HIC NIHIL, HIC SALTA!

(a critique of Bartlebyism)

Research and Destroy

July 29, 2015

[We offer up to our comrades the following critique of the nihilist turn in communist and anarchist thought, in part because we find some of its appeal mystifying and some of its appeal understandable. We hope that at very least it will provoke some conversation among friends and comrades sympathetic to this line of thought.]

After the jailings and beatings and trials; after the last-ditch efforts you knew wouldn't work, the surprising turn-of-events you thought just might, the labored attempts to force the situation; after the too-many meetings, the too-little sleep, the what-the-fuck-is-going-on-here; after the list of former friends has grown longer, after deciding there must be a snitch, after all the terrible things have been said and regretted and then said again and not regretted; after afraid, sad, tired, and after admitting, finally, sooner than some and later than others, that you failed, that it was over, that *they* won and that you can't just call it a day, give up, go home, because when *they* win, *they* don't just go home and feel happy and count their money and their votes and their weapons, they fuck your life up bad, they fuck up the people you love, they put them in jail or on probation, they take your money, they raise your rent, they wreck the place where you live, they kill and kill and keep on killing—after all this, it's natural to feel pretty depressed; it's natural to feel that everything you did was just stupid, that you were a fool, that you must have done something wrong or, better, that someone else must have done something wrong, even though you're up against an enemy who is stronger than you, and even though the history of every struggle ever is a concordance of failures, and even though no one has ever figured out how to succeed against such an enemy in any kind of consistent and repeatable manner. It's easier if there's someone to blame. It's easier if there was some mistake. If there was a mistake, then there was hope; if there was a mistake, then one can remain melancholically attached to the grim specter of *what might have been…*

The world is depressing enough as it is, of course. For many of us, it's the return to normality, the prospect of another year of the grinding everyday, that makes the end of a political sequence unbearable. Through the experience of defeat we realize that the quotidian is constituted by defeat; the normal functioning of capitalism is continuous counter-revolution. Depression and anxiety are forms through which this victory is secured, through which people are rendered compliant, isolated, but only when these moods are modulated by brief moments of hopefulness, relief, imagination, ambition. What capitalism wants is a continuous, low-level unhappiness. They

want people engaged in a continuous process of emotional management – with images, with work, with sex, with commodities. Anything more extreme makes people unpredictable, and it's no surprise that communities that define themselves in opposition to the status quo are filled with the most wounded and miserable types. Once such feelings get politicized, once their political origins are disclosed, all sorts of problems result. Because these affects are the one thing that people in such communities are guaranteed to share, they tend to be valorized as a mark of authenticity; they become markers of an identity, something to hold onto, burnish, aestheticize, worship. Our feelings become not the motivation for our politics, not their energy source, but their object. The result is miserabilism, a community formed by a shared unhappiness, whose reproduction secretly depends upon the continuous provision of more sources of unhappiness.

Most of the theoretical expressions that emerge from this confused condition share a fundamental misidentification of effects as causes. Identifying the source of their unhappiness in their own naïve optimism and commitment, their investment in some political project or process, they reason that, in order to spare themselves future suffering, they must cease to hope, to commit, to desire, they must treat each new event as dead from the start. They conclude not only that disaffection and pessimism will cause us to suffer less in the face of the failure of struggles, but that optimism, earnest commitment, investment, are the source of these failures. In other words, they reason that the reason we lose is because we keep trying, despite the fact that it is obviously the other way around. There are now dozens of accounts of how struggle against capitalist domination requires some form of withdrawal, subtraction, de-subjectivization, removal, impassivity, patience, slowness. In some cases, there may be real practical and psychological insights in these accounts, but each one makes, in our view, a fundamental mistake – it turns a political process into a psychological operation; it substitutes an ethics for a politics. Though it's true that capitalism uses our investments and passions against us all the time, the better to render us compliant, exploitable; the better to set us against each other; the better to keep us scrambling after illusory goals, capitalism has no problem mobilizing various forms of disaffection, indifference, and unfeeling. These moods quite obviously render one just as pliable as the excited, enthused worker; the passionate consumer; the overly sentimental parent; the enraged activist. Depression is not a weapon, it's a wound in the shape of a weapon.

These expressions go under various names – anti-political, nihilist, post-left. We call this phenomenon Bartlebyism because we think the best introduction to its misprisions can be had through an examination of the nearly identical claims made about the main character in Melville's duly famous story of clerical work, "Bartleby the Scrivener," by a whole generation of soi-disant left philosophers, from Badiou to Hardt and Negri, from Zizek to Agamben. Bartleby is a law-copyist, encharged with duplicating the various contracts and affidavits upon which 19th-century Wall Street depended, and so the story allegorizes not only the violence of the labor-capital relationship but the legal superstructure it requires, the intimate acquaintance of cop and boss. Bartleby is famous for defying his employer in a manner that stymies all response; rather than refusing outright the work he is asked to perform, he instead utters the famous reply, "I would prefer not to," when called by his employer. Readers of the story have been quick to note the peculiarly unanswerable quality of this answer, with its mixture of politeness and refusal. As his employer, the narrator of Melville's story, notes, "Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience of impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises." But the conditional character of Bartleby's utterance gives it a strange power that a more steadfast, in-

dicative or future simple declaration would not have. In the contemporary political imagination, the passive aggressive power of Bartleby's utterance circumvents the reactive, reflexive character of the destructive impulse, which as we so often know, often ends up sustaining the object of attack. Bartlebyism sees in this kind of phraseology a way of divesting the object of attack – here the work process – from any kind of cathexis. Bartebly is simply indifferent to work, and thereby work has no power over him. This is the core of the nihilist vision of struggle.

But in reality, this weak power is truly weak, rather than secretly strong. The law-copyist Bartleby ends his days, as a result of his curious workplace action, in a New York city jail, victim of the legal apparatus his refused scrivening would have sustained. Though Bartleby manages to occupy the office in a prefiguration of the sitdown strikes of the 20th century, defeating his employer's entreaties to either work or depart, and eventually forces the employer to vacate the premises and set up office elsewhere, the new tenant is not so obliging, nor is he flummoxed by Bartleby's bizarre actions. He calls the cops and Bartleby is sent to jail where, refusing all food, he dies.

This is not a promising model for a resistance movement. As Nikil Saval shows in his book on the history of the office, Melville may have been inspired here by an 1841 movement among New York dry-goods clerks to get the stores where they sold goods to close earlier. But rather than imitating the forms of struggle of manual laborers, who were at that time exploring the powers of direct action, these clerks remained entirely identified with the employers (whose seat they hoped some day to fill). Instead of making demands, "they sought a 'solicitation' of merchants good will and argued that a few hours of rest would make more "willingly devoted servants" in the store. The tone of Bartleby then is the tone of the refined, genteel clerk who prefers to struggle through diplomacy rather than confrontation. It may also be possible that Melville had in mind Henry David Thoreau's contemporaneous essay on "Resistance to Civil Government," which was published in 1849 and which he might have seen while writing those stories. Portions of Walden were published in *Putnam's Monthly*, where "Bartleby, the Scrivener" also appeared, and Melville caricatured Thoreau's friend and colleague Emerson, transforming him into the philosophical huckster Plinlimmon, in his weirdest of novels, *Pierre,* the book published right before "Bartleby." Intentional or not, the resemblances between the Bartlebyan and Thoreauvian mode of resistance are striking. In his outrage at the Mexican-American war, and the continuing horrors of slavery, Thoreau decides in his famous essay that the only admirable path for a person of conscience is to withdraw all support for the US government, chiefly by refusing to pay tax. The important political distinction which Thoreau articulates, and which was relatively novel, is that this is a form of resistance that concerns itself only with one's own participation in the detestable action: "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support." This is a doctrine of withdrawal rather than active contestation. Thoreau imagines it as a method of peaceable social transformation; if such tax refusal were to spread it would mean a bloodless revolution:

> I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name — if ten *honest* men only — ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.

Bartleby himself might have been withdrawing from such a dreadful copartnership; as a Wall Street law-scrivener, the "rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds" which he reproduced would certainly have involved the deeds to slaves, given that almost all Southern planters were reliant on financing from Northern Banks. Like Bartleby, Thoreau's story natural ends in jail. It is jail where a man demonstrates his spiritual superiority to the law not to mention his solidarity with the humans in bondage under slavery: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principle… the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor." Thoreau even mentions that it may be preferable to give one's life than to participate in an unconscionable system.

As we know, Thoreau's essay and the Bartlebyan principles it systematizes has been enormously influential if not enormously effective. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are only two of the most famous names who have sought to convince would-be rebels that the path of withdrawal, noncompliance, and aggressive passivity is the way to success. Today, there is an entire industry built around systematic and technicized noncompliance as protest. Its ineffectiveness is legendary. Such routinize, scripted forms of nonviolent protest – instrumental non-compliance of various sorts, whether by locking one's neck to a tractor or locking arms and refusing to move – join a panoply of "violent" tactics to form the tactical repertoire of contemporary activism. These techniques are perfect for what is the usual social situation of activism – that is, protest by dedicated radicals in the absence of any kind of mass rebellion. These techniques carry very low risks; the consequence for being prosecuted for such forms of noncompliance are usually very low. And therefore despite their demonstrated ineffectiveness in most social contexts, people keep turning them again and again in situations where people want to do something, anything, to demonstrate their serious unhappiness with the world as it is. This is of course to say nothing about their use in situations like the Jim Crow South or India, where they were one set of tactics among many, in the context of mass rebellions that involved riots, bombings, the taking-up of arms, and constant exposure to deadly force from state and non-state actors. These situations simply can't be compared to the context in which the same tactics of noncompliance are used today.

There is an important difference between systematized noncompliance of the sort we see today and Thoreauvian civil disobedience: Thoreau concerned himself only with refusal of activities that were part of his daily routine, and which gave indirect support to the oppression of others. The activist, on the other hand, ignores Thoreau's proviso about interfering directly in the affairs of others. The activist is always rushing to the rescue of some oppressed entity somewhere else: the trees, the whales, the children, the workers. This is not to deride solidarity struggles and actions; actions undertaken on a moral basis. They are an important part of the way that political sequences unfold, and we engage in them routinely, but it is easily verifiable that the most powerful and successful struggles involve self-interested antagonists, fighting against the conditions that face them directly. Seen in light of this distinction, we immediately see what Thoreau's protests share with the activism of our day– they are still conducted on a moral basis, they are still undertaken on behalf of others, even if they refuse direct support, and only concern themselves with indirect complicity.

In the last 20 years, powerful critiques of the logic of activism have emerged from within the antagonist milieu, critiques we borrow from above. But as is so often the case, these critiques share more with their object than they are willing to admit. Both the activist tendency and its "passivist" critics share a common origin in Bartlebyan thinking. The best critiques, such as the one offered by the famous article "Give Up Activism" emphasize the importance of strategic context, pointing out that a series of tactics developed in order to affect the behavior of specific institutions, corporations, or state-actors, lose all effectivity when there is no longer a clear, well-defined opponent, as was the case in the so-called anti-globalization movement. The worst critiques, however, misconstrue the implications of their entirely accurate critiques of spectacularized and routinized activism. Rather than treating activism as a failed strategy against a formidable enemy, it becomes the enemy itself, as if protest itself were what sustained capitalism and as if enervated activism were itself one of the prime weapons in the arsenals of our enemy. In some sense, what we note here is a target of opportunity. Lacking any effect beyond the microscopic demimonde of their would-be comrades, they look for opponents they might actually vanquish. In reality, those preaching the gospel of St. Bartleby lack the courage of their convictions; if they didn't hang around the edges of the radical milieu and instead took their own advice, they wouldn't be able to enjoy the effects of their critique; instead they keep the necrotizing body alive in order to savor the truth of their diagnosis. Few are fooled, of course, since investment in preaching hopelessness to the true believers of activism is its own opiate and its own distraction. If they didn't doubt the wisdom of their own advice, they'd depart for good. But like Bartleby, they remain stubbornly encamped in the antilaw-offices of the radical milieu, weakly re-enacting their passive aggressions at each new turn of events, each new failure-to-come. This is a fundamentally therapeutic politics; a politics of feeling, that takes our own investments in things to be the problem; it proposes the dogma of certain failure as response to the pain of hope.

The most coherent of these contemporary nihilisms – the so-called *Nihilist Communism* of Monsieur Dupont – makes all of the above very clear. The authors (who use the collective pseudonym Monsieur Dupont) are to be commended for their comparative honesty and lucidity. What makes the authors interesting is that, unlike others who proudly claim the term nihilist, Monsieur Dupont believes that proletarian revolution is possible. However, such a revolution emerges as a fundamental discontinuity with all which precedes it; nothing we do or say today will hasten its arrival. The frantic to and fro of the active minority serves no purpose except to assuage our own anxieties and so the only meaningful response to activism's "desperate injunction to press every button to save the world" is the Bartlebyan "I would prefer not to." Once said, Monsieur Dupont confronts an immediate problem. If what they say makes no difference, why do they write at all? Some attempt to solve this apparent contradiction with reference to personal expression, enjoyment, the usefulness of the useless in an instrumentalized world, etc. But Dupont have a more sophisticated answer. The authors draw from the historical ultraleft a deep belief in political narratives of betrayal; they offer a cartoonish version of this story, in which proletarian self-activity was continually diverted, subverted, managed, contained and betrayed by the egoism, self-aggrandizement and incompetence of its would-be leaders. As such, while every attempt to hasten the arrival of such a revolution is useless today, tomorrow those selfsame activists will be an active hindrance. Therefore, the only meaningful activity that a group of communist writers can undertake in non-revolutionary times is to try to actively destroy the left, to

neutralize their capacity to manage, contain or otherwise fuck-up revolutionary possibilities in the future (never mind the fact that "the left" committed suicide a few decades ago). All of this raises a deeper question: if the revolutionary proletariat that arises from some definitive future crisis can, in the view of Dupont, produce communism entirely on its own, without the meddling of intellectuals, professional revolutionaries, and other parasites, why can't it also resist the usurpation of its would-be friends, evaluate and reject the bad theory and strategy it receives from the past, and otherwise think for itself? It is a curious political theory that treats a revolutionary class as both profoundly gullible, on the one hand, and possessed of a unique, essential genius, on the other. There is therefore no reason whatsoever for Monsieur Dupont to continue writing, on the terms they've set for themselves, a fact they seem to have realized, retreating into spasmodic and convoluted orations on modernist art.

Other approaches fare much worse in trying to confront the contradictions of this approach, though they present deeper ambitions. A popular recent tract, *Desert*, attempts to marry the Bartlebyan perspective to Green Anarchism. They offer a "simple realization – the world will not be 'saved.'" As counter to a straw-man optimist, they bring the Bad News: "Global anarchist revolution is not going to happen. Global climate change is now unstoppable. We are not going to see the worldwide end to civilization/capitalism/patriarchy/authority." They are right, of course, to stress that climate change is unstoppable. Any future revolution will have to contend with this, though it remains to be seen just how catastrophic its effects will be; it is of course true that different social structures will entail different mediations of its effects. Climate change is a social-natural phenomenon. But this seems as likely to be the cause of revolution – leaving aside for the moment the curious adjective "global" – as its foreclosure. The authors of *Desert* direct our attention to the psychic wounds that revolutionary hope produces, and propose, in its place, "active disillusionment." But true disillusionment, the removal of all illusions, would not mean supplanting one false certainty with another, supplanting the certainty of triumph with the certainty of failure. This is an avoidance rather than acceptance of the uncertain. What the authors offer, then, is not disillusionment, but therapy. And it is a therapy likely to fail, inasmuch as the authors want to remain actively opposed to the world as it exists, a stance that will cause pain as long as the world remains a world of pain. The only true therapy would be the one that could somehow effect a readjustment of person to the world, an acceptance of the status-quo, a return to normal and an abandonment of all talk of struggle. The authors attempt to split the difference, however, by suggesting that we look for the kinds of tactics that might lead to modest, meager success. What results is a kind of "nihilist reformism," an endorsement of partial, limited conservation struggles undertaken on an ethical basis, the creation of temporary zones of autonomy in unsettled places and frontiers where a few people might make a difference. They are therefore, despite their critique of activism, brought back to a fundamentally activist position.

The authors have no choice, of course, given their conclusions and assumptions. The most important of these assumptions is their commitment to the curiously ahistorical figure of the "anarchist" as the essential and determinative ingredient in meaningful revolution. Only anarchists – dedicated, self-conscious revolutionaries, opposed to capital and the state – can make an "anarchist" (that is, real) revolution. And because, as the authors conclude, anarchists will always be a minority, meaningful revolution is impossible. They devote one sentence to the obvious counter-argument here, the idea that anarchist (or antistate communist, as we think is largely synonymous) revolution can be made by people simply acting in response to the oppressions and miseries they encounter. Their argument: capitalism has indoctrinated people to prefer authori-

tarian and hierarchical structures. All "social movements" will always be thus. Never mind the obvious question of how "anarchists" become "anarchists." Never mind the possibility that experience of struggle might provide the impetus for an education in anarchism, might cause people to draw anarchists conclusions, to look for answers in anarchists texts. Never mind the fact that anarchism was itself born from historical experience, and not the unbroken transmission of a line of elite humanity, passing their enlightened ideas from person to person. The argument is foolish, obviously, but it is also indicative of the fundamental voluntarism of so many anarchists, who for the most part remain incapable of thinking revolution or insurrection or anarchy as anything but the action of the right people with the right ideas. This can lead to the most aristocratic contempt for the common people, as with the nihilists of the "Conspiracy of Cells of Fire," who lambast the "resignation of the exploited, their herd mentality, their collaboration with the system." Drawing curiously from the language of Marxism, they describe capitalism "as a social relation in which all have their responsibility – and make or don't make the choice to fight against it." Once politics is submitted to the egodicy of choice, of the sovereign decision, it's impossible to retain any sense of strategy. The spectacular bombings of the CCF and its associated groupings are simply personal expressions, declarations of "I exist" detached from any sense of purpose. Occasionally, these groups commit solidarity attacks in the name of other like-minded groups, but if these have a social meaning, they don't have a political one. They have zero instrumental effect, and do nothing to help the imprisoned in Chile, Mexico, Indonesia, or wherever. They might as well send an email.

It's worth noting that this view, the one that stresses consciousness and the meaningfulness of decision in the here and now, is diametrically opposed to the position of Dupont, the would-be colleauges in nihilism of groups like the CCF and the authors of *Desert*. Dupont, of course, who insists that conscious decision is entirely meaningless at present. And yet, beneath this apparent opposition, there is a shared structure of feeling. Whether one thinks that consciousness is all that matters, or it doesn't matter at all, the result is the same, as one has failed to think consciousness and activity together. One has made one's feelings, one's attitudes, the object of politics. This kind of politics is therefore fundamentally *moralizing,* even when its emphasizes in a Nietzschean manner the transvaluation of all values. The questioning of value, the reduction of action to value, is not itself questioned. *Hic nihil, hic salta.*

*

Bartlebyan politics emerge, as often as not, from a recognition that resistance is a motive force within capitalism, that capitalism benefits from its loyal and disloyal antagonists by using them to induce the sort of meaningful systematic restructuring that it needs in order to respond to ever changing historical conditions, new forms of crisis. After such a recognition, withdrawal seems promising. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is Melville's reflection on this problematic, but it's not his only reflection, and is best read, in our view, as an example of a failed response to such a dilemma. "Benito Cereno," the story published after "Bartleby" in *Piazza Tales,* offers a very different strategic outlook. It is also a story of rebellion, based upon an actual slave uprising on a Spanish ship in 1805. The putative leader of this uprising, Babo, shares with Bartleby more than a similar-sounding name (both names might be transforms of the word "baby"). Like Bartleby, Babo exerts power from a position of presumed weakness. The story begins when the American captain of another ship, the *Bachelor's Delight,* comes across the captured ship, *San Dominick* (the name of which suggests the colony of Santo Domingo, and the Haitian slave revolution which was broadly contemporaneous with the time of the story). Thinking the ship in distress, the

captain of the *Bachelor's Delight,* Amasa Delano, who narrates the story, boards the ship to offer his services. There the mutinous ex-slaves, under the direction of Babo, perform servitude and enslavement for Delano, pretending to follow the directions of the Captain Benito Cereno. Like Bartleby, the power of Babo and the other slaves is exerted from a feigned servility, and Babo, playing the part of Cereno's personal servant controls him as a puppeteer might a marionette. Much of the drama of the story involves the narrator's inability to read the scene, to interpret what he observes through the racial codes and logics of power of the US. Like the narrator of Bartleby, also American, and also characterized by a naïve trust in other humans, he fails to parse the ambiguities of what he sees according to established rubrics, just as Bartleby's employer fails to parse the ambiguous utterance, "I would prefer not to." Both Melville and Babo have a great deal of fun with the carnivalesque reversals and manipulations taking place on the page of "Benito Cereno" and on the deck of the *San Dominick*, presenting one of the ex-slaves, a former king, Atufal, in chains, where he is periodically brought before Benito Cereno, who asks if Atufal will apologize. Atufal refuses, proudly, of course, and so we have not only the performance of servility but the indication that servility can be no more than performance, that Atufal is possessed of a dignity and integrity indifferent to chains symbolic or otherwise. Then there is of course the scene in which Babo carefully shaves Cereno, performing a servile task that is, at every turn, a domination through threat of violence. On the bow of the ship, next to the figurehead on the bowsprit, cloaked in a sheet at the beginning of the story, are written the words "Seguid vuestro jefe" or "Follow your leader." Later we learn that the slaves have hung the skeleton of their former owner on the bow, and put the phrase up as warning to the crew, lest they think of resisting.

The brilliance of the phrase is that it suspends the question of leadership – the "leader" might be Babo, Benito Cereno, or the dead slavetrader Aranda. The resistance on the San Dominick is illegible through the established protocols and hierarchies that Delano expects. There are no longer leaders and followers as we might come to expect; Babo and the other former slaves take power without occupying the place of power, and thus they avoid the risk of becoming their own owners, of becoming liberal subjects. In the place of the legal, self-possessing subject, some other identity and organization of identities emerges, at least for a while, and it is this that allows them to successfully fool the Europeans. It ends poorly, of course (Melville is a man of the 19th-century, after all, and one can at the same time read this story as the exposition and subtle enforcement of all sorts of white supremacist logics); the ex-slaves are defeated and Babo brought before a tribunal and hanged. Like Bartleby, Babo ends his days in stubborn refusal, in this case refusing all speech when questioned by the judges. As Captain Delano recounts, "His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words." This is many regards the exact opposite of Bartleby, who speaks words because he can do deeds but won't. In Babo, we see a promising synthesis of passive refusal and active contestation, one that requires collective solidarity, cunning, active judgment, and discrimination. But there is no magic, here. This position risks failure as much as it risks success. There is more to come. Let's keep our wits about us.

Research and Destroy
HIC NIHIL, HIC SALTA!
(a critique of Bartlebyism)
July 29, 2015

https://researchanddestroy.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/hic-nihil-hic-salta/

theanarchistlibrary.org