of the “imaginary party,” as the most trenchant anarchist and anti-authoritarian criticisms maintain? Perhaps caught in this subcultural tree-gazing, shall we abandon the forest for the factory, where *class* composition remains under-investigated, especially in our current era? This is the conceit of the neo-workerists, who, while laudably working to preserve the science of class hatred, have only tenuously established the objective relation between *composition* and that hatred, and tend to dismiss struggles that do not immediately cohere with abstract working class identity, subjectivity, and unity.<sup>10</sup> It is little wonder how these two seemingly incongruent strategies can continue to circulate on the left. They do so with a kind of polar interaction. The workers movement and land defense struggles have a sordid, complicated history, and both have tended to be siloed, at times antagonistic to the other, such that the work of overcoming this apparent opposition can appear to us now as something novel or unique.<sup>11</sup> It is in this conjuncture that “composition” circulates as anti-authoritarian buzzword, on the one hand, and an object of workers’ inquiry, on the other. Little common cause is made between the two. The presumption seems to be that they invoke very different, mutually exclusive problematics, to which they offer distinct, unrelated resolutions. The coincidence of the terminology is merely happenstance. One a verb: something prescriptive, nor-

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<sup>9</sup> This will remain an important theme.

<sup>10</sup> As an example, see Angry Workers’ dismal appraisal of the May 2021 wave of Palestinian riots and general strikes in response to police raids of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and evictions in Sheikh Jarrah. Angry Workers. 2021. “Editorial #3: Palestine – Israel.” *Angry Workers of the World*. <https://www.angryworkers.org/2021/05/25/editorial-3-palestine-israel/>. For a critique of Angry Workers on this issue, and race and the problem of class unity more generally, see Gus Breslauer. 2021. “Race, Class, and the Zionist State.” *Cosmonaut Magazine*. <https://cosmonautmag.com/2021/06/race-class-and-the-zionist-state/>

<sup>11</sup> Erik Loomis has helped to undermine the overly simplistic narrative of workers as opposed to environmental protection, in the context of forest defense in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Still, Loomis’ account does not periodize the decline of workers’ movement and the transition to largely defensive forms of worker struggle and identity. As a result, his critique of the opposition between environmentalists and extractive industry workers from the 1980s to the present day is primarily moralistic and is itself quite reductive. It cannot help to explain the limits of workplace strategies in this current context, especially as regards struggles for indigenous preservation of territory, e.g., union support for the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines. See Erik Loomis. 2016. *Empire of Timber: Labor Unions and the Pacific Northwest Forests*. Cambridge University Press.

mative even. The other a noun: descriptive, but not without its own practical implications. They appear simply as different parlances, different traditions.

Things are not always as they appear. If there is an inner connection between the descriptive and prescriptive, it needs to be drawn forth and clarified. We believe that the current attempts to do so fall into methodological error, leading to strategic dead-ends. The most sophisticated effort in this area has been Hugh Farrell's "The Strategy of Composition." While it is unique in its attempt to outline the shared contours of the different usages of composition, we believe it falls short, and ends up reproducing the one-sidedness that both traditions begin with. Farrell published this essay shortly after the first charges of domestic terrorism associated with SCC/DFA, and shortly before the murder of Tortugueta (Manuel Esteban Paez Terán). In the year that has passed, the SCC/DFA movement has become a flashpoint for discourse on strategy and tactics, repression and counter-repression, and the false antimony of the "mass movement" and the "clandestine" underground.<sup>12</sup> Much is at stake. Lives have been lost. Many have been or are currently incarcerated. In this vortex, the "strategy of composition" or even simply "composition" has become a real focal point of polemics, but it also seems to have increasingly become conscious scaffolding for the public-facing campaigns, from the Block Cop City convergence of late 2023 to the more recent Nationwide Summit to Stop Cop City. Farrell's piece has often been a reference point, good or bad, in sorting out how to move. Farrell also uses SCC/DFA to demonstrate what a strategy of composition looks like in practical terms. For these reasons, his essay will serve as a repeated point of reference as we work our way through the problems of composition and develop a critique and counterproposal. To the extent that Farrell uses SCC/DFA and other apparently similar territorial struggles to ground his argument, we will make reference to those struggles. Lest it be unclear, what follows is not a critique of any particular campaign, effort, or concrete objective, nor is it a critique of any particular tactics deployed to those ends. No real movement or conflict can be subsumed to a given strategy, interpretation, and representation. Real struggle is organic.

Our pursuit is more limited, but we will need to be expansive to advance it. For composition to present a real strategy, it must first be understood as a fate. It is not an even, but a necessarily uneven and combined fate. Composition is always immediately decomposition—fragmentation, disaggregation, and differentiation—as united as it is internally hostile. It is only through this recurrent strife that composition can have any real content. It is an identity of identity and non-identity. The unfolding of this hostility between composition and decomposition is historical, and does not look today as it did in prior periods of crisis and uncertainty. Any investigation into composition must now reconcile with this real world of disintegrated integration into the global circuits of capital, in both its temporal and spatial dimensions, if one is even to attempt coughing up something worthy of being called a strategy. In a banal sense, all real strategies are strategies of composition, in that they are built on the basis of these constraints, and attempt to overcome them precisely by working through them. This therefore is not a dismissal of a strategy of composition, *per se*, but an effort to appreciate all that such a strategy must account for, as a concrete reconciliation of history and its inheritances.

Our exploration of this problem is broken into three parts, each of which will be published separately. The first part, "The Parlance of Composition," provides a history of the term and its two

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<sup>12</sup> As of this writing, the most recent example is an anonymous statement published on Ill Will Editions. See Anonymous. 2024. "States of Siege." *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/states-of-siege>

meanings—composition as both descriptive and prescriptive, as a limit and a strategy—tracing how these concepts arose out of and attempted to grapple with specific historical moments. The second part, “The Problem of Composition,” provides an account of both contemporary theorizations of composition as a problem and attempts to solve that problem. We focus on two primary strands of strategic thought that attempt to address the problem of composition: the “strategy of composition” grounded in territorial defense as seen in Stop Cop City, and a neo-workerism that attempts to analyze class composition in services and logistics as the basis for a new unified working class strategy. We note the limits of each of these tendencies, while highlighting what both reveal about the problem of composition in the present. In the final part, “The Cacophony of Communism,” we attempt to theorize composition and decomposition in the present, beginning not from the factory floor, but from the common problem of reproduction. In so doing, we demonstrate the necessity of integrating what Marx called the “universal metabolism”—ecological relations—into any analysis of reproduction and therefore composition. We end by noting some implications for political strategy and for communism, which we understand as the struggle for life and its conditions of possibility.



# Part One: The Parlance of Composition

## Development and Compulsion

The thematic of “class composition” is often cited as the most significant theoretical and practical contribution of the *operaismo* tradition.<sup>1</sup> By speaking through the objective categories of economic rationality, the production process, and the division of labor, “composition” was an attempt to explain class activity that did not, on the surface, avail itself of the psychosocial complexities presented by “consciousness,” “hegemony,” or processes of ideological “interpellation,” which had dogged so-called “Western” Marxism since the spectacular revolutionary failures of the interwar period. “Class composition” appeared as a return to form—in many ways a return to Marx—present informally in Marx’s most sophisticated political analyses. Examples here might paradigmatically include *The Class Struggles in France* (1850), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), and *The Civil War in France* (1871), but we must also include his articles on the British Chartist movement and the American Civil War, and his letters on the Irish question.<sup>2</sup> More formally, “A Workers’ Inquiry,” published in 1[880] in *La Revue socialiste*, anchors the workerist discourse of class composition. This series of 100 survey questions was intended as a serious and rigorous inquest into the position of the French working class, which, following a period of rapid de-peasantization, industrial development, and sequence of revolutionary crises, was both embryonic and restive. In Marx’s words, this belated development had left France without an “*exact and positive* knowledge of the conditions in which the working class — the class to whom the future belongs—works and moves.”<sup>3</sup> In England, the Factory Acts, won through protracted class conflict in and against industrialization, had provided the framework for inspectors to conduct the basic inquiries which formed the empirical basis for Marx’s analysis in *Capital*, seen most clearly in the chapters on the working day and machinery. It would be exegesis of these chapters that provided the mandate for the analytical approach of the workerists, more generally.<sup>4</sup> It was in the analysis of the production process that the transformation of labor-power into wage labor, and more specifically wage labor sorted and attenuated by the commands of capital, was revealed as not only determining the development of capital, but the organization of workers in concrete fashion. This process of labor-power becoming labor was fundamentally organizational, rather than ideological, and thus the basis for a strategy of refusal.<sup>5</sup> This remains the basic way of understanding of class composition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the “Introduction” to Wright’s *Storming Heaven*. Steven Wright. 2017. *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. Pluto Press.

<sup>2</sup> For a collection, see Karl Marx. 2019. *The Political Writings*. Verso.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx. 1880. “A Workers’ Inquiry.” *La Revue socialiste*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm>

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Mario Tronti’s *Workers and Capital* or Harry Cleaver’s *Reading Capital Politically*. Mario Tronti. 2019. *Workers and Capital*. Verso; Harry Cleaver. 2000. *Reading Capital Politically*. AK Press.

<sup>5</sup> See Tronti, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> See Wright, 2017, 70–78.

“Workerism” as such is most associated with mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Italy, particularly in the northern industrial cities. Following the devastations of two world wars, failed communist revolutions, and fascism, Italy, like most of Europe, anticipated a lag in terms of economic development. The post-war economic boom, referred to Italy and elsewhere in Western Europe as the “economic miracle,” was the combined result of Cold War geography, US aid and investment in the form of the Marshall Plan, and the integration of free trade regions, such as the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Common Market, and the European Economic Community.<sup>7</sup> What was really decisive was the availability of cheap labor-power, the product of mass migration from the pools of agrarian surplus populations in the south of Italy.<sup>8</sup> The belated, but rapid industrial development that this de-peasantization made possible reflected the general character of global capitalist development and is the real story of the long boom.<sup>9</sup> The confluence in northern Italy included high investments in new plant, equipment, and fixed capital and a newly proletarianized migrant population. But workers were also faced with the shortcomings of the traditional unions and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Italian Socialist Party (PSI), in particular their strategy of the united front. In this context, the further slow development of working class *consciousness* through communist ideology, counter-hegemony, and war of position seemed an utter failure. A generation of young dissidents—including Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, and Romano Alquati—among the parties’ ranks would turn to *organization* as the fundamental axis of strategy, and in this sense they were almost ultra-orthodox Leninists. Where they distinguished themselves was the basic thesis that the form and capacity for organization was a function of class composition in the immediate process of production.<sup>10</sup>

The founders of *Quaderni Rossi* (Red Notebooks) were not alone in this return of focus. Italy was not unique in undergoing this process of rapid industrialization, de-peasantization, and proletarianization, so it should be no surprise that the *operaismo* was itself only one grouping that reoriented strategy around workplace antagonism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. *Quaderni Rossi* was notably influenced by France’s *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the figure of Cornelius Castoriadis, who was himself influenced by fellow disenchanting Trotskyists in the Johnson–Forest Tendency and *Correspondence*: C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace Lee Boggs, and James Boggs. This internationalist character of workerism has been noted extensively before.<sup>11</sup> What is interesting about this turn toward class composition and the return of the workers’ inquiry is that it has as its basis not only rapid industrialization of wage of labor, but a racial and gendered character.<sup>12</sup> The gendered character of class composition has been noted by Italian and American feminists associated with these tendencies, especially in their internal criticisms, often prompted by the failure

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<sup>7</sup> The best account of the long boom is given by Brenner. See Robert Brenner. 2006. *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005*. Verso.

<sup>8</sup> This de-peasantization was the trend globally from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, accelerated after 1973. See Endnotes. 2015. “A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers’ Movement, 1883–1982.” *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation*; Mike Davis. 2017. *Planet of Slums*. Verso.; Farshad Araghi. 1995. “Global Depeasantization, 1945–1990.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36(2): 337–368.

<sup>9</sup> See Endnotes. 2015. “A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers’ Movement, 1883–1982.” *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation*

<sup>10</sup> This history is detailed by Wright, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Wright, 2017, and Viewpoint. 2013. *Viewpoint Issue 3: Workers’ Inquiry*.

<sup>12</sup> Endnotes reminds us that it is a fallacy to maintain that “the development of capitalism tends to unify the workers. The labour market may be singular, but the workers who enter it to sell their labour power are not. They are divided by language, religion, nation, race, gender, skill, etc. Some of these differences were preserved and transformed by the rise of capitalism, while others were newly created.” Endnotes, “A History of Separation”

of prominent theorists to account for gender or social reproduction in the composition of wage labor.<sup>13</sup> The dimension of race has less clearly and consistently graced analyses of composition. Yet the racial character of class composition was central to the workers' inquiries and critiques of American unionism of James Boggs.<sup>14</sup> The development of capitalism in America, had, after all, pursued essentially racial dimensions. This history is what gave a racial, predominantly black character, to the surplus agrarian populations that migrated to industrial cities and formed the basic units of "unskilled labor" in the factories and the substratum of the industrial unions.<sup>15</sup> It was arguably the analysis of *race* and critical explanation of racial domination that revealed the dynamics of *class* composition in this context, rather than the other way around. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* should be understood as one of the earliest inquiries into American class composition, in this regard, and a seminal work of communist theory.<sup>16</sup> Race and gender would continue to provide the proximate coordinates for the analysis of class and reproduction in America, even before the Johnson-Forest Tendency's most influential publications.<sup>17</sup> Domestic work and services, including the illegal and illicit, tend to have a symbiotic interaction with industrial development, so the relationship between housework and unionized labor, racialized domestic slave labor and social reproduction, and the place of gender and race in the supply chain often formed the content of these earliest inquiries.

Prior waves of agrarian depopulation and rapid industrial development had begot similar accounts of revolutionary activity as a technical problem of composition and organization.<sup>18</sup> Rosa Luxemburg's account of the mass strikes of the 1[905] Russian Revolution rely heavily on the historical features of Russian depeasantization and late state-directed transition.<sup>19</sup> She paid particular attention to the relative composition of the respective proletarian milieus of Russia and Germany in her consideration of the possibility of similar mass strikes in Germany.<sup>20</sup> We would be remiss not to mention at this juncture Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Rus-*

<sup>13</sup> See Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. 1972. "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community" and Leopoldina Fortunati. 1996. *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. Autonomedia. See also Viewpoint. 2015. *Viewpoint Issue 5: Social Reproduction*

<sup>14</sup> See James Boggs. 1963. *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*. Monthly Review Press; Jason Smith. 2020. *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation*. Reaktion Books; Wright, 2017; Viewpoint, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> See Boggs, 1963. See also Endnotes. 2015. "Brown v Ferguson." *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation*.

<sup>16</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois. 2014. *Black Reconstruction in America*. Oxford University Press. See also Karen E. and Barbara J. Fields. 2012. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso.; Theodore W. Allen. 2012. *The Invention of the White Race*. Verso.; Noel Ignatiev. 2009. *How the Irish Became White*. Routledge.

<sup>17</sup> Viewpoint traces these lineages well. See Viewpoint. 2015. *Viewpoint Issue 5: Social Reproduction*.

<sup>18</sup> Loren Goldner makes the argument, following Marx, that agrarian revolutions were fundamental to the formation of home markets for labor-power and means of subsistence. In historical context where this process was incomplete, communist organization tended to accelerate it, whether wittingly or not. According to Goldner, these revolutions are fundamentally bourgeois in content, but take various political forms—political absolutism, enlightened despotism, liberal democracy, social democracy, or Bolshevism. See Loren Goldner. "Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today." <https://libcom.org/article/communism-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today-loren-goldner>

<sup>19</sup> Rosa Luxemburg. 1906. *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/>. See also Teodor Shanin's similar appraisal of the composition of forces in the development and limits of the Russian Revolution of 1905, with particular attention to the role of internalized differentiation and racialization, and the contradiction between the limited industrial core and the vast hinterlands. Teodor Shanin. 1986. *Russia, 1905–07: Revolution as a Moment of Truth*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>20</sup> Sergio Bologna made this point in considering Luxemburg and important predecessor in the analysis of class composition. See Sergio Bologna. 1972. "Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin

*sia*, a tremendous survey of class formation through Russia's belated and truncated transition.<sup>21</sup> Though drawing political conclusions quite opposed to Marx's analysis of Russia's social composition,<sup>22</sup> Lenin's work is nonetheless a critical analysis of how the uneven transition made possible a particular political strategy.<sup>23</sup> Marx's own treatment of inquiry into the composition of the French proletariat followed a similar cycle of crisis and expansion.<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps these "late transitions" that most dramatically reveal the fragmented content of composition,<sup>25</sup> in which "unity" has only the form of dispossession. The ratcheting of industrial development is all that practically unifies vast swaths of the species *as a species*. It is therefore little wonder why then the workerists found solace in the material organization of the factory as the cypher of political strategy.

Still, in the workerists' own analyses, the concept and category of "class composition" is surprisingly underdeveloped.<sup>26</sup> Analytically and methodologically, *operaismo* as a whole was quite ambiguous on this front. The premier theoretical work, *Workers and Capital*, contains little overt development of concept, and in Tronti's hands, "composition," "recomposition," and "decomposition" all tend to signal a discussion of *subsumption*—the valorization process determining the material and technical character of the labor process. *Operaismo*'s most influential reports that developed the concept in concrete relation to the new cycles of struggle—Romano Alquati's studies of worker struggles at FIAT and Olivetti—did little to formally advance the terminology of "class composition" itself.<sup>27</sup> Still, it was this openness to sociological inquiry<sup>28</sup> as militant practice, informed by Panzieri, Montaldi, and Alquati, that sought explanation of class activity and worker behavior through the *material* categories of the labor process and the division of labor. These studies formed the real basis of "class composition" as an analysis and discourse. As a category, it was deployed to explain "the forms of behavior which arise when particular forms of labour-power are inserted in specific processes of production."<sup>29</sup> In the direct experience of the reproduction of capital, the interaction of what Marx called the objective and subjective factors, unfold in ways that dispose struggle to take on particular forms.<sup>30</sup> Here, it should be said that in this initial form,

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of the Workers' Council Movement." <https://libcom.org/article/class-composition-and-theory-party-origins-workers-council-movement>

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. 1899. *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/devel/>

<sup>22</sup> See Teodor Shanin. 1983. *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism*. Monthly Review Press.

<sup>23</sup> Ed Emery. 1995. "No Politics Without Inquiry!: A Proposal for a Class Composition Inquiry Project 1996–7." <https://libcom.org/library/no-politics-without-inquiry>

<sup>24</sup> Marx, 1880.

<sup>25</sup> We are not the first to draw attention to the relation between "uneven and combined development" and "class composition." See Angry Workers of the World. 2020. "Reflections on 'uneven and combined development' and 'class composition.'" <https://libcom.org/article/reflections-uneven-and-combined-development-and-class-composition>

<sup>26</sup> This point has been made by Steve Wright in his foreword to Tronti's *Workers and Capital*.

<sup>27</sup> Romano Alquati. 1961. "Organic Composition of Capital and Labor-Power at Olivetti." *Quaderni Rossi* and Romano Alquati. 1964. "Struggle at FIAT." *Classe Operaia*, no. 1. See *Viewpoint's* issue on workers' inquiry: <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/30/issue-3-workers-inquiry/>

<sup>28</sup> Alquati, for instance, was a practicing sociologist and influential in early Italian sociology. See Wright for a broader discussion on the relationship between *operaismo* and sociology.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, 2017, 45.

<sup>30</sup> "...within or without the factory (this is a false problem: today the factory does not exist as a moment that can be separated, etc.), are nonetheless in the midst [nel vivo] of the class struggle – where political recomposition, the circulation of experiences, critique and discussion, the elaboration of new forms and contents, have reached the high-

which we think the best and most clear, class composition had as much to do with *constraint* as it did possibilities for class struggle. It is after all *capital* that does the insertion and division of labor.<sup>31</sup> It is a particular composition of capital that determines the character of the labor process and the resulting configuration of class activity. Thus, the first tract on class composition contains no use of the term “class composition,” but instead refers to political composition and subjectivity in reference to the organic *composition of capital* in a particular industrial sector.<sup>32</sup> So we can arrive at a first principle that class composition expresses a political dimension of the mute compulsion of political economy and is given its historical accentuation by the character of capitalist transition.

*Operaismo* itself would of course never assent to a conception that risked ossifying struggle as a category of capital. There was always a latent tension in their work between a desire for class autonomy and an understanding of composition as tendency of capital. In a rudimentary way, the turn to “composition” as an explanation of new forms of struggle was intended both as analytical clarity, and as a political effort to undermine the orthodoxy of the PCI and the mystified notion of class consciousness.<sup>33</sup> The allegiance to Leninist party structure would present a consistent and confounding contradiction. The notion of class composition returned the question of organization to the factory floor, to the process of production and the forms of subjectivity and self-activity that arise therefrom. *Operaismo* sought to rescue and differentiate the autonomy of the class from the movement of capital, struggle from the subsumption of labor-power. The class is composed, both within *and against* capital. Yet, despite influence from the ultra-left and council communism, early workerists, especially Tronti, were in many ways quite conventional in their approach to the question of organization and essentially argued for the reform of the reformist PCI and a strategy of entryism.<sup>34</sup> Where workerists lauded shop-floor spontaneity, they also failed to decouple organization from the trappings of *political* organization. These tensions between organization and intervention, composition and autonomy, were often seedbeds for the many splits that proliferated in the lineage of *operaismo*.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, with sequence of struggles from Creeping May through the Hot Autumn giving way to the rise of struggles in the sphere of circulation and across university campuses, “composition” became a less central category. This decline appeared concomitant with the shift from *operaismo* to *autonomia*. Ultimately, this signaled the failure of the tradition to really make sense of the concept of composition beyond the factory,<sup>36</sup> despite its growing gestures to the contrary.

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est moment, where problems attain an increasingly deeper and more generalized significance alongside the unfolding of the struggle itself.” Alquati, 1961.

<sup>31</sup> As Alquati noted, “The group did not choose Olivetti, Olivetti chose it.” Alquati, 1961.

<sup>32</sup> See Alquati, 1961. This is despite the equivocation on the *tendencies* of capitalist development present in Alquati’s work. See Wright, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Salar Mohandesi. 2013. “Class Consciousness or Class Composition?” *Science & Society* 77(1): 72–97.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, 64–70.

<sup>35</sup> As Sergio Bologna observed, “...the hoary old questions started coming out: should the organisation, with its programme and its plans, march over the corpse of the movement; should the programme be external to and counterposed to the class composition?” Sergio Bologna. 1977. “The Tribe of Moles.” <https://libcom.org/article/tribe-moles-sergio-bologna>

<sup>36</sup> The exception here is of course the Marxist-feminist tradition of critique that grew out of and *in opposition to* Italian *operaismo* and *autonomia* around groupings such as Wages for Housework and *Lotta Femminista*. See the *Viewpoint* dossier on social reproduction: <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/11/02/issue-5-social-reproduction/>. Maya Gonzalez offers an excellent gloss of the significance of this contribution to understanding the process of class formation: Gonzalez. 2013. “The Gendered Circuit: Reading The Arcane of Reproduction.” *Viewpoint*. <https://viewpointmag.com/>

## Practice and History

In the nadir of communist struggle, the legacies of *operaismo* and *autonomia* have been obfuscated by the general crisis and restructuring of capital attended by the decline of the traditional workers' movement. The spectacular events of the late seventies including Italy's Years of Lead and anti-terrorism campaign, followed by Negri's persecution and cause célèbre, and later academic works of post-Marxism associated with *autonomia* have not clarified matters. The turn away from the factory to the social factory, from capital to "modernity" or "empire," loosened whatever grip "class composition" was beginning to have on critical communist politics. As a method of analysis, it retreated to the refugia provided by small "libertarian communist" circles that were in the process of critically appraising the legacy of workerism and autonomism in the midst of new cycles of struggles that would come to be associated with "globalization" and "neoliberalism."<sup>37</sup> Many of these groups had retained the ethos of a "strategy of refusal," but began to reorient their analyses of workplace struggle around the newly ascendant services, transport, and logistics sectors, as well struggles in the sphere of circulation, e.g., the "auto-reduction" of prices. It is to their credit that, in search of struggle on less familiar terrains, this milieu helped to clarify "class composition" as an analytic.

Kolinko's "Paper on Class Composition" is a model in this regard and serves as a reckoning of the concept for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> They begin with a general thesis that all notions of revolutionary subjectivity are *derived* from specific notions of the class relation. Leninism and its "left critics," specifically the Dutch-German council communists, share a common understanding of the class relation as formal, by which they mean the appropriation of surplus labor in the form of surplus value. Kolinko contends that such a conception of the class relation misses the real content of the relation through the material process of production, which is a process of exploitation. Council communists and Leninists thus arrive at strikingly similar conceptions of organization as a formal matter—either the party or the workers' own self-activity should cohere around the control of this mass of formally dispossessed. Dispossession, for Kolinko, does not explain worker *power*, nor does it explain worker behavior through the supply chain.<sup>39</sup> They argue, usefully, that the differing formal approaches to communist organization can be explained historically by the differing material conditions of production that workers and communists confronted.<sup>40</sup> It is from this content of material production as the process of exploitation that the concept of class composition springs: "the core of the notion of class composition is the thesis that there is a close relation between the form of struggle and the form of production."<sup>41</sup>

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2013/09/28/the-gendered-circuit-reading-the-arcane-of-reproduction/. See also Maya Gonzalez. 2023. *Feminist Autonomy and the Concept of Social Reproduction: The Italian Workerist-Feminist Tradition of Lotta Femminista*. UC Santa Cruz.

<sup>37</sup> Groups and journals such as *Wildcat*, *Subversion*, *Aufheben*, *Midnight Notes*, *Kolinko*, and *Kämpa tillsammans!* are illustrative of this trend.

<sup>38</sup> Kolinko. 2001. "Paper on Class Composition." [https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e\\_klazu.htm](https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e_klazu.htm)

<sup>39</sup> Notice that this anticipates the key problem of composition today: the formality of dispossession is all that coheres proletarian experience, as the relation to production is far more contingent and precarious. The *formality* of dispossession is the only content composition in our current era. This is the composition problem that we explore below.

<sup>40</sup> Sergio Bologna made a similar point regarding the technical organization and expertise of the German councilist movement. See Bologna, 1972.

<sup>41</sup> Kolinko, 2001.

Here, Kolinko advances the notion by discretely expanding it into its two aspects: the “technical class composition” and the “political class composition.”<sup>42</sup> This distinction was mostly latent in workerist writings, especially those of Sergio Bologna,<sup>43</sup> though occasionally rather explicit.<sup>44</sup> Technical composition refers to the ways that capital brings together and divides labor-power in the immediate process of production. This bears a strong resemblance to the notion as advanced by early *operaismo* and essentially adds terminological clarity. Importantly, Kolinko adds the “form of re-production” here as well. Though they do little to clarify how reproduction attenuates composition, they do insist that it is critical in the formation of revolutionary subjectivity.<sup>45</sup> We will return to this thematic in greater depth. Political composition refers to the forms of struggle that emerge from and turn the technical composition *against* capital. This sets the familiar dialectic espoused by Tronti and the subsequent generations he influenced: “Capital reacts to the ‘political class composition’ (the generalization of class struggle) with a ‘technical re-composition’” and so on.<sup>46</sup> The end result, for Kolinko and other libertarian communists and post-autonomists, seemed to be the growing *coherence* of proletarian self-organization, as the uneven development of capital’s organic composition would seem to bring about greater proletarianization, technical development, and thus more intense struggles throughout industry. The growing significance of services, transport, and logistics in relation to manufacturing, the rise of East Asian firms, and market liberalization of China and the former USSR and Eastern Bloc, and the American expansion of the 1990s, all seemed to signal that this outcome was not far off. The real unfolding of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is of course far more grim. They thus arrived at the same limit that confronted the workerists: by locating strategy in the material process of production,

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<sup>42</sup> “In the analysis of the coherence of the mode of production and workers’ struggle we distinguish between two different notions of class composition:

- the “technical class composition” describes how capital brings together the work-force; that means the conditions in the immediate process of production (for instance division of labour in different departments, detachment from “administration” and production, use of special machinery) and the form of re-production (living-community, family-structure etc.)

- the “political class composition” describes how workers turn the “technical composition” against capital. They take their coherence as a collective work-force as the starting-point of their self-organization and use the means of production as means of struggle. We are still discussing the question of at which particular point in the process of workers’ struggle we can describe it in terms of “political class composition”. One position uses the term as soon as workers of a single company or branch organize their struggle out of the conditions of production. The other position takes as a pre-condition for a new “political class composition” a wave of workers’ struggles that are unified into a class movement by struggles in central parts of the social production process (for example in the 60s/70s the focus for the class movement were mainly the struggles in automobile factories).” Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See especially Sergio Bologna. 1993. “Nazism and the Working Class.” <https://libcom.org/article/nazism-and-working-class-sergio-bologna>, Sergio Bologna. 1977. “Eight Theses on Militant Historiography.” <https://libcom.org/article/eight-theses-militant-historiography>, and Bologna, 1977, “Tribe of Moles” and Bologna, 1972.

<sup>44</sup> “The technical class composition specifies that section of the working class on which capital bases its accumulation, while the political class composition specifies the materially determined characteristics of class antagonism.” Alberto Battaglia. 1981. “Mass worker and social worker: reflections on the ‘new class composition’.” *Primo Maggio*. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/mass-worker-and-social-worker>

<sup>45</sup> “It was criticised that the notion of class composition is used to identify a central subject within class struggle (thereby filtering out the rest). In contrary, we have to see the importance of every “proletarian experience” not just at the work-place, but also in the sphere of reproduction, the special experience as (work-)immigrants etc. The analysis of class composition can only help us to understand specific situations we are confronted with, e.g. why particular divisions between workers exist on a special shop-floor.” Ibid. See also Jamie Woodcock. 2019. “Interview with Kolinko Collective.” *Notes from Below*. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/interview-kolinko-collective>

<sup>46</sup> Kolinko, 2001.

they failed to adequately address problems of machinery, rising organic composition, the twin poles of deskilling and increasingly specialized technical expertise, labor-shedding and precarity, and the general decoupling of proletarian reproduction from the production of surplus value.<sup>47</sup> It was this uneven decomposition of the “mass worker” that plunged workerism and the theory of “class composition” into a crisis from which it never recovered.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps the greater oversight is not so much the results of an overemphasis on unchanging model of production, but the very core thesis of class composition itself: that technical composition *determines* political composition in any sort of straightforward way. Indeed, the workerist oeuvre suggests that there is not only a coherence and correlation, but an order of causality at work here. This is the wellspring for accusations of a crude “economic” or “mechanistic” “determinism” that plagues Marxism generally, but class composition in particular, as it *seems* to necessarily abstract from race, gender, and culture in its persistent focus on the class relation in production.<sup>49</sup> The added difficulty here is that for the most trenchant workerists, the technical composition is itself always a response of political composition. There thus seems to be an invariance to class antagonism that unfolds in concrete ways through the dialectic of technical and political composition. The poles of class composition are reciprocal. “Class composition” was heralded from the earliest days of *operaismo* as a *materialist* answer to the “idealist” model of strategy and organization that derives from the muddled concept of “class consciousness.” Both, however, deal with the difficult problem of political subject formation. To some extent, the parlance of “composition” has merely pitched this duality of the objective and subjective in new terms. Solar Mohandesi, for example, has argued that the pairing of “technical” and “political” composition has displaced the more orthodox and ontological pairing of “class in-itself” and “class for-itself.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, despite the familiar philosophical limitations here, he concedes that “class composition” remains “more fruitful” than “class consciousness” as a model for explaining revolutionary subjectivity and activity.

While Mohandesi fails to stress it, the aspect of “class composition” that gives it an explanatory power that is suppressed or absent from models of “class consciousness” is that the former carries with it a *practical* dimension.<sup>51</sup> Practice is the irreducible element of subject formation and the content of composition. The question that remains is which kinds, forms, or species of practice matter in the churning of the capitalist planetary complex. We will return to this discussion later. For now, it suffices to note that practical activity is the heart and hearth of the metabolic relations that we call the human society.<sup>52</sup> That this metabolic interaction takes the form of a “irreparable rift” in capitalism does not negate that this ecological chasm and crisis itself is still the reification of an everyday social practice and its reproduction. Social activity is not

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<sup>47</sup> James Boggs, an early influence of workerists, had anticipated these problems as early as 1963. See Boggs, 1963.

<sup>48</sup> There were important efforts to address this problem in the early days of the crisis. Negri and the autonomists had turned away from the “mass worker” to the “social worker,” a figure that, with all of its problems and confusions, attempted to adequately capture the trend as it was unfolding. These attempts anticipated the growing problems of composition and decomposition as both social and spatial in ways not immediately or directly linked to the process of production. As Battaglia observed, the “current class figure is therefore ‘social’ because, in the first place, it is tied to the decomposition of the class across the territory.” Battaglia, 1981.

<sup>49</sup> We shall have occasion to address this below.

<sup>50</sup> Mohandesi, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> “The class composition model illustrates how proletarians work through a broad set of strategies, making do with what they find at hand, improvising, testing, and learning from their practical experiences.” Ibid., 91.

<sup>52</sup> See “Tragic Theses” for a critical discussion of this concept.



the buildup of individual consciousness that reaches some critical mass to become hegemonic. It is never separated from concrete practice—at work, at home, at school, at the grocery store, during “leisure,” at a strike, during a riot—practices which are themselves linked, quite differentially, to subsistence and reproduction. It is through practice that something like production and reproduction, technical and political composition, or composition as a noun and composition as a verb, are mediated. The irreducibility of concrete practice makes composition a powerful category of analysis, one that forecloses the confounding problem of looking for a given “revolutionary subject” and simply building up its own consciousness of its historical role.<sup>53</sup> This repudiation of anachronism is what allows “composition” its explanatory power and historical dimension.<sup>54</sup> Composition serves as a “skeleton key”—the basis for a communist historiography.<sup>55</sup>

## Limits and Opening Moves

If the broader workerist tradition took pains to return organizational strategy to its objective conditions in the form of class composition, it was more ambiguous as to the content of the revolutionary activity would initiate the process of communist negation and construction.<sup>56</sup> For the American post-Trotskyists of the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Correspondence*, the questions of party organization and the spontaneous self-activity of the proletariat led to a number of differing and opposed positions and polemics.<sup>57</sup> Socialisme ou Barbarie (SoB) and the associated (through Guy Debord) Situationist International retained an adherence to worker self-organization in the

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<sup>53</sup> “The churning of the productive forces does not automatically stir up a revolutionary subject adequate to the era. There is instead the question of *political subjectivity* (or more specifically, what communist philosophers call ‘subjectivation’), which is the practical process of composition through which a revolutionary subject can be constructed in action. (All these forms of ‘subjectivity’ are inherently collective and inherently practical, by the way; we’re not just talking about building ‘political consciousness’ in the minds of individuals.)” Phil Neel. 2023. “Hostile Brothers: New Territories of Value and Violence.” <https://haters.noblogs.org/files/2023/11/Hostile-Brothers.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> “The model of class composition, therefore, avoids the perils of anachronism by emphatically insisting on the historical specificity of all struggles: just as capitalist exploitation varies from historical conjuncture to historical conjuncture so too must the corresponding form and content of the struggle to abolish this exploitation.” Mohandesi, 2013, 87.

<sup>55</sup> “It is only when the category of class composition is defined, or, rather, applied, that militant historiography emerges from its infantile disorders, and succeeds in regaining the terrain of ‘social history’ on the one hand, and on the other the terrain of political-institutional history. The concept of class composition, while it is functional, it is at the same time all-embracing and therefore ambiguous. It is a skeleton key which opens all doors.” Bologna, 1977, “Eight Theses on Militant Historiography”

<sup>56</sup> We borrow from Phil Neel and Nick Chavez their formulation “communist construction,” which usefully avoids the pitfalls of debates around the transition from capitalist to “socialism” to communism and the confusions associated with the umbrella of “communization.” Communism is in a very real sense always in transition, always becoming: “communist construction—the gestation and emergence of communism from a non-communist body—is continually giving way to communism, plain and simple.” Neel and Chavez, 2023. It is also immediately destruction—of value, money, and the market, of private property, of the state—and so we add “negation” here only to emphasize that communism is first and foremost a negative content, carried out through the form of communist measures.

<sup>57</sup> C.L.R. James famously became increasingly skeptical of the role of “vanguard” party in relation to working class struggle, and in particular black proletarian self-organization, while Raya Dunayevskaya was more equivocating. Grace Lee and James Boggs, developing a critical understanding of transformations in racial class composition brought on by de-industrialization, arrived at the conclusion that the party organization was even *more* critical for black proletarians. The variation in positions here was also reflected in the organizational history and practice of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) in Detroit. See Kimathi Mohammed. 1974. “Organization and Spontaneity: The Theory of the Vanguard Party and its Application

form of workers' councils and worker self-management. Though not workerist in any immediate sense, the SI's shared influence from *SoB* had them commit officially to this program through the events of May '68, though those events would begin to dissolve the very basis for this adherence. And as discussed above, *operaismo* was internally fractured along lines of organization and program, with many of the early founders returning to the PCI and PSI in an effort to rescue those parties from themselves. While, as Bologna had demonstrated, the concept of "class composition" had allowed communists to explain these particular forms of concrete struggle through an analysis of specific historical conditions, it did little to advance an understanding of what a "communist program" might entail. It was no less available to recuperation and revision by prevailing institutional forces, who often just inserted the same tired dogma in the empty spaces.<sup>58</sup> In other words, what "class composition" helped to explain were the particular terms and forms of struggle. It did not seem to explain its content.

This question of communist content is what occupied a distinct, slightly younger generation of communist theorists. Particularly influential were their experiences of revolutionary failure in the long arc of 1968. The crucible of revolutionary experience served as the messy testing ground for a range of strategic approaches, but also a range of objectives supposedly carried by those forms of organization, whether the party, the union, or the workers' council. It is on this basis of limits of these programs that partisans drew attention to the absence of a clear horizon. The earliest and perhaps most influential texts associated with this post-68 milieu were gathered for publication in *Le mouvement communiste* in the early 1970s, written by Gilles Dauvé (Jean Barrot).<sup>59</sup> Crudely stated, Dauvé sought redress of many problems associated with the limits of '68 by synthesizing councilism with the tradition of *invariance* that surrounded Amadeo Bordiga and his protege Jacques Camatte. For Dauvé, this meant taking the *form* of self-organization (councilism) and the *content* of Bordigism, which he interpreted as the immediate abolition of value, money, and private property. For Bordiga, the "invariance" of this program cast all reinterpretations of Marxism as revisionist.<sup>60</sup>

For others in the milieu, "invariance" posed the problem of historical anachronism, unburdening itself of the analytical challenge presented by the concept of class composition. The grouping around the short-lived journal *Négation* along with participants in the journals *Intervention Communiste* and *Cahiers du Communisme de Conseils* that would later go on to publish *Théorie Communiste* coalesced around this very problematic. In attempting to avail itself of historical

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to the Black Movement in the U.S. Today." [https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kimathi-mohammed-organization-and-spontaneity#fn\\_back7](https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kimathi-mohammed-organization-and-spontaneity#fn_back7)

<sup>58</sup> It is interesting that the earliest studies of *operaismo* were critical in the development of Italian academic sociology.

<sup>59</sup> Later translated, edited, and published in English by Fredy Perlman as *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*. Perlman had drawn his own conclusions on the limits of the "ultra-left" from his experiences during May 68. Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman. 1969. *Worker-Student Action Committees. France May '68*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/roger-gregoire-fredy-perlman-worker-student-action-committees-france-may-68>

<sup>60</sup> See Amadeo Bordiga. 1958. "The Original Content of the Communist Program.;" *Il programma comunista*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1958/marxism-property.htm>; Amadeo Bordiga. 1957. "The Fundamentals of Revolutionary Communism." *Il programma comunista* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1957/fundamentals.htm>; Amadeo Bordiga. 1957. "The Revolutionary Program of Communist Society Eliminates All Forms of Ownership of Land, the Instruments of Production and the Products of Labor." *Partito Comunista Internazionale*. <https://libcom.org/article/revolutionary-program-communist-society-eliminates-all-forms-ownership-land-instruments>; Amadeo Bordiga. 1953. "The Immediate Program of the Revolution." *Sul filo del tempo*. <https://libcom.org/library/immediate-program-revolution-amadeo-bordiga>

specificity without betraying the negative content of communism, these groupings turned to new cycles of struggle and the transformed terrain of composition. Négation's "LIP and the self-managed counter-revolution" is an analysis of the struggle at the LIP watch factory, which initially emerged on the basis of action committees before erupting into wildcat strikes, hostage taking, factory occupation, and eventual resumption of production under worker self-management. In Négation's estimation, the struggles at LIP represented a particular expression of contemporary capitalism and the historical limits of the old workers' movement. Notably, the periodization of formal and real domination is introduced in part to explain this limit.<sup>61</sup> More important, however, is the analysis of class composition that is concealed by this abstract characterization. LIP was unique in that its workforce was composed of mainly skilled laborers. French watchmaking had retained an artisanal character to the labor process that readily predisposed workers to self-management.<sup>62</sup> In Négation's words, capital had "not yet achieved real domination" in the sector. At the same time, LIP was major firm beset by the global pressures of the period, most crucially competition from Japan and American manufacturers and manufacturing over-capacity. These newer firms set out their lines with higher organic composition of capital and were able to absorb a fall in the rate of profit through an increase in its mass, made possible by higher levels of productivity. LIP was "backwards" in this respect, but nevertheless compelled by the same pressures. Unable to increase productivity by either investment in fixed capital or ratcheting the intensity of a highly skilled labor force, by 1973, the firm had planned for liquidation. The struggle for self-management was thus fundamentally *defensive* in character. However, rather than defending the character of artisan craft production threatened by the proletarianizing transition a century earlier, the struggle in this period was in content the defense of capital. For Négation, it was precisely the particular class composition of the factory struggle that revealed this contradiction. The character of the labor process at LIP preserved what Négation called a "producer's consciousness" among workers that might otherwise appear out of sync with the period. While this became the basis for self-management, it also formed the limit of struggle, one that could not be overcome on that basis any longer.<sup>63</sup> Négation had developed some of these themes in an earlier work, "The Proletariat as Destroyer of Work," in which they critique workerism as one among a range of new "rackets" that mystifies the new cycles of struggle during the period of "real domination," or, following Camatte, when the material community of capital has come to constitute all of social life.<sup>64</sup> What is noteworthy here, and following their analysis of LIP, is the place that "decomposition" of the proletariat begins to occupy in analyses of class composition. This is accompanied by a growing concern over "non-labor" compositions that help to mediate proletarian reproduction and anticipates some of the best re-appraisals of workerism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the Anglophone world, *Théorie Communiste* is likely the most familiar and influential group that trades in this periodization. This is in part due to the translation and popularization of their work by Endnotes, SIC, and others following the 2008 crisis. We will have more to say about these latter approaches to composition and "communization" later. TC has also been quite prolific in its own right, consistently publishing a journal since 1[977] that has systematically

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<sup>61</sup> This is one of the earliest works to use this distinction as a historical periodization, following Jacques Camatte, and its usage here predates *Théorie Communiste*, the group with whom the framework would become most associated.

<sup>62</sup> Notice the echoes with Bologna's argument about the council movement in Germany. Bologna, 1972.

<sup>63</sup> Whether it ever could is a separate question. Neel and Chavez offer an interesting discussion of this.

<sup>64</sup> Négation. 1972. "The Proletariat as Destroyer of Work." <https://libcom.org/article/proletariat-destroyer-work>

developed its theory of programmatism. Briefly, programmatism names the forms of struggle in which the proletariat finds a program to be realized. This would include social democracy, the vanguard party, workers' councils and self-management, the dictatorship of the proletariat, etc. In each, proletarian identity and class belonging is *affirmed* through the generalization of a particular program. The concept of composition is submerged here, but we nonetheless find it essential for understanding these claims. Observe, for example, the stress that TC lay on programmatism as a practice.<sup>65</sup> It is the concrete forms of struggle that emerge when workers are confronted by a particular relation to capital, specifically when lower organic composition is meted out in a rising demand for labor in new sectors and new lines. TC are making a claim as to the subjectivity of the working class to *identify* as such, and no longer strictly on the basis of kinship relations, local structures, or specific relations to place and culture. Historically, this coincides with a period of stubborn depeasantization and late transitions at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and through the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, or what TC thinks of (erroneously) as the period of formal subsumption.<sup>66</sup> This era of the classical workers' movement, from roughly the 1880s into the 1970s, was to be explained by the relative power of labor in relation to capital. Given the preservation of elements of the pre-capitalist labor process, relative skill of workers, and technical command over the rhythms of production, both the young capitalists and the old regime appeared as fetters, parasites on producer knowledge and social power. In this context, to affirm the figure of the worker *against* the capitalists was to unravel the whole class relation on which capitalism was predicated. This particular political horizon of communist politics was the historical product of particular composition of capital, and thus class composition. When that composition is gone, so too is the political horizon.

The frequent criticisms of TC tend to orbit around this near fatalist, "deterministic" account of cycles of struggle. In contrast to *operaismo*, TC certainly appear "structuralist" and have been associated with their fellow countrymen in the regulation school and that premiere anti-humanist Louis Althusser.<sup>67</sup> Of particular scorn is their explicit identification of capital and labor as the twin poles of the capital-labor relation. In this identity of identity and non-identity, the proletariat can never achieve the abolition of capital—in other words, communism—without the abolition of itself as a class belonging to capital. As Friends of the Classless Society observe, this formulation of "self-abolition" is not especially novel, but TC takes quite seriously this limit of class belonging such that any and all struggles that have a whiff of "affirmation" are dismissed.<sup>68</sup> This would seem to leave no room class autonomy, that pillar of workerist thought that has a close relation to concept of composition. Indeed, the very conception of "within and against" is

<sup>65</sup> Théorie Communiste. 2008. "Much Ado About Nothing." *Endnotes 1: Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/much-ado-about-nothing>

<sup>66</sup> There are a number of historiographic and theoretical problems here. TC's periodization of subsumption do not clearly align with their own periodization of programmatism. Notably, the real thrust of depeasantization, globally, occurred after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so it remains to be explained by the period of formal subsumption would not be extended until at least the 1970s. These problems are best explored in Endnotes. 2015. "A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers' Movement, 1883–1982." *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation* and Endnotes. 2010. "A History of Subsumption." *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value-form*.

<sup>67</sup> See Endnotes 1 and the exchange between TC and the journal *Aufheben*. See *Riff-Raff No. 8: Communist Theory Beyond the Ultra-Left*.

<sup>68</sup> While we share some of these concerns, we think that Friends of the Classless Society overstates the case, and underestimates TC's return to the problem of production and reproduction. Friends of the Classless Society. 2016. "On Communization and its Theorists." <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/friends-of-the-classless-society-on-communisation-and-its-theorists>

called into question. Class autonomy, for TC, is the activity of the class adequate to the era of programmatism. The post-crisis restructuring of capitalism, with its de-skilling, labor shedding, precarious employment, growing service sector, and low levels of productivity, has eroded the “old class composition” of which autonomy was an expression.<sup>69</sup> In turning class composition in on itself, by confronting the limits of composition as the impossibility of proletarian affirmation, it would appear that horizons of communism are foreclosed.<sup>70</sup> The arrival of the material community appears as the end of history.

The riddle would seem to be solved, for many detractors of the traditional workers’ movement and programmatic politics, by the ushering in of the era of riots—the return of the circulation struggle. We will not survey this trend here.<sup>71</sup> It is sufficient to note that the decline and suppression of the workers’ movement was paralleled by a concomitant rise in struggles over the terms of social reproduction, or what autonomists called “auto-reduction” struggles. This ebb and flow of cycles of struggle from the factory to the sphere of reproduction, to the neighborhood, to the housing complex, to the supermarket, indexes a particular phase shift in the capital-relation. It was, according to TC, the disintegration of the *double moulinet* of capitalist reproduction that would see the decomposition of the class in ways that would leave struggles over reproduction increasingly significant.<sup>72</sup> In such a composition, when the relation to capital decreasingly secures the means of subsistence and continued survival, *being* proletarian and worker identity as such are demystified and seen for what they are—constraints. Constraints enforced by the state, by invading and occupying militaries, by police, by racially segregated geographies, by gender relations. By making these concrete mediations the objects of antagonism, these forms of struggle present the possibility of *negation* of the class relation. Only those struggles that produce, through their very activities, “class belonging as an external constraint” have as their horizon the production of communism.<sup>73</sup> TC, and the “communization current” more generally, thus *ex-*

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<sup>69</sup> Théorie Communiste. 2005. “Self-organisation is the first act of the revolution; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome.” <https://libcom.org/article/self-organisation-first-act-revolution-it-then-becomes-obstacle-which-revolution-has>

<sup>70</sup> Brassier summarizes this as the “politics of the rift.” Brassier, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> For such surveys, see Joshua Clover. 2018. *Riot. Strike. Riot.: The New Era of Uprisings*. Verso; Phil Neel. 2018. *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict*. Reaktion Books.; Alain Badiou. 2012. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. Verso.

<sup>72</sup> The term double moulinet comes from the French edition of *Capital*. It is a translation of the German Zwickmühle, referring in this context both to a mill and being caught within or trapped, to be in a bind, to use an English idiom. It is doubled in the sense that the reproduction of labor-power is a precondition for the reproduction of capital, and also its result: two mill stones grinding together. On the double moulinet, see Théorie Communiste. 1997. “An Introduction to Théorie Communiste.” *TC 14*. Libcom.org: <https://libcom.org/library/theorie-communiste-0>; Théorie Communiste. 2009. “The Glass Floor.” Libcom.org: <https://libcom.org/article/glass-floor-theo-cosmevhttps://endnotes.org.uk/articles/crisis-in-the-class-relation>; Endnotes. 2010. “Crisis in the Class Relation.” *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value-form*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/crisis-in-the-class-relation>; Riff Raff. 2006. “Introduction to Riff Raff.” *Riff Raff: Communist theory beyond the ultra-left*. [http://www.riff-raff.se/wiki/en/riff-raff/introduction\\_to\\_riff-raff#the\\_double\\_mill\\_and\\_the\\_reproduction\\_of\\_capital\\_and\\_labour](http://www.riff-raff.se/wiki/en/riff-raff/introduction_to_riff-raff#the_double_mill_and_the_reproduction_of_capital_and_labour).

<sup>73</sup> This is the well-known formulation. See Théorie Communiste. 2011. “The Present Moment.” <https://libcom.org/article/present-moment-theorie-communiste>. It is necessary to note that, even from TC’s perspective, those very struggles find themselves confronted by the problem of material production. See, e.g., Théorie Communiste. 2009. “The Glass Floor.” Libcom.org: <https://libcom.org/article/glass-floor-theo-cosmevhttps://endnotes.org.uk/articles/crisis-in-the-class-relation>. This is the root of the pessimism associated with TC, or the “communization current” more broadly. Ray Brassier calls this “the rift between two impossibilities.” Ray Brassier. 2023. “Politics of the Rift: On Théorie Communiste.” *e-flux Notes*. <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/550201/politics-of-the-rift-on-thorie-communiste>

*pand* the concept of class composition in a way that makes it constitutive of its decomposition and its internal fragmentations and mediations. The class unity that from the outset tends to inform workerist accounts of composition and struggle is here bristled at, not with contempt, *per se*, but in acknowledgement that the only practical unity of the class—and therefore the species—is the unity of separation. We can derive at this junction a fundamental truth of capitalism: class composition only exists as disunity and it is from this disunity that particular struggles in the present era can be explained. This immanent tendency may be a necessary condition of the content of revolts today, but it is quite another thing to claim that these revolts therefore constitute a rupture in the material community of capital, one sufficient for communism. We will explore this problem of this leap later on. First, we must turn to a quite different conception of “composition,” one with a distinct parlance and lineage.

## Escape

It should by now be clear that “composition” as an analytic in the communist tradition has always had eye towards strategy. In the hands of the most lucid theorists of *operaismo*, “class composition” was always intended to as a materialist explanation of class behavior and as a basis for strategy. Subsequent generations of communists have preserved this kernel, despite either naively turning away from or fetishizing the factory as the paradigm of the class composition dynamic. This much has remained clear: strategy unfolds from the configuration of political subjectivities, forged in the crucible of social practice, which of course includes the process of production, but *has never* been limited to it. It must also include reproduction, which we will address below. But it also involves the practical activity of struggle itself. It is this last sense in which we often find “composition” today, referring to a practice of composing struggle, adrift from its former grounding in the material realities of production and reproduction. As the most poignant authors themselves admit, this is a strategy adequate to an era of crisis and stagnation, of “orphaned” insurrections.<sup>74</sup> While it may be adequate in a certain historical sense, we hold that it is a strategy that is wholly insufficient. The practice of composing is given its own “temporality and logic,” like a kite without a thread.<sup>75</sup> The “strategy of composition,” then, is one which finds itself far afield from the conditions which are its lot. In order to make full sense of this conceptual reversal, it is worth briefly tracing its distinct genealogy.

It should be little wonder that the breakdown of the workers’ movement and of communist organization has been mired in uncertainty. As the preceding historical account of “class composition” suggests, the period of crisis and stagnation in which we find ourselves today has rendered class relations quite oblique. It is of course the pace and trajectory of development itself that has brought about these transformations—deindustrialization, de-skilling, labor shedding, stagnating productivity and investments in new lines, and the relative growth of services and transport in relation to manufacturing. The character of class composition has changed at a pace with these more general dynamics. What is crucial in this history is the effect of the virtually completed process of agrarian revolution and de-peasantization since the 1970s, combined with low levels of continuous investment in these same geographic regions. New manufacturing lines, where they do emerge, do so with organic compositions of capital that reflect sectoral averages. This

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<sup>74</sup> See Farrell, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> See Farrell, 2023.

is the ratcheting effect of relative surplus value production. A sort of mirror process has taken place outward from industry itself. Stubbornly low rates of profit disincentivize firms from investing in new plant and equipment, so to meet prevailing levels of productivity and to lower costs, managers squeeze more labor out of the existing workforce, often by retaining a constant level of output (since they are often confronted with gluts and over-capacity) but with simply fewer workers. Those workers that are the last hired and commonly the first fired. The historical inheritance of capitalist expansion itself—the racialized character of the newly proletarianized—means that the newly un- and underemployed are disproportionately racialized as well. The result is a constellation of proletarian factions, sorted through race, ethnicity, gender relations, religion, language, citizenship—that increasingly confront misery and subsistence crisis and decreasingly find themselves integrated into labor processes that condition a “producer’s consciousness” or “workers identity.” There is no longer any clear “outside” of capitalist relations of production, but neither is there a clear or homogenous formation of the subsumed and dispossessed.<sup>76</sup> This is the truth of proletarian identity.<sup>77</sup> It is invariant, but a truth adequate to our era.<sup>78</sup> Nihilism and pessimism are not just for the disaffected, they are structuring features of all social antagonism. It is only in such a context that “compositional strategy” appears with any relief, as a solution to the social reflux.

It is in this era that we arrive at the short-lived journal *Tiqqun*, along with its disproportionate influence on revolutionary discourse. With all of the opacity that surrounds this milieu and its jargon, we are cautious to call it “a tendency” in any coherent, historical way. It nevertheless has repeatedly made its way into debates around the character of some significant contemporary struggles, most recently in Atlanta, and does so with a particular usage of the term “composition.” We thus will focus on it here in only that specific, narrow sense. In the journal itself, “composition” first appears as the problem of decomposition. For *Tiqqun*, however, “decomposition” is not linked to the capital relation and the internal fragmentation and abjection of the proletariat. Rather, their concern is the decomposition of “commodity society,” the untenability of the “Spectacle,” by which they mean, *pace* Debord, a “dictatorship of visibility.”<sup>79</sup> This is a metaphysical and ontological; for *Tiqqun*, commodity relations are pure phenomenality.<sup>80</sup> From the outset, *Tiqqun* finds itself among friends in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. It is not the despotism of capital,<sup>81</sup> but rather the totality of visibility, surveillance, representation—legibility to the state—that has reduced the species to bare life.<sup>82</sup> It is in this banality of abjection that we

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<sup>76</sup> Endnotes’ account of these trends remains instructive. See Endnotes, “A History of Separation.” See also Davis, 2017 and Araghi, 1995. Nathan Eisenberg provides an excellent account of the uneven geography of agrarian revolution, immiseration, and hunger. See Nathan Eisenberg, 2022. “Hunger Regime.” *Cosmonaut*. <https://cosmonaut-mag.com/2022/01/hunger-regime/>

<sup>77</sup> A New Institute for Social Research. 2018. “Class Composition and the Organization of Pessimism: Reflections on Class Theory in 2018.” <https://isr.press/Pessimism/index.html>

<sup>78</sup> Ultra. 2015. “Dead Reckoning.” <http://www.ultra-com.org/project/dead-reckoning/>

<sup>79</sup> We already see the influence of Agamben’s *The Coming Community*. See *Tiqqun*, 1999. “Theses on the Imaginary Party.” *Tiqqun 1, Conscious Organ of the Imaginary Party: Exercises in Critical Metaphysics*, and *Tiqqun*, 2001. “Theses on the Terrible Community.” *Tiqqun 2, Liaison Body within the Imaginary Party: Zone of Offensive Opacity*.

<sup>80</sup> *Tiqqun*, 1999. “On the Economy Considered as Black Magic.” *Tiqqun 1, Conscious Organ of the Imaginary Party: Exercises in Critical Metaphysics*.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Camatte. 1973. *The Wandering of Humanity*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camate/wanhum/index.htm>

<sup>82</sup> *Tiqqun*, 1999. “The Theory of Bloom.” *Tiqqun 1, Conscious Organ of the Imaginary Party: Exercises in Critical Metaphysics*.

find the stuff of the Terrible Community and the Imaginary Party, whose task is the preservation of “forms of life” that remain free or are freed from domination. This specialized struggle assumes the form of opacity.<sup>83</sup> This is a communism of withdrawal.<sup>84</sup> Tiqqun frequently preoccupied itself with “escape” as a form of life, while at the same time it understands this desertion as a hostility, as civil war.<sup>85</sup> It thus might be more apt to describe its politics as “destituent.”<sup>86</sup> It is only through this exodus that autonomy exists, not as class, but as forms of life.<sup>87</sup> This is to be accomplished through “gestures” and the “transmission of techniques,” that allow the imaginary party to inhabit the void left through the process of destitution.<sup>88</sup> We see all of the terminology of the milieu is here, ripe for appropriation and confusion. By the time of *Call (L’appel)*, “the invisible committee” is now explicitly associating this strategy of exit and inhabitation with communism and “communisation.” The separation from material history is quite clear, allowing the authors to declare with romantic immediacy that “communism is possible at every moment.”<sup>89</sup>

All of these elements of *tiqqunism* or *l’appelism* have been explored and critiqued extensively elsewhere, as has their relation to “communization” and the critique of programmatism more generally.<sup>90</sup> This is not the current concern. By the time of the publication of *The Coming Insurrection*, The Invisible Committee (TIC) had turned to more concrete struggles following the end of the anti-globalization summits. The era of riots seemed to have been ushered in Algeria, France, and Greece. For TIC, the stench of social decomposition among these locales had brought a breath of nihilist fresh air, and with it the possibility of new forms of life. This is where we get an explicit connection between social decomposition, in their Agambenian sense, with *composition* as a first act, a “resonance” from which new forms of life will spread: “the party of insurgents is the sketching out of a completely other *composition*, an other side of reality, which... is seeking its consistency.... In reality, the decomposition of all social forms is a blessing. It is for us the ideal condition for a wild, massive experimentation with new arrangements, new fidelities.”<sup>91</sup> Principally, this takes the form of “communes” as the basic units of insurrection. Though they

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<sup>83</sup> Tiqqun. 2001. *Tiqqun 2, Liaison Body within the Imaginary Party: Zone of Offensive Opacity*.

<sup>84</sup> Marcel. 2005. “Communism of Attack and Communism of Withdrawal.” *Riff-Raff 7: Critique of Political Organisation*.

<sup>85</sup> Tiqqun. 2001. “Introduction to Civil War.” *Tiqqun 2, Liaison Body within the Imaginary Party: Zone of Offensive Opacity*.

<sup>86</sup> This is more clear in The Invisible Committee’s *To Our Friends and Now*. For developments of this concept, see Kiersten Solt, V.I. 2021. “Seven Theses on Destitution (After Endnotes)” *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/seven-theses-on-destitution>, and Kieran Aarons and Idris Robinson, eds. 2023. *Destituent Power*. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122(1).

<sup>87</sup> Tiqqun. 2001. “This Is Not a Program.” *Tiqqun 2, Liaison Body within the Imaginary Party: Zone of Offensive Opacity*.

<sup>88</sup> Tiqqun. 2001. “How it is to be Done.” *Tiqqun 2, Liaison Body within the Imaginary Party: Zone of Offensive Opacity*.

<sup>89</sup> “Communism is possible at every moment. What we call “History” is to date nothing but a set of roundabout means invented by humans to avert it. The fact that this “History” has for a good century now come down to nothing but a varied accumulation of disasters shows how the communist question can no longer be suspended. It is this suspension that we need, in turn, to suspend.” Anonymous. 2004. *Call*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anonymous-call>

<sup>90</sup> See Marcel, 2005 and the subsequent debate in *Riff-Raff No. 8: Communist Theory Beyond the Ultra-Left*. See also Leon de Mattis, “Reflections on the Call” and Gilles Dauvé and Karl Nestic. 2004. “Communization: a ‘Call’ and an ‘invite’,” *Troploin 4*. <https://troploin.fr/node/23>

<sup>91</sup> The Invisible Committee. 2007. *The Coming Insurrection*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/comite-invisible-the-coming-insurrection>



invoke the Paris Commune, TIC means something quite different. “Commune” is fact nothing other than what they mean by “composition”—the coming together of partisans with the effect that the partisans are transformed in the process.<sup>92</sup> There is a spatial dimension to “composition” that involves “liberating” and “defending” “territories” as “zones of opacity,” and it is here that “composition” finds its relation to “the blockade.” These threads of territoriality, composition, blockade, ecology, and forms of life become even more matted in *To Our Friends and Now*.<sup>93</sup> The blockade and “logistics” take on an even greater importance in the process of destitution and the influence of the ZAD and NoTAV appears as praise of “inhabitation against governance.” Crucially, for our purposes, as “forms of life” is intended to describe ecological and territorial relations, “composition” begins to take on a transcendental, posthumanist character. We agree that the time has come to “betray the species,” but that means something far more practical and historical than TIC can possibly allow.<sup>94</sup>

That aspect is for later, however. What matters presently is that Tiqqun/TIC has rather obliquely decoupled “composition,” as something that the Imaginary Party *does* or forms, from its conditions. “Composition” is something *external*, both temporally and spatially, from the “dictatorship of visibility,” from “governance,” from Spectacle, from the economy. This is why we find preoccupation with desertion, succession, and withdrawal.<sup>95</sup> Destitution is supposed to transcend the limits of alternativism, but exactly how “communes” and “compositions” are supposed to proliferate as autonomous zones, immediately as gestures of attack *and* exodus, such that they come to “destitute the world” like a coalescence of bubbles that strangle the flows of capital, remains unclear at best and reactionary at worst. Yet it is composition in *this* sense that informs the “strategy of composition” en vogue today.

The popularization of this sense of composition can be traced first and foremost to historical entrance of “the ZAD” (“zone to defend”), specifically the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes and NoTAV. The ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes began initially as a farmer’s struggle to resist eviction for the purposes of developing an international airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. When those evictions heightened in 2008, following the crisis, squatting became the central form of struggle.<sup>96</sup> NoTAV was a populist struggle against the construction of a high speed railway (Treno ad Alta Velocità or “TAV”) in the SuSa Valley in northern Italy. The region hosts the

<sup>92</sup> “A commune forms every time a few people, freed of their individual straitjackets, decide to rely only on themselves and measure their strength against reality. Every wildcat strike is a commune; every building occupied collectively and on a clear basis is a commune, the action committees of 1968 were communes, as were the slave maroons in the United States, or Radio Alice in Bologna in 1977.” Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> The Invisible Committee. 2014. *To Our Friends*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-invisible-committee-to-our-friends>; The Invisible Committee. 2018. *Now*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-invisible-committee-now>

<sup>94</sup> See “Tragic Theses” for an elaboration.

<sup>95</sup> Marcel makes a similar case for communism as an externality that must be produced and secured. See Marcel, 2005.

<sup>96</sup> For readers interested in histories and experiences of the ZAD, see Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross. 2018. *The ZAD and NoTAV: Territorial Struggles and the Making of a New Political Intelligence*. Verso.; Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan. 2021. *We Are ‘Nature’ Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones*. Pluto Press.; S.G. and G.K. 2018. “ZAD: the State of Play.” *Field Notes*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/07/field-notes/ZAD-The-State-of-Play>; Alèssi Dell’Umbria. 2018. “Being in the Zone: Concerning Conflicts Within the ZAD.” *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/being-in-the-zone>; CMDO. 2018. “The ZAD Will Survive.” <https://illwill.com/the-zad-will-survive>; Crimethinc. 2019. “Reflections on the ZAD: Another History: Looking Back a Year after the Evictions.” <https://crimethinc.com/2019/04/23/reflections-on-the-zad-looking-back-a-year-after-the-evictions>; Crimethinc. 2018. “One but Many Movements: Two Translations from the ZAD on Isolation, Division, and Pacification.”

headquarters of Fiat, in Turin, once a major flashpoint of workerist militancy. Both the ZAD and NoTAV unfolded as “citizen struggles” against what were understood to be corrupt regional and national political actors who were pushing through unwanted and devastating infrastructural projects to attract commerce and tourism in their respective regions. These development projects, from the perspective of local actors, seemed irrational and unnecessary, as immediate economic gains would seem to pass over those most impacted by the developments, evictions, and transformation of territories. Both projects were long on the “back burner” of priorities, that is, until the financial crisis and recession. This both bolstered the populist character of the opposition, while simultaneously incentivizing stakeholders to actually get the projects off the ground. France responded to the 2008 crisis in part by infrastructure spending and mitigating its deficit through private-public partnerships.<sup>97</sup> A new airport promised alleviation on both of these fronts along with the promise of tourism and the real estate development that would attend such a large transportation project. The TAV offered similar promises. Italy’s industrial sector had long been plagued by low productivity levels, only made worse by the Great Recession, despite Italy’s relative financial insulation from the riskiest investments that triggered the collapse. Industrial regions such as the SuSa valley, mired in stagnant manufacturing output, investment, and capacity utilization, would benefit from developments in the speed of transport.<sup>98</sup> The TAV was intended to bring the region into better temporal alignment with speed of commerce and circulation of capital elsewhere in the Eurozone.<sup>99</sup>

These conditions are ripe for populist imagination and mystification.<sup>100</sup> There is an important convergence here between these territorial struggles and the broader movement of squares that would come to define the cycle of struggles following the crisis.<sup>101</sup> The narrative of “citizen struggles” that the Mauvaise Troupe Collective (MTC) and Kristin Ross employ in their analysis of this moment is intended as a contrast to the paradigm of “the revolutionary party.” As they argue, there is something “openly fractal” in the character of struggles today. They do not cohere as movements of common political subjectivity or social position. They do not carry homogenous or uniform objectives, intent, or desires. Instead, they are little more than the aggregate and synthetic effect of often conflicting and conflictual “components of struggle,” partisans who bring varied positions, stakes, experiences, interests, and approaches, and who only incidentally and conditionally find common ground in the unfolding of struggle itself. In this, these citizen struggles bear resemblance to what Asef Bayat calls “social non-movements,” composed of fragmented, non-collective actors, who nonetheless come together in incidental collective, common action in pursuit often non-common interests. Bayat links this more explicitly to the “ordinary” and everyday life of the subordinated, subaltern, and generally downwardly mobile.<sup>102</sup> The precipitate of this collective action is a general antipathy towards political illegitimacy or corruption. Their

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<sup>97</sup> Vivien A. Schmidt. 2012. “What Happened to the State-Influenced Market Economies (SMEs)? France, Italy, and Spain Confront the Crisis as the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” in Wyn Grant, and Graham K. Wilson, eds, *The Consequences of the Global Financial Crisis: The Rhetoric of Reform and Regulation*. Oxford.

<sup>98</sup> On these trends, see Silvia Sgherri and Hanan Morsy. 2010. “After the Crisis: Assessing the Damage in Italy.” *International Monetary Fund*.

<sup>99</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross, 2018

<sup>100</sup> This is described well in Aaron Benanav and John Clegg. 2018. “Crisis and immiseration: Critical theory today.” *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory: 1629–1648*.

<sup>101</sup> See Endnotes. 2013. “The Holding Pattern: The Ongoing Crisis and the Class Struggles of 2011–2013” *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-holding-pattern>

<sup>102</sup> Asef Bayat. 2013. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford University Press.

limit tends to be expressed in what Bayat calls “refo-lutions,” or struggle that is formally revolutionary but carries a counter-revolutionary content of “reforms” to political systems. While this has most aptly been used to describe the Arab Spring,<sup>103</sup> it is a reasonable characterization of the movement of squares globally and the current cycles of struggles more generally.<sup>104</sup> This bond with the “composition” struggles of the ZAD and NoTAV is perhaps most clear in the Gezi Park protests, which share features of both a territorial struggle (the defense of a small urban forest) and the movement of squares (the occupation of a park).<sup>105</sup> If composition refers to “components of struggle,” MTC and Ross argue that “what *composes* the components is larger than the sum of their perimeters.”<sup>106</sup> This “composition” lays claim to diversity and difference as its strength, its *raison d’être*, as if such conditions are unique or assumed as historically given, pre-formed but malleable to the process of “composition” in its unfolding.<sup>107</sup> Paradoxically, the “components” of struggle, the various communities of diversity that a “composition” or a ZAD seeks to remake and defend are somehow immune from the ravages of a capitalist world, existing as island refugia remote from the material community.

## Crusades, Maneuvers, and Other Adventures

If Defend the Atlanta Forest is heralded as the premier example in North America of the “strategy of composition,” it is instructive that the dominant purveyors of anarchist partisanship of the last two decades should treat it as yet another case of radical campaigning.<sup>108</sup> In many ways, the sequence of events and feedback loop of direct actions, mass protests, corporate cam-

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<sup>103</sup> Asef Bayat. 2017. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>104</sup> Endnotes’ claim is more precise here. In an era of stagnation and a crisis of representation, what characterizes struggle is the absence of “social movements” as such that can represent disparate and fragmented forms of reproduction. For Bayat, these are “revolutions without revolutionaries” in the sense that they are mass upheavals that topple entrenched political orders. For Endnotes, and we would agree here, these are not revolutions precisely because they do not achieve the great anthropological undoing of overcoming capitalism. Endnotes. 2020. “Onward Barbarians.” <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/endnotes-onward-barbarians>

<sup>105</sup> Crimethinc. 2022. ““Addicted to Tear Gas”: The Gezi Resistance, June 2013: Looking Back on a High Point of Resistance in Turkey.” <https://crimethinc.com/2022/06/20/addicted-to-tear-gas-the-gezi-resistance-june-2013-looking-back-on-a-high-point-of-resistance-in-turkey>; n.a. 2013. “This is Only the Beginning: On the Gezi Park Resistance of June 2013.” <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2014/03/03/18751818.php>

<sup>106</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross, 2018, 89.

<sup>107</sup> “Composition is really nothing more than the fruits of an unexpected meeting between separate worlds, and the promise contained in the becoming-Commune of that meeting. It is thus a space or process where even antagonisms create an attachment. “Composition” could be said to be the way that autonomous forces unite and associate with each other, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes contradicting each other, but always, in the end, dependent on each other. When it works, these different elements strive to recognize each other and work together to pursue common desires that surpass each of them, rather than trying to resolve their differences. Rather than trying, that is, to convince each other or convert the other to the superiority of one’s ways, whether this be sabotage, filing legal briefs, cataloguing endangered species, or frontal violence with the police. This is especially important in a movement whose enemies try ceaselessly to divide and conquer by setting one group up against another. The strength of the movement derives precisely from its diverse makeup, which in the case of the zad has allowed it to express itself through various kinds of actions, from highway blockages using tractors to legal maneuvering to violent demonstrations.” Kristin Ross. 2018. “The Long 1960s and ‘The Wind From The West’” *Crisis & Critique* 5(2).

<sup>108</sup> We speak here of Crimethinc and its analysis of the Defend the Atlanta Forest movement. See especially Crimethinc. 2023. “Don’t Stop: Continuing the Fight against Cop City.” <https://crimethinc.com/2023/12/12/dont-stop-continuing-the-fight-against-cop-city-six-more-months-in-the-movement-to-defend-the-forest>; Crimethinc. 2023. “Balance Sheet: Two Years Against Cop City.” <https://crimethinc.com/zines/balance-sheet>; Crimethinc.

paigns, teach-ins, canvassing efforts, speaking tours, letter writing that cohere under the banner “Defend the Atlanta Forest,” “Stop Cop City,” “Block Cop City,” or “Weelaunee Defense Society” have been treated as a litmus test for the “strategy of composition” as a new species of struggle in the otherwise counterrevolutionary period following the George Floyd Rebellion. Much hope has been hung on this precious scaffolding. It seems unfair to treat SCC/DFA as the decisive moment of our time, with some organizers insisting that it is “not a local struggle,” but one that connects everything from Gaza to policing to deforestation. Yet the convergence of factors—a sickened planetary metabolism and racialized economic decline both increasingly managed by a revanchist police state—leaves little in the way of other horizons.<sup>109</sup> There is no one campaign, no singular organizational approach that can be said to represent all the forms of struggle that have developed out of this small tract of land and its storied histories.<sup>110</sup> There is a certain futility in attempting to characterize all of this practical messiness as a coherent strategy, as if a certain “orientation” of activity was a normative prerequisite for activity itself. Rather, what matters in the first instance are the objective conditions that give rise to conflict, how it is sustained or reproduced through the objective characteristics of the political subjectivities involved and through the conflict itself. It also matters, much to the chagrin of the romantics often attracted to these flashpoints, what material limits are set by these conditions, which of course *include* the sequence of conflict, and do not simply precede it. Any critique of a particular strategic iteration must proceed on this basis. The detour here is not intended as a critique of the struggle against Cop City, or to defend the forest.<sup>111</sup> Whatever the real limits may be, those will be found across scattered battlegrounds by the partisans themselves—along Intrenchment Creek, within the South River Forest, before an APD vehicle, at the offices of Atlanta Police Foundation funders, door to door throughout Atlanta’s segregated residential neighborhoods, or at the polling station.<sup>112</sup> What follows is rather is something both more narrow and more broad: less a critique of SCC/DFA itself, but rather a critique of the *representation* of this struggle in the form of the desperate activist campaign, which has been taken up by the usual players ranging from the DSA to the Movement for Black Lives to the “Earth First!”/Rising Tide North America milieu to Rainforest Action Network to any number of “mainstream” environmental and climate justice

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2023. “The Forest in the City.” <https://crimethinc.com/zines/the-forest-in-the-city>; Crimethinc. 2022. “The City in the Forest.” <https://crimethinc.com/zines/city-in-the-forest>

<sup>109</sup> Jenny Jarvie. 2023. “The latest epicenter for anti-police protests: ‘Cop City’ in Atlanta.” March 15, 2023. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-03-15/stop-cop-city-forest-camp-atlanta>

<sup>110</sup> For the best and most encompassing accounts, see Darien Acero. 2023. “The Angel and the Mole: On the Struggle for the Atlanta Forest.” *Brooklyn Rail*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/06/field-notes/The-Angel-and-the-Mole-On-the-Struggle-for-the-Atlanta-Forest>; Micah Herskind. 2023. “This is the Atlanta Way: A Primer on Cop City.” *Scalawag Magazine*. <https://scalawagmagazine.org/2023/05/cop-city-atlanta-history-timeline/>;

Micah Herskind. 2023. “A Constellation of Tactics.” *Inquest*. <https://inquest.org/a-constellation-of-tactics/>; Grace Glass and Sasha Tycko. 2023. “Not One Tree: Stopping Cop City.” *n+1 Issue 46: Agitation*. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-46/essays/not-one-tree/>; Miliaku Nwabueze. 2023. “How to Build the End of the World: In Defense of the Chaotic Protester.” *Scalawag Magazine*. <https://scalawagmagazine.org/2023/05/black-radical-tradition-cop-city/>

<sup>111</sup> The two are not synonymous and the false equivalence often drawn here tends to reduce the core of black rebellion that gave rise to the “movement” that came to known as “Stop Cop City.” See Anonymous. “The War in Front of Us” <https://scenes.noblogs.org/post/2023/06/10/the-war-in-front-of-us/>

<sup>112</sup> *Scenes from the Atlanta Forest* provides good examples of the sort of action report backs and reflections necessary for such a material critique. It clearly also does not reflect the wider composition of participants, limited as it is by anarchist affinity.

NGOs.<sup>113</sup> We proceed from this initial premise: the representative compositional struggle of the moment has been characterized as a campaign by both its proponents and critics, perhaps unwittingly but no less definitely. We must examine why and how, and discuss the dire consequences of confusing the pursuit of practical, laudable objectives with revolutionary transformation.

As a collective politics that only announces itself in its *result*, the “strategy of composition” is, in a very real sense, a politics of the least common denominator. Hence, the seemingly endless discourse on conflicting strategies, tact and tactics, the meaning of “diversity of tactics,” and the dead-end debates on “violence and non-violence.” All struggle involves such conflict, but in “composition” the rehearsal of internal strife is constitutive of the strategy itself. These are not the stutterings of an otherwise coherent program. The delicate coordination of components is all that coheres. This is the province of the activist, of the campaign. It moves within these self-imposed commons, as if the commons, the composition, offering room to maneuver, offered either the mandate or the “autonomy” to do so. There, is in fact, a common denominator at work here—capital—and it has enclosed the world. This is the arena in which all activism takes place.

It is sensible that “compositional struggle” should open onto the terrain of “activism,” especially in the form of “the campaign.” As a result of this watering down of precision and clarity, it is quite difficult to cleave “composition” from “campaign strategy” at all. This is possibly why the proponents of composition as strategy must repeatedly assure us that “composition” is qualitatively distinct from “diversity of tactics” or the more quotidian and ubiquitous practice of “coalition building.” It is more about “tact” than tactics, conveying the importance of underling relationships and how they are mediated through the struggle itself. This is, after all, supposed to be a “new political intelligence.” Farrell, following Ross, insists that there is an element of “transvaluation of values” that the territorial struggle coheres through composition, which makes it distinct from either general insurrectionary “rupture” or the more tedious and protracted formal activist campaign. Yet later, as he attempts to distinguish this approach from the “diversity of tactics” or coalitional practice emblematic in the “St. Paul’s Principles,” he falls back into the most unimaginative and unoriginal formulation: composition is a method that doesn’t just tolerate diverse tactics, but links them synthetically for a qualitatively new potential.<sup>114</sup> He contrasts this to the united front or coalition “in which each group exits the same as it enters,” a description that is nothing but a ideal straw-man intended to present the “strategy of composition” as something entirely new.<sup>115</sup> “Groups,” “participants,” “spokes,” “partisans,” “affinity groups” or what have you are not pre-formed and static, offering identities that can be separated from their practical activity, either in struggle or (as is often de-emphasized by insurrectionary anarchy and theorists of “communization”) *outside of it*. Such a figure does not exist beyond the minds of these theorists of compositional strategy. It is material social practice that determines consciousness. However fleeting it may be in the world of the activist, there is never a “coalition” or “campaign,” even at their most generic or uninteresting, that doesn’t involve practice. Thus, we find in “composi-

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<sup>113</sup> This list includes 350, the Sierra Club, and Greenpeace. A fuller picture is painted by looking any number of “letters of support” associated with these campaigns. See, e.g.: <https://www.copcivote.com/sign-on-letter>

<sup>114</sup> “The movement’s open approach to political methods stresses not just a diversity of tactics, but their potential interlinking. This allows lawsuits to coexist with regular clashes with police at the edge of the forest, and for participants from a dizzying range of American subcultures (birdwatchers, ravers, academics, activists, history buffs, punks, tenderqueers, carpenters, etc.) to enter the movement and define their own participation within it based on their own resources and desires.” Farrell, “The Strategy of Composition”

<sup>115</sup> Jasper Bernes. 2023. “Deeds and Propaganda.” *Field Notes*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/06/field-notes/Deeds-and-Propaganda>

tional” struggles those same features of activist campaigns that the former attempts to disavow. Perhaps they protest too much. Given our skepticism on the matter, it is worth a brief detour into this tortured sphere to examine some of the limits to which the campaign gives way, in its own right.

There is not the space necessary for an adequate treatment of “activism” as a social phenomena. Interested readers should review the much longer history of grappling with the historical arrival of the “activist,” or, in a slightly different register, the “militant” as an alienated identity adequate to an era of disorientation and fragmentation.<sup>116</sup> It is notable that these reports on “the activist” or “activism” come from a place of direct experience and are often forms of immanent critique carried out by participants in particular cycles of struggle that held the left’s attention between the 1980s and the onset of the financial crisis and the “era of riots.” Environmental defense, anti-roads movements, anti-globalization summits and summit hoping, the so-called “direct action” and “anti-capitalist” movements—their limits are often treated as coterminous with activism itself. Yet communist skepticism of “activism” is a bit messier and often tangled with its relationship to anarchism, the deed, or the individual act. It thus extends much further back as a general cautioning against the specialization of agitational activity that is divorced from the mundanities of capitalist reproduction and the often nihilist character of proletarian life.<sup>117</sup> In brief, this criticism amounts to the tautology that “activism” lacks the practical truth, churned out from the wheels of history, that is the general movement of proletarian activity. This is what makes it “activist,” after all, its claim on situational awareness that transcends the “passive” balance of forces and in this way pushes beyond the deficient subjectivity of everyone else.<sup>118</sup> Marx grappled with similar concerns, though erring more soberly on the side of certain specialized activity—in his case the violent tactics of the Russian peasant-populist secret society Narodnaya Volya (“Peoples’ Will”)—under particular historical conditions. For Narodnaya Volya, those conditions involved the late development of capitalism, the persistence of agrarian regimes and the peasantry, and with them, the *mir* communal organizational form.<sup>119</sup> Marx’s appraisal of the relation of small sects to broader populations was quite distinct historically and geographically from either Bordiga or Pannekoek, who were confronted with far a greater generalization of capitalist relations of production. If the arc of capitalist development remains the through line, the period under present question—from the 1970s onward, and especially over the last two decades—calls forth an entirely different set of material conditions. “Activism” is thus no longer a question of specialization versus generalization, of secrecy and elitism versus the ordinary motion of social life. It

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<sup>116</sup> Amadeo Bordiga. 1952. “Activism.” <https://libcom.org/article/activism-amadeo-bordiga>; Organisation des Jeunes Travailleurs Révolutionnaires. 1972. “Militancy: highest stage of alienation” <https://libcom.org/article/militancy-highest-stage-alienation-organisation-des-jeunes-travailleurs-revolutionnaires>; S.T. 2013. “The Issues are not the Issue: A Letter to Earth First! from a Too-Distant Friend.” <https://usa.anarchistlibraries.net/library/various-authors-black-seed-issue-4#toc4>; Aufheben. 2001. “Anti-capitalism as an ideology... and as a movement?” <https://libcom.org/article/anti-capitalism-ideology-and-movement>; Undercurrent. n.d. “Practice and ideology in the direct action movement.” <https://libcom.org/article/practice-and-ideology-direct-action-movement>; Gilles Dauvé. 2003. “On the globalisation movement.” <https://libcom.org/article/globalisation-movement-gilles-dauve>; Alasdair. 2012. “Do something! A critique of activism.” <https://libcom.org/article/do-something-critique-activism>; Bernard Lyon. 2005. “We are not ‘anti’” <https://libcom.org/article/we-are-not-anti-bernard-lyon>; Do or Die. “Give Up Activism.” *Do or Die* 9. <https://libcom.org/article/give-activism>

<sup>117</sup> See, e.g., Anton Pannekoek. 1933. “The Personal Act.” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1933/person.htm>, Bordiga, 1952, “Activism”.

<sup>118</sup> This was for Bordiga the “illness of the workers’ movement.” Bordiga, “Activism.”

<sup>119</sup> See Shanin, 1983.

is now inseparable from conditions of complete capitalist domination of the planet and with that total encirclement the gradual erosion of growth and prosperity and a persistent uncertainty of a livable future.

In the United States, the modern era of citizen activism began in earnest in the wake of early postwar de-industrialization, which unfolded first and most severely among black populations that had only recently migrated to industrial zones following the collapse of Reconstruction and the pressures of Jim Crow regimes in the agrarian south.<sup>120</sup> In other words, citizen activism found its footing amidst racialized panic surrounding a looming “urban crisis.”<sup>121</sup> It is in this trajectory that we see the withdrawal of whatever meager forms of public provisioning and social democracy were afforded by the postwar boom. Racked by growing declines in profitability, manufacturing overcapacity, and stagnating productivity, urban industrial centers found themselves mired in fiscal crises as revenue streams were cut off by the re-territorialization of production.<sup>122</sup> Crudely put, policing, already born of racial and settler animus, replaced social provisions as the most cost effective form of population management. Paradoxical as it may seem, citizen activism emerged in much the same way, as a targeted form of resource distribution and program control.<sup>123</sup> In the vacuum left by state administration of provisions necessary for social reproduction, this privatization alleviated fiscal burden, despite the fact that most nonprofit operations were government funded.<sup>124</sup> They also allowed for greater degrees surveillance and population management, which were simultaneously more concentrated and diffuse. It provides a clear disciplinary function cloaked in the form of social independence and civic action.<sup>125</sup> The modern “activist” era is thus not so much defined by voluntarist detachment from the real workers’ move-

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<sup>120</sup> A lucid account is given by James Boggs, *The American Revolution*. See also DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. James Boggs. 2020. *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook*. Monthly Review Press. A more general history of dynamics of economic development in the US is offered in Jonathan Levy. 2021. *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States*. Random House.

<sup>121</sup> The classic accounts are found in Ruth Wilson Gilmore. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, and Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. 2017. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Bloomsbury Publishing. More recently, Jarrod Shanahan and Zhandarka Kurti provide an excellent analysis and critique in relation to the George Floyd Rebellion. Jarrod Shanahan and Zhandarka Kurti 2022. *States of Incarceration: Rebellion, Reform, and America’s Punishment System*. Reaktion Books.

<sup>122</sup> This geographic reconfiguration of production complexes is critical to understanding the response to capitalist crisis as spatial, as well as temporal (e.g., logistics, JIT production). See Michael Storper and Richard Walker. 1991. *The Capitalist Imperative: Territory, Technology and Industrial Growth*. Wiley-Blackwell. Phil Neel applies this in his analysis of China’s simultaneous industrialization/de-industrialization and the tendencies of “development” in relation to the “long crisis.” Phillip Neel. 2021. *Global China, Global Crisis: Falling Profitability, Rising Capital Exports and the Formation of New Territorial Industrial Complexes*. University of Washington.

<sup>123</sup> Claire Dunning. 2022. *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>124</sup> This is not to say that nonprofit activity experiences growth in periods of acute downturn or crisis. Rather, this is a general tendency over the longer arc of capitalist development that has shifted from manufacturing growth and investment to services and the FIRE sector. This explains the emergence of the “nonprofit sector” proper in response to the secular crisis of capitalist profitability. Cyclically, nonprofits respond much like businesses. Dependent on revenues from both taxes (state-funding) and profit, wages, and rent (donors), nonprofits are pro-cyclical—their activities and services expand during boom periods and contract during acute economic downturns. Christine L. Exley, Nils H. Lehr, and Stephen J. Terry. 2023. “Nonprofits in Good Times and Bad Times.” *Journal of Political Economy Microeconomics* 1(1): 42–79.

<sup>125</sup> See, most famously, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. 2020. *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Duke University Press.

ment, as earlier communists had warned, though it is also that. Rather, it is characterized by community self-reliance, “mutual aid,” and campaigns for greater equality and equity emergent from its historical roots in the civil rights movement. No matter how far this form of civic action might drift from these origins, absorbing the some of the more innocuous “radical” or “revolutionary” jargon along the way,<sup>126</sup> it must be situated in the regimes of structural austerity that gave it its mandate.

The most basic forms of the “NPIC” are revenue-seeking, and thus participants in the market economy. It is this fact that allows state-funding and grant-making to be supplemented by capitalist firms, however indirectly, reducing the cost of provisioning by exposure to the mechanisms of price signals. Their tax status not only offers them greater leverage in carrying out economic activities, such as fundraising and merchandizing, it also ensures access to discounted goods and services and lower interest rates. In the most advanced capitalist economies, nonprofits are a major feature in the breakdown of economic activity.<sup>127</sup> This is in a very real sense a form of non-state mediation of social reproduction, one response to the decoupling of the *double moulinet* of capitalist reproduction. They may not be profit-seeking nor capital-accumulating, but it is a fool’s errand to defend nonprofits as non-capitalist. They form a part of the material community.

It may seem tempting to suggest that these trappings are limited to “activism” such that it is channeled through formal nonprofit organization. Nonprofits, embedded as they are in price signals and economic compulsions, are rightfully abandoned as models of reform or recuperation. They can never be meaningfully “anti-systemic,” being part of the very system that they are purporting to challenge. This objection is often paired with the reminder that there are many other avenues for civic action and solidarity that seem to obviate this political economic mediation. This is often the concealed conceit of many critiques of the “NPIC.” Community organizing, campaigning, and mutual aid need not apply for 501(c)3 status in order to participate in communities of struggle. This is where some of the most ostensible “radical” organizing tends to situate itself. As true as this may be in a definite sense, this merely returns us to the problem of social composition and decomposition, when capital’s abstraction and domestication of humanity is practically complete. The NPIC is “reformist” to the extent that its imperatives are shaped by the compulsions of capital. This is no less true of individual actors, “communities,” or class activity more broadly. All are imbued with the logic of capitalist reproduction. These limits of “activism” apply as well to “voluntarism” more generally: the *capacity* to act is restricted—determined, even—by the reproduction of daily life in ways that such activism regularly fails to interrogate, offering instead a one-sided analysis of the constellation of *wills*, *care*, or, (as is relevant here) *strategy*, necessary to *do something*. Yet to declare civic action as hopelessly reformist is a banality. The knee-jerk dismissal of organizations as per se “counterrevolutionary,” “reformist,” or “recuperative” is equally naive and disregards how materially embedded many such groupings and services tend to be in the social reproduction of class, race, and gender belonging.<sup>128</sup> An outright rejection of the types of social formations that desperately congeal around the downward spiral of capitalist reproduction amounts to little more than a rejection of the material conditions that

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<sup>126</sup> E.g., “direct action,” “nonviolent civil disobedience,” “anti-capitalism,” “horizontalism,” “allyship,” “mass action”

<sup>127</sup> National Council of Nonprofits. n.d. “Economic Impact of Nonprofits.” <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/about-america-nonprofits/economic-impact-nonprofits>

<sup>128</sup> A survey of *Ill Will Editions* from 2020 onward should provide a glimpse into such posturing. Shanahan and Kurt offer a sobering critique.



shape subsistence and survival, wishing instead for a ready-made revolutionary subject with no history. The ink spilled on the tepid rise of the activist, the corporate campaign, and the NGO and “nonprofit industrial complex” is extensive enough to constitute a complex of its own. Activism” is often so extensive a part of the reproduction of daily life that it forms initial conditions of political development and conflict, whether we like it or not.

Where this leaves critique is not with “organization” as such, but a particular form that has gained momentum concomitant with the decline of the workers’ movement: the campaign, or, more precisely the “political-economic disruption campaign” (PEDC).<sup>129</sup> In the enchanted world of the activist, with its ritual division of strategy and tactics, the model of the PEDC is the *prima materia* for the alchemy that transforms these components into “victory.” In its most basic framework, the campaign has a spatial dimension and a temporal dimension. In the spatial dimension, the campaign builds relationships horizontally, along a spectrum of “stakeholders” (this is where the concepts of impact and allyship gain purchase). It also escalates tactics vertically, that is, from “low-risk” to “high-risk,” and from non-confrontational to confrontational. “Diversity of tactics” is its bread and butter. There is also an implicit escalation *along* seams of power, involving whatever the target may be, and so these campaigns tend to involve a “power mapping” analysis that takes on spatial metaphor. This overall strategy unfolds temporally, with pressure building over time, so that movements appear to be gaining power vis-a-vis their targets, with the implicit promise that things will only get worse if the target does not fold. PEDCs are thus sometimes known as “pressure campaigns.”<sup>130</sup> These are the basic contours of the activist campaign.<sup>131</sup> It is “political-economic” and “disruptive” because it purports to operate through the mechanisms of the capitalist economy, specifically financial markets, turning the pressures of competition in on the intended target. It is critical to note that this particular theorization developed in specific antimony of Marxian critiques of capitalism, the law of value, and the irreducible centrality of surplus value production to the process of accumulation and reproduction. In this account, accumulation is independent of production and merely the effect of financial market valuation. There is thus no “absolute” accumulation of capital; all accumulation is *differential*, relative only to competing firms in a given sector.<sup>132</sup> Market competition and its mediation through “complex social processes” is all that matters. A more clear reification of our era there could not be. Consciously or not, this analysis of the capitalist economy informs the ins-and-outs of the pressure campaign, which have a tendency to fetishize the power of the market in allocating the social good, as long as citizens provide the pressure necessary.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> As far as we know, this terminology originates with the work of heterodox political economist D.T. Cochrane. See D. T. Cochrane and Jeff Monaghan. 2012. “Fight to Win! Tools for Confronting Capital.” In Deric Shannon, Anthony J. Nocella III. and John Asimakopoulos, eds. *The Accumulation of Freedom: Writings on Anarchist Economics*. AK Press: 95–116.; D. T. Cochrane. 2011. “Castoriadis, Veblen, and the ‘Power Theory of Capital.’” In I. S. Straume and J.F. Humphreys, eds. *Depoliticization: The Political Imaginary of Global Capitalism*. Aarhus University Press: 89–123.

<sup>130</sup> Anonymous. 2016. “#NoDAPL Indigenous Land Defense & Strategic Solidarity: Pressuring Power And Capital.” <https://itsgoingdown.org/nodapl-indigenous-land-defense-strategic-solidarity-pressuring-power-capital/>

<sup>131</sup> A basic example is offered by Ruckus Society in their “Action Strategy” guide: <https://ruckus-org.nyc3.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/production/app/uploads/2017/11/RuckusActionStrategyGuide.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> See Cochrane and Monaghan, 2012, and the “Power Theory of Capital” school of thought, of which Cochrane is a disciple: Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler. 2009. *Capital as Power: A Study of Order and Creorder*. Routledge.

<sup>133</sup> “For those involved in PEDCs, this dependence of capital upon complex social processes means disruption of production is not strictly necessary to disrupt accumulation.” Cochrane and Monaghan, 2012, 101.

While this form of campaigning in general has a much more storied history, its increasing prominence is quite clearly linked to the decline of traditional forms of proletarian power. Arguably the first iteration of the “corporate campaign” strategy emerged in direct response to these limits in the labor movement during that watershed period spanning 1963–1983, in the unionization drive of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) throughout the southern factories of the major textile firm J.P. Stevens. ACTWU’s campaign against J.P. Stevens was centered on disrupting the economic viability of the company by targeting shareholder institutions, individual corporate executives, and board members. The primary strategists had concluded that traditional labor tactics such as strikes and boycotts had failed and would continue to fail to produce collective bargaining and unionization among the thousands of workers at Stevens’s factories.<sup>134</sup> While this shift in strategy has been hailed as a much needed check on “corporate power” and evolution in the labor movement, little to no attention has been paid to the clear fact that such a strategy is an index of the overall *weakness* of the workers’ movement and its historical retreat. Little wonder why now, in our recent cycle of “strike waves,” heralded quite dubiously as the return of labor, the “corporate campaign” seems nowhere on the table of strategy. That is, except in those holdouts of non-labor organizing which had themselves flourished under the great decline of labor and the busting of the specter of communism.

The ACTWU campaign style was exported to other union struggles throughout the 1980s, but by the early 1990s it had gained most traction among anti-apartheid activists, environmentalists struggling to defend unprotected land by conventional political campaigning and lobbying,<sup>135</sup> and among the prototypical anti-globalization student movement. In the late 1980s, more militant tactics became regularly employed in the repertoire of the anti-apartheid solidarity and boycott movement with the express purpose of bringing economic and political pressure on the regime and its international scaffolding.<sup>136</sup> Similar international pressure was mobilized in the mid-1990s against Nike, after re-territorialization of its supply chains had publicly implicated it in “sweating” child labor in factories in the manufacturing zones of South and Southeast Asia, including India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This re-territorialization was the direct result of rising living standards among the “Asian Tigers” and mainland China, where Nike had previously sourced materials and labor. What emerged was a broad coalition of civic society and student organizations, including United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), that organized a campaign to turn the global market against Nike and undermine its profitability, which in many ways

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<sup>134</sup> n.a. n.d. “ACTWU vs. J.P Stevens: 1976–1980: Birth of the Corporate Campaign.” *Corporate Campaign, Inc.* [http://www.corporatecampaign.org/history\\_actwu\\_jp\\_stevens\\_1978.php](http://www.corporatecampaign.org/history_actwu_jp_stevens_1978.php); “U.S. textile workers win campaign in South (J.P. Stevens Boycott) 1963–1983.” n.a. n.d. *Global Nonviolent Action Database.* <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/us-textile-workers-win-campaign-south-jp-stevens-boycott-1963-1983>; James A. Hodges. 1994 “JP Stevens and the Union: Struggle for the South.” *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History.* Eds. Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed. University of Alabama Press.; Timothy J. Minchin. 2005. *Don’t Sleep with Stevens: The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963–1980.* University Press of Florida.

<sup>135</sup> For this history, see Keith Makoto Woodhouse. 2018. *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism.* Columbia University Press.

<sup>136</sup> Gavin Brown. 2011. “A brief history of the Non-Stop Picket.” *Non-Stop Against Apartheid.* <https://nonstopagainstapartheid.wordpress.com/2011/07/08/a-brief-history-of-the-non-stop-picket/>

worked.<sup>137</sup> This would crescendo in the 1[999] WTO protests and the era of the anti-globalization movement proper.

On the environmental front, the “corporate campaign” was most adequately adopted by Earth First! in Northern California under the influence of Judi Bari. This strategy was possible because of the particular historical configuration of industry in the redwoods, with increasing consolidation of timber companies and financialization of their operations. The main target, Pacific Lumber, was acquired in the late 1980s by Texas financier Charles Hurwitz and his conglomerate Maxxam, Inc. Hurwitz leveraged the acquisition with junk bonds, only to finance the merger and service the debt by rapidly increasing the rate of timber harvest. The best output to input ratio here was of course in the remaining old growth that Pacific Lumber owned. This opened the campaign to a broader strategy of pressure, including the lesser known “Corporate Fall” campaign that followed the more traditional “Redwood Summer” of the Earth First! milieu.<sup>138</sup> Bari is often credited with building coalitions among workers and environmentalists, on the one hand, and disavowing the economic sabotage and property destruction that become associated with Earth First! up to that point, on the other. Both claims are exaggerated. Whatever conciliation existed between rural timber workers and urban environmentalists was quite marginal, fragile, and fleeting, at least as a result of the explicit efforts on the part of radical environmentalists.<sup>139</sup> Workers’ relation to conservation is far more complicated and fraught with contradictions, ones only exacerbated by the reconfiguration and re-territorialization of the industry during the long crisis.<sup>140</sup> At best, the legacy of Judi Bari is more rhetorical: by undermining the persistence of anti-proletarian characteristics that were always part of the “environmental movement” among settlers and urbanites and seeking common cause with workers, the “tactics” much vaunted by the milieu could be subordinated to strategies that were situated in how capitalism actually worked. This is where her “disavowal” of tree-spiking comes in, not as a normative critique of the tactic, but a materialist critique of its efficacy when deployed in such turbulent conditions.<sup>141</sup>

This general climate of “anti-capitalist” activism is what characterized the 1990s and 2000s. It has touched anything from the anti-war movement,<sup>142</sup> to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli occupation and apartheid, to any number of Greenpeace corporate campaigns. Even today, the inheritance of this era is felt in the activities of Palestine Action Network or Extinction Rebellion. Strategically and tactically, it perhaps reached a zenith in the late 90s and early 2000s in the animal “rights” or animal liberation movements, in particular in

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<sup>137</sup> Cochrane and Monaghan, 2012; Jeff Ballinger. n.d. “Chronology of the Nike Sweatshop Labor Campaign.” Center for Communication and Civic Engagement. <https://depts.washington.edu/ccce/polcommcampaigns/Nike.htm>; Bette Jean Bullert. 2000. “Strategic Public Relations, Sweatshops, and the Making of a Global Movement.” *Shorenstein Center Working Paper Series*.

<sup>138</sup> Greg King. 2023. *The Ghost Forest: Racists, Radicals, and Real Estate in the California Redwoods*. Public Affairs. Keith Makoto Woodhouse. 2018. *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism*. Columbia University Press.; Richard Widick. 2009. *Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars*. University of Minnesota Press.; Judi Bari. 1994. *Timber Wars*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.; Rik Scarce. 2016. *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement*. Routledge.

<sup>139</sup> Loomis, *Empire of Timber*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*; See also Steven Beda. 2022. *Strong Winds and Widow Makers: Workers, Nature, and Environmental Conflict in Pacific Northwest Timber Country*. University of Illinois Press.

<sup>141</sup> See Bari, *Timber Wars*.

<sup>142</sup> See the Take Down SNC-Lavalin! campaign against ammunition provider SNC-Lavalin. Cochrane and Monaghan, 2012

the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty Campaign (SHAC).<sup>143</sup> SHAC emerged out of a sequence of smaller campaigns that successfully closed down farms that bred nonhuman animals (rabbits, monkeys, cats) for sale to “research” and often just contract testing of various commodities (household cleaners, cosmetics, etc) to mitigate company liability.<sup>144</sup> SHAC’s main target was one of these contract research organizations (CRO), one the largest in the world—Huntingdon Life Sciences of Suffolk, England and later New Jersey. The “SHAC model” is quite infamous in a certain activist milieu.<sup>145</sup> It combined “aboveground” (ostensibly or technically “legal”) tactics with the support for “underground” (i.e., illegal, clandestine) direct action. The tactical spectrum ran the gamut from phone-banking to property destruction to physical violence. “Diversity of tactics” was the watchword and here attained a practical reality quite apart from its previous employ. These tactics found coordination in a strategy of economic pressure that involved isolating the target—HLS—from its supply chain and financial overlords. This “secondary” or “tertiary” pressure was quite effective, and successfully and repeatedly severed HLS from its equipment suppliers, market-makers, financial service providers, institutional shareholders, insurance providers, and brokers of all sorts. It was even removed from the New York and London Stock Exchanges as its market capitalization was driven below the minimum threshold. Under pressure, the UK government requested the Bank of England provide HLS with banking facilities to prevent bankruptcy and liquidation of assets. Over the course of the campaign, HLS was forced to accept loans on increasingly unfavorable terms.<sup>146</sup> The campaign had successfully inserted itself into the calculation of “risk” that attends the process of valuation.

SHAC did not successfully close Huntingdon Life Sciences. It resulted in two major waves of state repression in the US and UK, including the passing of specific anti-terrorism legislation that treated this form of campaigning as a form of racketeering, along with countless arrests and court-cases that failed to make headlines. The campaign’s history is now inseparable from the wider so-called “Green Scare” that targeted animal liberation and radical ecological movements. To date, its limits have been treated by the usual suspects<sup>147</sup> as an inadequate balance between the “aboveground” and “underground” elements of the campaign, the absence of a critical constellation of tactics, and naive public relations. Even aside from these criticisms, a greater scrutiny into the “strategy” itself is warranted, but has not been undertaken. It is here that the fundamental contradiction of the “anti-capitalist” campaign reveals itself: in its pursuit to target firm by firm, availing the dominoes to fall, it relies on capitalist imperatives.<sup>148</sup> In an ideological move quite appropriate for the times, it separates the market from the firm, circulation from production (or extraction), and believes itself capable of pitting one against another to achieve the desired practices and allocation of resources such that capitalism simply vanishes. This is incrementalism,

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<sup>143</sup> The only comprehensive history is offered in Tom Harris. 2024. *You Neighbor Kills Puppies: Inside the Animal Liberation Movement*. Pluto Press. The best accounts of SHAC in particular and animal liberation in general are found in the archives of the Talon Conspiracy. <https://thetalonconspiracy.com/tag/hls-campaign/>

<sup>144</sup> Harris, *You Neighbor Kills Puppies* and Talon Conspiracy: <https://thetalonconspiracy.com/?s=campaign>; See also *SHAC Made History*: <https://shacmadehistory.noblogs.org/la-campagna-shac-the-shac-campaign/>

<sup>145</sup> Today, it directly informs the strategies of Palestine Action Network.

<sup>146</sup> For an overview, see Talon Conspiracy and Crimethinc. 2008. “The SHAC Model: A Critical Assessment.” <https://crimethinc.com/2008/09/01/the-shac-model-a-critical-assessment>

<sup>147</sup> See Crimethinc, “The SHAC Model”

<sup>148</sup> Crimethinc acknowledges this, but concludes from it little more than a shrug: “the SHAC model relies on the rest of the capitalist market to offer better options. In this regard, while it is not reformist, neither does it provide a strategy for taking on capitalism itself.” Ibid.

but with anarchist and anti-capitalist characteristics. It has left an indelible mark on subsequent campaigns, including the #NoDAPL campaign in support of the struggle at Oceti Sakowin,<sup>149</sup> the Tar Sands Blockade of the Utah tar sands development, the campaign against Keystone XL and Line 3 pipelines, solidarity actions with Wet'suwet'en land defenders, and any number of Rainforest Action Network or Greenpeace initiatives. Anyone following the activities of Palestine Action Network has witnessed how difficult it has been to shake. Many of the same NPIC actors are mobilized through the Rising Tide and EF! networks and so have advanced strategies that echo SHAC. A lesser known model is quite indicative of this trend. Shortly after the implosion of the SHAC campaign, Root Force emerged as an attempt to pair the PEDC strategy with growing movement against capitalist and colonial infrastructure. It was the best example of an attempt to *generalize* the PEDC strategy as an antagonism against global capital itself. This was the approach that paralleled the growth of insurrectionary anarchism during this same period, its complement, if not its sponsor. Though it saw support on the ground to effort to stop the expansion of I-69, it did not bear any fruit beyond its expansive vision.<sup>150</sup>

The particular strategy of SHAC was the result of a convergence of factors: the decline in militancy and mainstreaming of animal rights and welfare organizations, the development of “diversity of tactics” and “direct action” movement in the UK anti-roads campaign, Reclaim the Streets, and the UK Earth First! offshoot *Do or Die*, the general cycle of struggles around anti-globalization and anti-capitalism, and the “new economy” boom of the late 1990s, which was underwritten by depressed interest rates, stock market speculation, and the subsequent growth of valuations of technology and service start-ups.<sup>151</sup> This asset-price Keynesianism of the tumultuous period of the long crisis, accelerated through the 1990s by the adoption of monetarist “easy-money” policies of central banks, is the necessary background to understand the rise of the “activist campaign” at this juncture. This fetish of markets and the circulation of money took on its “anti-capitalist” character in these civic efforts, which did little more than provide checks on the capitalist economy itself. But even this is illusory, as the most egregious practices of a given firm are not the result of the firm’s corrupt managers, but of the capitalist system itself. It will tend to reproduce these practices elsewhere through the supply chain. This is the effect of competition.<sup>152</sup> Those horrors are structural, symptoms of the capitalist imperative to reduce costs of production, an imperative that only worsens as capital’s crisis tendency makes itself known. As even its ardent adherents and advocates maintain, political-economic disruption campaigns, pressure campaigns, or “differential accumulation” campaigns do nothing to undo or overcome capitalist relations themselves. Their inborn tendency, in fact, is to reproduce themselves on that very basis.

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<sup>149</sup> Ill Will Editions. ““Dispatches from Standing Rock: Against the Dakota Access Pipeline and its World.” <https://illwill.com/print/dispatches-from-standing-rock>; Shiri Pasternak, Katie Mazer, and D. T. Cochrane. 2019. “The Financing Problem Of Colonialism: How Indigenous Jurisdiction Is Valued In Pipeline Politics.” In Nick Estes. *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*: 222–234.

<sup>150</sup> Root Force. 2006. “Root Force: Demolishing Colonialism at its Foundations.” *Earth First! Journal* 26(2); Root Force. 2008. “The System is Still a House of Cards: A Revised Strategy.” *Earth First! Journal* 28(2).

<sup>151</sup> See Brenner, *Economics of Global Turbulence*.

<sup>152</sup> “This highlights one of the consequences of PEDCs: they may benefit others... as long as capitalism remains, there will necessarily be those who benefit from one corporation’s differential decline. As with the particular tactics of political economic disruption, PEDCs themselves are not inherently anti-capitalist. Rather, their purpose is to insert us into the accumulatory process, to become risk factors that must be accounted for.” Cochrane and Monaghan, 2012, 105.

The “strategy of composition” finds itself narrowing in on the activist campaign, attempt as it might to veer elsewhere, towards a “rupture” or break with the community of capital. In the emphasis on a diversity of tact and tactics, on complementarity amidst the chaos of decomposition and diffusion, one finds that familiar thread of organization in times of great weakness. It is worth noting that the SHAC model, if we take it as the premier PEDC strategy, was designed to efficiently mobilize sparse and disparate parties.<sup>153</sup> The appearance of this strategy is thus an expression of a period of weakness and retreat, and frequently includes a related voluntary preoccupation with “issues” not immediately linked with the mundane course of reproduction,<sup>154</sup> which has been fragmented and decoupled from class belonging and clear lines of political subjectivity. The limit of these campaigns expresses itself whenever their reproduction becomes identical with the reproduction of capitalist relations. On the one hand, this is the result of the program of the campaign itself, clinging as it does to persistence of capitalist contradictions. On the other hand, this expresses the problem of reproduction that lies at the core of contemporary cycles of struggle.

Activist efforts have a tendency to separate from the messiness and turmoil of day to day life, even when they have their basis in it, for reasons discussed above. Compositional struggles must constantly disavow activists campaigns because they share this historical identity. Both arose from the historical conditions of proletarian retreat from the workplace as a site of power, shifting to the more diffuse sphere of circulation. Both consequentially share a preoccupation with the power of the market in general and finance in particular, seeing in commercial capital and money capital the forms of capital *par excellence*, which stand in the way of the social good or “forms of life” worth preserving. Both tend towards strategies and tactics whose efficacy can only be brought into being by the mediation of competition. Both are reproduced only on this basis, and this forms their ultimate limit. Their trajectory is to replace concrete struggles over the terms of reproduction with strategies in the sphere of circulation, and thus increasingly attract the professional strategists and tacticians, the parachuting allies, the experts, and other familiar casts of characters.<sup>155</sup> This has already been observed in the Stop Cop City movement, particularly in the Stop Reeves Young and Stop the Atlanta Police Foundation campaigns, the Weelaunee Defense Society and Block Cop City speaking tour, and the Block Cop City action itself. Each of these iterations has represented a move toward a consolidated strategy of action in the tradition of the PEDC. Early in the campaign, Crimethinc advocated the adoption of the “SHAC model” and associates it with the history of “compositional struggles” in one of the most widely circulated pieces of the movement.<sup>156</sup> It might be said, generously, that “composition” in this sense is an *abstraction*, a heuristic for thinking through the complexities of identity formation and mediation beyond simply hailing a “diversity of tactics.” But this does not a strategy make. To touch ground, it must survey the concrete conditions and the key players that provoke the participation of the

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<sup>153</sup> “the SHAC model is efficient: SHAC USA has never had more than a few hundred active participants at any given time.” Crimethinc, “The SHAC Model”

<sup>154</sup> S.T., “The Issues Are Not the Issue”

<sup>155</sup> Klee Benally outlines some of this well in his critique of settler allyship. “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex, An Indigenous Perspective.” *Indigenous Action Media*. <https://www.indigenousaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>

<sup>156</sup> Crimethinc. 2022. “The City in the Forest.” <https://crimethinc.com/zines/city-in-the-forest>

broad coalition that composes the composition. In doing so, however, it falls back onto “diversity of tactics” to make a strategy, but presents the approach as something novel.<sup>157</sup>

The fundamental limit is this: the “composition” in question is already part of capital’s world and its actions, conflicts, strategies, and tactics are defined by the imperatives of that world. We can thus see a campaign achieving “victory” without moving the dial toward the production of communism.<sup>158</sup> This could have been and may indeed be the outcome of any number of contemporary struggles: the blockade at Standing Rock, Stop Cop City/Defend the Atlanta Forest, the defense of Lützerath, the occupation at Saint-Soline, or the struggle of the Wet’suwet’en. The differing potential for each of these struggles to move from *campaign* victory to the negation of capitalist relations of production is not found in whatever commonality they have in the use of particular tactics, or their superficially “territorial” character.<sup>159</sup> Nor is it found in the “composition” of that tactical repertoire or the constellation of wills emergent from it. It must be found elsewhere, in the material relations of production and reproduction. That is to say, it indeed must be found in *composition*, but in a quite different sense.

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<sup>157</sup> Note the similarity between the “strategy of composition” and Crimethinc’s analysis of SHAC: “Rather than pitting exponents of different tactics against each other, SHAC integrated all possible tactics into one campaign, in which each approach complemented the others. This meant that participants could choose from a practically limitless array of options, which opened the campaign to a wide range of people and averted needless conflicts.” Crimethinc, “The SHAC Model”

<sup>158</sup> It should be noted that such victories are not necessarily “reformist,” unless one adopts a definition of reformism that is so broad as to be absurd and hollow. “This in turn calls forth a maximalist critique that defames as reformism everything that does not immediately aim for revolution. But there is a massive difference between limited struggles for this or that reform to improve one’s own life, and even struggles to avert its deterioration, and reformism as such. Reformism is a political tendency that either has the direct intention of maintaining capitalism, by ameliorating its worst excesses or by steering inevitable demands into institutional channels, or it actually adheres to the illusion that one can transform this society into socialism by means of a long chain of gradual improvements. But in both cases, the state is charged with the task. Reformism is representation; it must keep all activity of the ranks within the prescribed channels. Against this, it is precisely in those struggles that the class’s own interests are championed in the first place. Only within those struggles does the possibility emerge of stepping out of existence as a bourgeois legal subject, as a seller of labor-power; in these struggles, those fighting must discuss their common aims and transcend their otherwise necessary egoism. Solidarity ceases to be a social democratic Sunday school sermon. Every struggle in the here and now for the improvement of one’s own life that resists representation, and in which self-activity occurs, is the experimental ground for the future society, whose forms of interaction do not suddenly emerge with the revolution.” Friends of the Classless Society. 2010. “28 Theses on Class Society.” *Kosmoprolet*. <https://kosmoprolet.org/en/28-theses-class-society>

<sup>159</sup> We must reiterate the dissection between territorial occupation as such and land defense as a defense of modes of reproduction, ways of life, and concrete relations to place, e.g., indigenous territorial defense.

## Part Two: The Problem of Composition

Composition appears to us today as both agency and constraint, a divided appearance adequate to our mercurial times. Caught between the unyielding floor of ecological and social survival and the descending ceiling of economic growth, political activity tends to cluster around the poles of autonomy and compulsion, hope and despair. In Part One, we charted how the political content of “composition” tended to be fixed through the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by distinct political strategies developed out of particular historical and geographic conditions. The dual meaning of “composition” today is a product of these historical struggles. The mid-century militant workerist movement and *operaismo* furnished us with a concept of “composition” that we would characterize as primarily descriptive, though clearly the theorists of *operaismo* derived prescriptive significance from their clarifications, such that “composition” offered a heuristic to analyze and strategize a sequence of struggles. The late-20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century turn away from the mass worker and towards the sphere of circulation provided us with a concept of “composition” that is fundamentally prescriptive, no longer fixed by historical circumstance and increasingly finding its normative expression in discrete campaigns or else a utopian withdrawal from the capitalist world.<sup>1</sup>

We now return from this broadly historical sketch to the present. If workerists correctly diagnosed composition as a problem confronting the worker as an alien force and organization, it was a problem that for them delivered its own resolution in the form of political recomposition of the class and its activity. Today, the problem of composition does not seem deliver these sorts of clear-minded political resolutions. It gives the impression less of being a Gordian Knot than a Sisyphean task. The composition problem appears immediately as the problem of decomposition, social disintegration, and planetary metabolic catastrophe. It is for this reason that politics of escape or exit can appear so attractive. In what follows, we provide a detailed theoretical account of the problem of composition and various attempts to resolve it in the form of practical political strategies. We pay particular attention to Endnotes’ characterization of the “composition problem,” as the standard-bearer of this formulation, as well as the limits and inadequacies of their and their fellow travelers’ treatment of the problem. We take up Hugh Farrell and the “strategy of composition” with more theoretical and historical scrutiny, given that Farrell is attempting to overcome the conditions set by Endnotes, and especially because Farrell argues that this strategy finds its most adequate expression in territorial struggle. We will thus treat “territoriality” to a closer investigation here and in Part Three. We then turn to alternative analyses of the contemporary problem of composition, ones that largely reject Endnotes’ and other ultra-left or “communization” theories. We argue that these accounts are neo-workerist, but make important advances on the analytical and strategic value of composition, providing an “update,” so to speak, for our current conjuncture, even if these remain insufficient or even misguided. First, a historical note to set the scene.

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<sup>1</sup> This was in many ways anticipated by the dissolution of *operaismo* into *autonomia*.



## Bucolic Bookends

If ours is the era of decomposition—of the *problem* of composition—we should start with a periodization. If there is something that the many theorists surveyed thus far might seem to agree on, it is that the term “composition,” whatever its ascribed meaning, found its historical expression and social validity from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The workerist account of this was given in Part One. This is the account to which we subscribe, with some caveats: particular configurations of class composition and political strategy are expressions of histories of capitalist transition, deagrarianization, patterns of development, and rates of economic growth. For these reasons, the politics of “composition” found their home in industrial regions that benefitted from late depeasantization, rapid industrialization, technical organizations of production, and uneven, often racialized development, such as Detroit and Northern Italy.

In contrast, Kristen Ross argues that the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century break, which saw not only the re-emergence of worker militancy, but the peculiar feature of *territorial struggle* that now seems to dominate political life, is best explained as when “people throughout the world began to realize that the tension between the logic of development and that of the ecological bases of life had become the primary contradiction of their lives.”<sup>2</sup> While perhaps not a truism, this is a banal observation that mistakes itself for an explanation. If ecological contradiction or metabolic crisis did indeed begin to present itself as something primary in the 1960s, it remains to be explained how and why, even in the most detailed histories of the “environmental movement.”<sup>3</sup> More to the point, Ross offers no explanation of who “people throughout the world” are supposed to be. Such a homogenous characterization of political actors lends itself to the very specious claim that this mass political subject has come to a realization about either “the logic of development” or the “ecological bases of life,” both treated quite generally and abstractly. Evacuated as they are of any historical content, Ross is able to claim that this new political intelligence, which emerged in the 1960s, is the “the new and incontrovertible horizon of meaning of all political struggle.”<sup>4</sup> The era of territory as praxis—the era of “composition” as subjectivity and program—is what she calls the “long 1960s.” Composition, in this sense, shared by Tiquun/TIC, is a political consciousness and strategy emergent from relational subjectivity, a “continuation of sorts of the relational subjectivity often said to be at the heart of 60s politics.”<sup>5</sup>

It betrays much that Kristin Ross and, following her, Mauvaise Troupe Collective, should date the era of the ZAD, of compositional strategy, *not* with the ZAD as such. Rather, Ross points to a struggle against another airport project from the mid-century, the Narita Airpot in Tokyo’s exurban hinterlands.<sup>6</sup> Ross makes her periodization clear when she claims that this struggle—the Sanrizuka Struggle—was the first in a series of “battles of the second half of the twentieth century that reconfigure[d] the lines of conflict of an era.” We will dwell briefly on this claim, as it demonstrates how the periodization of Ross, MTC, and other adherents of “compositional struggles” is dissociated from capitalist laws of motion and historical development, leaving itself open to utopian engineering. How well do these cases—Sanrizuka and the ZAD—conform to

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<sup>2</sup> Kristen Ross. 2018. “The Long 1960s and ‘The Wind From The West.’” *Crisis & Critique* 5(2): 321.

<sup>3</sup> We suggest our own schematic, to be developed more fully in subsequent work, in “Tragic Theses.”

<sup>4</sup> Ross, 2018, 321

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 321

<sup>6</sup> See Ross, 2018.

Ross's "long 1960s" of ecological consciousness? What is lost by reducing these struggles to their common features? Some background is warranted.

Post-war Japan was in the cross section of US military occupation, reconstruction efforts, and rapid economic growth.<sup>7</sup> Another example of "late development," efforts of state-led capitalist transition that began during the Meiji Restoration were only truly completed in the post-war era, the period of the "Japanese economic miracle." Despite its small landmass and the destruction of feudal elites, Japan had a persistent peasantry that lasted in the countryside well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1950s and 60s, depeasantization was carried through by state initiatives to reallocate labor from the countryside to the cities. Feudal relations had left a radical peasant tradition, but big push industrial transition and investments in heavy industry had left what remained of agrarian populations materially destitute. Agrarian struggles took a defensive character to preserve ways of life threatened by industrial development, from Sanrizuka and Shibayama to the protests of Minamata fishing communities against mercury poisoning.<sup>8</sup> It is in this historical context of state-facilitated disease and displacement, overseen by the US military, that a constellation of forces converged in opposition to the Narita Airport in the mid-1960s. Simply known as "Sanrizuka," the struggle here emerged in lands of historical significance to feudal shogunate, lands later used for experimental agriculture during the Meiji Restoration. That these lands should be debased and dispossessed for the development of an adjacent airport with ties to US militarization and urban modernization informed the thrust of the struggle as one *against* proletarianization, agrarian depopulation, farm consolidation, and rural household decline. Given the limited geography of Japan, the state was largely disinterested in investments in agrarian productivity. The countryside was in a real sense being sacrificed for the development of industry.<sup>9</sup> The organizational strategy of Sanrizuka was an effect of these conditions. Drawing in urban support from the radical student movement (Zengakuren) and the ostensible leadership of the reformed communist and socialist parties,<sup>10</sup> the real coordination at Sanrizuka was the preserve of the Hantai Dōmei ("Opposition Alliance"). The Hantai Dōmei had organizational roots in the social relations of the rural hamlet (burakumin), which was under threat of dissolution. Through the Hantai Dōmei, opponents of the airport engaged in a wide-range of tactics, from tree-spiking, to protest, to blockades, to sabotage, to expropriation, to open conflict with police. It was an "all-out insurrection," the apogee of Japan's long 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

The Hantai Dōmei was "compositional" in the sense employed by Ross, MTC, and now many others. Indeed, it could be thought of as *the* model of "composition," even synonymous with it. As the paradigm of a territorial struggle composed of disparate partisans, Hantai Dōmei would not be superseded, for the theorists of "compositional strategy," until the first occupations at the ZAD in 2008. Yet, note here the crucial historical periodization, the substantive bracketing offered by these two paradigmatic cases of strategies and tactics. The underlying threat to modes of reproduction and subsistence represented in the agrarian populations that constituted the core

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<sup>7</sup> See Makoto Itoh. 1990. *The World Economic Crisis and Japanese Capitalism*. Palgrave Macmillan; See also Brenner, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See Sabu Kohso. 2024. "Life of Militancy: Japan's Long '68." *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/life-of-militancy>; David Apter and Nagayo Sawa. 1984. *Against the State: Politics and Social Protest in Japan*. Harvard University Press.; AMPO. "Sanrizuka." AMPO Magazine. <https://libcom.org/article/sanrizuka>.

<sup>9</sup> Apter and Sawa, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> This was the result of the "Red Purge."

<sup>11</sup> William Andrews. 2014. "Sanrizuka: The Struggle to Stop Narita Airport." <https://throwoutyour-books.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/narita-airport-protest-movement-sanrizuka/>

of these struggles would seem to unify this epoch. Each was preceded by a period of positive, though tenuous, prospects that were shattered by swift reversal of outcomes. This would seem to conform to the J-Curve model of social unrest, in which civil disturbances, rebellions, and revolutions are explained socio-historically when rising subjective expectations become suddenly frustrated by objective decline.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, however, the J-Curve hypothesis tells only a partial story. A fuller historical picture requires attention to social composition in relation to capital. A comparative glance at the two paradigms—Sanrizuka and the ZAD—will make this more clear.

While Shōwa Era economic growth was concentrated in manufacturing and urbanization, this had the effect of weakening the power of rural landlords, something that the central government supported to increase agricultural productivity. While agriculture decreased in significance as a share of Japan's GDP, the expansion of the Japanese Empire abroad and domestic industrialization was fueled through its agricultural sector. This delicate vestige of agrarian prestige was eroded by the Pacific War. When prospects for growth returned in the post-war era, it was at the expense of the agrarian population.<sup>13</sup> However, as Makoto Itoh has argued, despite a radical reduction in agrarian population and demographic shift from primary to secondary and tertiary industries, the persistence of traditional forms of agrarian social reproduction was instrumental to Japanese development, allowing the state to reduce costs of social provision, relative to other industrial economies.<sup>14</sup> As the case of Sanrizuka illustrates, these obstinate agrarian relations were also instrumental to organizational capacity throughout this cycle of struggle.

The French case shares some of these generic features. It too underwent a great rural exodus and upheaval of class relations in the countryside throughout post-war “Economic Miracle.” Farm consolidation was supported by the government to bolster agricultural productivity.<sup>15</sup> By the 1970s, however, the resulting agricultural depopulation was counteracted by an opposite trend of urban to rural migration, which diversified the agrarian economy. This non-agricultural rural economic development was supported by the government, with agriculture itself eventually becoming a minor sector in the economic mix of the countryside to an extent unique among Western European industrial economies.<sup>16</sup> This policy of mixed land use is central to the concept of *bocage*, which Ross and MTC urge is essential to the politics of “composition.”<sup>17</sup> By 2008 though, the non-agricultural character of the countryside would only ensure its exposure to the

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<sup>12</sup> See James C Davies. 1962. “Toward a Theory of Revolution.” *American Sociological Review*: 5–19. Phil Neal explores this tendency in relation to contemporary class conflict, especially as it informs antagonism *within* the class. See Neal, *Hinterlands*.

<sup>13</sup> Itoh, 1990; Apter and Sawa, 1984.; Thomas RH Havens. 2015. *Farm and nation in modern Japan: Agrarian nationalism, 1870–1940*. Vol. 1335. Princeton University Press;

<sup>14</sup> “By making use of both family ties, and the reality that there were home villages for the majority of wage-workers to go back to when necessary, Japanese capitalism could dispense with many of the costs of social expenditure, or the burden of taxes and other direct costs upon capitalist firms in this regard, compared with rival capitalist countries. By the early 1970s, the proportion of GDP devoted to social expenditure was only 10 per cent in Japan, while it was a little over 20 per cent in a typical European continental country or 17–18 per cent in the USA and the UK.” Itoh, 154.

<sup>15</sup> Here, Sanrizuka shares more in common with its contemporary in the struggle against a military base in the Larzac region in France. MTC and Ross makes this connection as well, but blur the commonalities with the ZAD, NoTAV, and current territorial struggles.

<sup>16</sup> Elena Fourcroy and Nina Drejerska. 2019. “Agricultural Employment Transformation in France.” *Annals of the Polish Association of Agricultural and Agrobusiness Economists* 21(2).

<sup>17</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross, 2018.

crisis.<sup>18</sup> Productivity in France, as in elsewhere in the advanced economies, had been in stagnation or steady decline for decades. This trend was reversed slightly in the second half of 1990s.<sup>19</sup> This would prove short-lived. After the crisis, productivity gains were effectively wiped across all sectors.<sup>20</sup> Unemployment rose. The structural nature of the resulting fiscal crisis pressed the government towards implementation of austerity.<sup>21</sup> It is in this context that costly and disruptive development projects, such as the Nantes airport, should seem so irrational and corrupt.

What is at play across this history is not simply “composition” around the defense of a threatened territory and its associated *bocage* of life ways. At the Hantai Dōmei of Sanrizuka, the tradition of peasant rebellions shaped not only the forms of struggle—its tactics and strategic investments—but also the substance of the struggle itself. It was to a certain extent a struggle against capital because it was a struggle against proletarianization and depeasantization—against subsumption into the material community. Here, Ross’ insistence that one finds the coordinates for “composition” in the Paris Commune, or in Marx’s letters to Zasulich on the communist prospects of the peasant *mir*,<sup>22</sup> is perhaps more historically adequate. If there are “outlines of autonomous territory, the beginnings of a free commune” prefigured in “compositional” struggles, this might have been more readily apparent at Sanrizuka.<sup>23</sup> Yet, despite reference to Sanrizuka, or to the defense of Larzac, the paradigm of “composition” remains the case of the ZAD and to a lesser extent NoTAV. And here the case being made seems far less clear, far more specious in its assertions of autonomy, of prefiguration, of desertion and creation.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the Hantai Dōmei, the ZAD was not a place of defense against the encroachments of capital, but a geography and social fracture that is destituted and abject as already fully *within* the capital-relation, within its circuits of commodities, subsistence, and labor, even if those swallowed by their dependency on capital are not fully or evenly integrated into the process of production. It would seem the MTC and Ross forget Marx’s caveat in his letters to Zasulich: the potential of the *mir* to prefigure communism is limited by the extent to which it has been formally integrated and dissolved into capitalist relations of production and especially its *state mediation*.<sup>25</sup> The *bocage* against the state is little more than a mirage. It is a representation of escape, but no less a mediation in the

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<sup>18</sup> Florence Jany-Catrice and Michel Lallement. 2012. “France Confronts the Crisis: Economic Symptoms Exacerbate Social Inequality.” In Steffen Lehndorff, ed. *A Triumph of Failed ideas European Models of Capitalism in the Crisis*: 103–119.

<sup>19</sup> On this trend, see Brenner, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Janu-Catrice and Lallement, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> This tendency continues to shape politics in France, through the Yellow Vests, the movement against pension reform, and the Nahel Merzouk riots. See Roland Simon. 2023. “Statistics and Sentiments: On the riots of June 2023.” <https://haters.noblogs.org/post/2023/07/07/translation-statistics-and-sentiments-on-the-riots-of-june-2023-by-r-s/>

<sup>22</sup> Kristin Ross. 2015. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Brooklyn: Verso.; Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross, 2018, 3.

<sup>24</sup> It is in this space that the romantic politics of Tiqqun/TIC are able to insert themselves. Which, of course, they have done readily across these new territorial struggles. See any number of criticisms on the *Scenes from Atlanta Forest* blog: <https://scenes.noblogs.org/>. See also Anonymous. 2023. “Against the Party of Insurrection: A Look at Appelism in the U.S.” <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/against-the-party-of-insurrection-a-look-at-appelism-in-the-us>; Anonymous. 2023. “Decomposition: For Insurrection Without Vanguard.” *Ungrateful Hyenas Editions*. <https://ungratefullyhenas.noblogs.org/post/2023/02/21/decomposition-for-insurrection-without-vanguards/>; Crimethinc. 2019. “Reflections on the ZAD: Another History: Looking Back a Year after the Evictions.” <https://crimethinc.com/2019/04/23/reflections-on-the-zad-looking-back-a-year-after-the-evictions>; Crimethinc. 2018. “One but Many Movements: Two Translations from the ZAD on Isolation, Division, and Pacification.”

<sup>25</sup> See Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*.

reproduction of capital. What sets the terms of these two struggles is not a common solution to a common problem, but in fact superficially similar forms of struggle against historically separated social contents of capitalist expansion and contraction, of boom and crisis, fervent hope and abject pessimism. Without accounting for this longer arc of capital's uneven development, MTC and Ross see Sanrizuka and the ZAD as part of the same cycles of struggle, when they in fact mark the opening and closing of an era. It is this paradoxically ahistorical thread that shows us the limit of "compositional strategy" as such, as a strategy on its own terms. Its terms are never its own. They are the terms of capital. They are historically organized, but remain substantively indeterminate. The extent to which composition forms a real organizational strategy is the extent to which composition is confronted as a fate, and in actual fact a nightmarish inheritance of history.

## Coordinating and Demanding

Composition is a tradition of dead generations. It is in this sense that composition constitutes a problem to be confronted and overcome. The "problem of composition" is Endnotes' initial characterization of the current limit of organizational methods in an era of stagnation, crisis, and austerity.<sup>26</sup> It is worth quoting at length the first appearance of "the problem of composition" in their work, as this is what orient's Farrell's own project, along with many communist theorizations of revolutionary organization today.<sup>27</sup>

"The composition problem names the problem of composing, coordinating or unifying proletarian fractions, in the course of their struggle. Unlike in the past — or at least, unlike in ideal-typical representations of the past — it is no longer possible to read class fractions as already composing themselves, as if their unity were somehow given 'in-itself' (as the unity of the craft, mass or 'social' worker). Today, no such unity exists; nor can it be expected to come into existence with further changes in the technical composition of production. In that sense, there is no predefined revolutionary subject. There is no 'for-itself' class-consciousness, as the consciousness of a general interest, shared among all workers. Or rather, such consciousness can only be the consciousness of capital, of what unifies workers precisely by separating them."<sup>28</sup>

We can see here the clear influence of the workerist conception of class composition that we outline in Part One. We can also see a prelude to Endnotes' historicization of the "mass worker," or more accurately, the rise and decline of the classical workers' movement, around which such a representation of "worker" subjectivity can cohere as a product of a particular historical composition and *tendency* towards the massification of this subjectivity. For Endnotes, *pace* the periodization offered by *Théorie Communiste* or *Négation*, the basis of this "revolutionary subject" is found in not in "formal subsumption," but the twinned process of economic expansion and

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<sup>26</sup> Endnotes. 2013. "The Holding Pattern: The Ongoing Crisis and the Class Struggles of 2011–2013" *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes*.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Phil Neel's discussion in a recent interview. Phil Neel. 2023. "Hostile Brothers: New Territories of Value and Violence." <https://haters.noblogs.org/files/2023/11/Hostile-Brothers.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Endnotes, "The Holding Pattern"

de-peasantization, and the dissolution of old regime social structures. The rise of the “worker” and “worker identity” is thus an aspect of the rise of capitalism itself, which *composes* the worker as as the concentration of labor-power. Rising productivity throughout this long expansion is what gives an economic basis to the augmentation of worker power, whether in its representation in unions, councils, of parties. The period of the long crisis, with its erosion of productivity gains and virtually completed process of agrarian dispossession and de-peasantization, undermined this basis. The decline of the workers’ movement and the fragmentation of this particular composition—the one which bedazzled the minds of the best workerists—is a tendency of capitalist development itself.<sup>29</sup> The problem of composition is thus really expressed in the process of *decomposition*.<sup>30</sup>

The dialectic of composition and decomposition is one of the basic preoccupations of Endnotes’ work, and can be found in analyses of gender, race, or “balkanization.”<sup>31</sup> Their analysis of the composition problem keeps an eye towards *strategy*, and so tends to anticipate the question of what a “strategy of composition” might look like. The turn from descriptive to prescriptive is perhaps most clear in their presentation of the “coordination problem,” which to us seems little more than alternative phrasing. Here, the process of atomization gives way to the practical question of how to coordinate masses of fragmented beings—atomized, abstract humans—in the crucible of spontaneity. The fragmentation of belonging, identity, and subjectivity is the essential condition for this spontaneous self-activity, but it finds its limits in the problem of coordination—the composition problem, *redux*. If this mass of proletarian reflux can organize formal mediations of this decomposition, Endnotes wagers, then it can achieve the partisanship necessary for a *rupture* with capitalist relations of production.<sup>32</sup> This is only an opening, however, and not the production of communism itself.<sup>33</sup> Still, it is in this moment of rupture that something like a communist party has any real historical purchase. It is little more than a *partisanship* of the rupture, a Party of Anarchy, if you like, that emerges through the conjuncture in which the process of materially negating capitalist relations is *generalized* through a partisan coordination.<sup>34</sup> This party is neither a formal organization, nor a unity. It is simply and profoundly the historical party of insurrection finding ephemeral form, of historical continuity becoming rupture.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Endnotes, “A History of Separation”

<sup>30</sup> “Rather than unifying all workers behind a specific subject, growing superfluity has meant a decomposition of the class into so many particular situations – fragments among fragments – pitting the interests of those with stable jobs against precarious workers, citizens against undocumented migrants, and so on.” Endnotes. 2015. “Editorial #4.” *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation*

<sup>31</sup> Endnotes. 2013. “The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection” *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes.*; Endnotes. 2015. “Brown v Ferguson.” *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation.*; Endnotes. 2015. “Gather Us From Among the Nations: The February 2014 Protests in Bosnia-Herzegovina” *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation.*

<sup>32</sup> Endnotes. 2013. “Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture.” *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes.*

<sup>33</sup> Neel and Chavez, “Forest and Factory”

<sup>34</sup> “The concept of the party merely registers this fact: like spontaneous revolt itself, the rupture will not proceed automatically, out of a deep or even ‘final crisis’ of the capital-labour relation. The proletariat will not suddenly find itself holding the levers to power, after which point it is only a matter of figuring out what to do with it. Instead, the revolution will be the project of a fraction of society, i.e. the party, which solves the coordination problem in the only possible way – by abolishing class society.” Endnotes, “Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture,” fn16.

<sup>35</sup> Amadeo Bordiga. 1965. “Considerations on the party’s organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable.”; Ultra. 2014. “Tomorrow’s Parties.” <http://www.ultra-com.org/project/tomorrows-parties/>

We thus remain at a very abstract level. This is to some extent par for the course, given that any analysis of the composition problem in a moment of true break from capitalist society is a bit like reading tea leaves. There is thus something trite about this observation of the composition problem. It can lead to any number of pompous missives about the present “lack of organization” as the problem of our times.<sup>36</sup> These observations do little to clarify matters at hand: the false antinomy of spontaneity and organization, the relation between organization and particular forms of organization, coordination and mass action, and, as will be important further on, the relationship between production and reproduction. These all carry a historical content such that simply posing an abstract formula for mediation or coordination of generalized spontaneity does little to solve.<sup>37</sup> Rosa Luxemburg observed this as unity of “political” and “economic” struggles that have as their form the “mass strike,” when, under revolutionary conditions, the “partial” or concrete characteristics of particular struggles are immediately general. Partisanship must be understood less as a form of mediation, a form of organization which is all too easy to reify in non-revolutionary times, and more as a historical content—the horizon for which cannot be made apparent until after it has passed.

This is the impasse of the era of decomposition. But this is also a tendency immanent to the capital relation that finds its practical truth expressed in a period of unmooring, such as ours. Over its long arc, the uneven development of capital has involved both a centripetal and centrifugal balance of forces that determine composition. The reproduction process has both a centripetal and centrifugal character. Centripetal, because capital organizes production through valorization and humanization,<sup>38</sup> homogenizing labor while dehumanizing its source. Centrifugal, because this unification is achieved only through expulsion, dehumanization, and the capillarization of the dominion beyond the reach of immediate subsumption by abstract labor. When the capitalist system was rapidly expanding, dissolving non-capitalist modes of life, and absorbing supplies of agrarian labor into markets for labor-power, the centripetal character—the binding together of the immediate process of production—appeared to overtake the centrifugal character. Social reproduction and subsistence was increasingly bound to the reproduction of capital. High rates of profit mitigated the productivity growth that was tendentially shedding labor from the process of production, allowing relatively higher wages shares and investment in new lines of production that would in turn absorb redundant labor in the floating surplus population. It was really only with the dawning of the era of secular crisis and stagnation that these homogenizing effects would be displaced by social fragmentation, when the centrifugal character that was *always* present would appear to outstrip the centripetal character. The combined forces of composition and decomposition appear now fundamentally as a decomposition, as a possibility of non-reproduction of the class relation that is its own limit.<sup>39</sup> Endnotes describes this as the

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<sup>36</sup> Communist Caucus. 2022. “Our Moment: Proletarian Disorganization as the Problem of Our Time.” <https://communistcaucus.com/our-moment/>

<sup>37</sup> “In one sense, all of this is pretty straightforward observation. There are high points of struggle, and those high points generate coordinating efforts. It is in the details, however, that we discover the importance of the party-concept. Coordination and partisanship themselves *are necessary but insufficient* here. Highly coordinated organizations can emerge out of a moment of mass partisanship that have nothing to do with the party” Ultra, “Tomorrow’s Parties”

<sup>38</sup> On our use of the “humanization process,” see “Tragic Theses.”

<sup>39</sup> “...our point is not only to insist again that the workers’ movement has been weakened globally since the 1970s, that class composition itself primarily reveals itself negatively, as decomposition, and that new ideological symbols are therefore shaping protests and reconfiguring social movements.” Endnotes, “Onward Barbarians”

“holding pattern” and imagines its overcoming in a partisan mediation, the concrete details of which are left to the reader’s imagination.

When we analyze specific struggles through this framework, we often find that their limits take the form of political demands, or the inadequacy of democratic representation. Decomposition takes the form of atomized and competing demands for some palliative or representative solution to particular problems or grievances. Given this discrete particularity, which is *the* condition of possibility for spontaneity, demands are unable to *generalize*—they cannot attain the level of partisan mediation required for a rupture with capitalist society:

“Let’s venture a hypothesis: that the problem of demands is identical to the problem of composition. For any singular, consistent social agent in struggle, the essential demands of the struggle will be evident in the simple facts of who the agent of the struggle is, and what has caused this agent to form in struggle. But where a struggle manifests an unsynthesised multiplicity of social agents — where it expresses a problem of composing a unified agent of struggle — by the same token it will express a problem of demand-making. In such a situation it is not that demands are absent, for in fact there’s a multiplicity of them, but rather, that they’re not synthesised at the general level, as unifying demands of the whole movement. Thus their absence in one sense is directly related to their multiplicity in another. What should then probably be done in pursuing the question of demands in a particular movement is, rather than simply posing the question of their presence or absence, to ask what the consistency of demands, as well as their content, tells us about composition. Demands, we could say, are a direct index of the composition and texture of a movement.”<sup>40</sup>

Anyone with a passing familiarity and experience with “social movements” will likely assent to this—still quite abstract—characterization of the “non-movements” of our time and their conflicting compositions. This is not particularly new, and certainly the problem of demands as a necessary but insufficient mediation of composition has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> Despite the insistence on diffusion and confusion, this analysis is still in a sense haunted by the specter of the “revolutionary subject,” now a bygone relic of the period of capitalist expansion. For Endnotes, it is *no longer* given by the movements of capital, *as it ostensibly once was*, when the workers’ movement was on the ascendancy and worker identity was able to represent itself in the interest of the species as such. Yet, like the capital-labor relation itself, the dialectic of composition and decomposition is *invariant* in the capitalist mode of production, despite its historical unfolding. There was *never* a revolutionary subject, and the worker appears as a positive representation of humanity only by standing on the corpses of the dehumanized.<sup>42</sup> Our present moment simply

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<sup>40</sup> Endnotes, “Gather Us From Among the Nations,” 213.

<sup>41</sup> Endnotes. 2013. “A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats: Crisis Era Struggles in Britain.” *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/a-rising-tide-lifts-all-boats>; Jeanne Neton & Peter Åström. 2011. “How one can still put forward demands when no demands can be satisfied.” *SIC 1: International Journal of Communisation*. <https://www.sicjournal.org/how-one-can-still-put-forward-demands-when-no-demands-can-be-satisfied/index.html>; Zashia Bouzarri. 2014. “Arson with demands – on the Swedish riots.” *SIC 3: International Journal of Communisation*. <https://www.sicjournal.org/arson-with-demands/index.html>; or, in the more normative register, Crimethinc. 2015. “Why We Don’t Make Demands.” <https://crimethinc.com/2015/05/05/feature-why-we-dont-make-demands>

<sup>42</sup> “In the figure of the lumpen, we discover the dark underside of the affirmation of the working class. It was an abiding class-hatred. Workers saw themselves as originating out of a stinking morass: “At the time of the beginning of



reveals this figment more easily for what it is, and so ushers in the successive search for a “new composition” that can more adequately end the hell on earth.<sup>43</sup> It was *operaismo* thus first raised this specter, after their own sequence of struggles had failed to produce a revolutionary crisis on the basis of the “mass worker,” but it remains with us, in various forms and under new names.

It is quite tempting to turn from these modulations of class composition and social lot to the *process* of composing as an act, as a gesture that *transcends* the given conditions of belonging and surviving. For some, especially following recent cycles of struggle, such as the George Floyd Rebellion, this has taken the form of fetishizing the actions themselves. These destituent gestures are said to be all that coheres partisans in moments of rebellion.<sup>44</sup> A true party of insurrection has at its core a tactical unity, and it is by reproducing this fidelity that “all the historical and contemporary notions of solidarity, politics, and organization” can be undone.<sup>45</sup> While it is true that rebellion produces subjectivity, this is a truth of all social practice. It is quite another thing to argue that the most recent sequence of riots produced a “new subjectivity,” or in other words, a new composition, born from the fires, looting, and teargas,<sup>46</sup> that overcomes the limits of race, gender, nation, class. This is the thread to be drawn from such claims: atomized “identities” are decomposed by unrest itself.<sup>47</sup> Its ultimate reification would be in a “Party of George Floyd,” doomed, it would seem, from the start.<sup>48</sup> In the structural retreat from the sphere of production, many have found consolation in the sphere of circulation.<sup>49</sup> When the complex processes of this sphere are treated one-sidedly as the square, the streets, or the riot, as they often are, composition *appears* a matter of pure militancy and will. So, as the cycle of struggle unfolds and the seemingly inevitable retreat to atomized relations of reproduction comes into view, the militant is left with the same puzzle.<sup>50</sup> The implicit premise would seem to be that, if riots could overcome their tendency toward exhaustion, this unity-in-tactics in the figure of the abstract (read: raceless)

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modern industry the term proletariat implied absolute degeneracy. And there are persons who believe this is still the case.” Moreover, capitalism was trying to push workers back into the muck. Thus, the crisis tendencies of capitalism could only end in one of two ways: in the victory of the working class or in its becoming lumpen.” Endnotes, “A History of Separation”

<sup>43</sup> Endnotes describes this sequencing of struggles as “descending modulations.” Endnotes, “Brown v Ferguson”

<sup>44</sup> For example, see, Adrian Wohlleben. 2021. “Memes Without End.” <https://illwill.com/memes-without-end>

<sup>45</sup> Shemon & Arturo. 2020. “The Return of John Brown: White Race-Traitors in the 2020 Uprising.” *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/the-return-of-john-brown-white-race-traitors-in-the-2020-uprising>

<sup>46</sup> “The rebellion has produced a new political subjectivity—the George Floyd rebel—initiating a set of processes with many possible outcomes which will be determined by class struggles in the present.” Shemon and Arturo. 2020. “Theses on the George Floyd Rebellion.” <https://illwill.com/theses-on-the-george-floyd-rebellion>

<sup>47</sup> While this theme is often found in the analyses of Shemon Salam and other writings on *Ill Will Editions*, it also buttresses the conceit of late stage Endnotes and appears as their solution to the composition problem. See “Onward Barbarians” and the dossier *That Summer Feeling*.

<sup>48</sup> Spirit of May 28. 2023. “SM28 Dissolves: A Balance Sheet.” <https://www.sm28.org/articles/sm28-dissolves-a-balance-sheet/>

<sup>49</sup> Shemon. 2021. “Missed Insurrections.” *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/missed-insurrections>; See also Clover, *Riot.Strike.Riot*.

<sup>50</sup> “When revolt ends, proletarians tend to revert to atomisation. They dissolve back into the cash nexus.” Endnotes, “Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture.”

militant could overcome the problem of composition.<sup>51</sup> When this fails to coalesce, it leaves the militant with that bitter feeling of betrayal and wandering, unable to explain what happened.<sup>52</sup>

## Pledging Fealty?

Some take a different tactic altogether. Where “the riot” seems insufficient, but a fidelity to tactics still prevails, we find the struggle over “territory.” This is the wager of Hugh Farrell. He attempts to answer the riddle posed by Endnotes with the legacy of “compositional struggle” as has been deciphered by its acolytes, most clearly in the work of Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Kristin Ross. We use Farrell’s work as representative, not because it presents an easy strawman,<sup>53</sup> but rather because it is a brilliant attempt to address the genealogy of “composition” as a strategy to the material problem of decomposition that we sketch above. It also provides the most sophisticated account of composition as a *self-conscious* process of coordination in an era of confusion and chaos. The “Strategy of Composition,” unlike so many analyses of the present moment, makes an earnest attempt to confront the limits of social organization where it is at and through the real unfolding of concrete struggles. There is no better elaboration or defense, certainly not among the Tiqqunists who originated this conceptual meaning, nor among the anarchists who steadfastly defend it.<sup>54</sup> Adding to the conceptual confusion, most recent criticism has argued that “composition” is little more than window dressing for a new brand of “vanguardism” or a “Blanquism,” a secrete society of authoritarian (by which they probably more accurately mean “centralist”) communists seeking to covertly guide struggle or insurrection towards its aims and via its means.<sup>55</sup> Would that it were true. Unfortunately, to us, it would seem that “compositional struggle,” if such current does indeed exist, does not have sights set so loftily on coup d’états or the production of communism. The scale on which it unfolds seems quite different.

It is for Farrell, following Ross, *territorial* struggle from which this strategy seems to crystallize. As we indicated in Part One, most of the recent discourse has been proximately grappling with Stop Cop City/Defend the Atlanta Forest, and Farrell is no different. If we have exhausted disproportionate space on Defend the Atlanta Forest, it is only to confront the terms of the strategy of composition as Farrell has established them. But there are other contemporary examples. There is of course the ZAD and NoTAV, and Farrell draws from the former as an example of the merits of composition. More recently, there is Les Soulèvements de la Terre (Earth Uprising), which notably was initiated as “L’appel des Soulèvements de la Terre” (The *call* for Earth Uprising), which has carried out large scale demonstrations and sabotage of the the “megabasin” at

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<sup>51</sup> “Yet today’s riots hit their limit when they exhaust available goods: when rioters find the stores empty and can no longer reproduce themselves through the wage, they tend to retreat back into capitalist social relations.” Shemon, “Missed Insurrections”

<sup>52</sup> Shemon Salam. 2022. “Lost in the American Wasteland.” *That Summer Feeling: The George Floyd Protest and America’s Hot Pandemic Summer of 2020*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/dossiers/that-summer-feeling>

<sup>53</sup> Many of the anti-authoritarian and anarchist critiques do indeed approach “composition” with readymade straw men.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous. 2023. “Ten Theses on Anti-Tiqqunism.” <https://scenes.noblogs.org/post/2023/07/26/ten-theses-on-anti-tiqqunism>

<sup>55</sup> See Anonymous. 2023. “Breaking Ranks: Subverting the Hierarchy and Manipulation Behind Earth Uprisings.” <https://scenes.noblogs.org/post/2023/07/02/breaking-ranks-subverting-the-hierarchy-and-manipulation-behind-earth-uprisings/>; See also Anonymous, “Against the Party of Insurrection” and Anonymous, “Decomposition: For Insurrection Without Vanguard.”

Sainte-Soline.<sup>56</sup> There has been the occupation of the Hambach Forest and the defense of the village of Lützerath, both in Germany's Rhineland coal country, where protesters and residents oppose the further development of open-pit mines.<sup>57</sup> Some have even discovered "composition" in the street battles of 2020, which in certain cities became struggles over sites of symbolic power.<sup>58</sup> Farrell himself includes Standing Rock, along with DFA/SCC and the ZAD, as the paradigmatic example. This is telling in more ways than one, which we will soon explore. First, it is worth pausing to consider why *territory*, *place*, or *space* seem to form the substrate of compositional struggle, which is to say, according to Farrell, the struggles of our era.

"The Strategy of Composition" begins by outlining many of the same premises we established above. He takes seriously the basic problem of composition, a la Endnotes, as the defining feature of a period of stagnation, crisis, and profound "social reflux." Any material basis for a coherent worker identity has collapsed, any hope of a communist program has been shredded by the decomposition of reproduction:

"If the left can no longer claim to extrapolate a stable program, this is not due solely to the watering-down of its supposedly 'core' Marxist values by postmodernist criticisms of neoliberalism, but rather because, at a material level, there is no longer any reasonable claim to an homogenous, shared experience that could serve as its foundation."<sup>59</sup>

Like us, Farrell is skeptical of the activist milieu and the "direct action" and "decentralization" that characterized the period of the anti-globalization and anti-war movements in the lead up to the 2008 financial crisis:

"Today, the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left bequeaths to us a sad binary: on one side, there is the classical labor movement's singular program, with its dialectical resolution of difference, and its dependence on the leadership of a now-extinct mass subject; on the other, the contemporary activist approach, itself based on the prioritization of tactics, the non-resolution of difference, and the abandonment of any strategic horizon of victory."<sup>60</sup>

With this, we can mostly agree.<sup>61</sup> We also share with Farrell an uncertainty about the prospects of "pure" fidelity to struggle, which often just means fidelity to tactical militancy, that was supposedly produced in the latest sequence of crises and uprisings. Here, Farrell uses Phil Neel's "oaths of water" as a general coordinate to orient his criticisms. Neel, Farrell

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<sup>56</sup> Les Soulèvements de la Terre. 2023. "To Those Who Marched at Sainte-Soline." Ill Will Editions. <https://illwill.com/to-those-who-marched-at-sainte-soline>; Anonymous. 2023. "The Trap of Sainte-Soline." Ill Will Editions. <https://illwill.com/sainte-soline>

<sup>57</sup> Crimethinc. 2023. "The Defense of Lützerath." <https://crimethinc.com/2023/01/19/the-defense-of-lutzerath-a-photoessay-and-poster-documenting-ecological-destruction-and-resistance>; Crimethinc. 2021. "The Forest Occupation Movement in Germany: Tactics, Strategy, and Culture of Resistance." <https://crimethinc.com/2021/03/10/the-forest-occupation-movement-in-germany-tactics-strategy-and-culture-of-resistance>;

<sup>58</sup> Anonymous. 2020. "Rhythm and Ritual Composing Movement in Portland's 2020." Ill Will Editions. <https://illwill.com/print/rhythm-and-ritual>

<sup>59</sup> Farrell, "The Strategy of Composition"

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> We reject the notion of a "now-extinct" mass subject. See above.

argues, is similarly grappling with the problem of composition and proposes that the only viable solution is found in the unfolding sequence of crisis activity in the raw moments of rebellion. In the absence of a historically given revolutionary subject, *revolutionary subjectivity must be forged*. Unrest itself is all that binds. Neel argues that this is Marx's Party of Anarchy. For him, it is an "oath of water," a fidelity to the flood.<sup>62</sup> We observed this *becoming-partisan* during the George Floyd Uprising.<sup>63</sup> This process—which must of necessity remain fluid—routinely became calcified in the supposed defense of territory. In Seattle, it was the appearance of the "Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone." In Portland, it was the polar magnetism of the Justice Center and adjacent Chapman Square. These reifications of either autonomy or authority often form a peculiar polarity around which practical questions of partisanship become stifled by the reproduction of these rituals themselves.<sup>64</sup> Neel is responding to these traps of LARPing and the more broad tradition of defending leftist and anarchist "spaces" when he insists instead on a fidelity to the act. In the insular and inverted world of the activist, the radical clique, the leftist sect, or the groupuscule, the act is consumed by the program—whether communist, anarchist, or "anti-fascist." The program becomes the measure of all practice, and this is nothing but utopia.<sup>65</sup>

Farrell correctly diagnoses a certain utopianism of its own present throughout the sublime fidelity to insurrection. Though we find it more apparent in those joyous celebrations of the riot as the great social cleansing, the return of the "race-traitor,"<sup>66</sup> there is something sobering about his appraisal and criticism more generally:

"...oaths of water tell us very little about how to organize, and they represent only the ethical distillation of those sequences of rapid erosion which occur during vast movements and uprisings. These insurrectional sequences hardly make up the majority of our lives, even in the context of capitalist stagnation and growing instability. Thinking only from within these moments constitutes its distorting trap, risking a politics of urgency and sacrifice."<sup>67</sup>

As quickly as he touches on something rather determinate and critical, though, Farrell pivots away from it. For us, this line is crucial: "insurrectional sequences hardly make up the majority of our lives." Then what does? Instead of setting his sights on the bizarre and irregular contours of daily life, the material shapes of social production and reproduction, their atomization and conflictuality, Farrell turns to the abstract question of land—or more precisely "territoriality"—which he sees as a solution to the problems presented by both Endnotes and Neel.

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<sup>62</sup> Neel, *Hinterlands*

<sup>63</sup> Neel observed this as well: "On the surface, many of the movement's de facto leadership—all of whom are on the frontlines, and none of whom were established activists—hold extremely amorphous and rapidly shifting political positions. They are united not by any shared program, but instead at the tactical level, by an oath committing them to whatever action will further the unrest, pry open the rift in society and seed political potentials further afield." Phil Neel. 2020. "The Spiral." *Field Notes*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/09/field-notes/The-Spiral-Epilogue-to-the-French-Edition-of-Hinterland-Americas-New-Landscape-of-Class-and-Conflict>

<sup>64</sup> Endnotes observed this experience during the 2011 London riots. "This riot demanded the presence of the police, as the immediate interlocutor for whom it was performed, whose recognition it insisted upon, whose presence and participation it invited, and through whose efforts it was constituted." Endnotes, "A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats"

<sup>65</sup> "It is this fidelity to radical actions (the oath) and not to professed radical actors or language or symbology (the program) that ensures the political trajectory of such struggles." Neel, "The Spiral"

<sup>66</sup> See above

<sup>67</sup> "The Strategy of Composition"

According to Farrell, it is the doubled crises of our time—ecological and economic—that have returned many, especially younger generations to the primacy of the local struggle:

“On the one hand, the climate crisis sharpens the sense of ecological loss in every local development controversy, at the same time as it raises the stakes. On the other hand, an entire generation facing high unemployment rates and the collapse of institutional legitimacy has sensitized itself to these losses and has, especially since the 2008 housing crisis, responded evermore sharply to formerly local controversies.”<sup>68</sup>

This locality is simultaneously a universality, as organizers commonly remind. Whereas, for Farrell, the worker may previously have been able to present their particular interests as universal interests of the species, that honor now falls to the territory. But instead of the narrow interests of the species, these struggles have as their horizon the conditions of planetary life itself. This is no platitude. It captures something fundamentally true about the cycles of struggle of our era. Yet there is a metaphysical slippage, found most clearly in Farrell’s adoption of Ross’s assertion that composition represents a “transvaluation of values.” Farrell sees this most clearly in the “territory,” which overcomes the limits of fleeting fidelity by grounding that practice to *place*: “Whereas Neel is right to claim that, in the flood of insurrection, it is unrest itself that binds participants together, territorial struggles differ in that there is something *worth defending*.”<sup>69</sup> What Farrell believes is that a strategy of composition bridges the gap from a pure fidelity to the event, to *the temporal*, which is clearly necessary but insufficient, with the more complex background social processes that produce the “components” of a given struggle *across a territory*. But here, with a somewhat tepid acknowledgement of reproduction, Farrell sets his own trap. For Farrell, these social processes are constituted by the territory and what it demands. We see here another endless list of examples of different tactics and practices that are emergent from the land: ecological restoration, plant walks, agro-ecology, or hosting music festivals and raves, or building camps, tree-sites, and blockades. But these tactics-cum-composition are not suspended above the *material* composition that give rise to them. There is thus conflict over differing terms of production and reproduction that are mediated as conflict over tactics and strategy. To Farrell’s criticism of the “oaths of water” model of partisanship, we could simply respond: “compositional” practices hardly make up the majority of our lives, even in the context of an increasingly *ecological* crisis.

By obviating the material circumstances of reproduction as concrete constraints and generative possibilities, “territory” becomes only an abstraction. Perhaps Farrell forgets his history of “environmental struggles” in the United States: something or somewhere is “worth defending” to the extent that subsistence and reproduction is meaningfully bound to place, to the extent that the daily life is woven through the fabric of a place, to the extent that a particular land or waters is constitutes a mode of life, survival, and reproduction. Given the settler history of the United States, the largely urban “radical environmental” movement has never been so bound to place. When activity is so practically untethered, the question of “worth” is transformed into a question of risk. Is it worth it in the face of terrorism charges? Prison time? Death? The Defend the Atlanta Forest movement has genuinely raised these questions practically since Farrell published his essay. But even a cursory examination of even the most “radical” iterations of the (predominantly

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

urban white) environmental movement in the US, bound both by fidelity to tactics and fetishism of the land as “wilderness,” demonstrates the limits to this “transvaluation of values” when reality sets in.<sup>70</sup> This gap can only be explained if we understand composition to be a function of social reproduction, which is always classed, racialized, and gendered. Farrell gestures at this at times, such as in his discussion of Standing Rock as a novel attempt of social reproduction outside the circuits of capital, but such discussion always comes at the expense of an honest appraisal of limits, of conflicting dynamics that are given to the process of composition itself. How any conflictuality is negotiated is presumed to be the special province of the compositional matrix in its churning, in the act of composing, weaving, integrating and disintegrating. Never, however, are these conflicts grounded clearly in the noisiness of social reproduction.

It is precisely the common but heterogenous forms of social reproduction that form the limit of a compositional strategy, as they cannot take shape as anything other than a politics of the least common denominator. His chosen examples all illuminate this, if one would choose to look. We will not belabor this point vis-a-vis the struggle to Stop Cop City/Defend the Atlanta Forest. Many criticisms have been made over the last year, since the murder of Tortugueta, the initial wave of terrorism charges, and the South River Music festival raid. It is worth digesting just how this sequence of crises and struggles has unfolded since Farrell penned his piece over a year ago. Then, it could have been argued that “The movement is based less on protests — which do still occur frequently at construction company offices and in downtown Atlanta, where a group of elementary school children regularly demonstrate in solidarity — than on forest raves and a patchwork of distinct camps” or that “the inability to fall back on the mediation of institutions has forced participants to develop customs and practices of compromise and conflict resolution,” but hardly is this the case in the present. Now, the core momentum of the movement orbits around more familiar mass protest actions and pressure campaign strategies, with the diffuse clandestine action here and there that keeps the fires burning. Arguably, as even many of the strategic thinkers have conceded, these larger umbrella campaigns provide the radical-flank effect necessary for the various legal efforts to Stop Cop City to achieve victory.<sup>71</sup> In other words, practical objectives are to be achieved precisely by falling back on institutional mediation. It is not that this is good or bad. It is that it no longer resembles the qualitatively distinct characteristics that Farrell assigns to compositional struggles. What does a strategy of composition explain about this lurch toward the activist world, with its spokes-councils, affinity groups, media strategies, and action agreements?

Similarly, Farrell praises the ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes for successfully blocking the construction of the airport at Nantes. The “victory” of the ZAD has been called many things, from “reformist” to “Tiqqunist,” each with their own niche charge. What seems important to clarify is how the occupations unfolded as increasingly state mediated, in an effort of some organizers, participants, and residents to secure the legalization of their various land projects and clientelist artisan economy. Though it was always market-mediated, as agricultural projects were foundational to the ZAD, that some partisans of composition sought state security to protect these

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<sup>70</sup> It is telling that in the face of 1,000 year prison sentences, only a select few of the original defendants in the “Green Scare” cases did not snitch. And two of those ended up being Nazis.

<sup>71</sup> E.g: “...for now the city administration refuses to even count the petition signatures—stalling with bad faith legal runarounds. If it is able to clear these hurdles, the referendum will be on the ballot in the upcoming elections this March. Without a legal order to halt construction, whatever happens at the ballot box will be too late.” Block Cop City: <https://blockcopcity.org/>

projects following the defeat of the airport is what fueled the conflict over evictions in 2018. As some participants observed, “composition, like an ode to the legendary peace and understanding which supposedly reign in the struggle against the airport, with as a side effect the rendering invisible of internal conflict to the advantage of the most powerful.”<sup>72</sup> If composition is a balance of forces, it tells us very little about the relations between those forces, their social material bases, and their relative power. It subsumes all of the social chaos of conflict into the neat package of strategy. This could be sufficient, if we were on the terrain of the campaign, with its discrete and limited horizons, goals, strategies, and tactics. But this is not how the strategy of composition announces itself. No, compositional struggles are supposed to be immanently *generalizable*.<sup>73</sup> What makes it the strategy of composition “the mode of organization in profoundly disordered times,” is its universality. Its form may indeed be universal, but only to the extent that it manifests as atomized. Farrell does not err in characterizing these tendencies as a mode of organization for our times. He errs in not adequately charactering the limits of compositional organization, such that it does exist. In fact, his account rather inadvertently helps to explain why this mode of organization tends to drift towards diluted popular front politics and remain mired in the pitfalls of activism and discrete campaigns in search of discrete victories, as if each victory is another domino to fall on the trail to the coming rupture. This was the wager of the ZAD. It did not materialize.<sup>74</sup> In the era of compositional struggles, it remains entirely possible to “win” and for a communist horizon to remain out of reach. In fact, obsession with victories might just index how utterly distant we are from anything resembling communism. Remember that anytime you hear the common refrain that “we need to win” something, as if that justifies what is about take place.

The strategy of composition *cannot* achieve this leap to generalization, precisely because its strengths in discrete campaign efforts are transformed into limits when they are generalized. Increasing mass participation in this or that territorial struggle betrays this tendency, as the forms of self-activity that Neel argues constitute “oaths of water,” which are often nihilistic and lack clear instrumentality or purpose, are burned off by something we might call “oaths of fealty,” in which common objectives come to subordinate all that is uncommon among a given mix of participants in struggle. The measure is no longer a fidelity to unrest, nor is it some artificial fidelity to territory. Rather, the measure is commonality itself. The composition *is* the program. It manifests as community agreements, programs, spokes-councils, consensus processes. If the Party of Anarchy is always a subset in the matrix of upheaval, it can never generalize via a strategy of composition, as articulated by Farrell, because such a strategy is first of all characterized by a unacknowledged or even disavowed dependency on institutional mediation. This may be even more true if compositional struggles are necessarily territorial struggles, as such struggles tend to require increasing external inputs—food, energy, raw material resources, construction, legal defense, physical defense, court injunctions, protected status, childcare, medical care, etc. Unless

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<sup>72</sup> Anonymous. 2018. “The ‘Movement’ Is Dead, Long Live... Reform!: A Critique of ‘Composition’ and Its Elites.” <https://zad.nadir.org/IMG/pdf/splash3-a4-booklet.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> “While the ostensible aim of both struggles lies in protecting specific territories, they have also succeeded in challenging the more general terms of our current period of reaction.” Farrell, “The Strategy of Composition”

<sup>74</sup> “Part of the ZADist wager was that anti-Macron mobilization would spread across the country, beyond railway workers and students, which would have relieved much of the pressure on the ZAD. For now, this has not materialized, but the games are not over yet.” Alèssi Dell’Umbria. 2018. “Being in the Zone: Concerning Conflicts Within the Zad.” *Ill Will Editions*. <https://illwill.com/being-in-the-zone>

a territorial struggle immediately unfolds during a period of mass general expropriation, or as defense of place-based modes of reproduction beyond the circuit of capital,<sup>75</sup> these inputs are found on the market or via the state or para-state institutions, such as nonprofit organizations. The strategy of composition is therefore reproduced through these mediations, not unlike the “autonomous zone,” “worker co-operative,” or other such “radical spaces” that Farrell insists are of a different sort. He has no qualms with critiquing the limits of activism, or diversity of tactics, but seems assured that composition cannot suffer similar fates.<sup>76</sup> History would suggest otherwise. This becomes more clear over time, as either DFA/SCC or the ZAD demonstrate, but mediation is a germ of the compositional strategy. Farrell repeatedly refers to the “logic of composition,” and at one point maintains that “although it operates upon the ground of capitalist stagnation and crisis, it continues to move within its own distinct compositional temporality and logic.”<sup>77</sup> As should by now be clear, if composition has any logic at all, it is not its own. It is nothing other than the logic of capital transmitted through the confusion of subjectivity formed through fractured and segregated modes of reproduction, separated temporally and spatially from the immediate process of production in uneven ways.

Farrell’s third example of composition warrants special attention because it invokes these separations in particular ways. Standing Rock, “the largest contemporary territorial struggle” in the United States, is a challenging example of compositional strategy because, as Farrell observes, it necessitated “serious experiments in social reproduction outside the circuits of capitalism.”<sup>78</sup> Precisely what this outside is, in our era of capitalist dominion, is unclear. What is clear is that it is an uneven geography, one riddled with the scars of colonial domination and racialized subsumption. Unlike Farrell’s other examples, Standing Rock is in the first instance a struggle to defend indigenous relations to place from the scouring infrastructure of crisis-plagued capitalism.<sup>79</sup> There are two important questions that Farrell’s account of Standing Rock elides. The first, which we noted above, is the absence of an explanation of why “territoriality” or spatiality becomes increasingly important to capital’s continued reproduction. The second is what the social *content* of an indigenous struggle such as Standing Rock actually is, and if it is adequately represented in the framework of composition. Regarding the first, Marx had already laid out a basic answer in the counteracting tendencies or counterbalancing forces that mitigated the fall in the rate of profit. As we argued previously:

“The declining cost of raw material inputs and constant capital acts as a countervailing force against the secular decline in the rate of profit. The long-term tendency of

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<sup>75</sup> Here, indigenous territorial defense should be treated as qualitatively distinct, despite Farrell’s collation with other forms of territorial struggle. We discuss this more below and in Part Three.

<sup>76</sup> “The problem with [diversity of tactics] is that it effectively abandoned the possibility of a collective strategy or mode of organization. In order for each section of the movement to enact its tactical program during a mobilization, it must enjoy (according to the canonical “St. Paul Principles”) a “separation of time and space.” As a result, whenever any movement-wide discussion would occur, the focus would be on allowing each tactical program to be enacted without getting in each other’s way, rather than on winning in a broader sense. This liberal concept of “autonomy” as tolerance-amidst-separation mirrors the atomized structure of neoliberal citizenship. In the end, it allowed the most conservative sections of the movement to cunningly reestablish their dominance through the back door.” Farrell, “The Strategy of Composition”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> This is not to say that there are not indigenous stakes in the DFA/SCC struggle. The participation of the Muscogee or black residents adjacent to the project clearly complicates claims on the land and its ancestral significance.



capital is to displace human work with these raw materials and nonhuman energy inputs. Generating and maintaining increased access to cheaper and cheaper elements of constant capital—necessarily speciated as nonhuman—will remain a central role of the state. This is already seen in policing of extraction sites and the circulation of energy flows (i.e., pipelines) as well as the repressive maintenance of animality in the form of raw material inputs.”<sup>80</sup>

Crisis and territorial re-organization of production and extraction constitute a cyclical process that has a secular trajectory. In the *Grundrisse* notebooks, Marx called this the “annihilation of space by time.”<sup>81</sup> When, on the whole, reproduction is decreasingly mediated by immediate production of surplus value, worker identity, expressed fundamentally in the struggle over *time*, tends to fade into a non-worker morass, certain components are expressed spatially in the struggle over land.

However, all land-based struggles are not created equal. Even when not manifestly reactionary,<sup>82</sup> defensive territorial struggles carry a certain ambiguity, taking on similar forms while pregnant with quite different social contents and functions. The extent to which these struggles can be rendered as communist measures is not a function of their *abstract* territoriality, as Ross or Farrell present it. Place-based struggles are most fertile when they are inseparable from the reproduction of the daily lives of participants and stakeholders, when they manifest as conflicts over the means of subsistence and social reproduction, immediately threatened by a given industrial, infrastructural, or extractive project.<sup>83</sup> Indigenous struggles, for instance, tend to operate as struggles over reproduction, over traditional land bases, for access to water, subsistence agriculture, hunting grounds, and foraging traditional foods and medicines. They unfold as specific concrete relations to place and thus are often registered in terms of *survival*.<sup>84</sup> Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson call this “grounded normativity.”<sup>85</sup> While this might superficially appear to be interchangeable with a “transvaluation of values,” this would miss the crucial distinction. While both perhaps express metaphysical and ethical dimensions, a strategy animated by a “transvaluation of values” risks degenerating into *only* these elements. The forms of social and cultural reproduction are the decisive measures, not “land” as such.<sup>86</sup> As the writer Mike

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<sup>80</sup> “Tragic Theses”

<sup>81</sup> “Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange—of the means of communication and transport—the annihilation of space by time—becomes an extraordinary necessity for it.” Karl Marx. 1993. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin, 524.

<sup>82</sup> For examples see Neel, *Hinterland*; Antithesi, “The Ecological Crisis and the Rise of Post-Fascism,” <https://illwill.com/antithesi>

<sup>83</sup> Clearly, the struggle to Stop Cop City meets this criteria, particularly for Atlanta’s black residents, whose very lives are threatened by the police training complex. But Farrell’s focus on the “territorial” character of this struggle—as something “worth defending”—tends to crowd out the clear struggles over black social reproduction because they are not immediately identifiable with the “compositional” representation. See Anonymous, “The War in Front of Us,” <https://scenes.noblogs.org/post/2023/06/10/the-war-in-front-of-us/>

<sup>84</sup> See Mike Gouldhawke., 2020. “Land as a Social Relationship.” *Briarpatch*. <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/land-as-a-social-relationship>; Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2016. “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity.” *American Quarterly* 68(2): 249–255; Glen Coulthard. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.; Audra Simpson. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus*. Duke University Press.

<sup>85</sup> Coulthard and Simpson, 2016

<sup>86</sup> This much is clear from Coulthard and Simpson’s description: “What we are calling ‘grounded normativity’ refers to the ethical frameworks provided by these Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowl-

Gouldhawke argues, these matters are not settled by a mere commitment to protect a place, but by social relationships and practices structured by modes of reproduction and relations to capital and the (settler) state:

“In settler-colonial societies, land appears as an immense accumulation of property titles. To traditionalist Indigenous Peoples, in contrast, land is not a thing in itself but a social relationship between all living and non-living beings... How we relate to the land is tied to who we are... Land is the terrain upon which all our relations play out, and it can even be seen as a living thing itself, constantly shaping and being shaped by other life forms. Land isn’t just a place, it’s also a territory, which implies political, legal, and cultural relationships of jurisdiction and care.”<sup>87</sup>

Relation to place is mediated by a host of differing material capacities, including racial, gender, class, and geographic compositions. The ways that land can be confronted as a constraint *and* generative possibility, in settler colonial nation-states, has much to do with the particular histories of colonization, which left native populations substantially reduced in size, dispersed through the far-flung hinterlands of reserves, relatively unintegrated into the waged economy, and often dependent on commodity food distribution. Sites of indigenous struggle thus tend to be *unevenly* integrated into the circuits of capital, with certain definite avenues of non-capitalist subsistence practice often assuming the terms of struggle and its form.<sup>88</sup> Occupations and blockades are clearly also mediated by the market, or the state, in similar ways to the compositional struggles noted above, if to a lesser extent. But they are *constrained* in ways that give them far greater force in the sphere of circulation. This constraint is a much greater relation of interdependency with concrete land bases which gives to indigenous defense a character of *necessity* that is generally absent from the compositional struggles that Farrell highlights. If there is indeed something “worth defending,” it comes from this particular configuration of racialized class composition.

Indigenous land defense is something quite distinct from compositional struggles, or territorial struggles, treated in the abstract. It is not something one can “inhabit” by some utopian affinity for place, for the “wild,” or for the bocage.<sup>89</sup> It is a political subjectivity born from concrete modes of material reproduction. That is, it is a particular social composition, but closer to its original sense. So what of Standing Rock? In Farrell’s account, if Standing Rock had these particular characteristics, they only serve to highlight the strength of compositional struggle.<sup>90</sup>

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edge. Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests. Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which *we practice solidarity*.” Ibid., 254.

<sup>87</sup> Gouldhawke, 2020

<sup>88</sup> This is most clearly seen in blockades such as the Unist’ot’en Camp. <https://unistoten.camp/about/governance-structure/>

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, “Another Word for Settle”

<sup>90</sup> “here was a vast and constant flow of bodies, goods, ideas and strategies through the camps, fed by multiple social strata each of which arrived with their own distinct experiences of being rendered surplus to the economy. Native people, substantially excluded from the waged economy or relegated to its lowest, rural rungs across widely-

While this is not the space to give a full accounting of Standing Rock, it is needless to say that Farrell's description is broad and fails to really capture the dynamics and strife that led to the initial failure of the encampments. Without detailing all of the various components of the camps, it is worth pausing over the mediation of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as a formal institution in the latter days of the battles that preceded the winter evictions. Though it was not the origin point of the sequence—that belongs to the Sacred Stone Camp—it was through the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council that both the state and many participants sought mediation. Much of this was practical, as most the encampments were constructed on the Standing Rock Reservation, and much of the protest activity was facilitated with the council's approval, as well as the support of surrounding institutions like casinos.<sup>91</sup> Still, it was an institutional mediation that presented itself increasingly as a contradiction as the movement proceeded. The complexities of claims to traditional indigenous governance and ceremony were made "abundantly clear" when the tribal council voted unanimously to remove the Red Warrior Camp—by far the most militant and active element of the broader composition of forces on the ground—for its celebrated use of more controversial tactics.<sup>92</sup> It was also the most targeted by state and law enforcement agencies, who understood it to be an "insurgency" in the making and acted accordingly.<sup>93</sup> The purging of militant elements supported by a narrative of "outside agitators" is part of the continuity that Standing Rock offers as bridge between the Ferguson and Baltimore uprisings and the George Floyd Rebellion. But it is also a continuity it shares with "compositional struggles" and Farrell is correct to note this. He only does so by disavowing this strife and conflict, the composition achieved by dejection. Given the complex investments of competing groups—environmental agencies, native organizations, tribal councils, environmental NGOs, legal supporters—nurtured in the daily reproduction of the Standing Rock protests, it is easy to see why the more illicit—even opaque—aspects could not be tolerated. To the extent that Standing Rock was compositional, as Farrell maintains, this was its Achilles' heel as much as a condition of its possibility. To the extent

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dispersed reservations, used the Standing Rock camps as a space of regroupment. Settlers, disproportionately young and hailing from a generation defined by precarious employment, flocked to the camps to support Native claims, to fight a carbon economy that holds them hostage as well, or simply (for many) because they had nothing better to do. While their exposure to precarity, as service workers or indebted college graduates, is structurally distinct from that of Native people confined to impoverished reservations, the end of Fordist career certainties allowed thousands of settler youth to spend months at a time camping in the plains of North Dakota, building defensible structures, participating in ceremony, or fighting the police. Why not quit a Starbucks job, which lacks security or any possibility of advancement, and live almost without money? How else can we renew that ethical substance which long ago disappeared from the normally-functioning metropolis?"

<sup>91</sup> For histories and first hand accounts of Standing Rock, see Ill Will Editions. "Dispatches from Standing Rock: Against the Dakota Access Pipeline and its World." <https://illwill.com/print/dispatches-from-standing-rock>; Nick Estes. 2019. Nick Estes. *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*. University of Minnesota Press. Nick Estes. 2018. *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. Verso Books; Crimethinc. 2017. "Interview: The Standing Rock Evictions." <https://crimethinc.com/2017/02/28/interview-the-standing-rock-evictions-audio-and-transcript>; Crimethinc. 2016. "Report Back from the Battle for Sacred Ground." <https://crimethinc.com/2016/11/01/feature-report-back-from-the-battle-for-sacred-ground>

<sup>92</sup> Red Warrior Camp. 2016. "Red Warrior Camp Closes." <https://warriorpublications.wordpress.com/2016/12/11/red-warrior-camp-closes/>; n.a. 2016. "Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council votes unanimously to ask Red Warrior Camp to leave." *KFYR TV*. <https://www.kfyrtv.com/content/news/Standing-Rock-Sioux-Tribal-Council-votes-unanimously-to-ask-Red-Warrior-Camp-to-leave-401548985.html>

<sup>93</sup> Alleen Brown, Will Parrish, and Alice Speri. 2017. "LEAKED DOCUMENTS REVEAL COUNTERTERRORISM TACTICS USED AT STANDING ROCK TO 'DEFEAT PIPELINE INSURGENCIES'." *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2017/05/27/leaked-documents-reveal-security-firms-counterterrorism-tactics-at-standing-rock-to-defeat-pipeline-insurgencies/>

that it was a struggle over the terms of reproduction—led first and foremost by native elders and militant youth—it finds its limit in being subsumed by this composition.

The “strategy of composition” seem to be caught in this double-bind. Yet this is exactly what Farrell intends it to avert:

“Composition as a strategy positions itself between these two extremes. The negative rationale for its development resides in the disappearance of any leading identity, which forces movements — propelled as they are by the contradictions of capitalist society — into a productive crisis.

However, it also has a positive rationale. Whereas the programmatic approach to struggle relied upon dialectical resolution of conflicts — i.e., the assumption that, through the course of the struggle, a synthesis would emerge that would produce a new sort of unity — the method of composition proposes that the multiple segments of a movement *remain multiple*, while simultaneously weaving the necessary practical alliances between them.”

But this is a caricature, both of programmatism and composition, one that seeks to remedy any apparent resemblance between the two.<sup>94</sup> We have seen that this “remaining multiple” seems a tenuous position at best, hardly the generative ground for *expanding the flood* or producing a revolutionary crisis bringing us onto the fertile plain of communist construction. What it understands as its greatest merit is itself a positive program, one that demands constant defense, sacrifice, renunciation, and the ritual of *process*, so familiar to the activist campaign. It is programmatic because it has as its basis the reproduction a historically given material composition of struggle. That this composition has no leading representation, such as positive “worker identity,” does not discount the fact that its horizon remains the now disintegrated and atomized conditions from which it emerged. It is programmatic because its common cause *is* a program, the only unity through which the coordination of a plurality of activities is given any practical truth. Farrell, almost anticipating this criticism, calls this a “practical machine,” rather than a unity. All “social unity” is practical, so it is unclear what this distinction really accomplishes. What matters is that the process is inverted: activity finds its truth only in this program of composition. Communist partisanship cannot proceed from such a program. It must crystallize from communist measures that have as their effect the mosaic erosion of capitalist relations of production. Composition is indeed a strategy adequate to the era, but it is not adequate for the generalization of unrest that we call insurrection.

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<sup>94</sup> There are other caricatures that prop up the argument. See, for example, Farrell’s rather lukewarm description of coalition building, which he must insist is a different creature entirely: “‘Composing’ as a practice means holding together and expanding the relations between social sectors of a struggle, and ‘composition’ as a strategy refers to the assumption that a collective victory under current conditions is only possible provided our movements find ways to tease out such collaborative meshworks across and between various social identities. However, this is not merely a coalition of different subjects, each of whom remains the same throughout. In order for this strategy to function in practice, in order to maintain the composition of a movement, each of its component parts must be willing to step away from their identities to some degree. The aim here is not to enter into some kind of new synthesis, erasing particularity; rather, the assumption is that, in order to win, each segment must commit to a contextual form that invites all the other pieces of the movement to destabilize the identity and commitments that they may otherwise have held in normal capitalist politics. In this way, composition produces not “social unity” but a practical machine fueled by the partial desubjectification of its constituent parts.” This could just as easily be guide to action planning, campaign strategy, coalition building, or diversity of tactics.

## Subjectivity and Material Production

If Farrell's proposal does not amount to a fix for the composition problem, he does correctly identify many of the limits of the common proposals on offer. Endnotes does not pose any clear resolution to the problem themselves, tending to fall back on the potential decadence of "the non-movements" to bring about a crisis of representation itself.<sup>95</sup> They are correct to note that decomposition is the necessary mode of politicization of struggle today, yet they rely on the tired Marxist sociology that sees behind the mediation of "identity" the *real* separation that is class belonging. They are better than Jacobin or Catalyst counterparts (though not without overlap) in that they do not trouble themselves with a critique of "identity politics," discerning correctly that any real critique is emergent from the non-movements themselves. If race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, nation, age, religion, or geography are the prerequisites of the non-movements today, that is because, for Endnotes, these are decompositions of class belonging that vaguely "calibrate" the class struggle. Rather than understanding decomposition of constitutive of the class relation, as substantively invariant, if historically organized, they see it purely as an effect of contemporary economic crisis, stagnation, and austerity, and with it, the decline of the workers' movement and democratic representation. This leaves open the question of new universalism, which Endnotes insists the non-movements themselves covet.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps this is a negative universalism—something like the practical unification of the species in the moment of its undoing, in negation of the capital relation. It is perhaps in this moment that their titular "barbarians" find their role, but we suspect that Endnotes' usage carries a more positive content that this invocation lets on.<sup>97</sup> The positive content of this proletarian self-abolition is the ushering in of the true human community.<sup>98</sup>

We find greater solace in Bordiga's appraisal of the communist "barbarians" as destroyers of the pillars of "civilization" as such.<sup>99</sup> Bordiga, who was far more ambivalent about human dignity, was correct to break the identity of the species with its universal mediation in the cult of man in the abstract.<sup>100</sup> Short of communism itself, which we ourselves do not think of as a universalism,<sup>101</sup> what could Endnotes mean by the hunger of the non-movements for a new universalism?

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<sup>95</sup> Endnotes, "Onward Barbarians"

<sup>96</sup> "Yet because they represent the crisis of a stagnating capitalism, and their effect is to make that stagnation ungovernable, the non-movements point to the need for a universalism that goes beyond the ruins of the workers' movements." Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> "...what every wave of mass mobilization comes up against is the limited ability to move beyond a negative unity (a unity against racism/police/elites) to establish a positive and creative social or political force. The perpetual problems of identity politics are symptomatic of this limit: the inability of a wave of struggle to embody and sustain itself given the atomization and fragmentation of its constituents. At some point each wave crashes and shatters on those fragments." Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> "The first stumbling steps out of our anarchic era lie in the confusions of identity that the non-movements give witness to in their hunger for human community." Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> "...family, property, and the state are not institutions formed with the birth of the human species and which the species requires in order to survive. We live in a society, and we had long been living in one before these concepts came to fruition. By demonstrating this scientifically, we also show that one day these three institutions will disappear. We must not write in our program the reform of these three wretched bases of *civilization*. Instead, we must call for their destruction." Amadeo Bordiga. 1951. "Onward, Barbarians!" <https://libcom.org/article/onwards-barbarians>

<sup>100</sup> Bordiga, "The Fundamentals of Revolutionary Communism." See also Amadeo Bordiga. 1952. "The Human Species and the Earth's Crust." <https://libcom.org/article/human-species-and-earths-crust-amadeo-bordiga>

<sup>101</sup> Phil Neel and Nick Chavez provide an interesting discussion of this in their recently published "Forest and Factory."

Certainly, this is not to pose the question of a new revolutionary *subjectivity*, determined by the exigencies of the period. It seems to return us to a fidelity to the event, to the barbarian rejuvenation of the species. Though they caution “against those who fetishize destitution,” they find themselves unable to overcome this same limit. It is through their destructive acts that the non-movements are supposed produce a spectral “anti-formist” possibility of eclipse of formal mediation itself, hoping, once again, for tactical unity to deliver a social *carte blanche*, dissolving all those pesky divisions and speciations that separate us. We are dangerously close to a wishful thinking that plagued some corners of the ultra-left during the George Floyd Rebellion. If there was a memification during that period, it was this obsession with transcending the realities of social segregation, which remain a speciation, as Fanon called it, by way of the sacrificial, destituent act. Still, despite the romanticism on this front, there is a somber and pessimistic tone in these works, and for good reason. If Endnotes holds hope for the barbarians, it is because every other possibility of overcoming the capitalist mode of production has been foreclosed. The capitalist world is rife with instability and ungovernability, yes, but that does not automatically deliver a way out. It could just as easily be swallowed by a sequence of civil wars and the fragmented continuation of capitalist orders on the ruins of a once stable climate. Perhaps this is the more likely scenario. The communist prospect seems increasingly distant as a practical possibility.<sup>102</sup>

It is too much to ask for ready-made solutions. Most of these critiques, including our own, are little more than diagnostic, after all. But this is what has left some communists increasingly desperate for strategy. What *operaismo* offered was the possibility of turning class composition in on itself as a mode of organization *within and against* capital. It provided practical tasks to would-be revolutionaries and worker-agitators: carrying out or facilitating workers’ inquiries, political entryism, and intellectual salting. More recent fixation on “ultra-left” or “communization current” explanations of crisis and stagnation, the decline of the workers’ movement, or the limits of programmatism have not offered a clear practice adequate to these politics. This has been attended by a concurrent rise in “insurrectional anarchy,” a poor descriptor for a range of positions, from those of Stirner and egoism, to Luigi Galleani, Alfredo Bonanno, or Tiqqun/TIC. It conveys anything from general social war to clandestine cells carrying out armed struggle or attack.<sup>103</sup> The decomposition of the program easily lends itself to a confusion of approaches, and a skepticism of formal organization, sometimes organization as such. At worst, the abstract theorizations of the milieu offer no materialist method of class composition and thus can say nothing about organization.<sup>104</sup> We will return to this theme later. First, we turn to recent criticism not of grand historical abstractions, but of something concrete: the insurrection itself. If the decline of the workers’ movement gave us the turn from class composition to its decomposition, it seems a new generation is picking at the would-be corpse of the working class and finding life still yet. It is not the decline of worker identity that vexes them, but, as they assert, the clear

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<sup>102</sup> Neel and Chavez diagnose this as well.

<sup>103</sup> Mike Gouldhawke maintains an excellent archive of insurrectionary anarchist writings, especially as they relate to indigenous peoples: <https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/>; See also Michael Loadenthal. 2017. *The Politics of Attack: Communiqués and Insurrectionary Violence*. Manchester University Press.

<sup>104</sup> These are the themes of the more thoughtful and sober criticisms, at least. See Tim Barker. 2017. “The Bleak Left: On Endnotes.” *n+1 Issue 28: Half-Life*. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-28/reviews/the-bleak-left/>; Bue Rübner Hansen. 2015. “Surplus Population, Social Reproduction, and the Problem of Class Formation.” *Viewpoint Issue 5: Social Reproduction*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/surplus-population-social-reproduction-and-the-problem-of-class-formation/>

history of missed insurrections that has scarred our present moment. These neo-workerists<sup>105</sup> argue for a return to the factory, yes, but more pointedly maintain the need for communists to grasp the new class composition in the services sector, in transport, shipping, and logistics, in care work and social reproduction, all shaped by newer waves of migration and the global restructuring of supply chains and labor markets. The neo-workerists operate with a basic, if unnamed understanding that political subjectivity, or at least the political subjectivity that counts, is determined in relation to material production and the circulation of commodities. We intend to take this presupposition seriously and examine what it both clarifies and mystifies about the concept of composition.

The sort of composition that Farrell refers to as a “new political intelligence” is entirely alien here. The neo-workerists are quite orthodox in their approach. Class composition still refers to a basic dialectical relation between technical and political composition, only now that composition must be understood to have permeated the entire circuit of capitalist reproduction. The global working class still appears here as a given revolutionary subject, “in the driver’s seat of social emancipation,”<sup>106</sup> albeit confused in its orientation and means of communication. It might be easy to dismiss these groupings as yet another desperate attempt at romancing the worker, adrift in the sea of neoliberal and postmodern ideology. Despite the presence of some of these crude characterizations and vulgarities, these neo-workerist groups—which range from researchers, organizers, to publications—offer a far more reasonable outlook on the global (de-)industrial condition than their more social democratic counterparts. They do not merely fetishize so-called “economic struggles” or their singular expression in the strike, for example, nor do they herald acritically any steadfast “return of labor” or union strength—the same so readily assimilated into the Democratic Party platform.<sup>107</sup> The entire gamut of struggle left in the wake of the convulsing global supply chain is here taken seriously and analyzed soberly—formal strikes, wildcat strikes, work slowdowns, absenteeism, sabotage, factory occupations, street protests, square occupations, and riots. Still, they tend to refuse any easy sublation of “working class” identity by a new composition, which they see as trendy and infused with postmodern sensibilities of “difference,” whether that’s the “multitude,” “precariat,” or “surplus populations.”<sup>108</sup> The working class still exists, as do its prospects for self-emancipation. For communists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this reality remains *unknown* for all its beautiful simplicity and in its complicated specificity.<sup>109</sup> They see this lack of empirical knowledge as a basic refusal of materialist method that continues to plague the left, polarizing it into the familiar camps of utter nihilism or naive programmatism. As a direct consequence of this perspective, we see a return of the workers’ inquiry and a special attention to the category of class composition. Following the apparent impasses of the era of riots, two particular

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<sup>105</sup> We include here *Viewpoint*, *Notes from Below*, and *Angry Workers of the World*.

<sup>106</sup> Angry Workers of the World. 2020. “Revolutionary Working Class Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” <https://www.angryworkers.org/2020/04/07/revolutionary-working-class-strategy-for-the-21st-century-part-1/>

<sup>107</sup> Brooklyn Rail has published several good articles chronicling this journalistic shift and its socialist appeal. See Jason Smith. 2022. “‘Striketober’ and Labor’s Long Downturn.” *Field Notes*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2021/12/field-notes/Striketober-and-Labors-Long-Downturn>, and Marianne Garneau. 2022. “Striketober: Hopes and Realities.” *Field Notes*. <https://brooklynrail.org/contributor/Marianne-Garneau>

<sup>108</sup> See, e.g., Angry Workers, “Revolutionary Working Class Strategy”

<sup>109</sup> “For the few comrades who do try and understand what ‘the global working class’ actually is, the theoretical and conceptual framework seems inadequate to deal with the amount of empirical data and multiple facets of global working class lives and struggles today.” Angry Workers, “Revolutionary Working Class Strategy”

groups emerged in recent years that we think are worth close consideration here: Angry Workers of the World and Notes from Below. We shall deal with them in turn.

Angry Workers of the World refers to themselves as small political collective, based in London, UK. Cosmopolitan in their origins, the participants of Angry Workers had roots in various projects and employment, but “chose” (their words) to move to working class neighborhoods on the outskirts of London in rejection of the city’s more transient, professional, and student-based left. These characteristics reflect the city’s place in the international division of labor, especially in service sectors. In contrast, the Angry Workers had observed a re-territorialization and re-concentration of labor in urban hinterlands, where the logistics sector dominates in the form of warehouses, distribution centers, and correlated manufacturing lines. Taking inspiration from comrades in the German group WildCat,<sup>110</sup> Angry Workers began their project of inquiry by “getting rooted”—finding employment in warehouses and manufacturing centers, finding rooms in suburban terraced housing, and embedding in the daily lives of working class people.<sup>111</sup> What is especially interesting for us about Angry Workers is their consistent emphasis on two concepts that we share an affinity for and likewise find especially generative, concepts that we have already lingered over extensively: “class composition” and “combined and uneven development.” Why they come to rather distinct political conclusions requires a bit closer look at how they use and integrate these concepts.

While they draw on some of the analytical frameworks of *operaismo*—e.g., workers’ inquiry, class composition—where they fall quite clearly in line has everything to do with what they view as the relationship between development and working class power. Quite loyal to this framing, most clearly articulated by Mario Tronti, Angry Workers argue that capitalist development and dynamism are *driven by* working class socialization and organization in the process of production.<sup>112</sup> While this importantly retains the concept of social forms as mediations of social relations, it is of course quite one-sided, neglecting constraints that appear external to capital but are in fact immanent to it. Capital, rather than being merely a response to working class power, is a form of social reproduction that seeps from conditions of generalized dispossession—a compulsion that is emergent from the separation of life and its conditions. It is a kind of metabolic domination, a rupture in the continuum of planetary ecological relations, that inverts the process of social reproduction and subordinates it to the alien hostilities of value. It shapes the contours of the total social fabric and appears as much as “structural” constraints—subsumption, market competition, wage-labor, productivity gains—as the class autonomy or balance of class forces. Any distinction is ideological.<sup>113</sup> This is what remains best about the concept of class composition, but it also where *operaismo* wavered, often preferring—more often, as the years wore on—to explain class behavior through the lens of political agency or autonomy. Angry Workers

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<sup>110</sup> WildCat represents an earlier iteration of neo-workerism, which we discussed above.

<sup>111</sup> Angry Workers detail this in their 2020 book and report, *Class Power on Zero Hours*: <https://www.angryworkers.org/class-power-on-zero-hours/>

<sup>112</sup> “The dynamic character of capitalism and ‘development’ in general is less explained out of ‘market-forces’ or ‘abstract greed for super-profits’, but by this dynamic relationship between struggle and changes in production as response. Capitalism contains class conflict through developmental leaps.” Angry Workers of the World. 2014. “On relations between capitalist development, class struggle and communist organisation.” <https://www.angryworkers.org/2014/07/30/general-thoughts-on-relation-between-capitalist-development-class-struggle-and-communist-organisation/>

<sup>113</sup> We have our disagreements, but Søren Mau’s treatment of capital as a “mute compulsion” is likely one of the best. Søren Mau. 2023. *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. Verso Books.



is aware of this limit to *operaismo*, critiquing the latter's tendency to glorify the refusal of work or its implosion into "adventurism."<sup>114</sup> Yet, as they preserve the logical kernel of *operaismo* and the contradictory concept of "class composition," they find themselves doing a similar dance. For Angry Workers, subjectivity is the independent variable. Workers *as individuals* (they refuse the problem of "atomization" here) may not enter production fully formed, but it is through their collective socialization and subjectivation that *class power* coheres as an emergent property that must be confronted by capital, and partially overcome through its developmental leaps. They understand capitalist development—and therefore history—as fundamentally a *political strategy* of the capitalist class to *decompose* the working class, *isolate* workers, and *contain* class conflict, which in turn re-socializes them on a new material foundation.

The workerist periodization and strategy are all familiar by now (see Part One). Angry Workers defends this perspective quite fluently. It is *not* their view that class behavior is any way a compulsion. That is one-way street: it is the capitalist who are compelled by the collective worker. They may allow the compulsion to sell labor-power to survive, but the subjectivity that follows from this state of dispossession is the privileged site of class agency, and more specifically, agency through socialization in production proper. This is why they so clearly reject that structural constraints are a real problem for class composition. They have no time for "surplus populations" or object identities. The working class is irreducibly singular in their analysis. In fact, their approach to problems of class decomposition, abjection, or redundancy in relation to subject formation is quite anti-Marxist, presenting "surplus populations" as a figment of the post-modern preoccupation with difference. In their demand to understand the integration of redundant and precarious labor into value chains, they forget themselves. This uneven and *conditional* integration into the immediate production process is what *constitutes* the surplus population.<sup>115</sup> They instead treat it the surplus population as identical to what Marx called pauperism or the lumpenproletariat—the permanent surplus population—which they either denigrate as irrelevant or virtually non-existent in the new supply chains of capital.<sup>116</sup>

All of this leaves the Angry Workers with a real problem: in their quest to exalt class power, they cannot make sense of the realities of development today: stagnating growth, de-industrialization, and productivity stalls. Where they see "massive growth" in concentrated factories, along logistic networks, or in the unfolding of new territorial industrial complexes, they neglect the ratcheting effect of competition (since they tend to ignore competition entirely): new lines are opened at the prevailing technical level in order to remain cost-competitive on the global market. They attract new constant capital at a higher rate than new labor. Angry Workers ignore that surplus populations tend to cluster around these very supply chains and territorial complexes that they propose as their fix.<sup>117</sup> In their own schema, this logic and history of global development is the *response* to class power, but it tendentially undermines that power, even as

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<sup>114</sup> See Angry Workers, "Revolutionary Working Class Strategy" and *Class Power on Zero-Hours*.

<sup>115</sup> Phil Neel discussed this confusion in a recent interview. As he says: "the whole point is that people in the surplus population *aren't* able to escape the economy." Neel, "Hostile Brothers." See also Endnotes. 2010. "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital." *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value-Form*; Aaron Benanav. 2020. *Automation and the Future of Work*. Verso; Jason Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work*

<sup>116</sup> "The idea that the world is dominated by 'surplus population', which is largely excluded from value production, is equally flawed. Anyone who has a bit of insight into modern slum-economies will know that, for example, nearly half of US almonds are processed in slums in North India or that car part production reaches into Mexican shanty towns." Angry Workers, "Revolutionary Working Class Strategy"

<sup>117</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*

new class compositions emerge from the restructurings. There is a cyclical and secular effect at work. Lest they be caught arguing that worker power has as its long-term consequence its own repression and *atomization*, Angry Workers' ignores the secular tendency in favor of the cyclical.

There is a basic truth to their analysis though. The new class compositions and political subjectivities that sprout from the muck and mire of decomposition need to be better understood. They propose this as a first step on the material path toward communist transition. For Angry Workers, this is less a technical problem that requires particular vectors of knowledge,<sup>118</sup> though it is also that. It is more fundamentally a problem of political subjectivation that accrues to workers in the immediate process of production and the (less immediate) process of distribution. One of the merits of Angry Workers, which they resurrected from *operaismo*, is the practical significance of communication. This is not a flighty memification of conflict, but real lines and modalities of communication that are opened by the concentration and diffusion of capital within and across sectors and value chains. Vectors of communication transmit the objective process into subject formation, occupying the rather vague liminal space between *technical* and *political* composition of the class. That they emphasize this is essential for understanding how Angry Workers views the problems of class composition today: the *subjective* unevenness of the class that results from the uneven combination of labor processes—and thus uneven channels of communication—in the global development of capital.

“Uneven and combined development” is the other compass that Angry Workers uses to reckon the working class today.<sup>119</sup> What they actually argue more explicitly is that, other than “class composition,” “uneven and combined development” is the only genuine working class strategy to emerge from revolutionary cycles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This may seem a bit odd, given the original application and development of the concept in Trotsky was to account for the peculiarities of the Russian experience in 1[905] and to develop a materialist basis for the revolutionary aims of Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in what by more vulgar Marxist accounts would have been an “unripe” country. Conceptually, “uneven and combined development” can be traced to Marx more generally, though he also had a growing interest in the Russian experience of industrial concentration combined with large rural hinterlands and agrarian regimes.<sup>120</sup> It was this combination of factors that drew both strategy and scorn from democratic socialists, who saw Russian socialism as either uniquely positioned for a seizure of power, or else cursed by the long shadows of populism or nihilism. In the former camp, Trotsky analyzed how the Russian Empire had been integrated into the world capitalist economy in latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, exposing its territorial security to the pressures of industrial competition. In order to modernize its industry, it had to borrow on the international financial market, primarily from France, as the regime was dominated agrarian landlords who would refuse taxation to subsidize urban development. In order to compete with the older, more established capitalist nations, the Czarist regime was forced to its incubate industrial development. Its heavy international debts would discipline it to do so. Its development was thus *combined* through its integration in the circuits of global capital, but *uneven* both geographically and temporally.

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<sup>118</sup> There is a contrast here then with the case made by Neel and Chavez in “Forest and Factory.”

<sup>119</sup> Angry Workers, “Revolutionary Working Class Strategy”

<sup>120</sup> See Shanin, *Late Marx*

This “big push industrialization” is in fact the general form of capitalist transitions, especially through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>121</sup> This is significant not least for how it shapes class politics, which is to say, class composition. As Angry Workers trace, Trotsky was concerned with the strategic implications of late development in his homeland. Because development was uneven, there still remained a vast agricultural hinterland, complete with large peasant populations and social structures, including landed proprietors, the *obshchina* or *mir*, as well as landless descendants of serfdom, and small landlords. There were also the large estates and landed gentry. Though they largely retained their class structures, they were not immune from the conditions of capitalist pressure. In order to service its debts, the regime was forced to tax grain exports. Given that there had been no agrarian revolution in social relations, productivity levels remained stagnant. In a scenario typical of absolutism, the state—caught between an obstinate landlord class and a productivity ceiling—was forced to expropriate peasants of their grain. The newly dispossessed that had migrated to urban centers fared little better. This proletariat, like the southern Italian experience half a century later, was formed rapidly from the stuff of the hinterlands and thrown onto factory lines with little mediation by the social institutions that might be found in England, or France. It was more restive as a consequence, while retaining direct relations and generational ties with the peasantry from which it came. Strategically, these two uneven compositions could be combined effectively in a revolutionary cycle that always sought expansion through the industrial world.

This was the basis for the theory of “permanent revolution.” Angry Workers is at pains to defend this theory from subsequent Trotskyist degenerations, and from critics who see it as limited to a particular historical situation that has since been eclipsed—namely, the persistence of an agrarian hinterland population. Given the rapid de-peasantization from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, these criticisms seem to carry weight. Like the German workers councils, the soviets were a peculiar historical product of uneven and combined development and class composition. Yet, for Angry Workers, this misses the real content of the theory. As they argue, the development of capitalism remains combined and uneven, despite the near total integration of the planet into its inverted metabolism. This is clear in the concept of class composition, which they see as an inheritor of the theory in a sense. In their schematic, class composition today is the product of this developmental tendency which tends to concentrate workers, on the one hand, and marginalize them on the other. This is seen most clearly in the development supply chains and territorial industrial complexes, in which productivity and poverty stand in for combined and uneven development. Why this does not amount to fragmentation or atomization is unclear, but what matters is that class composition must be understood as an expression of combined and uneven development, which is really another way of saying capitalist laws of motion.

We think this is an advance worth emphasizing. Where we differ in matters of degree, the consequences become a matter of kind. For Angry Workers, the emphasis on class composition has everything to do with subjectivity, the sense of collective social power of the working class. The present issue remains for them the apparent divergence of *interests* that results from the real divergence in composition along capital’s globalized terrain. The industrial workers and the marginalized share common, but also uncommon experiences and develop different subjectivities in relation to material production, and thus different political horizons. Communist prospects, in

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<sup>121</sup> Robert C. Allen. 2013. *Global Economic History: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. See also Endnotes, “A History of Separation”

Angry Workers' view, tend to lie with the former, while the latter remain swept up in spectacular political struggles. This is little different than the false opposition of "economic struggles" and "political struggles" that Rosa Luxemburg argued become obliterated in the mass strike. In contrast, the Angry Workers hold no such hope for general insurrection. Instead, they argue that proletarians must *politically* overcome this division by recognizing the empirical basis of their shared condition. This is why we find repeated emphasis on the evidence of an actually existing working class, on its real unity, despite what they see as charlatan attempts to chart the decline of its real movement. It is here that they recede theoretically from their initial advances. What they continuously fail to recognize in both class composition and uneven and combined development are the secular tendencies of both against the *mise en scène* of capital's long decline. Their analysis of these phenomena are always one-sided. In their emphasis on new compositions, they never recognize that composition is always also decomposition. Their emphasis on combination—through states, military alliances, trade agreements, supply chains, transport routes—belies its unevenness, or frankly, its disintegration. For neo-workerists, there is always the possibility of new lines of communication, new vectors of subject formation, to be tapped in these new compositions and combinations. Yet, when faced with the sobering realities of separation, Angry Workers also falls back on the atomization that they resoundingly disavow:

"If the two poles of the revolutionary contradiction – an increase in social productivity on one side leads to an increase in relative poverty on the other – would meet in a single experience, the system would explode. The problem is that this experience is instead diffused within the global working class (meaning different groups experience it at different times and in different ways) and mediated by nation state measures and ideologies... this creates a common condition, but this itself does not create material links as such."<sup>122</sup>

Note the appearance of ideology. This betrays more than they realize. Their diagnostics of the "problem of composition" today are far more ideological than they let on. They emphasize the "neoliberal" "postmodern" plague on the working class, because they unable to explain the decline of the workers' movement in clearly materialist terms. They are unable to do so because they refuse to acknowledge a secular crisis of capital, the process of decomposition, the relative de-industrialization of labor, or the aerosolization of production.

For the Angry Workers, the common condition remains the global working class as such, merely diffused widely throughout the system, but still very much combined or composed as the working class. Why does this not automatically create material links? For one, as Angry Workers has it, the working class is always the prime mover. They are not conduits of capital's logic, but the unruliness to which it responds. Here, they are forced to have the "guts" to make the leap into the subjective, universal, and strategic: the working class needs to recognize itself as the veins of the production system, which in turn through an integrated labor process provides the channels of this subjectivation. The key for Angry Workers is the subjective dimension unleashed by new combinations. It is always unleashed as there are always new combinations that are able to absorb the freshly marginalized.<sup>123</sup> For us, it the *objective* process of combination—which is to say the composition and reproduction of capital—on the global scale that reveals that

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<sup>122</sup> Angry Workers, "Revolutionary Working Class Strategy"

<sup>123</sup> David Ricardo thought the same.

it remains geographically and socially uneven as a condition of capital's logic of centrifuge. The subjective dimension expresses itself only through this fragmentation. On this terrain, any easy "universals" are as ideological as "difference." The objective unity-as-dispossession has no automatic expression in a *subjective* unity-as-working class. For this, Angry Workers simply hope for a return of proletarian autonomy. Oddly, they find themselves proffering a similar line to Farrell or the Tiqqunist adherents of compositional strategy: what is needed is to take the reigns of composition from capital, *to compose* by an act of sheer will, the universal subject, out of its objective conditions. The problem for Angry Workers, as for Farrell and others, is that the objective conditions in question no more unify than they do separate. The discrete mediations that seem to "interfere" and result in subjective experiences of race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or religion have real material bases, more material basis than any empty calls for working-class unity.<sup>124</sup> In their strategic analysis of class composition and uneven and combined development, the Angry Workers offer only half-measures. The riddle that they have posed clearly in the present era is developing the relationship between material production and subject formation, and thus material production and revolutionary transition. They have no real answer, beyond the more trite observations on the need to attend to production. By refusing to admit that the contemporary character of material production expresses itself in subjective vicariance, they offer a hollowed out—that is, ahistorical—politics.

If subject formation appears curbed by the process of material production, perhaps this suggests an inadequacy to the concept of class composition, or, at least its political salience. As observed by the editors of Notes from Below, outside the immediate process of production, the working class remains "a mystery" from the rigid viewpoint of traditional workerism.<sup>125</sup> This is perhaps overstating the case, especially when considering the immanent critiques of workerism developed by the likes of Wages for Housework and *Lotta Feminista*. Here, the question of how the social metabolism is transformed into the commodity labor-power, all *before* it purchased and used in production, was paramount. Still, this is a general criticism that holds water, and one which we share, as detailed in our discussion of *operaismo* in Part One. As the resurgence of the concept in the work of Angry Workers of the World has made more transparent, the current usage of class composition often differs little from the narrow applications developed by *operaismo*, much to the detriment of its potential explanatory power. The formulaic relationship technical and political composition remains one-sided, abstracting in favor of the technical dimensions of the process of capitalist reproduction. But, as Marx and early *operaismo* theorists such as Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti demonstrated, the technical form of production is itself an expression of specifically capitalist social relations, which of course are far more expansive than the process of production proper.<sup>126</sup> Panzieri's portable formulation was that "the relations of production are within the productive forces."<sup>127</sup> Important as this corrective was, whether or not this ex-

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<sup>124</sup> The worst results of this analysis came during the George Floyd Rebellion and the 2021 Palestinian uprisings. See Angry Workers. 2020. "The necessity of a revolutionary working class program in times of coup and civil war scenarios." <https://www.angryworkers.org/2020/10/10/the-necessity-of-a-revolutionary-working-class-program-in-times-of-coup-and-civil-war-scenarios/>, and Angry Workers, "Editorial #3: Palestine-Israel."

<sup>125</sup> Notes from Below. 2018. "The Workers' Inquiry and Social Composition." *Issue 1: No Politics Without Inquiry!* <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/workers-inquiry-and-social-composition>

<sup>126</sup> See Raniero Panzieri. "The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists." <https://libcom.org/library/capalist-use-machinery-raniero-panzieri>; Raniero Panzieri. "Surplus Value and Planning." <https://libcom.org/library/surplus-value-planning-raniero-panzieri>; and Tronti, *Workers and Capital*

<sup>127</sup> Panzieri, "Surplus Value and Planning"

aggregates the power of capital is still subject to debate.<sup>128</sup> Part of the issue remains clarity on what precisely the “power of capital” is, as well as what constitutes “relations of production.”<sup>129</sup> According to Derek Sayer, for Marx, social relations “have explanatory primacy.”<sup>130</sup> Even if so, the concept is relatively undeveloped and abstract, even in the mature works of Marx. 20<sup>th</sup> century communist discourse often found itself bereft when confronted with this conceptual puzzle, finding itself on the shores of some of Marx’s more well-known, if not uncontroversial, islands of thought: the “Preface” to his 1[859] *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the so-called *German Ideology*. This gives us the “economic structure” of society, but little else of concrete detail.

In *Capital*, Marx is more concerned with specifically capitalist relations of production and the “forms of intercourse” which corresponds to it. Here, the concept is used somewhat interchangeably with social metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*), indicating that for Marx the relations of production involved the totality of specific social relationships involved in the processes of production, circulation, and consumption—or, take together, social reproduction. In the capitalist mode of production, these concrete forms of intercourse are imbued with the mute compulsion unleashed by the metabolic separation of life and its conditions. The class relation of generalized dispossession is thus fundamental to capitalist social relations of production. They are necessary but not reducible to the forms of exploitation that are the object of a narrow application of class composition.<sup>131</sup> Relations of production are incommensurate with the immediate process of production. Rather, the specific forms of the latter *crystallize* out of the former.<sup>132</sup> As Sayer has argued, if “relations of production” merely indexes the totality of social relations which make a particular form of production (i.e. capitalism) possible, then this broadens the range of possibilities to include what conventionally or vulgarly might be considered “superstructural” epiphenomena— race, gender, legal forms, religion, kinship relations, cultural practices, ethnicity. Relations of production—and, we should emphasize, *reproduction*—are traversed through these particular forms and practices of concrete belonging that are irreducible to the abstract class relation. If composition only applies in the narrow sense of the labor process, then indeed it can explain little about the process of class formation and degeneration in the reproduction of everyday life.

Notes from Below offers a remedy. Where they see the inability of technical composition to explain the totality of political compositions, they propose the category of “social composition,” which has as its basis not the technical aspects of the labor process, but the shared condition of dispossession.<sup>133</sup> It is only in the process of “working class reproduction,” represented in the

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<sup>128</sup> For instance, there remain ecological, physical, and physiological limitations to the reproduction process that are historically invariant and similarly inhere in its technical form, even in the capitalist mode of production. They are subordinated to the compulsion of socially necessary labor-time, but never overcome by it.

<sup>129</sup> Søren Mau provides the best contemporary account of recent Marxist theory in this area, but an important and too often overlooked precursor is Derek Sayer’s critique of analytical Marxism. Derek Sayer. 1987. *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytical Foundations of Historical Materialism*. Basil Blackwell.

<sup>130</sup> Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction*, 34

<sup>131</sup> This distinction between “relations of production” and “forms of exploitation” was articulated by Jairus Banaji. Jairus Banaji. 2011. *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*. Haymarket Books

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> “...we feel that previous analysis of class composition has based workers and their resistance almost exclusively on the workplace. Yet workers are made into a class before they are employed by a capitalist. Before they are required to sell their time, they are dispossessed of the means of production. Tied to this condition is a whole range of political struggles beyond the wage. This includes those over the conditions of state-provided social services, migration and borders, housing and rent, and a wide range of other issues. We believe that analyses of technical composition alone

formula C-M-C, or the social metabolism of exchange and consumption, that the full unity of the proletarian condition comes into existence. This “general formula of working class reproduction” had already been observed by Leopoldina Fortunati as the “arcane of reproduction,” which in this case referred to the structural necessity of (gendered) activities that are unwaged and not subsumed to the immediate process of production, but are nonetheless internal to the wage relation and capital’s total circuit.<sup>134</sup> As conditions of capital’s reproduction, these relations of reproduction appear as natural and given. They thus form a hidden abode of their own. Notes from Below correctly deduces this problem for class composition and workers’ inquiry: “as things stand, class composition analysis cannot understand workers beyond work.”<sup>135</sup> If we take the commodity labor-power as a naturalized given, the political class composition is woefully impoverished. “Social composition” is intended as an update that accounts for the activities of reproduction as political activities, an entire dimension of class struggle beyond the wage.

“Social composition is primarily a way to understand how consumption and reproduction form part of the material basis of political class composition. It involves factors like: where workers live and in what kind of housing, the gendered division of labour, patterns of migration, racism, community infrastructure, and so on.”<sup>136</sup>

Combined with the technical composition in the labor process, social composition makes possible “the leap” into political composition, the working class viewpoint, or collective subjectivity.<sup>137</sup>

For the most part, this is an editorial perspective of Notes from Below, and they aim to publish working class perspective and inquiries to that suit that position. They have published a few theoretical essays that help to develop the concept of social composition, from reflections on inflation and circulation struggles, including the practice of auto-reduction (or proletarian shopping), and the means of subsistence as a universalizing horizon,<sup>138</sup> to the process of “territorial inquiry”<sup>139</sup> in response to capital switching from primary manufacturing to the service, transport, logistics, and FIRE sectors in de-industrialized regions. “Social composition” appears to have the flexibility to account not only for the sphere of reproduction, but the heterogeneity of capital’s circuitry, both in terms of geography and social constraints. This is an advance to be sure, but the concept of social composition was at the same time always latent in the strife internal to *operaismo* and *autonomia*, including its Marxist-feminist critics. Consider early *operaismo*’s emphasis on the belated and rapid transition, proletarianization, and migration from the south of Italy to the North.

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can produce their own hidden abodes beyond work. We therefore propose a third dimension: social composition.” Notes from Below, “The Workers’ Inquiry and Social Composition”

<sup>134</sup> Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, and Gonzalez, “The Gendered Circuit”

<sup>135</sup> Notes from Below, “The Workers’ Inquiry”

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> “In all three parts, class composition is both product and producer of struggle over the social relations of the capitalist mode of production. The transition between technical/social and political composition occurs as a leap that defines the working class political viewpoint.” Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Notes from Below. 2023. “The Coming Indigestion.” *Issue #18: Seeds of Struggle: Food in a Time of Crisis*. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/coming-indigestion>, and Seth Wheeler and Jamila Squire. 2023. “Food Price Hikes, Social Composition and Auto-Reduction.” *Issue #18: Seeds of Struggle: Food in a Time of Crisis*. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/food-price-hikes-social-composition-and-auto-reduc>

<sup>139</sup> Neil Gray. 2019. “Notes Towards a Practice of Territorial Inquiry.” *Issue #10: Housing*. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/notes-towards-practice-territorial-inquiry>

This meant shared kinship networks, vectors of communication, urban concentration, housing, etc, all of which shaped the character of workplace struggles as well as struggles beyond work. The advance represented in Notes from Below is their insistence on making “social composition” a category of its own, placing it on equal footing with technical and political composition, no longer subordinated it to a background feature of the class struggle.

Where Notes from Below errs is in not going far enough. The problem with the workers’ inquiry and composition analysis model here, as with their countrymen in Angry Workers, is that it takes for granted the central thesis of workerism: that the proletariat is both within and against capital—that there is an autonomy from the capital relation that capacitates political will, discipline, base building, and practices political recomposition. They have expanded the scope of what this composition includes, to be sure, but they have done so on a foundation of a unified working class identity. This is quite clear in their recent editorial on “The Organisational Question.”<sup>140</sup> In this issue, they continue to advance their theme of political composition as a “leap” into new organizational forms adequate to the technical and social class composition. This leap is possible because, for them, organization remains fundamentally in the normative realm—that is to say, in the realm of ideas. Having traced some of the same issues that above go under the heading of “the problem of composition,” Notes from Below remains unerringly programmatic in their approach. Communism is the self-emancipation of the working class. Organization form flows from the actually-existing coherence of the class, and its common viewpoint in opposition to the viewpoint of capital.<sup>141</sup>

How should they arrive at such distinctly programmatic perspective on working class unity, despite the advance “social composition”? It seems, rather simply, because they (editorially, at least) do not clearly link the processes composition, recomposition, and decomposition to any logic of capital. Refusing to understand working class behavior as an expression of the mute compulsion of capital, any internal logic to capital as an alienated form of social relations is eschewed in favor of a class reductionist struggle between the capitalists and the workers. They thus tend to highlight “greed,” inequality, and profiteering, rather than the structural constraints of declining profitability and idling productivity imposed on both capital and labor. Severed from the logic of capital, composition is also severed from its historical dimension. The unity of the class appears as an invariant, only to be “discovered” and politically composed by communist intervention. In the absence of the historical periodization of capital’s combined and uneven development, Notes from Below cannot explain how these facets of class composition relate to each other under distinct conditions. Today, this is the problem of decomposition. They cannot see its practical truth: the decoupling of the *double moulinet* has undermined the capacity of the production process to mitigate the decomposing effects of atomized social reproduction. Now, those effects swell in relation to stagnating and uneven economic growth. Fragmentations appears not only as de-industrialization of labor, but segmentation of labor markets, segregation

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<sup>140</sup> Notes from Below. 2023. “The Organizational Question.” *Issue #19: The Political Leap: Communist Strategy Today*. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/organisational-question>

<sup>141</sup> “Social composition allows us to extend the logic of class composition analysis to the whole of the working class. This includes the unemployed and workers not directly involved in producing the capitalist form of value. Both productive and unproductive workers are members of the same class. They all lack control of the means of production, sell their labour-power to survive, and work to reproduce capitalist society. Class composition is grounded in the working class viewpoint on work, not on capital’s viewpoint of productivity.” Notes from Below, “The Workers’ Inquiry”



of social reproduction, the material barriers of language, citizenship, or religion. What appears to them as universal—the cohesion of social composition—is in fact historically relative and incomplete. They can maintain that “a political organisation, regardless of the form it takes, is a tool,”<sup>142</sup> because for them its content—proletarian unity—remains invariant. This is of course not the case. Worker identity has never been uniform or universal, and it has always rested on the shattered plane of dehumanization. When and where it is achieved, organization, composition, coordination must be understood as *historical* coherences of particular social forces. There is a leap to be made, surely, but it never be a matter of sheer political will.

Both Notes from Below and Angry Workers of the World emerged from a particular socialist milieu in Western Europe, England specifically. When the cycle of struggles immediately following the 2008 crisis had reached its trough—when insurrections had died—they sought remedy in the reconfigured spaces of working class life. The groups have collaborated in their advocacy of workers’ inquiry and a return to class composition analysis. Both have tended to see themselves as the sobering counterpoint to what they see as the fatal flaw of the nihilist “ultras” — a rejection, or worse, a supersession—of worker struggle in production in favor of generalized insurrection in circulation. Strangely, they have only stumbled upon what *Théorie Communiste*, those ultra-left communization exponents extraordinaire, themselves termed “the glass floor” of production. To only briefly gloss, TC argue that the glass floor of production is reached when struggles over reproduction (looting, rioting, attacks against the state, police, military, etc) generalize to the extent that class belonging, the proletarian condition, is confronted as a material constraint, but the separation of reproduction and production is not abolished. To do so, reproductive struggle would need to descend through the glass floor and “go into the sphere of production in order to abolish it as a specific moment of human relations and by doing so abolish labour by abolishing wage-labour.”<sup>143</sup> In their case study of the 2008 Greek riots, TC argue that the rioters became stuck in an antagonism with the institutional mediations of reproduction, and thereby reproduced these forms of separation as the condition of possibility for revolt. They did not overcome the proletarian condition because they did not call into question the core of the class relation: dispossession. Friends of the Classless Society go further, in their critique of TC, by arguing that “TC has abandoned every materialist conception of production... Communism is no longer the determinate negation of society, but a total miracle.”<sup>144</sup> For it to be determinate, proletarian “self-abolition consists of nothing other than taking possession of [the] means of production.” Neel and Chavez have recently reintroduced this problem as the science of communist construction.<sup>145</sup>

The dynamic between subject formation, composition, and material production will be essential to the production of communism. Even taken in its primarily negative content—the determinate negation of capitalist relations of production—communism requires attention to the subjectivities that are formed in the process of production, at least in those sectors producing means of subsistence and basic infrastructure. We would argue that, despite some socialist fear-mongering about postmodernism, this remains the horizon for most attempts at communist organization today. However, we forget ourselves if we neglect the common but atomized problem of reproduction, that messy sphere of refuge and suffering, segregation and kinship, survival, despair, and beauty. This matters not because the arcane of reproduction can be plucked away

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<sup>142</sup> Notes from Below, “The Organizational Question”

<sup>143</sup> *Théorie Communiste*, “The Glass Floor”

<sup>144</sup> Friends of the Classless Society, “On Communisation and its Theorists”

<sup>145</sup> “Forest and Factory”

from the technological dystopia of production, as a romantic revolutionary refuge, maintained by barricades, blockades, occupations, general assemblies, and community meetings. That is a separation adequate to capital. Today, the only community is the material community. It matters because, for struggle to even reach the point of genuine insurrectionary crisis, when the problems of material production have practical relief, we require attention to a different dimension, social *reproduction*, not as a unity, but as a common problem mediated by *difference*. It is in light of this discontinuity that social reproduction must be reckoned in its *primary* significance in the process of class composition and decomposition. Taken together, Parts One and Two show the importance of considering material practice as the basis of composition, but also demonstrate that when reproduction is taken for granted or left unattended, *any* strategy that proceeds from this basis is at best incomplete. The historical and contemporary accounts of composition explored above fail to account for either one or both of these facts. It is to this that we turn in Part Three.

## Part Three: The Cacophony of Communism

### Whither Composition?

Given the rather extensive survey of struggles, traditions, and concepts that we have presented thus far, allow us a moment to be parsimonious. Composition is a both material process and a practical activity—a noun and a verb. It follows that analyses of composition and the composition problem have historically been both descriptive and prescriptive. This is a qualitative distinction, but it exists as a spectrum, and we do not attempt to suggest that any theory or application of composition is firmly in one camp at the exclusion of the other. Despite our doubts and criticisms, we do not wish to caricature any earnest attempt at clarifying or resolving the problem of composition. The balance sheet we have constructed thus far is meant to serve more humble functions. It is an attempt to clarify terms and definitions, identifying distinct lineages and political traditions that can and often are practically at odds with one another. This forces us to pick sides, in the last instance, if we are to continue to use “composition” in service of political theory and strategy, as a term with meaning or explanatory power. So, we find it necessary to *re-assert* the basic original meaning of the term as it was developed by theorists of *operaismo*. Understood comprehensively, it names the process of class formation and deformation as a *material* process and activity. Whatever limits confronted *operaismo*, *autonomia*, or *post-autonomia* in their development of this concept were historical. The basic definition remains invariant; it merely describes the objective and subjective aspects of capitalist development itself.

At present, it falls on communists to better account for what falls in and out of the “material processes and activities” that composition is meant to name, describe, and problematize. On the one hand, this is where we think the workerist tradition reached its impasse. As industrial restructuring unfolded and agrarian labor reserves became increasingly tapped in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the historical basis of the “mass worker” disintegrated, and with it, the social validity of a “class composition” that privileged the factory. Autonomists and feminists identified this problem early on, but the turn towards the sphere of reproduction and the growing service sectors was partial. Today, neo-workerists carry this torch, but their understanding of the “social factory” is pregnant with a workers’ movement and concept of worker identity that has long since been eclipsed. On the other hand, as the tilt of history has opened an “era of riots,” “circulation struggles,” and the “return of the blockade,” we find a growing concern with struggles that manifest over territory, space, and place. Removed as they often appear to be from direct processes of production,<sup>1</sup> such struggles might appear to be removed from the dictates of class composition that have hitherto constrained the activities of the working class. This is all the more the case when working class identity is posed *against* the interests of territorial struggles. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> This is not strictly true, both because, globally, many riots and mass protests erupt precisely as a means of seeking redress for industrial grievances when other alternative paths are foreclosed, and because any easy distinction between “production,” “circulation,” and “extraction” is conceptually abstract, especially as production is increasingly carried out *through* circulation.

as these forms of struggle have attained practical significance over the last several decades, they have attracted a concept of composition, in its application as a *strategy*, that is entirely unfamiliar to the churning movements of history and risks separation from material reality altogether. In place of the dynamic interplay of material processes and activities, “composition” has instead come to mean something purely prescriptive and normative. Its application has become another substitution for autonomy, affinity, or diversity of tactics. Given its origins in a particular kind of post-autonomia (see Part One), this should not be surprising, nor should it be controversial.

These distortions and impasses do not mean that composition should be abandoned by communists. Lest we be misunderstood, let us restate our position clearly: the composition problem remains of the utmost significance. It is not simply a historical problem—the accumulated activities of dead generations, the pile of debris that devours the horizon. The composition problem is fundamentally practical. The *activity* of composition is fashioned from its constraints, and *this* is the fate of composition as we have presented it. This is why we believe that the constraints of our present moment need to be clarified. We see this project as one of disenchantment. We are not alone in this endeavor. This was also Farrell’s pursuit, we believe, as he attempted his synthesis of the descriptive and prescriptive. For the reasons we have outlined, we think he falls short, and when the contradictions of his position emerge he is forced to pick the side of prescriptive and normative, echoing earlier theorists of “compositional struggle,” to make sense of the movements that he surveys.

Given our repudiation of these representations of “compositional struggles,” it may seem that the processes and problems of composition are not applicable to territorial struggles. We hope to show that this could not be further from the case. In the final part of this essay series, we aim precisely to return the materialist thrust of composition, both as process and problem, constraint and activity, to the analysis of ecology, territory, and land. We think it is not only possible, but necessary if we are to take the present ecological crisis seriously. If the recent Coordinated Economic Blockade to Free Palestine has revealed anything, it is that the sphere of circulation remains for many the most immediately accessible terrain on which to effectively block the “flow of capital.” The spatial character of such actions conforms to an era of logistical struggles. At a more general level, the spatial extension and geographic spread of these tactics confirms our understanding of what we may call alternatively the “territorial problem,” or perhaps better, the “ecological problem.”

Capitalism is fundamentally a metabolic separation, a breach between social reproduction and its ecological conditions that gives a historical truth to the human species, as the culmination of its practical activities, and nonhuman “nature,” reduced to the common condition as non-labor, as raw materials, objects of production, or energy inputs. It is not this metabolic relation as such, but the *breakdown* in this relationship that presents itself in our conjuncture and appears uniquely as anthropogenic ecological crises. The ecological problem names the process by which the counteracting tendencies against falling profitability, specifically the cheapening of elements of constant capital and foreign trade, are expressed as the increasing significance of land acquisitions and extractive processes to lower the cost and increase the rate of raw material and energy flows. In the feeble turnover of the total system, the centrifugal character of capitalist reproduction prevails over the centripetal, and these counter-tendencies take on an increased significance.<sup>2</sup> The significance of human labor-power, given the technical constraints of production,

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<sup>2</sup> See Part Two for an elaboration of this dynamic.

is tendentially reduced vis-à-vis the need for these nonhuman inputs, and those inputs compound in material terms more quickly than their costs. Capitalist reproduction appears increasingly as an ecological crisis and struggle over land and its inhabitants. But precisely because of its anthropological character, *it furnishes no given political subject*. This is the primary ambiguity of ecology and land defense, and precisely why the analysis of social composition is essential to understand the content and functions of these superficially similar struggles. It is not the characteristic features of territoriality or the form of occupation or blockade that define the social content and function of conflicts as diverse as the Sagebrush Rebellion, the 2014 Bundy ranch standoff or the 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Redwood Summer, the Warner Creek blockade, the Unist’ot’en Camp, or the present struggle to Stop Cop City. Mother Nature hails many strange bedfellows.<sup>3</sup> Taken as a common element, the problem of the land only tends to mystify. Disenchantment must be practiced. The question of ecological struggle presents itself immediately as a problem of composition.

The ecological problem is the primary focus in the final part of this series. We follow from where we left off in Part Two, from the partial accounts of political composition that take reproduction for granted or leave it under-theorized. We believe that a frequent error of some of our fellow travelers has been to mistake the sphere of circulation with the sphere of reproduction. Circulation is not identical to reproduction, but is only one of the moments that mediates it. Indeed, we think that the noisiness of circulation often informs accounts of the composition problem, partially because the case studies tend to be riots. Instead, we understand reproduction as the aggregate processes and activities through which class is primarily composed— a common problem, but one that gives rise to disaggregated and heterogenous strategies. Here, we extend Bue Rübner Hansen’s criticisms of Endnotes’s conception of the composition problem, but note what we see as deficiencies in Hansen’s own account. We treat social composition and reproduction as fundamentally problems of social metabolism and metabolic separation, reiterating what we have called the ecological problem. We argue, however, that this problem furnishes some potentially critical openings for communist measures, if we can look beyond the ecological or territorial appearance of certain struggles and make sense of their distinct characteristics as struggles over material reproduction. For communists, confronting metabolic separation has historically meant confronting the “Agrarian Question.” We explore this question and the various ways it has been posed and consider its applicability to contemporary struggles over land, contrasting it with both more general concerns over ecology or territory and the more specific case of indigenous defense. The relevance of the agrarian question today involves a more ubiquitous concern with metabolic repair or reconstruction, projects that must be carried out quite differentially as a result of the heterogeneity of reproduction and the land itself. We conclude by reflecting on what that heterogeneity must mean for the character of communist reconstruction of the planetary metabolism as an uneven, discordant process.

## The Constraints of Reproduction

If historically it was late and rapid industrial development that socially validated the analytic of class composition, the link between development and composition today suggests that a different problem—decomposition—destabilizes the already precarious footing of working class

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<sup>3</sup> Antithesi, “The Ecological Crisis and the Rise of Post-Fascism,” <https://illwill.com/antithesi>

identity. The coherence of this intractable class of dispossessed in the workers' movement as such rested on the configuration of unique historical conditions, notably the late and accelerated transition to capitalism secured by state sponsorship, campaigns of de-peasantization, and the corrosion of old regime social structures. If the workers' movement was constructed through the unrest of this transition, its strategy primarily evolved as a war of attrition against landed elites and the tottering class structures of the countryside, which not only fettered the development of the "productive forces," but precluded the establishment of liberal democracy. It was this forging of new rights and freedoms, materially supported by rapid gains in productivity and the purchasing power of the wage, that gave to the concept of worker unity any practical relief.<sup>4</sup> With this material support wrested away, along with the prospects for any foreseeable reversal of those trends, the workers' movement has recoiled back to the disarray of its constituent parts. To paraphrase Endnotes, the forces of atomization overwhelm the forces unification.<sup>5</sup> In the presence of materially atomized reproduction, a coherent class subjectivity does not appear readymade, nor is it given by the modes of reproduction themselves. In this, it is distinct from the subjectivity that precipitates in the organization of material production, which we surveyed in our discussion of neo-workerism in Part Two. Subjectivity does indeed crystallize in the spheres of circulation and reproduction, but it does so as the many manifold forms of belonging through which reproduction is secured.

There is perhaps another line of inquiry concealed by such a grim perspective. Why should there be forces of atomization to begin with? It has been the work of Endnotes and those that journey with them to demonstrate that atomization is brought by capitalist development itself. This is true, but is not sufficient for telling the whole story. The one-sidedness of this view is what continues to fuel that hope for a *new* universalization—the unification of the proletariat in its practical class suicide. This is for others the "true human community." We are less certain that communism should look something like the practical reproduction of the species *as the human species* itself, the abstract object of social production. We will explore our reasons below, and how this weighs on the problem of composition. First, however, is the problem of speaking of "atomization" so abstractly. Unlike some neo-workerists, we do not reject that atomization is in fact a problem. On the contrary, it reigns as the problem of the day. But this is not because it is the specific product of a destabilizing capitalism, the unique and determinate consequence of crisis and stagnation. The real problem is that capitalism never completely overcame atomization—or more precisely, the discontinuity of social reproduction. Instead, it has maintained, integrated, and reproduced it on a new basis even during its long expansion and periods of relative prosperity. Worker identity has always had need for abjected forms of non-belonging, made concrete through the inherited histories of race, gender, and colony. Chuang has argued similarly that:

"Historically, proletarianization was always partially incomplete. The term itself designates a transition, by definition spanning both worlds of the 'new working class' and those being siphoned into it. The incomplete character of the process has always taken on both racial and gendered characteristics, with the work of immigrants, black people, the colonized, the indigenous and women all deemed to be of less value than

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<sup>4</sup> Endnotes, "A History of Separation." On the relationship of liberal democracy and workers' movements, see also Timothy Mitchell. 2023. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. Verso Books, and Geoff Eley. 2000. *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> "A History of Separation"

the ‘normal’ work of those who were formally acknowledged as wage laborers, and also less likely to be remunerated with a wage at all. Even where more explicit racial, national or gender divides may not exist, the same ‘incomplete’ characteristics are *produced* by the uneven character of industrialization—as can be observed with the ‘Okies’ in 1930s California or the southern ‘Terroni’ working in the factories of northern Italy in the 1950s.”<sup>6</sup>

Non-belonging and non-existence—forms of life beyond the pale of humanity—have always characterized capitalist history. With the transition to capitalism largely completed only over the last half century, those forms of surplus now appear as malignant growths on struggling industrial centers and diminishing populations of workers employed in productive sectors.

“Such a tension has *always* marked the historical process of proletarianization, which has seen proletarians forced to combat one another along lines of ethnicity, geography, gender, etc., in order to secure themselves within the realm of the ‘included’ via access to the wage—as well as formal recognition of this inclusion through citizenship, access to education, mortgages and other forms of credit. Similarly, the proletariat has seen relative ‘lumpenisations’ before, through colonization as well as the simple immiseration of migrant workers from the countryside in the early stages of Europe’s industrialization. What has changed, then, is not so much the relations themselves (the relation between capital and labor, and between inclusion and exclusion), but the global context in which these integral antagonisms are playing out.”

The flip side of shrinking rural reserves has been the acute crisis of industrial capital itself, no longer able to tap cheap pools of “proletarianizing” demographics, open new lines of manufacturing, and resolve structural overcapacity and falling profitability.<sup>7</sup> This crisis of valorization, in which profits are too low to valorize existing fixed capital investments, has untethered the growth of human belonging from the accumulation of capital. Employment growth occurs primarily in services and low productivity sectors. Industrial production everywhere sheds labor, puts the screw to existing workers, and operates with excess capacity. The sphere of non-belonging is absorbing more and more of the proletarianized, who now confront their own reproduction as many forms of dehumanization.

Capitalism did not invent atomization. What appears today as general atomization are diverse and particular forms of survival that were once eclipsed by the momentum of the workers’ movement and the coupling of survival, or even prosperity, to the reproduction of capital. Common working class reproduction has always been something of a fleeting horizon. Now it is simply chasing after a ghost. This arcane, patchy, and erratic sphere of reproduction mediates *all* of social life outside the immediate process of production. Its long reach does not even leave production untouched. Here, the concept of composition is paramount. It names the attenuation, fragmentation, and atomization of social reproduction. In a very real sense it regulates the possibilities

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<sup>6</sup> Chuang. 2016. “No Way Forward, No Way Back: China in the Era of Riots.” *Chuang 1: Dead Generations*. <https://chuangcn.org/journal/one/no-way-forward-no-way-back/>

<sup>7</sup> This relationship between de-peasantization, proletarian reproduction, overcapacity, and a falling profit rate is laid out by Makoto Itoh, though we find his general account of crisis to be misguided and at times self-contradictory. Itoh, *The World Economic Crisis and Japanese Capitalism*.

of revolutionary crisis, which requires the stepping away from the mosaic of reproduction without any guarantees of abolishing its separation from material production. It presents the first constraint, even prior the glass floor of production.

The conditions of reproduction are the marrow of capitalism. The social relation of capital is an emergent property of the historical separation of life and its conditions. It acts on the subject—the proletarianized—not directly, but through its surroundings, its *environment*. It is a metabolic separation that allows capital to act through the conditions of reproduction. The separation can take many forms, from the general to the specific: the dispossession from the land and means of subsistence, the enclosures of common lands, property rights and law, policing, poor houses, etc. What is common is the need of subsistence, biological survival and reproduction. That commonality is what gives to capital its power, given the presence of a metabolic gap. This is what makes political economic compulsions “mute,” having the appearance of freedom and choice, which in actual fact is the choice between work or non-reproduction—in other words, death.<sup>8</sup> So capital *begins* at the outset from the common problem of reproduction. Common, but not even, not homogenous. Reproduction is one aspect of the planetary metabolic continuum, which contains an endless diversity of life history strategies and ecological relationships. It becomes commonly *human* only as a result of a historical separation and generalization of the wage relation.<sup>9</sup> The common reproduction of the species mediated through the wage (directly or indirectly) is nothing other than the *metabolic separation* cleaving human reproduction from the metabolic continuum of life histories, and subsuming it to the reproduction of capital. The human being is indeed nothing other than “a ritual of capital.”<sup>10</sup>

It is this ritual of reproduction that Marx takes as his starting point in *Capital*. There is a dual character to reproduction, and, like so many things in Marx, this dual character must be grasped in order to make sense of the specifically capitalist mode of production. On the one hand, there is the transhistorical character of reproduction as social intercourse.<sup>11</sup> Marx’s treatment in this regard is actually quite similar to his analysis of social metabolism (*stoffwechsel*)—a process of renewal and transformation—that all forms of society must repeat. There is, on the other hand, the specifically capitalist form, which he was at pains to analyze over the course of his studies, notebooks, and published works. He analyzed this in the immediate process of production and accumulation (Part Seven of *Volume I*), the total social circuit and the process of circulation (*Volume II*), and the concrete social forms that crystallize out of this movement (*Volume III*). What he showed was how capital secures reproduction through the mediation of price signals and the social forces that enforce them. Capitalist reproduction is a silent compulsion, rather than a conscious act of the species. It nevertheless reproduces the species as such on the basis of common dispossession, which gives to human beings the appearance of a unique capacity for labor, and the integration of that capacity into the valorization process. There is other another duality to reproduction that Marx observes. Its social form, whether transhistorical and particular, is al-

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<sup>8</sup> Mau’s formulations here remain the best. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*.

<sup>9</sup> See “Tragic Theses”

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Camatte. 1973. *Against Domestication*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camate/agdom.htm>

<sup>11</sup> “Whatever the social form of the production process, it has to be continuous, it must periodically repeat the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction. The conditions of production are at the same time the conditions of reproduction.” Marx, *Capital*, 711.



ways a mediation of a biological imperative. Yet, the capital relation places great stress on the coupling of the social and biological, and the subsumption of biological reproduction attains a new significance.

“Reproduction” is first used by Marx in *Capital* to characterize not social reproduction—the turnover over the system as a whole—but the socially necessary labor time (SNLT) required to reproduce the value of the commodity. Reproduction inheres in the concept of SNLT, suggesting that social determination in capitalism unfolds temporally. This is not separated from the biological, but in fact is carried out through biological imperatives: “Given the existence of the individual, the production of labour-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance.”<sup>12</sup> The theory of surplus value owes its existence to the biological fact that the SNLT required to reproduce the worker is less than that congealed in the form of the commodity product. Reproduction thus captures the essential moment between the biological, the corporeal, and the terrestrial, and the social form that mediates it. Reproduction is the nexus through which capital takes hold of life and its conditions and enchants them with its drives and perversions.

It is through the commodity labor-power that capital achieves the unity of the biological and its topsy-turvy social hell. While labor-power appears a natural capacity, this is in fact its own mysticism. Unveiling this for the reification that it is was the charge of the Marxist and autonomist feminists who did so much to course correct the concept of class composition inherited from *operaismo*. Labor-power is the commodity product of a historical separation of producers from their conditions of existence *and* the separation of spheres—production and reproduction, work and home, public and private.<sup>13</sup> The sphere of reproduction names a diverse range of activities that do not count as labor to capital. They do not produce value, but they do produce labor-power ready for sale at a *price*. This gap between the price of labor-power and the non-value of the work that went into its reproduction is essential for production of surplus-value. Labor-power appears as the unique quality of the species as an axiom of capital’s logic. This metabolic inversion appears a natural condition, and so naturalizes the social forms that attend to it, most notably gender and sex, but also sexuality, race, citizenship, the family, and kinship.<sup>14</sup> The common problem of reproduction is thus faced with many uncommon solutions, many of which are not even mediated by the great equalizer, human labor-power as such. Reproduction, as mediated by these forms of non-labor, appears as the *appropriation* of various “natural” resources. From the gendered reproductive circuit to racial subordination to ecological destruction, capital presents these modalities of reproduction as essential and natural. What it seeks, in the final instance, is to be the immediate condition of life itself. Composition faces unique problems on these grounds.

As a material condition of existence, strategies for reproduction are in part historically inherited and in part re-made and repurposed in determinate historical conditions. Given the virtually endless diversity of survival strategies, forms of kinship, ecological relations, and modes of life that capital dissolved in its enclosure of the planet, it would be patently absurd to maintain that these processes of reproduction have been subsumed by the wage and have exited the other side

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>13</sup> For the best accounts, see Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction* and Endnotes, “The Logic of Gender”

<sup>14</sup> See Viewpoint, *Issue 5: Reproduction*.

in a homogenous working class formation.<sup>15</sup> Yet this is exactly what neo-workerists maintain in their rejection of “atomization” or the “composition problem” thesis. Even when *Notes from Below* attempts to overcome this absurdity by admitting that “workers are made into a class before they are employed by a capitalist,” they are still made *as the working class subject*.<sup>16</sup> They have merely extended the ostensibly homogenizing effects of the labor process outward to the whole of capitalist society. Yet capital assimilates difference into the immediate process of production as well, as lines of differentiation and separation can be subordinated to the reproduction requirements of labor-power. This is in part the result of unevenness in the sphere of circulation. Labor market dynamics reinforce and strengthen pre-existing historical divisions and reproduce new forms of partition, as navigation of the market requires reliance on interpersonal networks that possess gendered, familial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and racial character. The production process inherits these discrete and often segregated compositions and reflects them anew in the social and technical division of labor, *a posteriori*. These now *technical* compositions of labor serve as vectors of knowledge, trust, communication that socialize labor, lower its costs of reproduction, and increase productivity and intensity. It is on the basis of this intensive accumulation that the social discontinuity of the labor process is reproduced. The formal equality of the wage is made operational by the real inequality of these “sorting mechanisms.”<sup>17</sup> The uneven and partitioned composition of reproduction is both a premise and result of the reproduction of capital. The construction of worker identity on this basis is identical to the practical unification of the species. Even still, the formal mediation of this humanizing process can never universalize its content. There is always an external shell of the human species, whose *social* belonging to humanity is conditional on the requirements and dictates of production.<sup>18</sup>

This the geography of capital, a dissected plateau of social life in which the apparent relief is that of the worker. What is common here is not the condition of working existence, which takes so many concrete forms, some waged, some unwaged, some legal, others illicit. The only common condition of its existence on this terrain is the condition of separation, of metabolic domination—a sort of “existential wagelessness.”<sup>19</sup> It has become standard to describe this is a unity-in-separation,<sup>20</sup> or a unity of dispossession. This has its purposes, but it tells us quite little about how people actually survive and the aggregate effects of those survival strategies on the social composition. Wage-labor constitutes a particular kind of composition that is also *real* abstraction, which in turn is given even more concrete character as it is sorted through the composition of capital in the production process. The same is not true of reproduction. This is

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<sup>15</sup> See Shanin, *Late Marx*; Andrew Liu. 2020. *Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India*. Yale University Press; Harry Harootunian. 2015. *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Notes from Below, “The Workers’ Inquiry”

<sup>17</sup> Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* is perhaps the most famous study in this regard. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*. See also Liu, *Tea War*; Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*; Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; Théorie Communiste. 2016. “Class/Segmentation/Racialization.” Libcom. <https://libcom.org/article/classsegmentationracialization-notes-theorie-communiste>

<sup>18</sup> “Tragic Theses”

<sup>19</sup> “When we assume the perspective of social reproduction, we see that our basic state, so to speak, is not defined by a waged job, but rather existential wagelessness. On the terrain of social reproduction it becomes abundantly clear that unemployment precedes employment, the informal economy precedes the formal, and proletarian does not mean wage worker.” Asad Haider and Salar Mohandes. 2015. “Making a Living.” *Viewpoint, Issue 5: Social Reproduction*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/28/making-a-living/>

<sup>20</sup> See *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation*

the primary basis of Bue Rübner Hansen's critique of Endnotes' conception of mediation and the composition problem: it cannot provide a materialist account of class formation without attending to the common problem of reproduction.<sup>21</sup>

“... proletarians have to reproduce themselves through exchange. However, this gives us nothing but the abstract social form through which labor is reproduced; indeed the ways in which labor takes this form are innumerable. Behind the common problem of the proletarians (dispossession of means of re/production) and their common 'solution' (money) lies a manifold of heterogeneous modes of life through which the proletarian condition can and must be lived.”<sup>22</sup>

These modes of life may indeed be yoked to money, directly and indirectly through the wage, but their concrete character is not necessarily doubled in its abstract social character, as in the production process. As survival and subsistence activities, modes of reproduction do not therefore express their unification as a practical truth. For the process of class formation/deformation, their effects are more immediate and historically circumscribed. Salar Mohandesi calls this the “constellation of intersecting mediations” involved in class formation.<sup>23</sup> But this is still not quite right. “Mediation” may be strictly accurate, in that these reproductive activities, survival strategies, and modes of life mediate the reproduction the class in the abstract. But class formation—that is, subjectivity—is not identical to this abstract homogeneity. Subjectivity is a process that unfolds on a more immediate plane. It is practical and tangible, formed through the burdens of daily life. Indeed, it is quite possible for abstract class relations to be expressed in the concrete formations of social intercourse that more readily take the form of family, neighborhood, community organization, race, religion, ethnicity, age, etc. Phil Neel has argued that the crisis of class belonging unfolds over time and so takes on a generational character that is far more discernible to the disaffected than the abstract categories of class politics.<sup>24</sup> This is also true over the *longue durée*, in which class belonging becomes legible in the lived histories of race, colony, or gender. Even if these coordinates shift over time, they are the stuff from which modes of life are made.

Subjectivity is wrought from the concrete. In the process of production, as we have seen, the concrete labor process takes difference as its basis and reproduces it fresh through its integration into the division of labor. The abstract character of labor—in the valorization process—of course dominates here and continuously revolutionizes the concrete character of labor as well, deskilling and displacing labor, increasing intensity and productivity, extending the duration of work. Production is able to achieve a concrete unity to a degree. This is the basis for a relatively stable workers' movement, when production is booming, expanding, and extending its lines. The same is not true of reproduction. Absent the direct discipline of socially necessary labor-time, the abstract character of capitalist domination remains quite abstract. The concrete “mediations” of social reproduction are simply that—the concrete experiences of those caught up in them. This is even more the case in regions where industry and manufacturing retreat, only to be replaced the direct violence of the state, which maintains the borders of social life quite discretely. It is

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<sup>21</sup> Bue Rübner Hansen. 2015. “Surplus Population, Social Reproduction, and the Problem of Class Formation.” *Viewpoint, Issue 5: Social Reproduction*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/surplus-population-social-reproduction-and-the-problem-of-class-formation/>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Mohandesi, “Class Consciousness or Class Composition” 81.

<sup>24</sup> Neel, *Hinterlands*, 188.

not at all a given that these bubbles of reproduction, no matter how restive, will eventually percolate to the surface in a collective burst. This strategic coalescence remains a chimera, for now. Reproduction is as much a constraint as a possibility.

In considering these problems, we take as instructive Marx's analysis of the French peasantry and countryside in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

“The small peasant proprietors form an immense mass, the members of which live in the same situation but do not enter into manifold relationships with each other. Their mode of operation isolates them instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse... Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient; it directly produces the greater part of its own consumption and therefore obtains its means of life more through exchange with nature than through intercourse with society. The smallholding, the peasant and the family; next door, another smallholding, another peasant and another family... potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of the other classes and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class. In so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links or a political organization, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name... They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”<sup>25</sup>

Marx was wary of this representation. In the context of a declining peasantry, which had experienced a relative advance, prosperity, and security under the First Empire, after decades of heavy tax burden and agricultural appropriation at the hands of the Absolutist state,<sup>26</sup> Marx argued that the representation of the peasantry found its adequate form in Louis Bonaparte. There is a homology here with the cautioning Neel gives to “oaths of blood,” albeit under quite different historical circumstances and class configuration. Unable to find practical unification as a class, other mediations are able to intervene from above. What can we today say of the “identity” of proletarian interests? Does it too fail to produce a feeling of community or political organization? The total lack of real and sustained cohesion and confusion of organizational strategies would suggest as much. As some more conventional communists remind us, this is indeed the problem of our time.<sup>27</sup> Where they may look to organization as such, we think our present concern is of the first order: to what extent is the proletariat a class that can even be composed through its self-organization? Lenin had one answer to this. The council communists another. Each was the product of its moment and place. Today, when the hopes for return to economic growth seem dim at best, the political composition of the class has been eclipsed by its irregular but persistent erosion in the noisy sphere of reproduction.

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx. 2019. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.” *The Political Writings*. Verso. 573.

<sup>26</sup> See Xavier Lafrance. 2020. *The Making of Capitalism in France: Class Structures, Economic Development, the State and the Formation of the French Working Class, 1750–1914*. Haymarket Books; Ellen Meiksins Wood. 2002. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. Verso.; Robert Brenner. 1976. “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe.” *Past & Present* 70(1): 30–75.

<sup>27</sup> Communist Caucus, “Proletarian Disorganization”

Marx's concern with the French peasantry was a concern over their political subjectivity. Their common toil on the land was for him insufficient to produce the structure of feeling necessary for their composition to be practically expressed in organization. This is also the context necessary to understand Marx's infamous critique of the lumpenproletariat. Unable to secure reproduction through common means, the lumpenproletariat turned to "dubious means of subsistence" which taken in aggregate formed "the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither."<sup>28</sup> Their uneven modes of survival made them peculiar in their susceptibility to coordination from on high. This was how Bonaparte's Society of December 10 was able to organize the rabble, by offering a common organization of social reproduction through demagoguery, bribes, and charity. Social reproduction is not given, even less so does it amalgamate as an automatic process. Hansen calls this the contingency of reproduction, a mercurial form of existence hemmed in by the reach of the economy, in which social affinities crystallize and "melt away."<sup>29</sup>

In the formal networks of capitalist production, extraction and refinement processes, manufacturing lines, supply chains, transport routes, logistics, infrastructure all produce and reproduce vectors of socialization, even if limited and uneven. This combination remains an essential part of the total flow of business and the balancing of ledgers. It is both a compulsion and a plan that aims to "ride" price signals to maximize profitability. The systematic and efficient combinations of sectors and firms, the forecasting of orders, output, and costs of production, the reorganization of material flows to match the dictates of value—these are all technical arrangements that socialize labor as well as discipline it.<sup>30</sup> If, in contrast, we take the state of dispossession as the primary social arrangement of capitalist reproduction, all that is solid melts into air. Because capital does not for the most part directly organize social reproduction, it does not conform to standards of price and profitability that begrudgingly necessitate some degree of proletarian socialization. There is nothing technically given in proletarian reproduction other than the availability of greater or lesser pools of labor-power. On the contrary, because labor market segmentation is required for capital to have flexibility in its command of labor, the profit-imperative tends to *desocialize* labor, despite the indirect pressures it exerts on indirectly-market mediated activities.<sup>31</sup> Here, wage discipline must contend with the organization of survival activities through patriarchy, the family, state services, residential segregation, or colonial reserves and allotments.<sup>32</sup> The organization of kin relations—the primary historical site of social reproduction—has long been within the purview of capital, but it has never been able to subsume it, in the proper sense,<sup>33</sup> because capital does not directly discipline these activities through the wage. It instead forms a large part of the material community of capital, because these activities cannot escape the economy as such, and must be indirectly-market mediated. This peculiar configuration does not ensure any given form of socialization or communication, which are so critical to the process of class formation and subjectivity in the value chains of production.

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<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 531.

<sup>29</sup> Hansen, "Surplus Population, Social Reproduction, and the Problem of Class Formation."

<sup>30</sup> This is why Angry Workers has placed so much political emphasis on this process of recombination.

<sup>31</sup> This phenomenon is characterized by Endnotes in "The Logic of Gender"

<sup>32</sup> These alternative forms of reproduction are explored well in M.E. O'Brien, 2023. *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care*. Pluto Books.

<sup>33</sup> See Endnotes, "A History of Subsumption"

It was this tendency towards disaggregation and stubborn isolation that lead Marx to his hesitancy regarding the lumpenproletariat and peasantry. As Hansen argues, whatever validity this interpretation may have possessed was historically eclipsed when new forms of communication and transport averted the necessity of representation from above, in the figure of a Bonaparte.<sup>34</sup> This may be true to an extent, but on the other hand it is also clear from the history of the workers' movement itself that the socialization brought with technological modernization was always limited and predicated on the social exclusion of late comers from the colonial periphery and countryside. What Hansen observes then as coherence in the form of social reproduction was in fact the early stages of de-peasantization—its own transient form of socialization—from which self-organization and revolt could flow. This has unfortunately little application for the problem of composition today.

The whole issue of class composition is first of all conjunctural. To retain its social validity, it requires a schema of periodization and with it an understanding of capitalist development. Hansen does not make this clear, and so tends to equivocate when turning to the many ways that the common problem of reproduction is lived and survived. He rightly critiques much communization theory for leaving a materialist gap in strategy, and, we would add, emphasizing the constraints of class belonging without adequately mapping how the differential navigation of reproduction presents a limiting factor *before* the glass floor of production. When faced with the task of abolishing these separations, Hansen falls back on a maximalist approach: “anything and everything” that is a strategy of survival and reproduction.<sup>35</sup> He sees then one aspect of the evolution of Black Panthers, its survival programs, from illicit economies to “powerful municipal election campaigns” as a trajectory of reproductive struggle that untethers the grip of the internal colonial, and thus class, separation. While he chides Endnotes and communization theory generally for not taking seriously these racialized and anti-colonial struggles and forms of survival as practices of class formation among surplus populations, he himself fails to recognize the limitations of “community organization” when the economy has inserted itself everywhere in the field of reproduction. In the case of the BPP, Hansen does not account for how the growth of its survival programs shifted into formal electoral politics precisely when the state had introduced organized concessions (e.g., the Philadelphia Plan, Affirmative Action, increased political and educational representation, Baby Boomer GIs benefiting from the GI Bill, federal guarantees on student loans) that undermined the BPP’s capacity to appeal to black communities as the only guarantor of survival or mobility. The result was a bifurcation of the Party into an increasingly electoralist and centralist wing and an increasingly militant armed faction that would become the Black Liberation Army.<sup>36</sup> Without understanding this conjuncture as a period capitalist restruc-

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<sup>34</sup> “...a movement which develops the technical means and organizational forms through which peasants can communicate and link up is one that will abolish the need for a representative and enable the peasantry to represent itself. And indeed most of the successful revolutions and anti-colonial struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – in China most paradigmatically – were to a large extent successful due to the central involvement of peasant, party due to a communist re-appreciation of the peasantry, and due in part to the increased capacity of transportation and communication and thus coordination due to telegraphs, telephones, railways, cars, etc.” Hansen, “Surplus Population, Social Reproduction, and the Problem of Class Formation.”

<sup>35</sup> “Our task cannot be to search for the equation that will give us the result we want, but to explore the maximal possibilities of abolitions of separations here and now, between us and between us and our means of reproduction – be it through riots and affinity groups, mutual aid and autonomous zones or through taking municipal or state power.”

<sup>36</sup> Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin. 2016. *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*. University of California Press

turing and the last gasp of social democratic programs that would be unravelled over the coming decades, Hansen takes the forms of social reproduction out of their context, instrumentalizing them as anti-capitalist without view to their historical content.

Given this wider historical view of capitalist development, it should be no surprise that the disintegration of the workers' movement would be accompanied by an increase in residential, economic, workplace, and school segregation.<sup>37</sup> This is far from a return to the Jim Crow era patterns of migration, urbanization, and containment. This earlier rise in segregation was the result of rapid economic growth combined with a legacy of racial slavery and subsequent racialized de-agrarianization. The combination of urbanization and de-agrarianization was characterized most strongly by mechanisms of racial sorting at the household level, and therefore impacted rural and urban regions relatively evenly through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> Today, however, increases in segregation since the late 1970s and especially after 1[990] are driven by patterns of de-industrialization and the re-territorialization of manufacturing, the rise of the FIRE sector, municipal crises and the decline of public housing, and new patterns of migration. Racial sorting persists, but is no longer buoyed by economic growth or a rising capacity for homeownership. Demographic changes now tend to reflect real estate speculation, lending practices and mortgage disparities, rising rents, access to affordable housing, and household debt-burden. 81 percent of metropolitan regions in the US have undergone an increase in segregation over the last 30 years on this basis.<sup>39</sup> This pattern is most pronounced in the industrial midwest and mid-Atlantic, whereas in the southern states it is relatively less pronounced over the same time period, registering the general re-territorialization of industry from the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt. Beyond the mid-Atlantic, regions with high concentrations of the "new compositions"—high technology, venture capital, information and services, biotechnology, e-commerce, logistics and transport, and real estate—such as the west coast, also experience high rates of segregation.<sup>40</sup> This appears to be a global convergence, rather than an American exception, in the collapsing of core and periphery characterized by waves of "early" or "premature" de-industrialization all throughout the capitalist world.<sup>41</sup> As the general downward movement of immiseration unfolds, segregation grows in a paradoxical concert of diversification and polarization. In the United States, racial and ethnic diversity has been on the rise over this period, largely as the result of migration, itself the product of violent capitalist restructuring and de-agrarianization throughout Central

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Menendian, Arthur Gales, and Samir Gambhir. 2021. "The Roots of Structural Racism: Twenty-First Century Racial Residential Segregation in the United States." *Berkeley: University of California, Othering and Belonging Institute*.; Gary Orfield and Danielle Jarvie. 2020. "Black Segregation Matters: School Resegregation and Black Educational Opportunity." *Civil Rights Project-Proyecto Derechos Civiles*.

<sup>38</sup> Racial sorting is descriptive, but does not explain the mechanism itself. They were generally the combined effects of white flight, citizen's councils, restrictive covenants, redlining, and public-private partnerships in real estate and public housing. See Trevon D. Logan and John M. Parman. 2017. "The National Rise in Residential Segregation." *The Journal of Economic History* 77(1): 127–170.; Allison Shertzer, and Randall P. Walsh. 2019. "Racial Sorting and the Emergence of Segregation in American Cities." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 101(3): 415–427.; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. 2018. "How Real Estate Segregated America." *Dissent* 65(4): 23–32.

<sup>39</sup> Menendian, Gales, and Gambhir, "The Roots of Structural Racism"

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Maarten Van Ham, Tiit Tammaru, Rūta Ubarevičienė, and Heleen Janssen, eds. 2021. *Urban Socio-Economic Segregation and Income Inequality: A Global Perspective*. Springer Nature.; See also Phil Neel. 2022. "Broken Circle: Premature Deindustrialization, Chinese Capital Exports, and the Stumbling Development of New Territorial Industrial Complexes." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 102: 94–123.; and Benavav, *Automation and the Future of Work*.

America. The implementation of the Fair Housing Act has reduced racial homogeneity, in terms of all-black or all-white regions, but these things are largely a matter of scale and methods of measurement.<sup>42</sup> In our era, some of the most diverse regions in the country are also the most segregated. The same holds true in the rural hinterlands, though the phenomena is more diffuse and not quite as legible.<sup>43</sup> There is a word to describe this *polarization amidst diversification*, one that some neo-workerists have slandered as mere academicism. On the contrary, we think it accurately describes the real boundaries of social reproduction today: any materialist account of reproduction in the composition of struggle must contend with this fact of *atomization*.

The atomization of social reproduction is the fate of capitalist reproduction and responds to its increasingly craven impulses. So it remains entirely possible for heterogeneous survival strategies to be integrated into the circuit of capitalist reproduction, thereby *remaining* separated, while simultaneously being driven by community involvement for well-being, relief, and resilience, all while being organized under anti-capitalist slogans. This is often referred to as “recuperation,” but that characterization feels too conspiratorial and not nearly precise enough. It is more illuminating to view the problem of reproduction from the perspective of economic development. In actual fact, the self-organization of survival has been linked to state provision and state-led social reproduction for some time, largely for the purposes of generating employment in ailing industrial sectors and facilitating the development of infrastructure, predicated on a delicate balance of interests between the state and civil society. As we have already seen, the emergence of civic action and nonprofit organizational capacity during the mid-20th century indexed a shift in this balance. Profitability crisis brought fiscal crisis brought increased privatization of provision. Social reproduction and relief was passed off increasingly to “civil society” for it to handle through privatized and market-mediated provisioning, in the form of “resilience,” “mutual aid,” “community action,” or “community self-defense.” Essential as these forms of struggle may be as both modes of survival and socialization, they by and large operate entirely through the market and buttress the tottering, austere, and debt-ridden state.<sup>44</sup> These more atomized forms of social reproduction are more targeted and thus far cheaper, despite often having a contradictory posture towards capitalism and the state. Peer Illner characterizes this dynamic in the state response to crisis and disaster:

“Since the 1970s, we are thus confronted with the following double movement, relative to the spheres of the state and civil society. On the state level, a movement of integration, in which formerly specialist authority on disasters is relinquished and the vernacular skills and capacities of the people are drawn on during calamities. On the social level, a moment of exclusion, indexed by cuts to social spending and the exponentially rising unemployment that raised the number of so-called surplus populations, those permanently excluded from wage labour, to staggering dimensions. The inclusion on the level of participatory policies is thus undergirded by a growing and profound exclusion of people from the basic possibility of reproducing themselves. Let me reformulate this development as a hypothesis regarding emergencies today: Since the economic crisis of the 1970s, disasters have served as occasions that

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<sup>42</sup> Menendian, Gailles, and Gambhir, “The Roots of Structural Racism”

<sup>43</sup> Neel, Hinterlands, 70–74.

<sup>44</sup> The essential study here is Peer Illner. 2021. *Disasters and Social Reproduction: Crisis Response Between the State and Community*. Pluto Books.



absorb the reproductive labour of surplus populations as unwaged inputs, allowing the US state to cut back on social spending. While this development is a disaster for civil society, since it exposes communities to fend for themselves without support by the state, it is also, potentially, a disaster for the state, since austerity at the same time creates the forces that may contest it.”

Today, as social reproduction increasingly finds itself mediated by compounding disasters, the capillarization of discrete “disaster communities” suggest the reach of capital is both total and diffuse.<sup>45</sup> These conditions have for half a century given rise to new forms of engagement and subversion overdetermined by manufacturing overcapacity, fiscal crisis management, racial regimes of exclusion, and geographic containment, demonstrating that separation is a *condition* of revolt, whether in its more spectacular or subtle forms, but it is also its *result*. It is thus entirely possible—even more likely—for social reproduction struggles to open back into the material community of capital, rather than point to a way out of the separations. As Chuang notes of the composition problem: “*the path-of-least-resistance for a conflict is rarely communist in character.*”<sup>46</sup> If there is a unifying feature of reproductive strategies and conflicts, it is that they tend to unfold along such paths. Even the most illegible or opaque forms of opposition in daily life are mediated at least indirectly by market dependency—the shinier side of dispossession. In the absence of explicitly communist measures—those with an *expropriative* character—the fetter remains. Antagonism to the state often expresses this contradiction, as its twinned features of austerity and direct violence tend to foster alternatives mode of life on the basis of the economy, whether formal or illicit.<sup>47</sup>

So it would seem that composition in the sphere of reproduction finds itself pressed against the same limit as “alternativism”: there are no alternatives, only capital, and all that and so on. While there is certainly a similar Robinsonade quality at work in some literary romanticism over reproduction strategies,<sup>48</sup> applied here this characterization misses the point entirely. It is not that the sphere of reproduction occupies a liminal space, at the boundary of capitalism and its exit. With few exceptions, the totality of strategies that confront the commonality of reproduction belong to capital, they cannot escape from the economy by virtue of their repetition or propagation. What matters is grasping how these necessary contingency measures form the basis of daily life, including consumption, education, socialization, belonging, communication, care, shelter, and support, but also terror, violence, and discipline,<sup>49</sup> from which subjectivity crystallizes in fragments. With the unevenness of employment and irregularity and decline of average job tenure, the prospects that a counter-socialization of worker or proletarian identity can eclipse

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<sup>45</sup> We import this term from Out of the Woods Collective. Out of the Woods Collective. 2020. *HOPE AGAINST HOPE: WRITINGS ON ECOLOGICAL CRISIS*. Common Notions.

<sup>46</sup> Chuang, “No Way Forward, No Way Back”

<sup>47</sup> Kirin Agustin Rajagopalan provides an excellent conjunctural and geo-historical analysis of the East Oakland Flatlands in this regard, which in many ways serves as a template for “compositional inquiry” that takes seriously the problems of social disintegration and containment of social reproduction. Kirin Agustin Rajagopalan. 2023. “From Below and to the East: Notes on Crisis, Dispossession, and Containment in East Oakland’s Flatlands.” *Ampersand: An American Studies Journal* II(2). <https://sites.bu.edu/ampersandjournal/2023/09/06/kirin-agustin-rajagopalan/>

<sup>48</sup> Per Henriksson. 2011. “Marcel Crusoe’s ex-communists in Intermundia. Notes on the discussion about communisation.” *Riff-Raff 9: Kommunisering*. <https://www.riff-raff.se/texts/en/marcel-crusoe-s-ex-communists-in-intermundia>

<sup>49</sup> This is a crucial point emphasized by O’Brien. See *Family Abolition*.

this fragmentation remain dim.<sup>50</sup> Analyses of composition must begin from these constraints. Strategy is designed with an eye to both limitations and the possibilities that they stage. Given the uneven geography of reproduction, those possibilities may take manifold forms.

## Ecology, Territory, and the Land Question

A characteristic feature of segregation not necessarily represented in measures of inequality is its spatial extension. Migration, spatial sorting, and geographic isolation are central components and mechanisms of social atomization, the concentration and polarization through which segregation manifests today. These spatial distributions of social species has only increased following the Great Recession and is a feature of both urban and rural regions.<sup>51</sup> Patterns of social fragmentation are also strongly correlated with topology, land use patterns, and geographic barriers.<sup>52</sup> This especially makes sense when we understand social intercourse and composition to be a form of metabolic exchange with the environment—the human and nonhuman conditions of existence.<sup>53</sup> That the course of capitalist development should take hold of social reproduction and universalize it under the conditions of its concrete separation raises questions as to how ecology, place, and territory figure into the common problem. There is a notable homology between these social and historical processes of separation, sorting, and reproductive isolation, and the ecological and evolutionary processes of speciation dependent on reproductive discontinuity, allopatry, and temporal separation. These mechanisms are both “internal” and “external,” with the combined result of speciation. Species are the result of speciating processes, not their cause.<sup>54</sup> Social *kinds* of belonging—through race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc—are likewise the *result* of forms of reproduction under given historical conditions (for our purposes, capitalism). If these sorting processes both have a geographic extension, it is worth pausing to consider how ecology and territory fit into the fractured processes of composition that we have been examining thus far as purely “social” phenomena. Both “social” and “biological” discontinuity have been essential in the development of capitalism.<sup>55</sup> Our wager here is that the specific interactions of these discontinuities *remains* essential for the reproduction of capitalism through the processes of composition. This is the ecological problem. It thus makes little sense to speak of political composition without regards to the spatial, territorial, and ecological. We add to this another thesis: viewing the ecological problem through the problem of composition reveals certain fissures in

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<sup>50</sup> Henry Farber. 2010. “Job Loss and the Decline in Job Security in the United States.” In *Labor in the New Economy*, Katharine G. Abraham, James R. Spletzer, and Michael Harper, eds. University of Chicago Press: 223–62.;

<sup>51</sup> Daniel T. Lichter, Domenico Parisi, and Michael C. Taquino. 2012. “The Geography of Exclusion: Race, Segregation, and Concentrated Poverty.” *Social Problems* 59(3): 364–388.

<sup>52</sup> Gergő, Tóth, Johannes Wachs, Riccardo Di Clemente, Ákos Jakobi, Bence Ságvári, János Kertész, and Balázs Lengyel. 2021. “Inequality is Rising Where Social Network Segregation Interacts with Urban Topology.” *Nature Communications* 12(1): 1143.

<sup>53</sup> Though we have our issues, the most developed accounts come from Kohei Saito and Søren Mau. Kohei Saito. 2017. *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*. NYU Press.; Man, *Mute Compulsion*.

<sup>54</sup> There is more to be said on the species debates. For those interested, see by John Wilkins. 2009. *Species: A History of the Idea*. University of California Press.; Quentin D. Wheeler and Rudolf Meier. 2000. *Species Concepts and Phylogenetic Theory: A Debate*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Noske. 1997. *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*. University of Chicago Press.

the capitalist reproduction process, cracks in the glass floor that may precipitate from the sphere of reproduction.

At first glance, this may not come as an unfamiliar observation. Neil Gray has argued for the relevance of a practice of “territorial inquiry” to supplement Notes from Below’s conception of social composition.<sup>56</sup> He takes a keen interest in the spatial composition of capital, which he borrows from Alberto Toscano, as regards new forms of investment (capital switching) in the “tertiary” sector and its impact on urbanization. His thesis of “territorial inquiry” is presented as a supplementary measure to more traditional workers’ inquiries, and is to be conducted primarily through housing struggles in order to grasp how workers are sorted in their reproductive environs and *exploited* there. Consequentially, we view this as distinct from a concept of territorial *composition*. It may be a necessary advance on understanding the relationship between class formation and place, but it is quite narrow and insufficient to capture how territoriality differentially composes belonging. This is evidenced through Gray’s case of how territorial inquiry might support political “massification” and base building, conforming to the general objectives of Notes from Below. What he sees in “urbanization” (which is here quite under-theorized and overly-simplified) is a new technical unification of the working class as exploited through rising rents, a more homogenous composition that might overcome the heterogeneity of labor processes after the era of the “mass worker.” This is a fairly traditional workerist account, and as such regards any differentiated reproduction as secondary. But it is precisely here that a more generative conception of territorial composition is to be found.

As we previously discussed, Hugh Farrell also gestures at something like a territorial composition. It is through a “connection” to and defense of a particular place that the “transvaluation of value” occurs, which is the driving force of his strategy of composition.<sup>57</sup> He is not quite explicit here, but the suggestion is that the compositional strategy opens up new forms of belonging mediated by new relationships that *include* the nonhuman. In the Atlanta Forest, for example, he argues that “new traditions emerge specific to the forest, and provide a basis for new forms of connection and kinship.”<sup>58</sup> He appears to making a similar argument to our own, that relation to place is part of the constellation of forces that shape composition. But, as we noted in Part Two, Farrell is primarily interested in composition as a practice suspended from the material conditions of its reproduction—a kite without a string. These forms of connection and kinship are thus treated quite insubstantially and ahistorically, providing a rather vague picture of how these belongings are integrated into the mesh of metabolic separation. The conceptual obscurity permits Farrell to collate a diverse range of land struggles based purely on a reading of their strategic and tactical form. Indigenous defense of territorial waters is treated interchangeably with “Zadism,” with its conflicts between agrarian artisanal production and urban radicalism, or more generally the “Blockadias” that attract of the likes of Naomi Klein or Bill McKibben.<sup>59</sup> What appears as a

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<sup>56</sup> Gray, “Notes Towards a Practice of Territorial Inquiry”

<sup>57</sup> Farrell, “The Strategy of Composition.” For a more extensive critique of Farrell, see above.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Gilles Dauvé does not hold back his sharp tongue for Blockadia or the ZAD: “The multiplication of ZADs will no more block the “global” than the positions formerly acquired by organized labor (mutual funds, associations, cooperatives, unions and parties) have dismantled capitalism. As much as the ZADs are often a place of positive confrontations, so much the zadisme spreads the illusion that the ecological questions would offer a privileged ground for a “united front” in an arm wrestling with the State, as long as one choose the right methods of combat. This is to forget that no emergency has in itself a unifying power and vector of change.” Gilles Dauvé. 2020. “Pommes de terre contre gratte-ciel.” *DDT21*. [https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page\\_id=3056](https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page_id=3056)

convergence of methods masks a divergence of social practices and material compositions, which is also to say relations of reproduction and with the land. Whatever transvaluation occurs here in the Robinsonades of composition, it may be ethical or metaphysical, but it is not practical.

The possibility of non-capitalist ways of being in relation to the non-human conditions of life has been popularized among certain North American anarchist and communist circles by Tiqqun and its progeny. This usually appears in their works as “forms of life,” an ontological notion borrowed from Giorgio Agamben intended to capture ways of being that escape the law, the biopolitical state, or the state of exception exemplified Agamben’s concept of “bare life.” Tiqqun would frequently gesture at forms of life that escape domination, or are opaque to the modern state. There is nothing new here, as far as utopian visions are concerned. What is of present interest is how Tiqqun’s formulation is intended to preserve relation to place, to land, to other-than-human intercourse. This plays a role in their thesis of destitution. Autonomous forms of life both destroy and create alternatives.<sup>60</sup> If the commune is the form, these “forms of life” are its ethical content. It is this aspect of their work in particular that has been most influential in some territorial defense campaigns in Europe<sup>61</sup> and later in North America, represented most clearly in the collective *Inhabit*. *Inhabit* sees these campaigns as footholds in the establishment of “autonomous zones,” or “ungovernable zones” of “ethical encounter” with other forms of life, that will expand and “exit this untenable way of life.”<sup>62</sup> This is quite explicitly ecological in its political orientation, as is their invitation to “inhabit the earth.”<sup>63</sup> This is not simply an acknowledgement of nonhuman species, but a program of establishing ways of being on the land that preclude domination or “governability.”

That all sounds nice, but unfortunately it does not actually mean anything. Leon de Mattis points out that these vague calls for “making common” have no historical substance because they presume the beings involved to be transhistorical actors, and so also the social relations between them:

“But ‘relations of production’ are no more relations between forms of life or worlds than they are relations between persons. The entities which are linked by ‘relations of production’ are just those which the same relations define: it is the position in the relation of production which determines the entities, and not the contrary. Relations of production are relations between classes.”<sup>64</sup>

We would add the qualification that relations of productions are also relations *within* classes, with a special eye towards how classes are constituted through division and relations of domination that are not immediately linked to exploitation. Still, this critique rings true because it captures the essential problem with utopian thinking in general: whatever possibilities exist for

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<sup>60</sup> For examples, see Tiqqun, “Theses on the Imaginary Party,” “Introduction to Civil War,” or “The Cybernetic Hypothesis,” *The Call*, and *The Invisible Committee, Now*

<sup>61</sup> See the work of Mauvaise Troupe Collective.

<sup>62</sup> *Inhabit. Inhabit: Instructions for Autonomy*, 28–29. <https://inhabit.global/tools/inhabit-instructions-for-autonomy>

<sup>63</sup> “We are becoming ungovernable—unbeholden to their merciless law, their crumbling infrastructure, their vile economy, and their spiritually broken culture. We violently stake a claim in happiness—that life resides in our material power, in our refusal to be managed, in our ability to inhabit the earth, in our care for each other, and in our encounters with all forms of life that share these ethical truths.” *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>64</sup> Leon de Mattis, “Reflections on ‘The Call’”

the production of communism, they are given only by the conditions as they exist today, not by some shared commitment to “ethical truths.”<sup>65</sup> This is the general problem of the “communist camp” and today it finds definite form in the program of Inhabit, the contemplative asceticism of Dispositions,<sup>66</sup> or in the strategy of composition. The social actors—be they anarchist, anti-authoritarian, communist—are given a wide berth from the relations of production that determine them, and so given the license and indulgence to carry out new forms of life as a matter of ethical consistency that is immanent to their being. This pure immanence has no history, no class conflict, no colonial legacy, no racial or gendered domination. It is quite easy then to draw the conclusions that this politics amounts to a white-washed, settler apologia for adventurism, escapism, alternativism, or worse, settlement and apartheid itself.<sup>67</sup>

We arrive back at the ecological problem, which raises the spectre of metabolism: how can non-capitalist form of social reproduction and interspecies intercourse emerge from a world totally enclosed by capital? Perhaps a better question would ask, inversely, whether there remain any elements of cultural knowledge, socialization, and practical metabolism with the ecological conditions of life that can serve as a basis for the production of communism, here and now, as historically given conditions, the slag of uneven and combined development.

In his correspondence with Vera Zasulich, Marx stressed that the whole movement of capital begins with the separation of producers from the soil. Moreover, he points out to the early Russian social democrat that in the absence of relations of private property, the “historical fatality” of the agrarian capitalist transition and mass expropriation of peasants does not apply.<sup>68</sup> Yet, the growth of capitalist relations remained an immanent global threat, not because it is endogenous everywhere, but because of the corrosive influence or “solvent effect” of capitalist market forces.<sup>69</sup> If capitalism is a historical form of social metabolism, this is one of its most potent catabolic tendencies. On a global scale, succumbing to capitalism was less about an autochthonous cast of characters following a template. It was rather the threat of market dependence being imposed from the outside and above under accelerating pressures to match productivity set by leading capitalist firms. This is why the state became more a central mediator in the process, and, as Marx called it, “an enemy to be beaten.”<sup>70</sup> These were essentially the terms of debate set for the *mir* and *obshchina*, the possibility of a “leap” over capitalism to communism by *defending* particular communal relations of primary production that had not yet been exposed to market dependence. Marx sometimes referred to this as the “natural economy,” but this of course too vague. Toward the latter decades of his life, after the publication of *Capital*, it seems Marx’s interests turned increasingly towards the questions of metabolic relations, ecology, and noncapitalist modes of life. This period delivered not only his letters to Vera Zasulich, but also the well-known *Ethnological*

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<sup>65</sup> “Being ‘alternative’ consists in the belief that we can, with limited numbers of people, establish relations within the world of capital which would be already a prefiguration of communism (even if one doesn’t use this term). The inverse position holds that, as long capital as a social relation is not abolished, nothing which can resemble communism can be lived.... Communism, rather than being produced collectively and universally by the proletariat destroying capital in forms that we cannot determine in advance, is predefined by the configurations that one can give it today, in the very heart of the world of capital.” Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Dispositions. 2020. *Re-Attachments: Towards An Ecology Of Presence*. <https://illwill.com/re-attachments>

<sup>67</sup> These points and others have all been made well in “Another Word for Settle.”

<sup>68</sup> Shanin, *Late Marx*

<sup>69</sup> Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 451

<sup>70</sup> Karl Marx. 1881. “The Marx-Zasulich Correspondence.” <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol08/no10/marx-zas.htm>

*Notebooks*, and the lesser known notebooks on natural sciences that Kohei Saito has termed “the ecological notebooks.”<sup>71</sup> It seems now irrefutable that Marx understood capitalism to be a particular form of metabolic exchange with the ecological conditions of life, and that he took more of an interest in the possibilities for communist revolution as a defense of non-capitalist relations to place. This is not to say that he thought of communism as identical with the *mir*, or the “natural” kinship-based economies of the Haudenosaunee.<sup>72</sup> That would be at best a gross overstatement and simplification.<sup>73</sup> At worst, it ignores Marx’s persistent chauvinism towards non-Western peoples.<sup>74</sup> What it does indicate, however, is that communist prospects are geographically and historically situated, and more specifically grounded by particular kinds of relations to the land. Now, as the planetary complex is thrown out of balance and the whole of the earth has been brought under the heel of capitalist production and extraction, those prospects are quite different, and would be entirely unrecognizable to Marx.<sup>75</sup> Communism must fundamentally be an agrarian revolution, a restoration of metabolic continuity on a new historical basis.<sup>76</sup> The problem of composition is a problem of metabolism.

Communists have grappled with this problem historically as “the agrarian question.” Following the revolutionary defeats of 1848, communists fixated on rural populations and agrarian relations as essentially instrumental to the class struggle. While those debates typically focused on rural populations as either reactionary pariahs or keys to revolutionary success, a closer examination of the concrete relations of reproduction in the countryside reveals that the real substance of the “agrarian question” lay in the question of property. Marx observed that capitalist development would “[squander] the the vitality of the soil,” and this concern became something of a signpost for Marxists of the Second International, especially those agitating for revolutionary programs in predominantly agrarian countries. Both Kautsky and Lenin, for example, understood the process of capital concentration and centralization to be rapidly dissolving the peasantry and landed aristocracy in newly industrializing regions (Germany and Russia, respectively) at a rate that far surpassed the protracted agrarian revolution in England around which Marx developed his schema on the genesis of the capitalist farmer. For Kautsky, this signaled the irrelevance of the peasantry to the program of the Social Democratic Party, who could only politically mobilize the proletariat through the march of this historical “progress.” The peasantry for Kautsky were fundamentally reactionary. This is both because he understood industrial production to be

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<sup>71</sup> Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*

<sup>72</sup> John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Hannah Holleman. 2020. “Marx and the Indigenous.” *Monthly Review*. <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/02/01/marx-and-the-indigenous/>; Franklin Rosemont. 1989. “Karl Marx and the Iroquois.” <https://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-iroquois-franklin-rosemont>

<sup>73</sup> For an archive of materials relating Marxism to indigenous struggle, see “Marxism & Indigenous Peoples,” <https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/marxism-indigenous-peoples/>

<sup>74</sup> Much has been made over Marx’s inheritance of Lewis Henry Morgan’s racialized anthropology. See, e.g., Fredy Perlman. 1983. *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/perlman-fredy/1983/against-his-story/chapter-2.html>; To what extent this aspect of Morgan’s work influenced Marx is speculative, but it is notable that he turned to an anthropological outlook at precisely the moment that he most forcefully articulated his *rejection* of the so-called “stage-ism” of social evolution, which he saw as fundamentally ahistorical and non-materialist.

<sup>75</sup> There is a good discussion of this in “Forest and Factory.”

<sup>76</sup> John Clegg and Rob Lucas. 2020. “Three Agricultural Revolutions.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119(1): 95–111; Endnotes. 2019. “Error.” *Endnotes 5: The Passions and the Interests*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/error.pdf>; Jasper Berns. 2018. “The Belly of the Revolution: Agriculture, Energy, and the Future of Communism.” In Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, eds. *Materialism and the Critique of Energy: Mediations* 31(2): 331–375.

replacing primary, agricultural production as the driving force of society, therefore marginalizing the peasantry as a political force, and because he understood peasant struggle as essentially *defensive* of the old regime, and thus conservative.<sup>77</sup> Lenin, for his part, began his study of the Russian transition with similar concerns, though drew a different political strategy.<sup>78</sup> We noted above that Lenin understood the rapid dissolution of the peasantry as a process of unification represented in the external enemy of the state, which wed agrarian populations to the urban social democratic program.

Historical results were of course mixed. Following the Russian Revolution and later the Chinese Revolution and the global process of decolonization, agrarian programs seemed increasingly critical to socialist transition. Given the historical pride of place occupied by processes of de-peasantization through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is to be expected that communist strategy would rest so heavily on the question of peasant organization. Capitalism is an agrarian regime, first and foremost. Yet the contradiction here is not the mere separation of town and country. The spatial character of this social conflict is real, but it masks a deeper issue at the heart of capital: “the antagonism between town and country can only exist within the framework of private property.”<sup>79</sup> The real historical content of this opposition is *capitalist* private property, of course, though this is only an inversion of the immutable laws of private property itself.<sup>80</sup> This property relation is both the premise and result of capitalist reproduction, the first historical expropriation of concern to Marx. This delivers the historical conditions for the “death knell” of private property itself, the second expropriation, but it also appears to position communism as *against* defensive struggles, with the assumption that the latter seek to reinstitute individual possession of means of production, smallholdings in land, or artisanal production. This contention is at the center of debates around the substance of “small farmers protests” around the world today.

As Bordiga forcefully reminded us, communism cannot be the ownership of the earth, no matter how small the parcels. He goes further, arguing that communism does away property as it

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<sup>77</sup> Karl Kautsky. 1988. *The Agrarian Question*. Pluto Press.

<sup>78</sup> Lenin, *The Development of Capitalist in Russia*.

<sup>79</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. 1845. *The German Ideology*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01c.htm>

<sup>80</sup> “It is quite evident from this that the laws of appropriation or of private property, laws based on the production and circulation of commodities, become changed into their direct opposite through their own internal and inexorable dialectic. The exchange of equivalents, the original operation with which we started, is now turned round in such a way that there is only an apparent exchange, since, firstly, the capital which is exchanged for labour-power is itself merely a portion of the product of the labour of others which has been appropriated without an equivalent; and, secondly, this capital must not only be replaced by its producer, the worker, but replaced together with an added surplus. The relation of exchange between capitalist and worker becomes a mere semblance belonging only to the process of circulation, it becomes a mere form, which is alien to the content of the transaction itself, and merely mystifies it. The constant sale and purchase of labour-power is the form; the content is the constant appropriation by the capitalist, without equivalent, of a portion of the labour of others which has already been objectified, and his repeated exchange of this labour for a greater quantity of the living labour of others. Originally the rights of property seemed to us to be grounded in a man’s own labour. Some such assumption was at least necessary, since only commodity-owners with equal rights confronted each other, and the sole means of appropriating the commodities of others was the alienation of a man’s own commodities, commodities which, however, could only be produced by labour. Now, however, property turns out to be the right, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labour of others or its product, and the impossibility, on the part of the worker, of appropriating his own product. The separation of property from labour thus becomes the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity. Therefore,\* however much the capitalist mode of appropriation may seem to fly in the face of the original laws of commodity production, it nevertheless arises, not from a violation of these laws but, on the contrary, from their application.” Marx, *Capital*, 729–730.

does away in practice with the individual human person, as society becomes subordinated to the reproduction of the species.<sup>81</sup> It is only this total integration of relations of reproduction into the mesh of society's productive apparatus that abolishes the distinction between town and country and the division of labor.<sup>82</sup> So long as ownership of the earth obtains—even in “socialist” form—the development of agrarian productivity carries a bourgeois, and thus transitory, content.<sup>83</sup> The only communist relation to the earth is one of usufruct, not for the individual, or even society, but for the “true human community.” We take the injunction against ownership in the earth quite seriously, though we discard the anthropomorphic communism that Bordiga derives from it. The problem is that a total integration into capital seems a prerequisite for either. The panic that sets in among Marxists around decolonization or peasant unrest is imbued with this presumption that only total integration can abolish private property. Any distinction between non-capitalist, “pre-capitalist,” or “petty capitalist” modes of life becomes blurred. All defensive reproduction struggles appear reactionary.<sup>84</sup> Thus, Bordiga cautioned against “the agrarian reflection of the proletarian revolution as an episode of redistribution or repartition of the land” or the “conquest of the land by the peasants.”<sup>85</sup> This might be missing the trees for the forest.

“Peasant” is a fraught and nebulous category, so it is difficult to draw forth such general prescriptions and expect them to have an invariant political substance. Modern “peasant studies” has typically characterized the peasantry in both ecological subsistence and class terms. That is, it takes “peasantness” to be a structural phenomenon, continued through particular relations of social reproduction.<sup>86</sup> Teodor Shanin's widely influential definition took peasants to be “small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power.”<sup>87</sup> Eric Wolf emphasized the significance of this surplus transfer, arguing that it marked the break between “primitive” rural modes of reproduction and “civilization.”<sup>88</sup> Still, these definitions tell us little about the kinds of social relations, cultural practices, or belief systems that mediated production and reproduction.<sup>89</sup> They do not even distinguish between communal usufruct, open-field agriculture, fee simple, land tenure, or sharecropping. It is with the transition to capitalism and market dependence that these different forms of peasant reproduction carry quite different political significance. Marx was neither the first or last

<sup>81</sup> We do not entirely agree with this point, but that is for future writings.

<sup>82</sup> Bordiga, “The Revolutionary Program of Communist Society”

<sup>83</sup> Bordiga, “The Revolutionary Program of Communist Society,” Goldner, “Communism is the Material Human Community,” and Loren Golder. 1995. “Amadeo Bordiga, the Agrarian Question and the International Revolutionary Movement.” *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 23(1): 73–100.

<sup>84</sup> It was, uncannily enough, precisely these traditions that gave the workers' movement its content. See Endnotes, “A History of Separation” and Chuang, “No Way Forward, No Way Back”

<sup>85</sup> Amadeo Bordiga. 1947. “The Revolutionary Workers Movement and the Agrarian Question.” <https://libcom.org/article/revolutionary-workers-movement-and-agrarian-question-amadeo-bordiga>. At the same time, Bordiga praised the communal relations of the Purépecha, contrasting their inheritance of “ancient communism” with “insipid modern individualism,” noting the features that would be carried over in modern communism. Amadeo Bordiga. 1961. “In Janitzio Death is not Scary.” *Il Programma Comunista* 23. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1961/janitzio.htm>

<sup>86</sup> See, e.g., Teodor Shanin. 1990. *Defining Peasants: Essays Concerning Rural Societies, Expolary Economies, and Learning from them in the Contemporary World*. Basil Blackwell.; Eric Wolf. 1966. *Peasants*. Prentice-Hall.

<sup>87</sup> Shanin, *Defining Peasants*.

<sup>88</sup> Wolf, *Peasants*

<sup>89</sup> Shanin thus characterized a very broad range of marginalized subsistence activities that fit the general definition.



to take note of this. In such an uneven and combined process, the *defensive* appearance of land struggles could take on a communistic character. Marx was aware, for instance, that three-fifths of the tilled agricultural lands of the Russian Empire were held in common through the *obshchina* social institution. He was also aware that there was nothing inherent to this institution that prevented it from increasing productivity by adopting more modern methods and equipment. On the contrary, the tax pressures of the state were the greatest impediment to yields and rural subsistence. He thus adopted his sympathetic attitude towards peasant insurrections and rural populism in this context, influenced also in part by his observations of the failures of the Paris Commune to penetrate the hinterlands.<sup>90</sup> Marx knew that the appropriation of land would be central to any communist program. He knew also that it would not be carried out by urban intelligentsia, but by those with practical experience on the land itself, even if their immediate interests were the defense of their ways of life. For Marx, there was nothing historically inevitable or progressive about rural expropriation, nor was there anything inevitable about capitalism itself. Capitalism is always the substitution of one form of private property for another. Where communal, egalitarian, and anarchic metabolisms persist, even in truncated forms, communism remains an immanent possibility, a red thread of history, rather than its final stage.

It is in this light that indigenous dispossession and the construction of settler economies of resource extraction and agricultural parcelization, along with what DuBois called the “counter-revolution of property” waged against reconstruction efforts can be seen as the original red scares.<sup>91</sup> Marx’s critique of “systematic colonization” in the final chapter of *Capital* is nothing if not a critique of settler capitalism—agrarian, patriarchal, even subsistence oriented—as an extension of the capital-dependent state by other means. It is in the last instance a metabolic inversion, the dissolution of many diverse (and often conflictual) forms of reproduction by small scale private property, the first step of the expropriation that births capitalism.<sup>92</sup> When and where capitalist relations take the form of the racial settler state, the agrarian question is transformed into a question of the land itself and the forms of relationality constitutive of it that capital threatens with annihilation.<sup>93</sup> In the United States, for example, the “agrarian question” and agrarian populism have been inseparable from the fate of indigenous peoples and black former slaves, farmers, and sharecroppers, as the Indian Wars, Black Reconstruction, and US industrialization coincided, pressing the fate of yeoman farmer between collapsing agricultural prices from above

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<sup>90</sup> Shanin, *Late Marx*; Ross, *Communal Luxury*

<sup>91</sup> “Red Scare” in this context has typically been used to describe political repression of Red Power during the 1960s and more recently anti-terrorism following protests of Idle No More and Standing Rock. See Joanne Barker. 2021. *Red Scare: The State’s Indigenous Terrorist*. University of California Press; Scott Rutherford. 2020. *Canada’s Other Red Scare: Indigenous Protest and Colonial Encounters During the Global Sixties*. McGill-Queen’s Press. We use it here in the sense advanced more generally by Nick Estes, but extended to include the history of racial slavery and Black Reconstruction.

<sup>92</sup> Hence, the centrality of legal forms that ensure the privatization of the land throughout the history of North American colonization. See Estes, *Our History is the Future*; Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. 2023. *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*. Beacon Press.; Brenna Bhandar. 2018. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Duke University Press.; Michael Perelman. 2000. *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation*. Duke University Press.

<sup>93</sup> “Value in its form as capital (value valorizing itself) is driven to accumulation, but also annihilation of non-capitalist social forms of relationality with the land. The abstraction of value (as capital) takes a concrete form in each particular industrial development project. When Indigenous people stand in the way, the state and its police step in to make sure capitalist accumulation continues.” Mike Gouldhawke. 2021. “Head Hits Concrete.” *Midnight Sun*. <https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/head-hits-concrete/>

and restive racialized proletariat from below. Agrarian relations, class-property structures, and ecological relations with the land more generally possess racial and cultural histories, which are essential to grasp in order to make sense of rural compositions and their varying trajectories.

Without grasping capitalism as not only an agrarian, but an ecological revolution, one with profound practical and epistemic consequences, the uneven geography of struggle is easily missed. This is what the ecological problem is meant to capture. Capital is a social relation, but with ecological and geographic extension.<sup>94</sup> It spreads globally and geometrically, but in the face of local subsistence struggles tied to proximate land bases and ecosystems. Capitalist reproduction is mediated by the destruction, subordination, and assimilation of these modes of reproduction. It gives rise to particular compositions and political subjectivities differentially mediated by ancestral ties to the land and territory, cultural practices of reproduction, and ecological relations. Black agrarian traditions thus formed distinct political compositions and trajectories, not easily assimilable into either agrarian populism or the workers' movement, as the history of Black Belt communism demonstrates.<sup>95</sup> This observation has a contemporary salience for indigenous struggle in particular, as "indigeneity," while in many ways a fraught category in and of itself, is consistently articulated by indigenous peoples themselves in relation to kinship and place.<sup>96</sup> Dine communist Glen Coulthard calls this "grounded normativity," or those "modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time."<sup>97</sup> It is "grounded" because it is *practical*, shaped by relations of reproduction and traditions that persist beneath the colonial imposition of capitalist production.

The "grounded normativity" described by Coulthard is quite apart from the "normativity" on offer in a "strategy of composition" or the "commune" or "forms of life" of Tiqqun. Those are largely ethical commitments, and as a result find refuge among activist formations and remain a step removed from daily life. What is more, they continue to subsist via a capitalist relation to land. The differing stakes are quite clear. Any concept of composition that neglects the ecological particularities of social reproduction—the relation to land—is incomplete. Any theory or strategy that takes political subjectivity to be given only in relation to the social configurations of capital—whether inside or outside the factory—is as misguided as it is naive. The communist impulse is far more ancient than any composition of capital, even if, today, it can only be realized on a particular technical basis. While some may raise the concern that political subjectivity today is primarily the product of patterns of capital concentration and re-territorialization, ever

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<sup>94</sup> Jason Moore. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books.; William Cronon. 2003. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill & Wang; Virginia DeJohn Anderson. 2004. *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*. Oxford University Press.; Alfred W Crosby. 2004. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>95</sup> See Robin D.G. Kelly. 2015. *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. UNC Press Books.

<sup>96</sup> Sheryl Lightfoot. 2016. *Global Indigenous Politics: A subtle revolution*. Routledge.

<sup>97</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press: 13. See also Mike Gouldhawke., 2020. "Land as a Social Relationship." Briarpatch. <https://briarpatch-magazine.com/articles/view/land-as-a-social-relationship>; Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2016. "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity." *American Quarterly* 68(2): 249–255; Audra Simpson. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus*. Duke University Press.

trapped by the phantasm of worker self-activity, it is worth bearing in mind that despite being only 5% of the global population, indigenous peoples make up a disproportionate percentage of the global poor (15%), and steward 80% of the earth's remaining biodiversity.<sup>98</sup> They occupy a crucial nexus between proletarianization and territorial or ecological composition. The extent of global proletarianization is a different metric than subsumption into the workforce, and a different metric still than market dependence. Indigenous peoples experience these processes unevenly, but given their widespread and disproportionate levels of poverty—especially extreme rural poverty—dispossession in the absence of employment prospects and mobility seems a common factor.<sup>99</sup> This follows the general pattern of de-agrarianization, in which the dispossessed become yoked to the market without passing the membrane into formal economic activities. If indigenous peoples remain a minority in the global proletariat, they are overrepresented in it. On the other hand, their remaining links with their traditional territories preserve the vast majority of the planet's species. They are thus overrepresented in ecological conflict all over the world. In the first decade of its existence, the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice, the largest inventory of environmental struggles in the world, has found that indigenous territorial defense makes up almost half of all global ecological conflict. If this is broadened to include other place-based “environmentalisms of the poor” (e.g. peasants, farmers, fisherman, pastoralists), then ecological struggle is quite irrefutably and overwhelmingly proletarian.<sup>100</sup>

That is, if by proletarian we mean generally dispossessed of the means of subsistence, requiring some mediation by the wage and the market in order to secure reproduction. This, however, raises concerns of its own. Recently, Neel and Chavez have argued against what they perceive as the popularity of “local autarky” on the left, especially among more ecologically realist communists, from Søren Mau to Kohei Saito to Aaron Benanav. In their criticisms of these reversions to a “communism in living,” Neel and Chavez argue that local subsistence ecologies are no longer possible, given the demographic transformations brought about by capitalism and the complex mesh of global integration that is the economy. As purely technical matter, today communism must be global or not all. Indeed, they caution that the “not at all” may be a likely scenario. They offer their skepticism on the communist prospect, arguing instead that the growing metabolic disaster means that the conditions for constructing communism on the scale necessary for its realization appear as an ever fleeting horizon. We find this all to be a fair assessment and welcome technicist intervention, but we also find here analytical foundations for a veiled skepticism of territorial struggles more generally, a position that conflates defense of grounded forms of reproduction with “localism” or “local autarky” per se. While Neel and Chavez insulate themselves from this charge, arguing basically for a communist version of the Zapatismo “world in which many worlds fit,”<sup>101</sup> others are likely to find in the critique of localism and bioregionalism

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<sup>98</sup> Anna Fleck. 2022. “Indigenous Communities Protect 80% Of All Biodiversity.” <https://www.statista.com/chart/27805/indigenous-communities-protect-biodiversity/>

<sup>99</sup> GILLETTE HALL and Ariel GANDOLFO. 2016. “Poverty and Exclusion Among Indigenous Peoples: The Global Evidence.” *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/poverty-and-exclusion-among-indigenous-peoples-global-evidence>

<sup>100</sup> Leah Temper, Federico Demaria, Arnim Scheidel, Daniela Del Bene, and Joan Martinez-Alier. 2018. “The Global Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas): Ecological Distribution Conflicts as Forces for Sustainability.” *Sustainability Science* 13(3): 573–584.; Joan Martinez-Alier, Leah Temper, Daniela Del Bene & Arnim Scheidel. 2016. “Is there a Global Environmental Justice Movement?” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43(3): 731–755.

<sup>101</sup> “...communism is not a social monoculture. Just as old forms of local agroecological subsistence provided a foundation for a wide diversity of social practices, so too would the new planetary productive foundation of a

a basis for rejection of indigenous struggle as anachronistic, at best, or a threadbare false equivalence between indigenous self-determination and blood and soil nationalism, at worst. Either characterization is baseless, if we simply understand indigenous struggle as an integral part of the global cycle of rebellion on commodity frontiers, or give even a cursory look to the history of internationalism within anti-colonial and indigenous movements.<sup>102</sup> What characterizes indigenous struggle in practice is the peculiar place it occupies in global cycles of accumulation in the hinterlands of capital, where differing modes of reproduction enter into protracted and punctuated conflict. Secwepemc leader George Manuel called this “the fourth world,” where land as commodity and land as relationship come into conflict and where, according to Coulthard, struggle realizes itself in the “purposeful revitalization of those relational, land-informed Indigenous practices and modes of life that settler colonization sought to destroy in its drive to transform Indigenous peoples’ lands into the settler-state and capital.”<sup>103</sup>

To what extent indigenous political subjectivities, place-based struggles, and territorial compositions can carry out the negative movement of communism is less a question of the “local” versus “global,” but a matter of material capacity. By this we mean the capacity to draw from these practices of struggle and revitalization something like a communist immanence, nurtured in the womb of communist measures. As we argued in Part Two, in the context of “territorial” struggle, communist measures can emerge from the constraint of reproduction to the extent that modalities of survival remain partially tethered to the land and place and thus remain within practical reach. It is market mediation that tends to sever this relationship. This returns us to the problems of global economic integration and market dependence. Most of the world’s population has been integrated into the market, but measures of this integration are difficult, and even more difficult to parse in ways relevant to an analysis of composition. Among contemporary economists, economic integration typically describes the processes that lead to convergence of global value chains and is often treated as synonymous with “globalization.” There are no direct measures, but instead proxy indicators, typically grouped into preconditions and results. Preconditions involve the removal of barriers to capital flows, including import and export tariffs, non-tariff barriers, capital controls, barriers to foreign direct investment (FDI), technology transfer, and real estate transactions. Results are outcome-based indicators generally agreed to represent degree of inclusion into the global economy, such as the ratio of foreign trade to GDP or the ratio of FDI to GDP. Other methods involve measuring the cross-border integration of factors of production (e.g., labor, land, fixed capital, technology) to reflect the microeconomic scale.<sup>104</sup> Both macro (goods, services, investments, interest rates) and micro (factors of production) flows measures are only operative at the level of the nation-state. Indeed, these measures were developed following the

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communist society induce a diverse efflorescence of new life-ways. The protracted process of overthrowing capitalism and constructing a communist world would itself produce a mosaic of new social forms through the chaos of the transition.” Neel and Chavez, “Forest and Factory”

<sup>102</sup> Mike Gouldhawke’s archives again provide a useful starting place: <https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/>. See also Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics*.

<sup>103</sup> George Manuel and Michael Posluns. 2019. *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. University of Minnesota Press, xi.

<sup>104</sup> Aseem Prakash and Jeffrey A. Hart. 2000. “”Indicators of Economic Integration.” *Global Governance* 6(1): 95–114.

experience of European Common Market with the intention of assessing policy implications for future integration of “underdeveloped” regions of the global south.<sup>105</sup>

Neither macro or micro indicators of economic integration are comprehensive enough to capture fragmented processes of social composition. They are especially inadequate when applied to rural zones, subsistence agriculturalists, or heterogenous so-called “traditional communities” or indigenous peoples, whose governance structures are subordinate to nation-states and whose populations are marginalized as economically insignificant. More to the point, however, they do not get at what is the heart of capitalism: money, or more precisely value.<sup>106</sup> Perhaps the greatest proxy for capitalist domination itself is the extent to which populations are rendered dependent on the market, directly or indirectly, by their dependence on money for survival. Because this is dependence on money is both formal (wage, revenue, pension, debt, etc) and informal (borrowing, solicitation, black and grey markets, etc), its extent at the demographic level cannot be directly measured. Rather, it is presumed at the outset if money has penetrated everyday life. This has been the standard assumption since the massive increase in urbanization—itsself a proxy for capitalist industrial development—since the 1950s.<sup>107</sup> But, as Aaron Benanav has noted, urbanization was not achieved by a symmetrical process of population transfer from rural regions. In other words, urbanization has not meant commensurate de-ruralization.<sup>108</sup> Rather, the urbanization of the earth is the aggregate result of “demographic proletarianization,” or rapid population growth among urban populations relative to rural populations. Through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, market dependence was achieved quite unevenly, especially in rural and agrarian regions. Despite the appeal of outright expropriation, the process of de-peasantization was fragmented and incomplete, as labor-power was not itself the primary objective in bringing colonized lands and the far-flung hinterlands into capital’s orbit. Rather, manufacturers and states were interested in resource extraction and agricultural exports. Most of rural dwellers in fact remained tied to the land, while becoming increasingly dependent on the market for survival. This passive process of dissolving traditional forms of reproduction without integration into formal labor markets has bequeathed us a surplus humanity.<sup>109</sup> This was the process of general proletarianization on the world scale, and in truth it unfolded only over the last handful of decades. That means that non-capitalist forms of reproduction and survival strategies remain in living memory for much of the global population, even if the ecological and territorial access required to actually achieve those modes of social reproduction remain structurally out of reach.

This is the qualitative significance of “revitalization” in the context of indigenous struggles to defend and reclaim territoriality. Market integration of indigenous peoples is perhaps more complex and uneven than that of non-indigenous rural producers, and includes anything from rent sharing to wage labor to commercial agriculture to credit use to illegal timber harvests or wildlife hunting. In general, practical ecological knowledge tends to decrease with these forms of market integration, accompanied by changed patterns of land use, but the process is far from straight-

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<sup>105</sup> Bela Balassa. 1962. *The Theory of Economic Integration*. Routledge.; Kui-Wai Li. 2017. *Redefining Capitalism in Global Economic Development*. Elsevier Science.

<sup>106</sup> Indeed, be these measures, economic integration is actually *declining*, belying the fact that capitalist penetration of the biosphere is at the same time the diffusion of crisis and disarray.

<sup>107</sup> Riccardo Di Clemente, Emanuele Strano, and Michael Batty. 2021. “Urbanization and Economic Complexity.” *Scientific Reports* 11(1): 3952.; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2019. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (ST/ESA/SER.A/420). New York: United Nations.

<sup>108</sup> Benanav, *A Global History of Unemployment*

<sup>109</sup> See “Tragic Theses.” See also Davis, *Planet of Slums*

forward or absolute.<sup>110</sup> These transformations are both protracted and very recent, as indigenous reserves have found themselves increasingly blocking the commodity chains of extractive capital over the last few decades. Despite the penetration of money, by maintaining access to land bases and the general continuity of cultural practices, many indigenous peoples have stubbornly refused the process of real subsumption and the total dissolution of their modes of life. Here, non-capitalist forms of existence are much more practically within reach, as a social and technical matter, than in “territorial struggle” in the abstract. The process of communist construction must pass through these indigenous ecological revitalizations, defend and fortify them, if it is to maintain the social heterogeneity necessary to keep within ecological limits.<sup>111</sup>

Of course, “revitalization” does not paint an adequate picture of competing claims on the land. Though the term has become a meme in recent years, the real history of “land back” extends as deep in the historical record as colonial occupation itself.<sup>112</sup> Still, territorial forms of struggle for land reclamation do have a modern tenor, in the Anglophone settler states at least, as capital seeks to maintain its profitability increasingly through the sphere of circulation. This is why Coulthard sees resurgent internationalism and grounded normativity as an explicitly anti-capitalist pursuit.<sup>113</sup> Yet it is not always so clear in the struggles themselves. Struggles against particular forms of development or infrastructure are not against development *per se*, nor are they necessarily against economic integration or a reversion to indigenous “natural economies.”<sup>114</sup> Market integration and “economic development” remain on the agenda for supranational institutions and native political leaders alike.<sup>115</sup> There is thus a tendency towards conflict between traditional governance and land use, on the one hand, and state-appointed local authorities who have an interest in development projects and revenue sharing, on the other. This is an observable pattern in recent years: at Standing Rock, among Wet’suwet’en and Gitxsan opposition to pipeline projects, on Secwepemc’ecw regarding the Trans Mountain Pipeline System, at the Ada’itsx/Fairy Creek Blockade in Pacheedaht territory.

Metabolic separation remains the order of the day. The conflicts over territory and the contending approaches to land use and integration are, when practically grounded, essentially struggles over social and biological reproduction. This is what distinguishes the concept of territorial composition from the “autonomous zone” or the “strategy of composition.” It is also distinct from the project of territorial inquiry, the primary object of which remains working class subjectivity. Broadly speaking, the “territorial campaigns” associated with the environmental movement are,

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<sup>110</sup> Katherine Milton. 1992. “Civilization and its Discontents.” *Natural History* 101(3): 36–42.; Flora Lu. 2007. “Integration into the Market among Indigenous Peoples: A Cross-Cultural Perspective from the Ecuadorian Amazon.” *Current Anthropology* 48(4): 593–602.

<sup>111</sup> See the discussion of limits in Neel and Chavez, “Forest and Factory”

<sup>112</sup> Mike Gouldhawke has a great survey of the term and its matrilineal descent. Mike Gouldhawke. 2020. “Land Back: The matrilineal descent of modern Indigenous land reclamation.” <https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/2019/12/29/land-back-the-matrilineal-descent-of-modern-indigenous-land-reclamation/>

<sup>113</sup> Glen Coulthard. 2013. “For Our Nations to Live, Capitalism Must Die.” *Nations Rising*. <https://www.nationsrising.org/for-our-nations-to-live-capitalism-must-die/>

<sup>114</sup> See, for instance, the range of perspectives in Shiri Pasternak and Dayna Nadine Scott. 2020. *Getting Back the Land: Anticolonial and Indigenous Strategies of Reclamation*. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 199(2). See also Jacob Vakkayil. 2017. “Resistance and Integration: Working with Capitalism at its Fringes.” *M@n@gement* 20(4): 394–417.

<sup>115</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. “Linking Indigenous communities with regional development.” <https://www.oecd.org/regional/indigenous-communities.htm>; Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson. 2017. *The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy*. James Lorimer & Company.

by the capitalist order of things, at some distance from the reproduction of daily life. In these cases, they must be mediated by specialists with access to institutional resources, and find their limit expressed in this very mediation (see Parts One and Two). The cases of territorial struggle in which this distance is removed or nonexistent may appear limited and isolated, from the vantage of the most developed regions of the global economy, but on the world scale, they form the majority of land conflicts.<sup>116</sup> Whether and how these present as major significance to the economy, or whether and how they are integrated into the supply chain in crucial ways is a matter of some concern.<sup>117</sup> Isolation and atomization of territorial compositions may presently inhibit their general coordination. This is nothing other than the problem of composition applied to the ecological problem. There is no reason to presume this will remain the case through the chaos of revolutionary unmaking. The truth that crystallizes from the secular tendencies of capitalist reproduction is not a homogenous revolutionary composition that arrives at the moment of rupture pre-formed, given by historical convergence of production. It is heterogeneity in the making in the process of revolution itself, formed from the historical conditions inherited by uneven geographic development and ecological integration. These fissures only increase with every wave of economic and ecological crisis that crashes up on this eroding social edifice. If social reproduction struggles remain only partial, their completion through communist construction—penetrating the glass floor—does not negate their character as particular, place-based forms of reproduction. This is in fact what gives them an objective independence. It is in the movement of communism that such assorted modes of life and ecological relations can flourish.

## Conclusion

Composition is mirrored in decomposition, but each also carries a double meaning. Recent analyses, following the *Mauvaise Troupe Collective*'s popularization of the term of art that developed in the ZAD, refer to composition as something like “components of the struggle” or a synthetic effect of coalitional practices in which the “the composition” is larger than the sum of its part. The “strategy” of composition has been taken up in other, more recent territorial struggles, from the George Floyd Rebellion to the climate crisis,<sup>118</sup> but nowhere has gained as much purchase and generated as much controversy as in some segments of the North American anarchist milieu, particularly among those globed around and invested in the struggle to Defend the Atlanta Forest and Stop Cop City. This is, at least in part, because “the strategy of composition” has received renewed interest among Anglophones following the publication of the essay of the same name by Hugh Farrell.<sup>119</sup> Farrell's contribution represents the most sophisticated analysis in this tradition, in no small part because he attempts to marry the ZADist sense of “composition”—as strategy, as method, as *autonomy*—with the material *problem* of composition, *sensu* Endnotes. Despite his best efforts, Farrell does not succeed in overcoming this problem of material constraint, instead presenting composition as a strategy and mode of organization suspended by oath. Composition is an *abstraction*, a heuristic for thinking through the complexities of identity formation

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<sup>116</sup> See the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice.

<sup>117</sup> The economic impact of the indigenous blockades across Canada in the winter of 2020 seem to suggest that this integration can be turned on its head, to disastrous effect on economic growth.

<sup>118</sup> See, e.g., Anonymous. “Rhythm and Ritual: Composing Movement in Portland's 2020,” *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, “To Those Who Marched at Sainte-Soline,” and Nicolò Molinari. 2023. “Breaking the Waves.” *Ill Will Editions*.

<sup>119</sup> Hugh Farrell, “The Strategy of Composition”

and mediation beyond simply hailing “diversity of tactics.” But it is not a strategy, it does not offer a concrete analysis. *Composing* becomes a matter of will; it pre-supposes a certain degree of developed autonomy from compulsion and, importantly, the very violent mediation of the state in the organization of capitalist reproduction.<sup>120</sup> As has been learned in Weelaunee and elsewhere, the strategy of composition raises the problem of defense *via* formal mediations in the state, civil, and economic sphere. While these may prolong the struggle as far as its immediate objectives as a campaign, it forecloses the possibility of generalization. At this moment, via the strategy of composition, the reproduction of the struggle and its ‘forms of life’ are mediated by the state or directly through capitalist reproduction. It is by way of this foreclosure that ‘campaigns’ can be won or lost and their attendant strategies can achieve victory. There is a tension then between a strategy of will and the generality of insurrection. This is the problematic that emerges in every coalitional or compositional struggle, whether territorial or not. The strategy of composition, as a solution posed to the problem of composition and coordination, poses a new problem—the mediation of fragmentation and differentiated reproduction—which appears first to be solved by the state. It is only through the production of communism that this problem is truly solved, but this can only be realized if the functioning of the state as mediator is likewise obviated and abolished in practice. The fate of composition, as a strategy, is that it poses this problem and is blocked by its own development: in seeking to compose from the actually existing differences on the ground, it does not offer a clear path forward to differentiate between those political mediations that reproduce the capital-labor relation and those that might overcome them. It offers instead a vague unity-in-difference as an open-ended strategy, the unfolding of which is supposed to hold the promise of its resolution in a revolutionary manner, but which could just as easily find resolution through state institutions.<sup>121</sup>

“Composition,” as employed here, is not necessarily incorrect, but it is one-sided. What “composes” a movement is also what sets its concomitant limits: the often dull and sometimes frenetic compulsions of political economy. This is the second sense of the term of art, “composition,” and the one with a rich history in communist struggle and analysis. “Composition” here names the set of real material restraints upon and expressions of class formation. It is what constitutes the “problem,” as so named by Endnotes, of revolutionary struggle and organization. Composition in this sense is inseparable from the uneven histories of transition, development, and decline. “Class composition” emerged as a category of analysis partially as a result of the poverty of “class consciousness” to explain the failures of communist revolutions of the interwar years, or in the immediate fallout of WWII, in which communist parties had become largely toothless and integrated into the apparatus of social democracy. In the workerist literature, “class composition” was variously referred to as labor-power becoming labor, as the concrete expression of the class struggle, and as the technical division of labor. The core thesis of “class composition” analysis is that there is a relation and necessary correspondence between the form of struggle and the form of production. It distinguishes itself from a theory and critique of “class consciousness” by being the only real *material* analysis of class activity. The technical and social organization of

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<sup>120</sup> See TC, “The Glass Floor”

<sup>121</sup> The mistake appears to be in thinking that particular victories advance the general movement against capital—a form of incrementalism. Rather, it is entirely possible that specific victories are not only compatible with the reproduction of capitalist relations, but that the formalism of campaigning and compositional strategy necessarily exclude communist measures, in the absence of generalized antagonism. That is because, during a period of such absence, the strategy of composition is mediated by capitalist relations, primarily indirectly through state institutions.



production, the division of labor, the level of productivity, the racial and gendered segmentation of the labor process—these are concrete forms through which the *double moulinet* turns. They constitute the conditions and limits of class struggle and organization. This class composition is identical to the composition of capital. Historical material composition is thus expressed as a *political* composition of the class. It is an organic form of struggle, adequate to the churning wheel of history.<sup>122</sup> Composition is a skeleton key, used to *explain* and *periodize* forms of communist struggle.

This thesis of composition comports with our own advanced here, but we extend two major caveats. First, in the absence of an analysis of *reproduction*, the analysis of class composition is a one-sided abstraction. We are far from the first to argue this; critiques of the shop-floor (and masculine) bias of class composition are as old as workerism itself. Social reproduction is historical, not abstractly “natural.” It *must* play a role in class formation. The totality of spheres of capitalist reproduction become unevenly integrated through class composition. This particular analysis of composition and class formation can be traced back to Marx, in his concrete analysis of the French peasantry and countryside in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Composition is mediated by reproduction, which in the case of peasantry was strongly atomized. Throughout its history, the workers’ movement operated as if this mediation was or soon would be displaced entirely by the factory, by the dignified work of man. The problem of composition today suggests that this atomization has not disappeared, but has found heterogenous forms, each of which is mediated by some combination of circulation and the direct violence of the state. The composition problem cannot provide a materialist account of class formation without attending to the common problem of reproduction, in which the abstraction of class itself is in practice inadequate. The glass floor is preceded by the cash nexus and the partition of social belonging. This *formality* of dispossession is the only content of composition in our current era. This is for us the decomposition problem. It is dispossession that maintains this heterogenous relationship to capitalist reproduction and to its humanization process. It is *lived* in the concrete by the mediation of *dehumanizing* processes, modes of life that attend to or are secondarily or tertiarily dependent upon but do not directly reproduce surplus value.<sup>123</sup> These forms are *historical* inheritances, the result of the uneven but global spread of the capital relation.

The second caveat is that reproduction is necessarily an ecological exchange, a metabolism. Even the concepts of “social composition,” broad as they are, do not adequately capture the various ways that land and ecological knowledge is integrated into the process of social reproduction. All relations to the land are practical, even if alienated. Survival and subsistence are attenuated by

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid. This analysis has historical echoes in Bordiga’s analysis of the organic synthesis of the communist party: when the historical party—the generalization of a restive proletarian composition—finds expression in formal organization. He attributes this distinction to Marx, but it is most associated with Bordigists. See Amadeo Bordiga. 1965. “Considerations on the Party’s Organic Activity When the General Situation is Historically Unfavourable.” *Marxist Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1965/consider.htm>; Jacques Camatte. 1961. “Origin and Function of the Party Form.” *Il programma comunista*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camate/origin.htm>; Marx’s own writings on the concept of the party are scattered, mostly in his correspondences. In a letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, he speaks of “a party that is everywhere springing up naturally out of the soil of modern society” and “party in the broad historical sense.” See Karl Marx. 1860. “Letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, February 29, 1860.” [https://wikirouge.net/texts/en/Letter\\_to\\_Ferdinand\\_Freiligrath,\\_February\\_29,\\_1860](https://wikirouge.net/texts/en/Letter_to_Ferdinand_Freiligrath,_February_29,_1860). For a thorough account, see *Theory & Event* 16(4): <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/29013>. See also A New Institute for Social Research. “This Party Sucks.” [https://isr.press/This\\_Party\\_Sucks/index.html](https://isr.press/This_Party_Sucks/index.html)

<sup>123</sup> See “Tragic Theses.” A more developed elaboration of the mechanisms of “humanization” and “dehumanization” is forthcoming.

these practical activities, including ethnobiological classification schemas, cultural and spiritual practices, and interspecific interactions, cooperation, competition, and communication. We thus extend what is sure to be the most controversial hypothesis in this piece: composition may indeed be an interspecies affair. This is the logical conclusion if we practically apply the ecological problem to the problem of composition. If these motley material compositions are the bases of practice, and thus subject formation, then communism cannot take the human being as a given, as a social ontology, which constitutes the transhistorical *sine qua non* of social reproduction.

Decomposition is therefore a generative process. It is the real condition and limit of partisanship. This is the problem of the glass floor, revisited: not the failure to penetrate into immediate production, which is increasingly far away, diffuse, and nebulous—but the failure to penetrate into the immediacy of social reproduction in ways that sustain the initial outbreaks of revolt. To do so would be the beginning steps of abolishing the separation of production and reproduction. It would signal the real construction of communism. Given the partitioning of everyday life, partisanship to the revolutionary crisis requires a partisanship to social reproduction, and this will unfold differently in different places, across uncommon geographies, and diffuse by mediations of gender, race, and class far before it can hope to abolish them. The prospects seem bleak, to be sure. But we can draw from these denuded conditions some political conclusions that should better place any talk of strategy.

First, a necessary synthesis. The foregoing analysis reiterates the need for communist measures: those acts of immediate de commodification of life and its conditions, the initial precipitates of communist production.<sup>124</sup> This characterization is necessary, but insufficient. Capitalism is not only market dependence; this is too partial a characterization. It is at its core a metabolic separation, or better, a metabolic inversion in which human reproduction is achieved by the mediation of the economy and at the direct expense of all life on earth and its biogeochemical cycles.<sup>125</sup> Capital seeks to be the immediate condition of life itself. Communism mends this shorn metabolic mesh. So, a better formulation: communist measures are those that repair metabolic continuity through expropriation. They are nutritive, metabolic, and basic, general and particular, local and ecological, and planetary and biospheric. The social compositions that give form to these measures are not given by a uniform process, but the general compulsion of metabolic domination and the many diverse ways that it is mediated.

For composition to present a real strategy, it must first be grasped as a fate. The *activity* of composition is the confrontation of this fate. It cannot be another name for coalition or united front. It must more closely attend to the real relations of production and reproduction in their technical, social, territorial, and ecological aspects. It does not look like winning campaigns, domino strategies, or diversity of tactics, or whimsical appeals to personal and collective transformation within the community of capital—however necessary all of these activities may be in a given time and place. None of the analysis that we have presented should be interpreted as an injunction against these activities or forms of struggle. Partisans must confront the world from where they are, with their conditions given, and make do. We wish more simply to caution how the possibilities, limits, or failures of these approaches—indexed by the histories of the ZAD, Sanrizuka, or DFA/SCC, or the range of communist United Fronts—are the real movement of composition

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<sup>124</sup> Leon de Mattis. 2014. "Communist Measures: thinking a Communist Horizon." *SIC: International Journal for Communisation*. <https://www.sicjournal.org/communist-measures-2/index.html>

<sup>125</sup> See "Tragic Theses" for our schema.

itself. A preoccupation with formalisms may meet the fate of composition, in another sense, *if* it is treated as a strategy suspended from the earth below. To grasp the problem of composition as decomposition is perhaps far bleaker, but far more tangible, and thus a foundation for a real political strategy when the contradictions generalize, and the possibility of insurrection gives way to communist measures, and eventually, the repair of the metabolic fabric—in which territorial defense will take on an entirely transformed significance in the reproduction of communist relations.

We wish to conclude on this final note: if it is the sphere of production that practically unifies, disciplines, and (de)forms humanity, then the significance of *reproduction* in the problem of composition suggests that struggle need not—indeed, *must* not—be subsumed by specter of human dignity.<sup>126</sup> In struggles in the sphere of reproduction, if and when capitalist reproduction is *suspended*, there will be openings—fundamentally distinct non-capitalist mediations that do not presuppose humanity as a formal mediation. They in fact proliferate variegated relationships among life and its conditions that undermine the human as a practical mediation. In these cycles of struggle, the defense of non-capitalist modes of reproduction and modes of life entails confronting both the circulation of capital and the mediation of state violence. It realizes direct concrete relations among human and non-human life in which differentiation, atomization, and decomposition become political horizons, conditions of possibility for the *generalization* of communism, but not necessarily articulated as an ambient *unification*.<sup>127</sup> After all, potatoes can tear through the sack. What matters when these insurgent forms of composition, reproduction, or kin-making<sup>128</sup> *negate* or *abolish* the reproduction of capital, is not their common relation to abstract human labor-power, let alone something like rational planning, creative flourishing, or the reproduction of the species, *sine qua non*. It is something more ordinary, and more essential. It is precisely this crisis activity that reveals that the content of communist struggle is more basic, more indispensable, more all consuming than “human dignity;” it is rather the struggle over life and its conditions of possibility. The historical actors here need not belong exclusively to the human species. In “Tragic Theses,” we argued that:

“Our current era of long economic stagnation and punctuated volatility is a period of dehumanization accompanied by a swarm of ‘natural’ compensations that disintegrate any clear break between human and nonhuman, production and consumption, industry and its extractive hinterlands. This peculiar ‘holism’ only seems to take the shape of catastrophe, the aggregate effect of climate chaos, mass extinction, social unrest, and economic instability. If nature has indeed taken back the reigns of history, it would seem to have done so only to end it. It is not a triumphant humanism that

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<sup>126</sup> As Hansen notes in his critique of Andreas Malm: “individuals are bearers of class relations and interests, and the creatures rather than creators of economic processes. Posing the problem this way shifts attention from agency and will to more structural questions of how the reproduction of human societies can be disentangled from the reproduction of capital. Such a transformation cannot simply be willed, and natural history cannot simply be disrupted, only rearticulated. How was social reproduction disentangled from non-human life – and how may it be re-entangled? Or rather, how was the entanglement of social with natural ecologies pushed to the edges of social ecologies, so that a core was insulated from damage and afforded carelessness?” Bue Rübner Hansen. 2021. “The Kaleidoscope of Catastrophe – On the Clarities and Blind Spots of Andreas Malm,” *Viewpoint*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2021/04/14/the-kaleidoscope-of-catastrophe-on-the-clarities-and-blind-spots-of-andreas-malm/>

<sup>127</sup> On this distinction, see Rust Bunny Collective. 2014. “Under the Riot Gear: on the Oakland Commune.” *SIC: International Journal for Communisation*.

<sup>128</sup> O’Brien, *Family Abolition*, 206.

resolves this crisis, but the abolition of the racialized regime of the human through the production of communism.”

It is from this consideration of metabolic reconstruction and ecological limits that the collective Artifices argues that communism would fundamentally be a disaster, a sequence of disasters—a complete break with the world as we know it.<sup>129</sup> To this, we would only add that the disasters would carry a necessary dissonance, a cacophony of perspectives and practices that refuse any unification in a single harmonious signature or melody. The noisy sphere of reproduction gives to communism its cacophonous features. In the production of communism, conflicts must discard their anthropocentric and anthropomorphic character and grasp for the fathomless depths of a more ubiquitous metabolism, but one that takes on peculiar and particular configurations. Communist partisanship is ecological, embedded, or not at all.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> “...against any sort of ecological planning which can only be a restructuring of capital, we want to raise the spectre of disaster, of communist disaster. Not disaster communism but communism as a disaster. Let’s take for example the latest media reports on the farmers’ promise to ‘siege Paris’ which pointed out that ‘in the event of a supply disruption, Paris would only have 3 days of food autonomy’. If we think that communist insurrection would involve, at the very least, the interruption of logistical chains on a regional scale, there would be no revolutionary scenario without an urban flight of several million people. We thus understand communism as a disaster when we look reality straight in the eyes, when we recognise the full severity of the revolutionary perspective and the fundamental break that it would bring about. Yet communism, as a movement that [abolishes] the present state of things, is the only perspective capable of breaking free the human species and thereby achieving an anthropological shift in its relationship to the living.” Artifices, “No Man’s Land.” <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/artifices-no-mans-land>

<sup>130</sup> Hansen seems privy to this: “beyond and beneath any abstract universality, we must elaborate on the question of an interest of breathing which is at once partisan and ecological... The relation is not specular, but a matter of inhalation and exhalation. It is a matter both of spirit and matter, whose unity is life.” See Bue Rübner Hansen. 2020. “The Interest of Breathing: Towards a Theory of Ecological Interest Formation.” *Crisis & Critique* 7(3): 110, 116; and, again, in his critique of Malm: “Despite such admitted ignorance, Malm treats humanity as the answer rather than the question. Or, put differently, he takes humanity for granted, and ignores the problem of anthropogenesis. That problem concerns the question of how humanity emerged as an infinitely variable species (think of the multitude of social, climatic, and ecological adaptations and inventions), and the more narrow question of how the idea of humanity as separate from nature arose. Had Malm posed the question of anthropogenesis, he would have been more hesitant to affirm the idea of humanity as separate from nature. He would, importantly, have been more sensitive to the blindspots of the idea of humanity-as-separate: what fails to be counted in this notion is those modes of cognition and activity, often cast as “indigenous” or “female”, which refuse to see themselves or act as separate from what, in a gesture of grand abstraction, is called “nature”. Put crudely, the definition of humanity as opposed to Nature, while loosely rooted in monotheistic cosmology, has only become established through the material and ideological separations produced by capitalism and colonialism. Moreover, we may ask whether the human capacity for abstraction is originary, or a mental reflection of the socio-ecological practices of abstraction inherent in commodity exchange? Certainly, Malm is sensitive to the geographic universalization of capitalist history, its imposition of uniform space-time, and treatment of all human activity as potentially abstract labour, etc. Yet the teleological drift of his description of capitalist history and strategies for transformation neglect the actual and necessary incompleteness of these processes, and the reliance of capitalism upon commons that are human – and more than that,” Hansen, “The Kaleidoscope of Catastrophe.”

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