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Toward the

Last Jubilee!

Midnight Notes at Thirty Years

Edited / Compiled by Craig Hughes



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Introduction

Craig Hughes

IN MID-NOVEMBER 2009 MIDNIGHT NOTES COLLECTIVE (MN) marked thirty years of collective work with a daylong conference at Brecht Forum in lower Manhattan; the event was called MN30. The gathering was a coming together of more than seventy comrades to discuss and celebrate MN. MN30 developed from a series of meetings over the year prior that had led to the pamphlet *Promissory Notes: From Crisis to Commons*, produced by an ambiguously constituted group called *Midnight Notes and Friends (MN&F)*.

While MN30 was celebratory, there was also a deep sense of practical and political urgency at its core. The meeting was called largely to address a crisis within MN, and it was intended to determine the future of MN and the much more recent MN&F project. As it addressed the past and present through panels and discussions, the gathering was also intended to address the future, revisiting and grappling with the struggle concepts MN had helped develop (commons, class composition, autonomy and so on), and providing a space to voice and hear desires and ideas for moving forward.

Indeed, at a time of capitalist crisis and a crisis in movements, there was nothing lighthearted about any of it; the crisis within MN itself and the lack of clarity of how to move forward in context of the capitalist and movement crises arched the entire event. But the sense of stuckness that these crises deepened was not isolated to one collective — what MN seemed to be experiencing was, in fact, characteristic of much of the contemporary radical left, making a coming together like MN30 both powerful and all the more difficult.

Humbly, after thirty years together and a remarkable body of writing to show for it, MN had come to others to help clear a path forward when they weren't sure what to do. Rather than retreat into isolated bitterness and ideological rigidity — as too often is the case on the left — they reached out, in hopes that new allied voices may bring new insights, energy and activity. This approach was similar to the approach they had taken in a number of their collectively produced documents, particularly through the 1990s and early 2000s, from New Enclosures through Auroras of the Zapatistas.

For decades MN has presented an analysis that cuts through the left's insufficiencies and problematic strategies, while being firm in commitment to real forms of social justice and a world free of exploitation. Celebration of the commons and an empowering use of histories from below have been key characteristics of MN publications. Unaligned to the Party, transcendent of Anarchist moralism, in solidarity always with those in struggle against domination — these have defined MN's dignified and respected, but awkward and relatively marginal place in the ideologically-centered radical camps of the day. And while this willingness to move beyond ideological constraints is a key strength of MN, at a time of generalized crisis it does not lead to easy solutions.

As the essays in this collection make clear, MN is a movement group; perhaps it is more like a network in recent years. Its ability to survive thirty years could only occur as a fluid movement group — flowing with movements has allowed MN to constantly innovate and re-generate. MN is part of the crises that flow through and surround it. And it is a movement crisis many of us are experiencing, particularly in light the

economic crisis that has increased the daily terror exacted against the working class by those in power.

I have come to view the short pieces within this pamphlet as characteristic of both the MN30 gathering and the movements and general environment that surrounded it. Here the authors do not mince words — not in their celebration and admiration of MN, nor in their presentation of the very real difficulties of the time; not in their critiques of where the project has been and gone, and certainly not in their raising of the real pressing political issues we all need to grapple with. These documents are written amidst multiple crises and need to be read in that context.

The pamphlet begins with reflections by core-members of MN. p.m.'s essay, written from Zurich and offered from a distance as part of MN30, reflects on the current crises from a wide-lens, celebrating the strength of MN in achieving thirty years of collective analysis. The author argues that we are at a time when capitalist “Expansion isn’t possible anymore,” and finds glimmers of hope in the “emergent commons” of “a transformed state, rural/urban subsistence, and an area of cooperative enterprises.” Here we are reminded that we must be active, but cautious: “Every step will require careful evaluation, collective organization and autonomous institutions.”

Steven Colatrella’s letter, offered as a contribution to MN30, reflects on his discovery of MN in the academy and moves through the anti-globalization struggles of recent years into the emergence of Left governments in Latin America. He argues, “it is time to talk about alternatives again, in a concrete way,” but this should be done in context of the approach developed by MN over the past three decades: “we need, along with comrades in movements around the world, to avoid two extremes — writing cookbooks for the cooks of the future, and on the other hand to think that we can say nothing about the better world we want except to analyze existing struggles.” Speaking about particular governments in Latin America, he suggests that MN needs to evaluate these governments from a critical but supportive stance, making sure to always ally with working class movements with the long-term in mind.

George Caffentzis' essay, the text of a talk he gave at MN30, reflects on major themes and concepts of MN: the refusal of work and the commons. He contextualizes the development of MN in the shifting political terrain of the post-Keynesian period. For Caffentzis, MN hinged on "a deep commitment not to 'give up' on the revolutionary possibilities that were created in the 1960s and 1970s." MN30, for Caffentzis, was "the completion of a thirty-year old commitment," but in a particularly open-ended way. He ends his essay with what was, perhaps, the question of the day: "Will [MN30] also be a step in the creation of a new place of thought and action?"

Finally, Chris Vance's comments, written for this pamphlet after the MN30 event, contextualizes his experience with MN through the anti-globalization movements, celebrates the importance of MN for his politics, and discusses the uses and difficulties he has had with certain concepts and terminologies in MN texts. Perhaps most powerful is Vance's point that future efforts "to help bring about zerowork and the abolition of patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy" must emphasize "developing self-reproducing movements, that keep our eyes centered on overthrowing powers that shackle us."

Following the writings of MN-core members, the pamphlet moves on to essays by 'friends' of MN— Team Colors Collective, Sabu Kohso, Jenna M. Loyd, and Manuel Yang — each of whom have been deeply enticed and inspired by MN's decades of work.

We begin with Team Colors' essay that calls for a return to the militant critique of the U.S. left, found more in past MN writings, and a re-discovery of autonomous, if microscopic, working class struggle. Team Colors, a collective scattered across the U.S. whose members have long been inspired by MN, asks, "Where, in the United States, are our becoming-rebels today?" in hopes that MN and friends may join them in trying to find an answer.

Sabu Kohso's essay addresses MN&F from his unique perspective as a participant and translator of text to comrades in East Asia. In this essay he discusses the uses of MN writings and the difficulties found in Japanese struggles from the perspective of class composition. Kohso finds useful

and important MN's anti-authoritarianism for comrades in East Asia: "the MN brand of anti-authoritarianism could function as an ultimate blow to the sectarian atmosphere based upon patriarchy, and help release the revolutionary impetus for recomposing the class struggle." His call for a wider conversation between movements in East Asia is directly inspired by MN's work.

Jenna M. Loyd's essay reflects on MN in context of her recent cross-U.S. travels inquiring into the intersections of immigrant and prison abolition struggles. Loyd found a deeply complex terrain and identifies "defensive" and "offensive struggles," in context of intense political violence. She argues that "across the country people are forming ad hoc raids response groups and communication networks to warn each other about police checkpoints, neighborhood sweeps, and worksite raids; organizing to oppose repressive labor, anti-immigrant, anti-poor legislation on the municipal, state, and federal levels; and creating self-help groups to support families of people who are incarcerated or face deportation." In her journeys, Loyd more often found defensive than offensive struggles, and she points to the need for "a lot of slow, deliberate organizing work to be done, including sustained discussion on abolitionist alternatives to punishment, citizenship, and the nation."

Finally, we end with Manuel Yang's essay, "An Elegy for Midnight Notes." In this piece, Yang reflects on MN's many writings, arguing that "MN decoded partially the evanescent but no less real flickers of revolutionary heat that intimated the possibility of this capitalist winter's end," though not always in the most helpful ways. Yang calls for an approach to anti-capitalist inquiry and argument that is grounded, open and dialogical. He concludes with a revision to a centuries-old slogan, in context of MN30: "Midnight Notes is dead. Long live Midnight Notes!"

The essays in this collection are a celebration of MN's work over thirty years. In the spirit of MN, they are all written in the cause of further movement and the critical approach that this requires. They do not present a singular narrative or a holistically coherent celebration or critique of MN. I see this

as a strength — the intent of this document is not a singular intervention, but rather a celebration, a thank-you, and a space for marking MN30 and thinking through ideas for future collective efforts.

Readers will notice that there is little introduction to the concepts or people mentioned throughout the text. This pamphlet, with a small hand-numbered pressing of 200, is intended for folks who have been involved in MN or MN&F, or those who are very familiar with MN's writings, as a way to commemorate and assist in further political work. If you are in need of further information, please visit MN's website at www.midnightnotes.org.

Onward.

*March, 2010
Washington, DC*

From Midnight to Dawn: Permutations of a Crisis and the Comedy of the Commons

p.m.

A PERMANENT CRISIS

The outbreak of the crisis in 1973 was determined by the movements of refusal of work that had re-emerged in the late sixties. At that time there was little doubt that ‘capitalism worked,’ that there were jobs, that there was income to buy the ever-increasing offer of new consumer goods. There was doubt, however, whether it was worth working for them so much and under the given conditions. The goods looked okay, but the work looked unbearable. The increase of productivity since — let’s say 1948 — had been so huge, that André Gorz and others declared that a four-hour work-week or a work-life of 10’000 hours would be enough to guarantee a decent standard of living for everybody. The double protests against ‘consumer society’ and ‘working for it’ defined the new crisis. Somewhere between the hippies and the striking mass workers capital found no place for itself.

Under these conditions capital would usually have smashed the whole shop, destroying capital and canceling the New Deal of the '30s and WWII. But such a radical new start was not possible — it was too risky under the existing relations of power — so capital wasn't able to be destructive enough, which meant that the crisis became chronic, dragging on until now. There were wars, Vietnam, wars in Africa, Latin America. But the scale of destruction wasn't big enough. Low intensity warfare and low profits went together.

Instead of destruction, capital had to choose expansion — a desperate move, which led to what we call 'globalization.' Work was moved to places, where workers didn't have the power to refuse work — mainly China, East Asia, some countries in Africa and Latin America, where local subsistence was destroyed by the new enclosures to set 'free' these workers. The crisis wasn't solved, the infection was just spread.

A lot of capital was destroyed in the de-industrialization of the eighties and nineties, but it was only patchy and resulted mainly in delocalization. Physical capital was destroyed almost completely in East Germany, but the promised new start only happened very partially. Brave new capitalism looks so bad, that, twenty years later, the Left (representing elements of the old socialist system) gets twenty-five or more percent of the vote and is governing in some of the old Länder of East Germany.

As the Chinese and other workers are realizing how capital's schemes work, the circle has closed. Even with a probable rate of exploitation of 200 percent, the over-all non-profitability of world capital (of which there is too much) cannot be balanced any longer. Expansion isn't possible any more.

The low profits so much feared in the late seventies and early eighties are back. There has been a big destruction of (mostly fictive) capital in the range of trillions of dollars during the last year. But clearly, this was not sufficient.

A way out within the logic of capitalism would have to be much more drastic and dramatic. At the same time, there is a worldwide consensus that such a solution is a no-go option. Capitalism must go on, be it with no profits, no capital and even no work (jobs).

The last resort, the ‘state’ (a curious, haphazard mixed bag of functions and activities — like rescuing cats from trees or giving lethal injections), becomes the address where all the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism are shipped. It sits there owning banks, industrial companies, millions of houses, becoming something like the United Company of Ford’s, Gillette’s and Sinclair’s dreams. The question is now: can the ‘state’ undo the spell of the ‘exchange of equivalents,’ on which this system is based, or can it find a new magic trick for another round of accumulation?

Of course, we aren’t quite there yet. It seems that Chimerica can squeeze another business cycle out of Chinese and other workers. There is some little financial relief, as billions have been stolen from workers’ pension funds, savings, real estate assets through the manipulations of financial capital. Jobless recovery has also brought a massive surge of productivity, even in old industrial countries like the United States. The usual threat of the crisis has its effects, to some extent. There are also wars — Iraq, Afghanistan — but they’re not the great national or ideological wars that could really have the necessary impact. They strangely resemble the colonial wars of the end of the nineteenth century (“Germans to the front!”), minus the empires.

All the ingredients of the old liberal recipes (including Keynes) are on the table, but there is no convincing menu. There is an atmosphere of a certain listlessness, as if world capital only went through the motions without any firm convictions. In a few years the effect of this last permutation of the same old crisis will have evaporated — and the situation will look much more dramatic than now. At the same time, more and more humans on the planet are looking forward to that resolution.

If we look back at these thirty years we see one single crisis that found no solution but went through different contractions. The desire for periodization is understandable, but in fact just a superficial construct, even the term ‘neoliberal’ seems obsolete in hindsight. The basics were always the same: work, energy, and resistance.

THE COMEDY OF THE COMMONS

Capitalism has never been as discredited as now. The conviction that it doesn't work and should be abolished is the common sense of our times. (Is Michael Moore our new Thomas Paine?) This common sense is so overwhelming, that most people don't even bother to criticize capitalism any more, but rather invest their energies directly in finding ways out of it. According to a BBC study, only 11 percent of the world population thinks that capitalism works well. In France, Mexico and the Ukraine more than 40 percent demand that it should be replaced by something completely different. There are only two countries, where more than one fifth of the people think that capitalism works well in its present form: the USA (25 percent) and Pakistan (21 percent).¹

It seems symbolically important, that this year's Nobel Prize for Economics went to Elinor Ostrom, who has been doing vast research on methods of governing the commons.² (Last year's prize went to Krugman, for his work on Ricardo! The predicament of the lack of surplus-value!) Among Ostrom's topics there are also the Swiss Alpine Cooperatives, a very old and efficient way of organizing the commons of the Alps. This cooperative tradition is being discussed now as one of the alternative ways of running whole regional or territorial households.³ Cooperatives are democratic and inclusive: although shares can be different in value, the vote is the same for all members. (In that they resemble the ideal of the modern democratic state). Cooperative banks and insurance companies survived the financial crisis almost unharmed. Workers have transformed hundreds of abandoned factories in Argentina into cooperatives.

1. *Der Kapitalismus hat ein Image-Problem* ("Capitalism has got an image problem"), in: *Tages-Anzeiger*, 11/10/2009, Zurich.

2. *Elinor Ostrom, Governing the Commons* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

3. *Hans Kissling, Wir Eidgenossenschaftler*, in: *Das Magazin*, 11/7/2009, Zurich.

Almost every day there is a new contribution to the pool of alternative ideas, and 'old' voices are heard more prominently. On November 4th, Vandana Shiva was in Zurich in a tightly packed disco hall, talking about seed-cooperatives in India and the necessity of reorganizing the big cities from the perspective of food production, of the countryside.⁴ More and more farmers seem ready for CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and other schemes of direct producer/consumer cooperation. The reruralization of the world that she speaks about is incompatible with capitalism (it is intrinsically non-profitable), but can at the same time be seen as a revitalization or resocialisation of our cities. (Cf. New York City in the year 2400 in the Mannahattan project). More and more people understand the concept of subsistence as a practical way of organizing our social metabolism.

Just when Vandana Shiva had pointed out, that our "north-western" life-style is only possible for one out of seven billion people on this planet, at the most, I got a book by Hans-Peter Gensichen on "Armseligkeit" (an interesting German word, a combination of poverty and beatitude) describing a new global way of life based on a consumption of resources on the level of countries like Chile or Slovenia, sustaining "happiness" with half of the GNP of the U.S. or Switzerland.⁵ Global household politics will be one of our next tasks, and it should be taken seriously. (However our "less" isn't their "less.") Gensichen bases most of his evidence on the experience of East German projects of local production, exchange and cooperation. Even the newcomers to the capitalist utopia seem to have seen enough. However Gensicher positions his proposals in a strictly global context.

Among the many initiatives that are being created at the moment, I want to mention sole-freiburg.de (life and solidarity). Their basic axiom sounds so simple that it almost hurts: "We help each other, we contribute things or services according to everybody's possibilities for the benefit of others. We do not keep book on what is given or received." Imagine

4. Vandana Shiva, *Soil Not Oil* (South End Press, 2008).

5. Hans-Peter Gensichen, *Auf dem Weg in die Gesellschaft des Weniger* ("Towards a Society of the Less"), Brussels.

how horrible this must sound in the ears of market fetishists.

Even the “state” looks better now (not just because private capital looks bad), especially in its municipal or regional aspects. There is no more talk of privatization at the moment, on the contrary. The privatization of the local electric supply was voted down in Zurich, a proposal to privatize the municipal catering system has no chance whatsoever. The tragedy of privatization is giving way to the happy endings of the comedy of the commons.

The actual state can be transformed in public cooperatives and so become a ready and easy tool of transition. Transition towns are emerging everywhere. Transition states, territories, provinces or regions could be the next step, up to a planetary transition ‘cooperative’ of democratic states. The expansion of public services can provide existential security for everybody and thus free us from the terrorism of waged work. As they can’t we’ll help them devalue their capital.

I can see three existing forms of organization of the emergent commons: a transformed state, rural/urban subsistence, and an area of cooperative enterprises. All these forms have a long history, are based on inclusive, democratic structures and can function beyond the law of value. At the same time, their constituency is functionally different and will guarantee systemic stability.

I think the way ahead is getting clearer every day. At the same time, watchfulness is essential. There is no automatic escalator into a better future. Every step will require careful evaluation, collective organization and autonomous institutions.

I wish Midnight Notes a happy anniversary. May we meet again at debates, discussions, demonstrations, parties and other occasions. It’s good to have friends in many parts of the world and to know that a common understanding about the essential things is possible. The continuity of analysis that we have been able to maintain is valuable against the attempts to use collective amnesia against the movement. We have seen a lot, but we are also ready to face future challenges. I wish you an inspiring gathering and a great party afterwards.

Comments on Midnight Notes 30 Years

Steven Colatrella

THIRTY YEARS AGO, I WAS ENROLLED IN A COURSE AT Bard College taught by Ferruccio Gambino, whose presence there was a result of the repression of the extraparliamentary movement in Italy. I curse the rulers of Italy whose repression shattered some lives and put many others on hold. But I, at least, benefited in one of those strange, dialectical ways that the working class movement experiences in moments of defeat — as Peter Linebaugh shows in his article “All the Atlantic Mountains Shook.” Experiences get shared as we move around, looking to survive, to make a living, to start again.

Ferruccio arrived at the right time for me — my friends and I were already activists and already Marxists. We had never had any affinity with the Soviet system, had been looking for alternatives: Sartre and existential Marxism, May '68 in France, various libertarian strands of Marxism, the Situationists. But Ferruccio brought our attention to a social force that could change the world: the working class. Not the working class as an instrument of a socialist party or government, but the working class as an agent of history, as

the real, living people we had already known growing up (for me, the people I had worked with in factories in Northern New Jersey and met eating breakfast at truck stops on the way to school).

One of the readings though, stood out. I went to the Bard bookstore and found the proper title on the syllabus — a magazine-like format, with a bizarre cover that only later I learned was Durer's Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. I started reading it and didn't fall asleep that night. I read it three times cover to cover. It was the "Work-Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse."

Sometime later, Silvia Federici came to speak at Bard on "Women, Welfare and the Energy Crisis," and George Caffentzis came with her. I didn't exactly 'join' MN — we have never been a 'membership organization' — I gravitated to it, almost literally.

I don't know whether I resent what happened next in all our lives, or if I feel sorry for my young students who will not have had an experience similar to mine: 1979 — the Coal Miner's strikes in the U.S., the Winter of Discontent in Britain, the Anti-Nuclear Movement, the Sandinistas, Zimbabwe, the Iranian Revolution, and then, in August 1980, Solidarity in Poland. Reading MN while watching the world's events I had this moment of epiphany: everything seemed to be coming together, to make sense, provide clarity and a sense of direction.

Little did we realize that the name MN was all too prophetic. I wasn't at the original meetings where the name was chosen, but it turned out to be apt. Reagan-Thatcher, the Debt Crisis, Structural Adjustment, Africa being transformed from a continent where the names of leaders symbolized vast struggles for transformation into one riven by civil war, desperation, migration, hunger, but also moved by new struggles against the IMF.

After huddling together for the initial period of horrors in Boston meetings, then spreading out in our own diaspora, we came together and produced the New Enclosures. I am very proud of having participated in its production. Look at movements today — even if they have never heard of us, how

many thinkers, activists, organizations talk about primitive accumulation, expropriation, the commons?

The anti-globalization movement gave us a new home. It is in crisis now, or even superseded, but I want to mention one important thing about that movement — at its height, it spread information about the real material conditions of work and struggles taking place all over the world, from Indian fishing peoples to steelworkers in the U.S.; from land occupations in Brazil to sweatshops in Asia. Probably more people heard or read of personal testimonies about the reality of working conditions and the struggles to change them around the world than was ever accomplished by the Second or Third Internationals. We played a small part in all that, but we made a contribution.

And we are still around now, at a time when, despite the fact that the initial reaction in many places politically has been to reinforce neoliberal parties — mostly because the center-left and social democratic parties have been at least as neoliberal as the right — capitalism has shown it has nothing left. This is not a prediction that it is about to fall — it is far too likely that it could last long enough to destroy us all. But it has now had its chance — globalization was given every chance, in virtually every country. It claimed to lift 300 million people out of poverty — though the vast majority of those turn out to have been in China and the result has been a huge increase in inequality and class conflict there. Otherwise, many of those who briefly found a better income source have fallen back — as a result of the Asian Financial Crisis and now the Great Recession — into a struggle to survive.

That's it. We know now (well, at MN we always knew, but now we are less alone) — capitalism can never, will never provide a decent, comfortable, reasonably secure life for the overwhelming majority of people. That is not what it is for. This means that it is time to talk about alternatives again, in a concrete way. To do this well, we need, along with comrades in movements around the world, to avoid two extremes — writing cookbooks for the cooks of the future, and on the other hand to think that we can say nothing about the better world we want except to analyze existing struggles.

At MN, partly as a result of the Italian wing of our background, we have avoided the former of these without a problem; we never had that temptation, though bolo bolo did explore the material possibility of what could concretely be lived instead. But the latter has been more typical of us. I want to address that briefly. We are good at talking about struggles and often at participating in them. Where can they lead? The Italian experience opposed “prefiguration” as an obsession with neglecting the present reality of struggles by focusing on their future, that is, as a merely different version of writing cookbooks, with all its elitist implications. But we have other roots — including the Correspondence group around CLR James and the social history school of EP Thompson and others. The latter showed that democracy itself was born of working class struggle. The former saw a self-governed world deriving from the struggles of workers at work to control the workplace and the need for that struggle to reshape society to defend itself.

I think we could say that currently two models present themselves to the world proletariat, both in Latin America. On the one hand, Zapatistas and Oaxaca, on the other Venezuela/ Chavez and Bolivia/Morales. I am for them both. The direct democracy and commons of Chiapas and Oaxaca are the real thing, but they have faced such repression that it is impossible to reject the efficacy of the new alliances between movements across countries ranging from Ecuador and Argentina to Bolivia and Venezuela. We don't feel comfortable about movements running the state. It has not turned out well all too often. There are inherent conflicts between government and base. But after reading Nikolas Kozloff's *Revolution: Latin America and the Rise of the New Left*, and seeing the documentaries “Beyond Elections” and “The Revolution will not be Televised,” the impression I get is that while these tensions cannot be wished away. These governments are a genuine attempt by the working class in its diversity to govern the country, reverse neoliberalism, make inroads into capitalism itself setting up noncapitalist institutions in both the economic and political spheres and lay the basis for a completely different society.

There are limits to these experiences, but I do not believe that the Chavez model and the Zapatista model, despite their real differences, are mutually exclusive. Representative democracy, with all its limitations under capitalism, was brought about by working class struggle, and it is a tool to make possible the expansion of possibilities for direct democracy and cooperative control of the economy and the neighborhood, city and countryside directly by proletarians. Where there are conflicts between governments of the left, such as Lula's and movements like the Landless Workers in Brazil, we of course stand with the movements. Where there are tensions between the different aspects of real alliances, as between say Chavez and the cooperatives or communal councils, we should study carefully what is happening, with our loyalties always to longer term goal of full, direct control of economy, society and politics by the proletariat and not depending on leadership by a caudillo, party or president. But an entire continent is working under the most difficult conditions imaginable, except those found in Africa I suppose, to change the system once and for all. What we can do, in Europe, in North America, in Asia and Africa to create our own versions of these movements. These forms of hybrid representative-democracy and direct democracy as first steps to finally leaving the capitalist era, should be on the agenda for MN's next thirty years.

Greetings and warm embraces to all the friends and comrades in Boston this weekend. I miss you all. I look forward to celebrating our sixtieth together, or maybe even our fortieth, with my daughter Ines by our side and in a world free of exploitation, war and ecological catastrophe.

Two Themes of Midnight Notes:

Work/Refusal of Work and Enclosure/Commons

George Caffentzis

WORK AND THE FORCE OF ITS REFUSAL

The first issue of MN, *Strange Victories*, was published thirty years ago in the Spring of 1979. This was a decisive year from many viewpoints. The partial meltdown of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in late March brought the planetary ecology at the center of political debate. Meanwhile, the U.S. Federal Reserve's decision to increase interest rates to over 20 percent set the stage for a new monetary regime, the subsequent severe recession, and the international 'debt crisis.' 1979 was also a turning point for revolutions in the Third World. The victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the anti-colonial forces in Rhodesia ended an era of formal colonialism. Finally, the election of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party in Britain, who came to power with the explicitly anti-proletarian ideology later to be known as 'neoliberalism,' opened an era of direct capitalist confrontation with the working class struggle in auto factories and mines.

All these developments were part of a historic turn in capitalist politics, of which we could dimly see the contours, but whose gravity did not escape us. By 1979, the zero-growth strategy, the freeze on investment — with which international capital responded to the struggle in the factories, fields, and kitchens of the world — had turned into a three-pronged attack on workers' wages and means of subsistence worldwide through inflation, de-industrialization, and relocation. Although such strategies as structural adjustment and globalization were still in the make, already by the end of the 1970s, we could see an attempt to restructure class relations through a process of permanent crisis, dismantling the welfare state, directing investments into the former colonized world, especially Asia.

Capitalism's wordsmiths brought forth a whole new vocabulary to describe crises: the 'energy' crisis, the 'entitlements' crisis, 'rust belt' crisis, the 'democracy' crisis, the 'Keynesian' crisis, the 'fiscal' crisis, and so on.

On the other side of the capitalist crisis was the crisis of anti-capitalist movements. While feminist and anti-racist activism was in retreat, new environmental, anti-nuclear power and anti-nuclear weapons movements emerged that did not recognize class relations as crucial for their struggle. The survival of the human species was their aim and not the fate of the struggle within class society. The parties and unions of the older workers' movement were considered part of the problem than the solution. Last, the rise of political philosophies like deconstruction, postmodernism, post-structuralism, and even the 'new philosophers' that elected diversity and particularization while denying the possibility of a unitary emancipatory project became the hegemonic trends and, for all their differences, they all called for the abandoning of 'master narratives' that Marxism was presumably committed to.

Strange Victories (drafted largely by p.m.) was intended to overcome the increasing divide between the anti-nuke and the (waged and unwaged) workers' movements. Its argument was that if the anti-nuke movement wanted to get out of an organizing "ghetto" of farmers and intellectual workers who recently moved to the countryside, it needed to address the

working class in the cities, and that required speaking of nuclear power in terms of wages and the price of energy.

The conceptual side of this argument was to show that the categories of Marxism could be detached from the factory-centered model of exploitation and be given a new life. A key element of this effort was to re-interpret the process of work in capitalism. Work was a manifold field extending throughout society with much of it unwaged, invisible and unrecognized. Any attempt to isolate work in a particular locale (a factory, field or mine) distorts it, since work is to be found in the home, the transport of workers, as well as in prisons. As we learned from the Wages for Housework perspective, the worker and the working class are no longer to be identified with the waged workers who wear a watch and are “protected” by union contracts. Housewives, slaves, drug runners, cash-crop peasants, prisoners are all part of the working class. Their work creates value throughout the history of capitalism.

We had to “stretch” (as Fanon said) Marxist concepts of labor and labor power to achieve this result. But along with this stretching of work is also a widening of the area of the struggle against work. This vision of the manifold of work had an impact similar to the one the notion of universal gravitation had on many others centuries ago. Just as the fall of the apple and the movement of the moon were explained by a single force, I for one began to see the signs of responses to the struggle against work everywhere, from the shape and weight of bricks or door knobs to the design of Levittown in the late 1940s. The world of objects began to speak to me not only of labor, but of the negative power of its refusal. The formal strike was no longer to be the measure of the struggle against work, rather it was the result of thousands of micro-refusals in the course of a work-day. The details of the ‘counter-planning’ from the shop floor to the kitchen began to reveal themselves in my eyes everywhere they settled.

We in MN applied this insight about work in a variety of ways. I, for example, was most involved in the analysis of the ‘energy crisis’ (as a work/energy crisis) from this perspective, but we also carried on an ongoing critique of autonomists like Toni Negri, who were arguing at that time that capital

had gone beyond work and that was the source of the crisis in the 1970s. We argued that far from being liberated from labor, the increasing computerization of production requires an ever-increasing exploitation of agricultural, manufacturing and reproductive labor. We insisted on the relevance of Marx's categories (class, surplus value, work) to the understanding of capitalism.

A key objective of the MN's founding group was to carry our political knowledge through a long period of counter-revolution, enabling us to cross over to a new phase of anti-capitalist struggle. There was a deep commitment not to 'give up' on the revolutionary possibilities that were created in the 1960s and 1970s. We knew it would require Secrets (hence the small tight group) and Surprises (hence the changing genres and typographies) and some Luck to get through. Our gathering here thirty years later is something of a fulfillment of this earlier pledge.

In retrospect, this attitude had much to do with the name we chose. We were in Boston and were preparing to print *Strange Victories*, but we still had no name for the journal. It was Saturday night and we went to listen to Gil Scott Heron and his *Midnight Band*. After the show, still hungry for music and still nameless, we dropped in on a bar in Cambridge to listen to a blind singer pumping out his blues. Someone looked at his watch and said, "It's midnight." Someone else said, "Midnight Notes," and we turned to each other in instant agreement. The name was there and it stuck. I now see why: it fit perfectly with our sense that MN occupies nocturnal time outside of and against the rhythms of the workday. As a Nigerian friend said, midnight is the only time when workers can get together to plot against their work.

The 1980s verified our prediction as to the intensity of the repression and we, for a period of time between 1982 and 1988, actually published anonymously. A number of us left the country (I went to Nigeria between 1983 and 1987) or went back to university to get re-qualified or in some way or other moved to escape the political repression of the Reagan years. But the knowledge we were originally given to transport to the future still centered on work and the struggle against it.

NEW ENCLOSURES AND THE COMMONS

There was a hardness, perhaps, in our project of the 1980s. We almost had a chip on our collective shoulder—with our class war *uber alles* stance. But the ironic spirit of struggle can undo the most obdurate of things. For in the period of repression we all were forced to experience new elements of the class in a great transformation. In my case it was in a Nigeria that first enveloped me like a huge humid warmth. It took a while after my arrival for me to recover and begin to ask, where is the class struggle here? The answer that eventually came was a surprise to me: the commons still existed in Nigeria and made it possible for many who are outside of the waged labor market to have collective access to land and for many waged workers with ties to the village common land to subsist when on strike. Much of the Nigerian class struggle I observed was a struggle against the police, the oil companies, and the army to prevent the enclosure of the agricultural village common land, forests and waters. In fact, increasingly I began to see Structural Adjustment and neoliberalism — both the theory and practice — as a direct attack on the remaining commons from pre-capitalist times and the new commons that were created by workers’ struggles (including our famous ‘social and economic rights’).

On returning to the U.S. in 1987 and joining with old and new MN comrades, we began to realize that through our different experiences of the neoliberal counter-revolution (that was beginning to take on its names like ‘globalization,’ ‘privatization,’ ‘new international division of labor,’ and ‘financial neocolonialism’) we were coming to a unified view of how to describe its dynamics. The phrase we used to specify this view was “the new enclosures.”

The notion of enclosures we were using to describe capital’s strategy was neither a throw back to the transition to capitalism (Marx), nor was it a continuous eating away at the remaining “natural economies” around the world (Luxemburg), but it is an ever present requirement of capital to continually expropriate continuously created and re-created common resources from those who are escaping from capitalist work or

from those who are fighting to not be completely dependent on capital for their reproduction (and hence have a weapon against their exploitation). The enclosure/commons struggle is the logical basis of the creation of and resistance to capital. For if workers collectively had the means of production and subsistence in their control, they could not easily be brought into a labor market to 'sell' their labor power, i.e., there would be no waged workers.

The recognition of the enclosure process and the struggle against it opened up a new dimension of class struggle (perhaps a more fundamental one than the struggle over the length of the working day) and has redefined the theoretical/political center of gravity for MN since 1990. Increasingly we were researching the inter-relation of the new enclosures in the U.S. and Europe (e.g., the attempt to impose an intellectual property regime on the internet) with those in the rest of the world, both in the present and throughout the history of capitalism.

This collective effort went into the writing of *New Enclosures* and our involvement with the movement against the Iraq war led to a number of pamphlets and later the book, *Midnight Oil*. That is why the Zapatista revolution in 1994 had such an impact on us: we saw in the words and actions of the Zapatistas a highly articulate expression of the kinds of struggles we were chronicling in our pages. Our involvement with the Zapatistas went on for many years and we marked it with the book, *Auroras of the Zapatistas* (2001).

In the 1990s we also engaged with the anti-globalization movement that was redefining politics in a way that premised the unity of struggles around the planet and also recognized the new enclosures as one of the basic ways in which capital was re-asserting its control of humanity. But we had an increasingly ambivalent relation to the work of autonomous Marxists like Toni Negri. On the one side, our conception of the manifold of work and the extension of the notion of the working class was similar to the Negri's category of the multitude, and our notion of the conflictual dialectic between commons and enclosure was similar to his understanding of the relation between the common and capture. However,

on the other side, we did not agree with Negri and his co-researchers on many other matters, e.g., that capital was no longer organizing production (either in the toy factories of China or in the corporate campuses of Silicon Valley) and no longer depended on profits, and only accumulated “rents” by “capture.”

After the 2001 publication of *Auroras of the Zapatistas*, however, MN became silent for a number of years. We were roused to write in a collective voice again only by the 2006 “*Si se puede*” rebellion in 2006 and then by intimations of crisis in the summer of 2008, at which point the latest phase of MN qua a wider group calling itself *Midnight Notes and Friends* begins. After an extensive discussion, this group produced a ‘pamphlet’ on the crisis through an effort of collective discussion involving many comrades over the internet and in face-to-face meetings. We wanted to test whether the methodology and basic ideas of MN and its friends — like work/refusal of work and the enclosure/commons struggles — developed over the years could still be useful in interpreting the crisis. This experiment in political composition resulted in *Promissory Notes*, a pamphlet that, for all its shortcomings, is what this large set of voices with allied politics was able to produce under the circumstances concerning the crisis by April 2009. It has also been found politically useful in many parts of the world, as shown by its translation and publication in a number of languages.

This brings us to today, the MN30 gathering. I know I need a site of continuous collective discussion and debate in dialogue with the anti-capitalist movement in order to create a political perspective that can be expressed in a journal. However, MN stopped being such a site a while ago. It is time to create a new and larger one. As I mentioned before, for me this gathering is the completion of a thirty-year old commitment. Will it also be a step in the creation of a new place of thought and action?

A Short Reflection on Midnight Notes

Chris Vance

“This context of struggle and being a warrior and being a struggler has been forced on me by oppression, otherwise I would be a sculptor, or a gardener. Carpenter — you know, I would be free to be so much more. I guess part of me or a part of who I am, a part of what I do is being a warrior — a reluctant warrior. ... The only way to live on this planet with any human dignity at the moment is to struggle.”

—Assata Shakur

I SENSE THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF MIDNIGHT Notes’ work akin to the tension that Assata Shakur points toward above. Each of us is forced to struggle due to oppressive “living” conditions, yet in the course of these same struggles we find humane and liberating powers through the forging of collective energies, both new and reclaimed. If we want to help bring about zerowork and the abolition of patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy, then facing this tension may help us carry-on important elements of successful and sustained struggles — perhaps most urgently

of developing self-reproducing movements, that keep our eyes centered on overthrowing powers that shackle us.

I was invited to participate in MN meetings, then officially welcomed as a collective member around the issue One No, Many Yeses in the late 1990s, and my involvement with MN has been deeply important for me. The deep friendships, abiding commitments, and sensible secrecies comprise some of the most profound embodiments of thorough openness and security I have experienced separate from relationships with lovers, close family, and lifelong friends. Each member and friend of Midnight Notes I distinctly remember the honour of first meeting, with sincere gratitude to our common contacts who nurtured introductions, in settings ranging from the streets of Philadelphia and New York City in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal, to the jazz clubs and rambling parks of Boston. I thank Peter Linebaugh who, after launching The Magna Carta Manifesto in Toronto, encouraged me to pick-up with MN again and thus caused me to meet so many new, dynamic and vibrant persons who have propelled MN into our future now.

My involvement in MN directly intertwined with my activist and intellectual concerns. Upon returning to Boston from my first visit to San Salvador in 1996, a member of MN returning from the first Encuentro in Chiapas questioned my passive recitation of the demand by Salvadorans for more work. And sure enough, Salvadorans would also teach me what lay behind and beyond such reductive mis-characterizations. Within a few busy weeks from that point a number of Zapatista-hosted Midnight Notes members, myself, and many other comrades from the New England region organized the first of many activist encuentros. These encuentros had an important influence on my involvement in cross-border solidarity to support unionization by workers in sweatshops as well as local squatting and co-operative housing projects.

This influence has continued. Between the 1999 and 2008-09 get-togethers in New York City that produced Promissory Notes, my involvements in Toronto strikes, international solidarity, and thinking through a terminal-degree in university (with a detour through the rough seas of learning on child-care, construction, and service jobsites),

have each benefitted from MN's resolute concentration on social reproduction and wars of globalization. Most important to me has been the sensitivity to recognize the restorative power of subsistence and planetary circuits of struggle in context of attending to commoning as a viable re-constituting of ourselves, and the refusing of neoliberal cooptation — including through official civil society.

But there are limitations in our published works that also need to be discussed. The strength of precisely acknowledging and constructively criticizing struggles we observe and/or are involved in has, unfortunately, coincided with us not engaging many people beyond the self-identified Left. Let us remember the myriads of myriads of sculptors, gardeners, carpenters, and others, whose very survival is often self-organized through struggle and whose successful revolutionary organization seems to me as the absolutely necessary condition for all our freedom. Where do they, and the tactics in struggles they wage, factor into our current interventions and analysis?

Throughout MN writings, I've found most challenging the application of certain scientific concepts to social struggles, especially when differing meanings are used — such as with 'entropy' regarding information and thermal dynamics. Are these literal, metaphorical, allegorical, or situationist? In contrast, I've come to regard the details about medicine/healing in Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* a clearer statement about proletarian (not bourgeois) science.

My need to learn science-speak reminds me of another difficulty: translation. MN could benefit from translation of relevant texts not in English into future projects. Simultaneously, it would also be helpful to have particularly useful MN writings translated into other languages — the long-awaited Spanish version of *New Enclosures* is always warmly received, but getting more dated!

The MN30 conference keeps me thinking about how our projects are vital to the commons we are at once excited by and targeted upon in today's newest enclosures. This is my waving hi-hi to us all in eager enthusiasm for eventually waving bye-bye to our appropriators.

“A great ship is about to sail on a beautiful early morning. Assembled on the ship are all of the self proclaimed ‘marxist’ ideologists who, now that the revolution has come, prepare to sail around the world to spread the good word, and build a society which will accept their vision of socialism based upon the joy of endless voluntary work and self-sacrifice [...] ‘atomized, serialized proletarians’ come to see the ship leave without any gratitude to the would-be-saviours on board. [...] Laughingly, the crowd promises the ideologists on board the ship, Gorz among them, that everyone will put in as much voluntary work to build socialism as they possibly can. Reassured, the ship sails off and the working class waves bye-bye to the ideologists. A few people light up joints and crack open beers. A few more go back to bed. A few go start a picnic. A few people carry on some needed services like health care, (and even they only work short shifts). Everyone takes it pretty easy and begins spending some of their spare time thinking up how to build safe machines that can do the work people still do, and inventing new drugs, sex positions and crossword puzzles made up of the names of famous marxist ideologists.”

— **“The Working Class Waves Bye-Bye:
A Proletarian Response to Andre Gorz”**
in *Midnight Notes 7 (bolo’bolo/Lemming Notes)*
1984

In solidarity.

High Entropy Workers Unite!

Team Colors Collective

(for this piece: Conor Cash, Craig Hughes, Stevie Peace, Beth Puma and Kevin Van Meter)

WHEN GEORGE CAFFENTZIS WROTE US ON THE twentieth of October with the request that we provide some commentary on thirty years of Midnight Notes and how the collective continues to say “something useful about contemporary reality” we were excited about the opportunity. But it then occurred to us: how do you even discuss a subject that rich? For us, Midnight Notes, along with Zerowork and the Wages for Housework Campaign, have provided key intellectual mentorship, and the lessons we’ve learned from reading writings under its name have been very wide in scope. In these short comments we attempt to answer George’s request by providing our view on some of the strengths and weaknesses of the perspectives of MN for contemporary anti-capitalist analysis and struggle. Our comments are brief and are made out of deep respect and comradeship, as well as a similar commitment to exiting capitalism with all deliberate speed.

Before we continue, an aside: as with any substantive organizing effort, revolutionary movement, or meaningful and engaged intellectual project, our encounter with and

mentorship by members of MN is grounded in interpersonal relationships. Some of us in Team Colors met George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, followed by Peter Linebaugh and others, as young organizers on suburban Long Island. Since the late 1990s, members of MN have supported us through early organizing campaigns, state repression, sudden death and the mourning that followed, as well as intellectual pursuits. It is relationships that developed during these moments, as much as any theoretical identification, that has deepened our respect for MN.

WRITING NOTES AT MIDNIGHT

Midnight Notes has been an anomaly in the United States Left, although at its inception there was more of a tendency for groups of radicals to come together and theorize social struggles and class composition. Nowadays, with theory most often tied into academic papers and presentations, along with steadfast anti-intellectualism buried deeply within the grassroots, groupings that intertwine the two are seemingly few and far between. Further, ‘class’ isn’t a dynamic and relation people often talk about explicitly, particularly not in a way that gauges working class movements in all their diversity within changing capitalist strategies. It is the unique blend of concepts — of the autonomy of the working class, of the importance of unwaged and reproductive labor, of the continued nature of wage struggles, of social history and the commons — that has separated MN from its predecessors as well as others, within what Harry Cleaver has called ‘autonomist Marxism.’

When Zerowork released its first issue in 1975, the collective, some of whom are in this room, were knee-deep in the crisis of Keynesianism. The “Introduction” to the first edition of Zerowork outlined an analysis of capital that took at its center class struggle. Most usefully, it provided a lexicon for conceiving of social struggles from the perspective of “composition.” Political recomposition, decomposition, and cycles of struggle are still only marginally used in the United

States, but we have yet to find better concepts to conceive of the strength and weakness of working class power against capital. The kind of analysis that places a diverse range of working class activity, including autonomous struggle, at the center of crisis is absolutely crucial right now, not only because it's likely more accurate than other explanations of crisis causality, but also because it's an empowering narrative for those of us hoping for the end of capitalism. In providing substantial analysis from a proletarian viewpoint, MN has substantially assisted radical understandings of crisis, struggle, and the possibilities to come.

MIDNIGHT NOTES, THE LEFT AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL STRUGGLE

With the mysterious ending of Zerowork, the beginning of MN provided the best available analysis of the anti-nuclear movement in the form of its first issue, entitled "Strange Victories." The analysis in that article still holds many insights for anti-capitalist organizing today, particularly in terms of activist class-interest and elitism. In recent decades there has been a deepening divide, at least as we understand it, between those who identify as capital-a Activists, and others involved in organizing and struggle, at least here in the States. The Activist-identity approach isn't unrelated to the Left's increasing self-marginalization through the development of neoliberalism. Activists are not "classless angels," although often-times the approach of the Activist develops through 'classless' rhetoric and stands. A particularly relevant thread of connection between 1979 and 2009 is found in the question of class interest of those on the Left, most saliently on questions of the environment, which plays an important role in contemporary international organizing as well as Midnight Notes and Friends' recent pamphlet Promissory Notes. As p.m. stated in "Strange Victories" while discussing a particular type of liberalism, "[t]here is no such thing as 'outside of capital' in a capitalist society: from a long-term perspective, the 'back-to-the-land' intellectuals are just testing out new

capitalist possibilities of dealing with certain problems of cheap production.” This insight proved in fact to be potentially more important currently, as ‘green capitalism’ has become increasingly popular here in the States. Many on the Left champion green capitalism, and the parallels to their seeming ‘classlessness’ are distinct.

We wish to draw this point out further. From a proletarian perspective, the question of who is involved in radical and Left organizing immediately leads to the question of autonomous struggles across the social field. In “Strange Victories,” p.m. writes that during the 1970s, “[t]he anti-nuclear movement ha[d] developed a certain rigidity and a fear of uninvited guests.” Five years after MN published “Strange Victories,” they argued that “the left” had become “an ally of capital against the class.” We agree with their exhortation that “[w]e must see this and critically deal with it if we are to move ahead.”

IT OCCURS TO US THAT AUTONOMOUS STRUGGLE IS still deeply feared by many of the progressive forces, including unions, the non-profit sector, as well as many self-identified radicals, within the United States. With the exception of some anarchists and some Marxists, few in the Left openly rally for autonomous class activity, particularly if there is a risk that it may get ‘out of control’ and involve petty crimes, shattered glass or even flames. In Promissory Notes it is pointed out that we should not make arbitrary comparisons to the Great Depression, that those were different times and we can’t try and repeat old strategies in current days. Similarly, we can’t leave lessons behind as if the Left re-invents itself decade by decade. Particularly important for us is understanding the mechanisms used to control the class. Put simply, it may be easy to understand Andy Stern of SEIU as a problem for advancing working class movement in the United States, but is it also easy to understand executive directors of ‘community-based organizations’ or professional ‘community organizers’ in a similar light? How do we deal with the reality that the Left in various ways is deeply intertwined with, and in some ways a central part of, the mechanisms that neoliberal capital has

utilized to prevent the kinds of organizing, resistances, and rebellions that have caused bosses and the ruling class as a whole so much frustration and loss?

In Promissory Notes, Midnight Notes and Friends largely dodged the question of the Left in the United States, instead talking in generalizations of what may come and barely analyzing class forces in the States. The pamphlet stated that “[t]hough many workers in the U.S. might not rise to the challenge today and continue to look to their bosses for salvation, we still should say what the logic of the struggles indicates should be done.” The discussion of response to the crisis basically said this: there are a few responses to the crisis in the U.S., but the substantial resistance to the crisis is happening across the planet. The pamphlet then moved from analysis to prescription. We agree that the current crisis cannot be understood without looking at the global class struggles and the assortment of movements involved in the causality of the crisis. But we think the question of class composition in the United States is not so easily let go, especially when this lapse moves us into prescriptions of what should be prior to engaging in a serious analysis of what is. More than a year since the discussions that began the pamphlet, the crisis in the U.S. has in fact only deepened and responses in the most-easily identifiable forms have not increased. While the work of Take Back the Land in Miami and the Republic workers in Chicago has been exciting to watch, it’s also been anomalous, and we believe that this is important to realize. In our view, what the lack of clear response leads us to ask is simple: how is the class is being controlled? How is the class rebelling? And what kinds of efforts are being organized to build class power around the crisis — that is, before and through it?

Many in the academic social sciences and on the liberal-Left respond to apparent inactivity and what they understand as ‘apathy’ by pointing to the corporate media and arguments that equate to a working and ‘middle class’ that have been brainwashed, essentially stating, yet again, that the class doesn’t ‘get it.’ We don’t buy it. Rather, we agree with MN, who argued in 1979 that “[e]ven very uneducated class-sectors have

always been able to grasp the essential knowledge about their problems” and discussed movement development from the perspective of “a qualitatively different relationship to capital.” The forms used to channel and parcel energies and angers and activities of class activity across the globe and in the United States change over time, as do the types of resistances we must look for. This is particularly important now, when resistance seems scarce.

Today there is a desperate need for intensified criticism of the Left from anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-capitalist points of view. Ripe for examination are ‘community organizing groups,’ ‘community-based agencies,’ and the non-profit sector as a whole, all of which practice almost consistent anti-unionism and commitment to livelihoods entrenched in disciplining parts of the class, parceling out poverty, and channeling anger and activity into highly-controlled forms that are important for maintaining the current balances of power. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), briefly mentioned in Promissory Notes, is a great example of a group that has not only relied on a highly exploitable workforce, but also sought to control and channel working class energy toward the Democratic Party, especially in a time of global capitalist crisis. Intense honesty about the class interests and loyalties of the institutional and radical Left has been a major strength of MN’s work for decades, and we believe such an analysis is still important. In the current crisis we think it might be worthwhile to ask not just why the class is decomposed, but also how it is currently controlled and how it is organizing and rebelling. What forms has capital created to control resistance and movement in the United States? After all, it was MN who decades ago, after concluding that the Left had abandoned the class, argued that “the class will again have to by-pass its ‘left,’ as it did in the 1960s.” The situation now, of course, is that the Right has had immense success in building power, a least partially through grassroots and community organizing, and the strength of the Right is far beyond anything on the Left in the United States.

Moving back to Promissory Notes, Midnight Notes and Friends’ discussion of “inside” and “outside” struggles more

or less evades the question as to whether ‘struggles’ can be broadly conceived of without analysis of the ways in which capital has, in fact, institutionalized ‘community organizing’ — particularly in the forms of services and ‘advocacy,’ but also in particular kinds of explicit ‘organizing’ — as key to its functioning. We don’t think that we can use an inside/outside dichotomy, nor presume that the institutions of each essentially have rebellious characteristics or even complement each other. Perhaps most of the time, they don’t. ACORN, for example, is a sort of capitalist institution. Organizationally, in a certain light, its role isn’t dissimilar from the United Auto Workers during the 1960s. It has played an important role in grassroots organizing in the States for years. On a larger level, the class interests of foundations as well as non-profit bureaucrats are not those of the working class. Rather, generally speaking, they might be much more similar to the class interests of the premature Green Capitalists involved in the anti-nuclear movement that MN analyzed and critiqued three decades ago. This isn’t simply sectarian Leftist nitpicking: as groups from Facing Reality to Midnight Notes have taught us, we need to be very attentive to the ‘progressive’ and ‘Left’ institutions that play key roles in controlling the class and channeling it into capitalist strategies. Only now, at a time of historic ecological destruction and strong right-wing development in the United States, the stakes are frighteningly high.

With this said, we do not want to imply that if folks are ‘working in the system’ they are automatically ‘enemies of the class,’ or any such reactionary argument. To try and flesh this out, we’ll briefly turn to another example from an article published in a Midnight Notes issue more than two decades ago, entitled “Spatial Deconcentration in D.C.”

The essay “Spatial Deconcentration” was written by radical anti-gentrification organizers in one of the most disenfranchised spaces in the nation, and took as its premise that Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was an institution of the capitalist state, which was deeply invested in maintaining white dominance. At that time, the authors argued, HUD’s strategy of providing Section 8 vouchers to those living in

public housing but requiring voucher recipients to move to the suburbs of Maryland was analyzed as a way to prevent struggle. The article pointed out how “[m]any of the grassroots housing groups in Washington are dependent on Section 8 contracts for their survival, and will refuse to recognize and discontinue the role they play in the program.” Today, many of the non-profits that play a key role on the ‘inside’ that MN discusses take contracts with HUD or other government agencies and implement their programs across the nation. While the particulars when you obtain a Section 8 voucher — now called a ‘Housing Choice Voucher’ — may be different (if you can ever hit the top of the waiting list!), the situation of HUD’s role in gentrification has continued, and the State’s role in co-opting grassroots energies have substantially increased, along with the help of private foundations.

Many agencies take foundation grants that require tight control on the types of work being done with ‘clients.’ These groups become immersed in funding regimes that preclude confrontational organizing — which has historically been the key mechanism for building working class power — and their loyalties become first and foremost to the capitalist state, while they simultaneously operate as key players in policy work and the ‘front line’ work of service delivery. They provide key resources that people need to meet the continually lowered bar of what’s acceptable to live, but they also reinforce current class dynamics by avoiding — and sometimes explicitly acting against — organizing efforts that may substantially challenge current power relations, among other means.

To elaborate further, the popular view that the ‘inside’ groups are ‘doing what they can’ within the neoliberal context misses the point that they are, in fact, a major part of the ‘left wing of capital’ on the ground: the service providers, community-based agencies, and community organizations. They play a key role in the crisis in the U.S., and we need to understand them if we are to understand how and why the class is reacting under the crisis. We are not arguing that these groups are the problem, but we arguing for a much more nuanced analysis of their role in the post-Keynesian period and particularly in the current crisis. Through this analysis, we might

understand better why the explicit struggle against the crisis in the U.S. has been hard to find, as well as address the ways in which the class has utilized, subverted, and challenged the non-profits, much as it has done with the unions for decades.

Regarding the 'outside' groups, we have less to say, but we suggest that these groups and their class interests must also be seriously analyzed. The radical Left in the U.S. has become increasingly entrenched in Activist-identity politics, which essentially sees 'Activists' as the new vanguard of struggle against exploitation and oppression, and often moves from a sort of "classless angels" approach. Here we simply wish to state that Activist-identity groups in the U.S. have only in exceptional situations sought to ground themselves in community struggles for better daily lives and working class power. It may be that some of the most exciting developments are to be found in groups that avoid an inside or outside approach, but rather engage many approaches in their struggles.

In understanding contemporary struggle we hope for an analysis that takes autonomous activity into account, and this may mean going back to examining the smallest of transgressions. On a macro-level, one example of this was found in Promissory Notes and George and Silvia's essay, "Must the Molecules Fear as the Engine Dies?" By taking on debt far beyond its means, many in the class engaged in a serious struggle, though in a seemingly non-coordinated way. This kind of argument needs to be weeded out and expanded. We can see in the U.S. consumer debt crisis a class deal that is collapsing under its own weight, but we've not given sufficient credit to the termites. The relationship of the U.S. working class to credit is an important element of class composition, and deserves the militant examination and empirical political economy that we encountered in MN earlier years.

On a micro-level, one wonders what we might find if we look into small-scale, non-explicit forms of response and struggle in the U.S. in recent years: workplace thefts and terminations due to insubordination, amongst countless others. George Rawick, an important thinker in the development of autonomist Marxism, argued decades ago in an analysis of slave resistance that "[u]nder slavery, as under

any other social system, those at the bottom were not totally dominated by the master class. They found ways of subverting the worst of the system and even at times of dominated the masters.” We do not wish to de-historicize responses to slavery, but we do want to draw attention to Rawick’s mention of “any other social system,” including neoliberal capitalism. How are people responding to the crisis beyond the resistances that are easy to understand? When it is hard for us to understand responses to crisis, we need to open up to questions of resistance beyond what we’re used to. Because, as Rawick argued, “[t]he victim is always in the process of becoming the rebel, because the contradictions demand this resolution.” Where, in the United States, are our becoming-rebels today? We think MN can help guide us through these questions, as they have for the last thirty years.

We also want to emphasize that there are many long-term, grounded, radical community organizing efforts occurring around the United States, some of which evade the ‘inside/outside’ dichotomy. These groups are engaged in campaigns that have made a concrete impact, and more crucially, shown us how resistance cannot simply attack the crisis as such; that is, struggles are ongoing and grapple with the before and during of the crisis, such as the realities of gentrification, the prison industrial complex, and sexual violence. We have tried to inquire into the development of some of these initiatives in our own work but know we have barely touched the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, these struggles clarify our own methods of inquiry and analysis; that is, we — all of us in this room — have tried to speak through the Left for a long time; it is our challenge right now to figure out how to speak around it.

IN CONCLUSION

We offer the above comments with humility and humbleness as part of a discussion on Midnight Notes. We also offer our sincerest congratulations. Few groups on the radical Left in the United States can sustain thirty years of collective effort at intervention, or anything else for that matter. More

important, however, few groups in the United States have been able to consistently offer substantially useful insights over three decades of time. Cheers to three decades on, and thirty years hence, unless we, hopefully, win first.

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An East Asian Mediator's View of Midnight Notes Collective

Sabu Kohso

SINCE THE 1990s I HAVE BEEN A READER OF WORKS BY Midnight Notes and some of its core members, including Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and Peter Linebaugh. After I observed the collective process by which Promissory Notes was written, I determined to take part of its practice, if marginally, as a translator into Japanese and a mediator with East Asia.

In Japan, PN has been published as a small book from Ibunsha Press in Tokyo, and groups such as the Anti-Capitalist Forum and VOL Editorial Collective are organizing discussion sessions about it. In Korea, members of The Research Machine Suyu + Nomo, a militant study organization based in Seoul, are in the midst of engaging in a similar project. Meanwhile PN has been sent to a comrade organizing an alternative social center in Wuhan, China, and shared therein.

Getting substantial responses from these groups is the goal of translation and useful for Midnight Notes and

Friends. In this short piece I would like to clarify my personal motivations for spreading MN's works to the opposite side of the globe.

THE POWER OF SPATIO-TEMPORAL ASSOCIATIONS

I migrated from Tokyo to New York City in the early 1980s. During the subsequent decade, I became familiar with the projects of Autonomedia that embody the diversity of American radicalism, and in that context I encountered the writings by MN and its members. The first project I remember catching my eye was *New Enclosures*. It was printed at a point when the major academic and intellectual milieu were organizing international conferences to celebrate the star players of postmodernism and deconstruction, who were more or less bantering about — yet tacitly going along with — the corporate culture coming into fashion. In such a context that humble booklet stood out with its dark but powerful emanations.

Simply said, I was taken by the way it posited the on-going singular struggles — for instance, those engaged in urban space as organized squatting and community garden building in the Lower Eastside/East Village in the global context of class struggle against neoliberal capitalism, epitomized by the debt crisis, homelessness, and the collapse of socialism. MN's conceptualization of “enclosures” in that pamphlet shed light on a new cycle of global struggles by mapping out unique spatial and temporal connections in a way that the historical stage theory of traditional Marxism could have never imagined.

Since then I have been observing and learning from the work of MN, as it consistently grapples with crucial conjunctures of the world in transformation — through the rise of the Zapatistas and the Global Justice Movement to the recent financial meltdown — always from the vantage point of class struggles being fought by the people in and across the planet.

It seems to me that what is inherent in MN projects is a power of spatio-temporal associations that cannot be attained by any single intellectual mind, but only by a collaborative procedure nurtured among a specific set of positions. In other

words, it could be seen as the fruit of a miraculous conjunction of a few indispensable standpoints, upon which many more voices could interact. These standpoints, it seems to me, are the ones that grounded the historical formation of MN: Wages for Housework, Zerowork, and History from Below.

What is drawn from Wages for Housework is the vantage point of reproduction: philosophically allowing for the anti-authoritarian and heterogeneous view of labor; its crucial conceptualization of the body leads it to the ultimate dimension of the common called 'earth.'

Meanwhile, Zerowork, with its insistence on seeing cycle of struggle as the motor of the historical crisis of capital, embodies the effort to elucidate the content of struggle in every phase of historical conjuncture, by redefining composition, decomposition, and recomposition of the working class as an essentially heterogeneous entity.

Finally, History from Below is an index of the historical imagination of the people, or the collective project of constructing historical imagination, for the sake of nullifying the border of national histories and achieving a global memory for the future.

MN's projects have been created by combining not just a multitude of oppositional stances, but through grounding in a singular encounter between the particular types of feminism, Marxism, and radical historicism.

MN IN THE EAST ASIAN CONTEXT

There are number of lessons that Japanese readers and comrades could learn from MN's projects. Here I point out just one definite aspect: anti-authoritarianism.

The anti-authoritarian nature of MN is explicit in its writings, and also embodied in the diversity of its constituent members and friends and their horizontal associations, particularly as I've seen through involvement with MN&F. Some involved are older, others are younger. There are gays and lesbians. I imagine that some are Marxists and others are anarchists; hybrids seem to exist as well. There is also

a diversity of involvements from different nationalities, ethnicities, and areas. Indeed, it seems rare that such a diverse group of people can work together productively in a horizontal manner. To achieve this principle or atmosphere requires both openness and concentration on a purely voluntary basis of the members. I would imagine that this has been made possible only by mutually developing a kind of ethos and internalizing it in writings, the collaborative method, and organizational principle. The concept of anti-authoritarianism, a point of commonality for various types of non-hierarchical movements, seems to suit the project called MN&F more than any other case.

In Japan and more or less in other East Asian countries, the concept of anti-authoritarianism would work much more radically than in the West, because it is still alien to the society, except among a few minor groups. There patriarchal social relations are still observed everywhere in everyday life, even in intellectual institutions and leftist organizations; it is unwittingly taken as a given. In such a context patriarchy is epitomized most crucially and nastily as the surviving faith in 'ism,' that represents a perfect synthesis among scholastic rigor, organizational hierarchy, and unbending will for executing tasks. Sectarian divisions based upon isms are stubbornly surviving, severely weakening the contents of the struggles themselves, including not only organizing but also analytical and theoretical practices. What is needed there most is a flexible and passionate collectivist spirit. Therefore the MN brand of anti-authoritarianism could function as an ultimate blow to the sectarian atmosphere based upon patriarchy, and help release the revolutionary impetus for recomposing the class struggle.

Japanese oppositional movement has long been in stagnation. The protest against the G8 in 2008 could not bring much significant effect. Although it offered a meeting place for activists from the world over — which inspired the younger generations as a new experience — no action was successful enough to encourage the transformative impetus. Most of all, the defeat had already been announced prefiguratively by a spontaneous turn of events: the day-workers at Kamagasaki in Osaka rose up against police brutality a week before the protest. As everyone agreed, the five-day insurrection was

truly significant. However, for many who had expectations in the coming G8 protest, it was also felt as if the main act had already been played out before the rise of the curtain. The lag between the day-workers uprising and the anti-globalization protest epitomized in many senses the ineffectuality of Japan's activism today to face the possibilities opened up by the social, political, and economic unrest. The fissure between the day-workers and the anti-globalization activists was a crucial case of class decomposition typical in Japan as a presumably middle class dominated society.

Since then the financial meltdown has hit, however, and the entire sector of the middle class has been shaken by the possibility of becoming neighbors of the day-workers. That is to say, now the people are thinking on the same ground as the new world-in-becoming that PN analytically presents. This is a new phase of class recomposition, where the value consciousness of the middle class is largely smashed and new possibilities for intra-class politics (or negotiation) or intra-movement politics (or negotiation) are surging up.

It is evident, however, that these possibilities cannot be fostered fully within Japan, or it might be that in the first place they can be grasped only interactively among the struggles across East Asia. I believe that the intervention of MN from outside the terrain offers important clues for the East Asian movements to self-analyze and interact with each other, in order to construct a new cycle of class struggle in East Asia.

But of course, MN's spatio-temporal associations are limited basically to Euro-American and African continents. One cannot ask MN&F to develop them for East Asia. This is the task that we the East Asians have to fulfill, perhaps by mutating some of the key concepts that MN have been developing. In the process of achieving a global spatio-temporal association together, I have the feeling that a few basic questions that we cannot avoid will return: Is the concept of revolution as a meta-level to struggles still useful? What are the contents of anti-capitalism, that is, beyond the analyses of capitalism? Is a global revolutionary organization possible? If so, in what form?

Beyond Walls and Cages: State Violence, Racism, and the Possibility of Abolition Economies

Jenna M. Loyd

I HAD THE HONOR TO SHARE SOME OF MY THOUGHTS on immigrant prisons and the current economic crisis at the MN30 conference. I had just returned from driving around the U.S. South and Southwest for two months where I was doing a roving investigation of how immigrant detention is building on the broader prison system, and how people are organizing. Here, I'd like to share these thoughts on walls and cages as crisis, as the tools of racist division between who will be protected and who will be abandoned. I'll elaborate a bit more on how my thinking has been influenced by Midnight Notes and friends, and raise some questions, particularly on theorizing racism in relation to social reproduction and class composition that I have for MN and friends in the near future.

At the edges of territorial sovereignty, and increasingly at the center, violent spectacle and repressive policing are

the only remaining legitimating practices (for some) of the U.S. states, which cannot deliver security except through exclusion, abandonment, and violence. The categories of criminal and immigrant are bearing the brunt of the war at home. At a moment of intense economic crisis, they have been legally excluded from the sorts of social supports, livelihoods, and possibilities for livelihood and enduring families and communities, which seem to fast becoming distant dreams to the remainder of the working and middle classes. This makes the question of the state particularly salient. In a nation founded on dispossession, enclosure and slavery, whose legal system perpetuates this through mass incarceration and citizenship policy, and where popular struggles have resulted in racialized and hetero-patriarchal state social supports, the state is decidedly double-edged.

From the Shenendoah Valley of Virginia to Flagstaff, Arizona, and many points between, I talked with anti-prison organizers, lawyers, cultural producers, and mostly with organizers in the immigrant justice movement about conditions of detention, and about the growth of detention centers as the latest and fastest growing round of prison expansion. My main question was, and remains, how are the prison abolition movements and immigrant justice movements recognizing each other's work, and how can bridges between them be made, and be made more sturdy?

I understand prisons and migration restrictions through the lens of racial capitalism and the racial state. This puts prison abolition and abolitionist immigrant organizing at the center of anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics. I studied with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a longtime abolitionist, co-founder of Critical Resistance, and professor of geography. Ruthie introduced me to feminist literature on social reproduction and the Wages for Housework campaign (particularly, Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati), and to *The Many Headed Hydra*. Where does utopia emerge from living through dystopia? From there I found my way to *Reading Capital Politically*, to MN on the new enclosures, to Silvia Federici's work on the body and primitive accumulation, and most recently Peter Linebaugh's work on the *Magna Carta*

and commoning. The sum of this is to say that I came to see the connections between prisons and migration policy through a focus on the relation between state violence and everyday practices of racial and gender violence.

If we understand contemporary configurations of state and capital as the result of so many social struggles, this makes prisons and migration policies prime sites to investigate the contradictions, exclusions and limits of our movements. Dominique Laporte wrote, in *The History of Shit*, “Surely the state is the sewer.” But the democratization of the sewer in part owes itself to the prison. Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) in Philadelphia installed running water and sewerage in each cell to maintain the prisoner’s absolute isolation, then considered a humanitarian reform. ESP became one of the models of forward-thinking imprisonment, which was exported throughout the U.S. and around the world. The Quakers have since apologized for this reform, and discerning the line dividing reforms that strengthen the system and what Avery Gordon calls ‘abolitionist reforms’ continues to drive abolitionist practice.

The 1980s build up of mass incarceration was part of the counter-revolution against the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and ’70s. Myriad U.S. freedom struggles, which joined global movements for “peace, bread, and dignity” (as Vijay Prashad characterizes the moment in *The Darker Nations*), challenged the profitability and governability of people who were waged and outside of the wage relation. Ruthie Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* shows how prison building became the way of resolving crises of excess land, labor and capital. “Law and order” — exemplified by the figures of Nixon, Rockefeller and Reagan — simultaneously worked to delegitimize the social welfare state, and can thus be seen as a form of enclosure.

I became involved in this issue in 2006 when the Sensenbrenner Bill (HR 4432) promised to turn unauthorized presence on U.S. territory into a felony. This brought people all across the country to the streets, but it marked only the latest round of criminalizing survival, which makes women and immigrants the fastest growing groups of people being caged.

I was living in Los Angeles where a million of us gathered downtown, students walked out for days, and we continued to take the streets for weeks. Everywhere I traveled this fall, these were the largest mobilizations that had taken place ever on any sort of issue, including the antiwar mobilizations of 2003. It was utterly stunning in terms of the movement and vitality compared to the antiwar movement, which was feeling increasingly desperate and depressing.

But I became concerned about how the line, “We’re not criminals,” was a dominant response to this next round of criminalization. Rather than recognizing how prisons had been deployed — through anti-Black racism — to smash people’s power and organization, many folks were saying instead, “No, no. We’re not that.” But there are all sorts of people whom I know, and hope to meet, who were trying to think around that idea in order to analyze the fact and power of criminalization and to mobilize without that exclusionary understanding. My trip confirmed that there are cross-currents of these understandings, and that they also remain uneven and contradictory. So, where are we at now?

I’m going to separate what I saw going on into two categories: defensive struggles and creative struggles for what I call ‘abolition economies.’ First, I mostly witnessed a wide range of defensive struggles. There are all sorts of places in which people are organizing to fight the opening of new immigrant detention centers. A lot of times people lose. And they lose because the things are already in the pipeline and people don’t even know who to talk to. Do you talk to the county supervisors who are sometimes asking for these prisons to be built, do you go to the private corporation? This is a big question people are struggling with. Do you go to the state, and who in Homeland Security? All of the reorganization of the institutions since 9/11 itself adds to the confusion. At the same time there have been successful stoppages of prisons. They don’t all get built, and people are sharing their strategies with each other. (I wouldn’t necessarily count all of the resistance against prisons on my team; some folks want to keep out criminals or immigrants, but this is the political terrain).

Beyond this, across the country people are forming ad hoc raids response groups and communication networks to warn each other about police checkpoints, neighborhood sweeps, and worksite raids; organizing to oppose repressive labor, anti-immigrant, anti-poor legislation on the municipal, state, and federal levels; and creating self-help groups to support families of people who are incarcerated or face deportation. Especially in places where mass migration is fairly new (from the 1980s on), say Mississippi and Louisiana, people's organizational capacity isn't as well developed as say New York City, or even Arizona where it's super polarized, but there is a capacity that's been built up. So in places like the New South or where I once lived in upstate New York, what you see is a state terrorism on an everyday level where people are afraid to even run errands, much less organize speak out on their own behalf. Individuals, in turn, prepare themselves for family separation: gathering documents and powers of attorney, making emergency child care preparations and so on, That's one thing that's incredibly frightening about the amount of state violence that's being developed — even though the use of state violence is an indication that the state has nothing left to offer but state violence, it does work sometimes.

Coping with terror also has its limits. In San Diego and Phoenix, places that have been subject to repressive migration police presence for years, people are organizing. In Phoenix, for example, people have been fighting Sheriff Joe Arpaio for much longer than he has been on his anti-immigrant crusade, yet he operates with near impunity. But a group there has been organizing in the neighborhoods where he's been conducting his sweeps, and people are saying, "All bets are off. My neighbors are being taken away, my loved ones are being taken away. There's nothing left to lose." And so they are being organized. And that's where I see some hopeful possibilities and limits to the dis-organizing work the state accomplishes through fear and terrorism.

These defensive struggles are necessary and they build organizational capacity, but ten years from now, I don't want us to be fighting these same defensive struggles. It seems to me that figuring out how to end state violence has to do with

building the sort of power that makes state violence politically impossible. This is where I see ideas of parallel power and creating abolition economies come in. Communities are trying to (re)-build the relationships that can create safety and accountability without relying on the state. In tandem with the defensive struggles are the “productive” projects that people are making to survive and to build power to create the family, love, and community relationships that they want. (Of course, the lines between ‘defensive’ and ‘offensive’ are blurry, for example fighting against the criminalization of labor enables workers to organize for better pay and conditions). We can see these little green shoots when we ask: What do people whose labor power has been legally stripped from them through felon disenfranchisement or illegalization do? People work under the table, people are forming their own cooperatives to make their own work, people are turning to mutual aid and creating their own businesses and community organizations to create livelihoods a bit more collectively. I would like to see us amplify those efforts as part of building what I imagine as abolitionist economies. How we build these small-scale efforts into a political-economic force is a central question for me.

So where do we go from here? In short, there is a lot of slow, deliberate organizing work to be done, including sustained discussion on abolitionist alternatives to punishment, citizenship, and the nation. I did not find as many cross-currents between the immigrant justice and anti-prison movements as I’d like. Though there are people working at this convergence, I think young people are getting this really organically because they are experiencing criminalization, and family separation through prison and migration policy. But there seems to be a real split in the immigrant justice movement, I think because some of the mainstream groups seem to be offering some others for sacrifice for a seat at the table inside the DC Beltway. Some of the immigration reform proposals being floated do not mention ending immigrant detention and border militarization. That leaves out millions of people who live along the border, and fails to confront detention as the U.S.’ de facto migration policy, to paraphrase Jorge Bustamante, special rapporteur for the rights of

migrants to the United Nations. People on the ground are mad about this, and so who's at the table and who's making these deals is very much a question.

The final thing I'd like to say is that part of what was so difficult about this trip — besides the grey oppressiveness of detention centers and the permanency of low intensity conflict being built into the ground — is that public education is simultaneously being dismantled. For example, at a protest in South Los Angeles, high school students were demanding education and health care rather than prisons. The California public schools where I went to college, where in graduate school I was introduced to some of MN and friends' ideas, and where I got some validation for (radical) thinking as a class project that I'm a part of is being dismantled. Gramsci took note of the 'excess' formal intellectuals in his time, but for me it feels like academic labor is being alienated to a point where it is becoming untenable as a livelihood.

Simultaneously, I have been inspired by and grateful for the intellectual and political generosity of MN and people who have been part of the collective's work. Before leaving on my trip, I had a lovely lunch with Silvia and George, which really helped set questions in my mind of what to look for. We talked about the terrible conditions migrants face in Italy, Greece, and throughout Europe, and the power they were building before Genoa. Silvia shared with me a bag made by women who had been arrested in one of the high profile workplace raids in New Bedford, Mass. They were represented and supported by Monty Neill and Shelley, whom I've now had the pleasure to meet. I carried this bit of an abolition economy with me across the country, and used it to tell the story of concrete possibility. I'm thankful for that generosity, and hope that the question of forming new collective ways of making a living doing critical research, writing, analysis and theorizing remains on the MN agenda.

This concrete possibility is what I felt sometimes in the US-Mexico border region, too. In this place where colonization is ongoing, where low intensity conflict is being built into the ground in the form of check points, walls and guard towers, the question of how people live and organize in the spaces

between the armed forces of the US and Mexican governments and narco-traffickers is palpable. I spent some time with an unlikely crew of folks who have come together there to provide aid to migrants. Some see their work as humanitarian, others as part of anti-militarization struggle, some were the folks on whose land the No More Deaths camp was set up, and then a smattering of libertarians, church people, or other anti-border folks. This was an unlikely group, and they were recognizing each other in a similar sort of project of not wanting the government to be doing what it's doing to people and to the lands that they love. And maybe I'll be called a utopian or romantic for saying this, but they were actually creating a space like this in the midst of that violence. Holding on to both the violence and creative refusal is my condition for getting up in the morning and the possibility for another world in the making.

Elegy for Midnight Notes?

Manuel Yang

*If we could conceive ourselves as one of the machines,
Our civilization would be considerably at peace
The bank door opens and the face value of securities scatters
The reproduction and expansion of finance capitalism
The two eyes that were given to me
Are certainly looking at what must be looked at.*

—Yoshimoto Takaaki, “Elegy of May 1952”

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE WORK OF THE MIDNIGHT Notes Collective a couple of years after the publication of their anthology *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992*. After anarchist and Situationist ideas, their contemporary application of autonomist Marxist theory appeared to offer the most promising political diet to rouse me out of the congenital post-Cold-War apathy, albeit laced with certain countercultural flavors, in which I had come of age. The Midnight Notes language had a purity of diamond-like rigor that cut through the morass of so much leftwing, progressive rhetoric in the manner of “class struggle über alles,” to borrow

a phrase George Caffentzis used at the MN30 event. As MN pointed out in the Introduction to *Midnight Oil*: “The struggle over the control of the means of production and subsistence substantially explains contemporary history... regardless of one’s gender, race, sexual preference, or feelings towards the earth, we all move through capitalist space; we live on capitalist soil, we eat capitalist bread, we expend our body’s energy in capitalist work.” This was ‘fundamentalist’ language in the best sense — cutting through not only rhetorical morass but the ideological ropes tying us to the dead weight of orthodox Marxist traditions that buried Marx under the rubble of vanguardist state power and returning us to the most fundamental formulations of *Das Kapital*, along with their most productive reformulation in the twentieth century: “Capitalist profit no doubt derives from extracting surplus labor from waged workers... but it also directly derives the surplus from the unpaid labor of many unwaged workers.”

What was so “productive” about the MN analysis, what instilled the fire of its crystalline purity, was its unceasing attempt to restore the crown of agency upon the tarnished head of proletarian activities, which suffered usurpation not only in the concrete capitalist realm of surplus value but also in the abstract realm of socioeconomic analysis, in which they were reduced at best to a subservient factor beholden to the juggernaut creativity of capital. Ironically, this latter fetishism of capitalist power was replicated in the majority of Marxist and dissident analyses, which appealed nominally to the power of social movements in determining historical changes but reflexively erased it in dissecting the determination of contemporary events. As MN stated in *Lemming Notes* in “The Left Today:” “the left not only has aided the right by its choice of analysis, demands and strategy, not only is at an impasse in which all it can do is function as the left wing of the Democratic party [sic], but also by its choices must also work to discipline any actions in the class which might upset the equilibrium suggested by the left.” These words, discharged polemically in 1984 to counter the U.S. Left “realism” that aimed at nothing higher than “a New, New Deal,” retain no less relevance today when the post-financial-capitalist-crisis

Obama administration dangles the empty promise of “a New, New Deal” as it keeps the economic engineers of crisis in its employ and continues to wage a state terrorist war in Afghanistan.

At the same time, such a polemically recalcitrant stance — even if politically correct — tends to expose its purveyor to the Achilles’ heel of one-dimensionally self-righteous critique. “Elegy for E.P. Thompson” in *Posthumous Notes* (May, 1983) and “Working Class Waves Bye-Bye: A Proletarian Response to Andrew Gorz” in *Lemming Notes* (June, 1984) are good cases in point. According to MN, Thompson’s analysis of the nuclear war industry “utterly ignores the fundamental part played by war policy and its enormous economic base in organizing the expropriation and accumulation of surplus value.” Gorz’s program constituted “an attempt to ideologically unite the stalinist, social-democratic and alternativist forces of the left in a way that can forestall struggles around the refusal of work and install the left as the managers of the working class.” These arguments were not so much wrong as ill-tempered in execution and unclear in the impact they aspired to yield. They were not addressed directly to Thompson or Gorz as an open exchange of ideas among comrades. They did not arise out of an existential necessity linked organically to MN’s own activities — neither Gorz nor Thompson had any direct association with MN and it was not as if a political disagreement on the nature of the contemporary working class with these figures necessitated a publicly stated clarification. Indeed, in such instances of sheer polemical fusillade (“Putting this all together we see that ultimately the left is signing on as cop;” “For any on the left who want and think possible the defeat of capitalism in its various guises, the break with the left must be thorough, for the left now is merely the most ‘human’ face of capitalism”), MN closed off any possibility of dialogue and displayed something of the doctrinaire habit found often in radical minority sects aimed to prove their revolutionary rightness above everybody else. This was the sectarian reflex that marred even the most politically sagacious groups of earlier generation, such as the Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the Situationist

International, and, more recently, the ‘post-left’ anarchist milieu. Correct principles, no matter how closely gauged to the shifting sea-currents of the movement, do not capture, let alone trump, the totality of that movement.

At best MN extracted and applied a theoretical principle germinating from actually existing struggles — what people did at a particular time and place — careful to remember that the concrete social labor of extraction, transportation, and refinement on the ground made the abstract labor of militant analysis possible in the first place. At worst they mistook the principle for the conceptual code to unlock the global capitalist system and its antithesis, ensnared temporarily by the sheen of their hard, bright, intensely pressurized methodology. Such codes do not exist, be they “refusal of work,” “manifold of work,” “new enclosures,” or even “surplus value,” no more than spiritual concepts of grace or satori could denote anything outside of human experience. So, for instance, as ‘correct’ as MN may have been about the proletarian lacuna in Thompson’s analysis, they overlooked its essential power of prophetic activist energy in bringing together a pan-European, Atlantic movement against the nuclear arms race, across the East-West divide of the Cold War. They failed to consider the biographical and historical experience of 1930-40s antifascist Communist spirit, 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and the antinomian, apocalyptic legacy of Muggleonian Marxism bound up in Thompson’s notion of nuclear “exterminism;” in such a failure, they lost the abiding sense of fraternal generosity, to say nothing of larger historical perspective, that should inform even the most bristling immanent criticism of various currents and forces within a movement.

This ruthlessly single-minded critical bite did have its impressive days in the sun. George Caffentzis’s “The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse” (November, 1980) and Silvia Federici and Caffentzis’s “Mormons in Space” (Computer State Notes, March 10, 1982) are pugnacious polemics at their best, playful, unpredictable, politically and metaphorically suggestive. Indeed, the former is nothing less than a splendid tour de force of sustained intellectual engagement, combining critique of debates on the energy crisis, history of science,

workerist political economy, and conceptual creativity that crisscrosses labor power with scientific theories of thermodynamics and Maxwell's demon, fused masterfully in the cutting language of the diamond blade: "Thus, according to our decoding, through the noise of the apocalypse, we must see in the oil caverns, in the wisps of natural gas curling in subterranean abysses, something more familiar: the class struggle;" "Capital's 'fuck up' possesses the energies it needs. Only we are in perpetual motion: eternally energetic, crafty, obedient, cowardly, insolent, revolting, but always in a motion that is the only source of work, development, surplus;" "Capital is more finicky than a cat when it comes to shitting. The whole debate on the location of nuclear plants is an example of this sensitivity." And what pitch-perfect good sense to capture the capitalist utopia of the New Right's high-tech futurological forays in the image of "Mormons in Space"! "It is clear that the vanguard in popularizing and developing this analytic diet on earth are the fundamentalists and Mormons themselves who, in preparation for the day of the Apocalypse, have already organized a large mail order houses stocked with de-hydrated food, thermal-stabilized food, canned foods as well as reserve gas tanks and arms (to defend your fundamentalist hole against commiefaggotlesbianblackdemons overlooked in the day of Judgment by the omniscience of the Lord)." This scathingly sardonic sense of humor is also Marxist in the original, fundamental sense, calling to mind those memorably mincing lines that crackled like eviscerating electric currents through the Moor's work, especially against the false messianic prophets and theologians of nineteenth-century political economy. Marx too wasted some of his finest polemical resources in skewering fellow radicals in exile (Heroes of the Exile) but, when the object of his trenchant obloquy took on the larger canvas of Victorian capitalism and its epigones, the style matched the scope of his critical character. This applies to MN as well.

The amateurishly mimeographed, makeshift, and underground urgency of MN publications took on professional typographical formatting with its ninth issue in 1988, which graced on its cover the Nigerian artist Ola's Yoruba-myth-

inspired art. It was not just its print design and aesthetic texture that took on a more expansive, diaphanous tone; as its subtitle (Wages — Mexico — Libya — India) indicated, the disciplinary bondage of the wage-form served as an empirically grounded, centrifugal focus in tracking the reverberations of the class struggle (in one instance — Harry Cleaver’s “The Uses of an Earthquake” — the reverberations of popular self-activity among the poor were chronicled after a literal reverberation of the earth) in various corners of the world. At this twilight moment of the Cold War, MN was prescient in grasping intuitively the geography of the insurrectionary class composition of the following decade, spanning the three continents of Africa, Middle East, and Asia. The three years between MN #9 and the preceding issue *Outlaw Notes* (August, 1985) — which sported for the last time the jocosely secretive and indeed “outlaw” look of an underground zine, with its theoretical meditation on the “manifold of work” and labor theory of value, historical sketch of the 1780 “excarceration” of Newgate prison, masked and anonymous debate over Antonio Negri’s Marx beyond Marx — were a considerable interregnum, even for a collective that had been publishing its periodical at the leisurely pace of once a year. Two more years would pass until MN released its heretofore most ambitious issue *New Enclosures* (Fall, 1990).

Clocking in at ninety-eight pages, *New Enclosures* was the longest MN publication up until that time, as long as three times the length some of its previous issues. Like MN #9, its contributions were signed and expressed a globally widening reach. Its very title displayed an incisive conceptual grasp of the neoliberal dispensation at hand: “new enclosures” resuscitated vibrantly the classical Marxist vocabulary of primitive or primary accumulation, the expropriation of traditional common lands, rights, means of production, customs, and laws, as an ongoing lived experience of contemporary capitalism and underscored the social reality of “blood and fire” that lay beneath the abstract façade of the worldwide debt crisis. The contrast between MN’s abstract “Conceptualization of the Law of Manifold of Work” in *Outlaw Notes* and the concrete elaboration of “*New Enclosures*”

presents a gulf analogous to the one found between Marx's labor theory of value in Part I of *Das Kapital* and the historical outline of capitalist "old enclosure" and terror compressed lucidly in Part VIII. Peter Linebaugh's "Jubilating; or, How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee against Capitalism with Some Success," the concluding essay in *New Enclosures*, brought further down to the ground, in the capacious burning shell of historical memory, what the MN had at times intimated but, in an almost sobering self-restraint, desisted from doing: namely to grab the poetic force of subaltern prophetic imagination by the horn and unravel this as a primary function of militant research and analysis. With its open embrace and burrowing into the empirical details of Biblical theology and social history of the red, green, and black Atlantic, reviving seminal figures from our radical tradition, such as Thomas Spence, Denmark Vesey, and Robert Wedderburn, "Jubilating" plucked a seemingly archaic Biblical custom of manumission and re-commoning the land and demonstrated its practical and metaphorical mobility across centuries — it is not without significance that this key term was presented as a verb, a living vector of agency, and not as the noun "jubilee," a statically codified act of law, ecclesiastical or international authority.

For me the most emblematic moments of MN's entire oeuvre lie in the magnetic poles of "The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse" and "Jubilating." The first spoke in the analytical and philosophical register to negate the apocalypse, a resplendent slashing and burning of secular illusions that occluded the reality of material labor — very much in the spirit of critical demystification that binds the early Marx of "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" to the late Marx of *Das Kapital*. In "Jubilating" I heard the positive song of revolutionary millenarian prophecy that animated Marx in his variously apocalyptic and indigenous modes of expression (from *The Communist Manifesto* to *The Ethnological Notebooks*), hidden cultural transcripts and practices inherited demotically from one generation to the next against the repressive patrimony of capitalist private property and bureaucratic state power — this was the

historical ‘boomerang’ of radical social energies that exceeded the language of ‘class composition’ and even the most fluid use of autonomist Marxist theory. Surplus value thus found its positive negation in the moral and cultural anti-capitalist ‘surplus values’ carried, transformed, and brought forth in the light of human experiences and practices that had a genealogical tradition all its own.

After the incandescently concentrated glow of *New Enclosures, Midnight Oil* (1992), an Autonomedia book that highlighted MN’s work of the preceding thirteen years, including signal articles from the pre-MN journal *Zerowork*, stands more as an unwitting elegy than as symptomatic of a new beginning. For such a retrospective overview occurs more often than not near the end of an artistic or political career, although oddly *Midnight Oil* contained no explication of its organizational history and political genealogy (its position within the history of various Marxist and radical traditions, split within *Zerowork*, and so on) and thus absconded from a fitting occasion for self-critical stocktaking. Indeed, much of the remaining 1990s and into the first decade of the millennium, no regular or even semi-regular MN issue was forthcoming. There was a flurry of pointed pamphlets on capital punishment, war, globalization, whose one considered expression was *One No, Many Yeses* (numbered MN #12 because *Midnight Oil* was counted as #11), which anticipated by a year the “development of new socialities” in the *Battle of Seattle*. A defining resource of MN’s political and theoretical energy in this period was the insurrectionary ‘boomerang’ of the Zapatista struggles in Chiapas, whose worldwide effects it mapped out in richly impressionistic polyvalence in its second Autonomedia book *Auroras of the Zaptistas: Local & Global Struggles of the Fourth World War* (2001). However symbolically pregnant as the image of the aurora is, from the mythical memory of the ancient Romans to that of the Cree Nation, it also connotes an insubstantiality that is yet to assume material manifestation. *Auroras of the Zaptistas* then, too, is a sort of unintentional elegy, not so much for MN but for the polyphonously embryonic movement that came into being under the negative heading of ‘anti-globalization’ and

that fueled MN's second wind of activities from the mid-1990s to 2001. In fact, two penultimate pieces in the book were eulogies for MN fellow travelers, Caribbean scholar-activist Roderick Thurton and immigrant worker activist Fernando Lopez Isunza. U.S.-led "War Capitalism" in the Middle East and its domestic corollary in the form of the expanded national security state apparatus (suspension of habeas corpus, rendition, torture) and intensified neoliberalization (demise of the auto sector, mushrooming of the new impermanent working-class sector of the precariato, historic financial crisis) contributed to the darkening, if not the dispersion, of the global Zapatista auroras.

During its thirty-year lifespan, MN savored unquestionably of tougher and more substantive stuff than the reified variants of contemporaneous academic Marxism whose most concrete proletarian referent was a textual figure, towering above the internecine old sectarian blind alleys that were as much a product of the Cold War as their seeming antithesis — no ghost of the Third or Fourth International fluttered above the underground analytical mining work of MN. Their constant point of departure and return was working-class self-activity and, although their adherence to the social principle of 'refusal of work' and other theoretical vocabularies of autonomist class struggle — the signs of "class struggle über alles" — sometimes bordered on the dogmatic, they came as close to discharging the critical debt any meaningful radical political collective owes to the class whose historical making it seeks to decipher and spur toward the supersession of itself and of the class against which it has been forced into the position of antagonism.

What first attracted me to MN is what induces the greatest ambivalence in me today — their revolutionary and theoretical mythos, fueled in part by the lack of transparency regarding their historical roots, conceptual illusion of analytically mastering the totality of capitalism and class struggle, twitches of sectarian sinews concealed from sight but occasionally sensed between their most vitriolic lines. Running a collective is no mean task and doing it for thirty years is nothing short of the "miraculous" within the short-

lived, politically splitting-atom-prone milieu of the radical left, particularly through the long winter of capitalist crisis and proletarian defeats we have lived through. MN decoded partially the evanescent but no less real flickers of revolutionary heat that intimated the possibility of this capitalist winter's end. In times of deracination, that is a praiseworthy task to undertake, worthy of emulation but not of imitation — for the midnight hour from the second Cold War to the latest moment of neoliberal financial crisis, which bookend MN's history, is coming to an end and new languages, new poetic and prophetic energies must be sought out and woven from the ongoing struggles today. One is tempted to modify the feudal slogan for MN at 30:

“Midnight Notes is dead. Long live Midnight Notes!”

