

# SALT

## ESCALATE





To all friends in prison

Who can truly tell  
How cruel sheriffs are?  
Of their hardness to poor people  
No tale can go too far.

If a man cannot pay  
They drag him here and there,  
They put him in the courts,  
The juror's oath to swear.

He dares not breathe a murmur,  
Or he has to pay again,  
And the saltness of the sea  
Is less bitter than his pain.

*Anonymous, late 13th century*

# 1. AFTERWARDNESS

## *i. Salt*

*One of the greatest discoveries that humans ever made was that salt allowed meat to be kept throughout the winter season. After this we started painting on cave walls, reflecting on the stars and thinking about more efficient tools for hunting. We had time.*

Under capital, austerity *is* necessary. If about nothing else, the cretinous impresarios of our transnational political circus are right about this. In crisis, capital accumulation (and therefore social reproduction) cannot be resumed without huge additional inputs of unpaid human labour. Without the calculated and brutal robbery of an immense quantity of human time and energy – and, at bottom, this is all that ‘austerity’ is – capital will remain frozen in its contradictions: it will congeal into meaningless numbers in the accounts of the banks which are charged with investing it; it will cease to be capital. But for so long as capital accumulation remains the basic principle of social reproduction across the enlightened earth, radiant with calamity, capital cannot congeal like this, because, wherever it does, unemployment will rise, poverty will increase, and houses will be taken from those who most need them. All in order to glut uselessly the asset sheets of mortgage lenders. And this is capital’s

most basic paradox: that the only way for it to remove itself from crisis is to rob those whom the crisis causes to suffer the most.

But remember the raising of retirement ages in France; and the reduction of minimum wages in Ireland; and the extra half hour soon to be added to the shifts of all Portuguese public sector workers under the indisputable aegis of “improved productivity”; and recall Cameron announcing that the British state will allow private sector developers to pay *later* for the public estate which they convert into private housing, with the intention of stimulating once again domestic mortgage lending. Time is of the essence here, it should be obvious; and all of these forms of theft have their basis in a still deeper structure of deferral. Since the period of financialisation began, in response to the stagnation of the old industrial economies of the capitalist West, the rise of debt – of household debt, of sovereign debt, of securitised debt, and of the financial institutions which administer and which profit from all these – has been at the crux of global capital accumulation.

All around Europe we see the effects of this paradox. It is incalculably damaging: there is no way out of it that doesn't lead away from the sovereignty of capital. We state this at the outset. Is it indulgent, therefore, to launch a high-minded inquiry into the relationship between capital and ‘time’?

The current crisis, more than any that has ever preceded it, is a crisis of debt accumulation: it is the greatest crisis

of capitalist *deferral* in capital's history, and the political potential of our conjuncture must surely be understood in its terms.

*ii. In defence of the grasshopper*

Aesop tells of an ant and a grasshopper. The ant spends the summer working each day, gathering food. Meanwhile, the grasshopper sings. When the winter comes, the grasshopper asks the ant for food. The ant refuses and the grasshopper dies.

It is, like most fables, a simple story; the moral is that we ought to prepare for the future. But when the future is merely another summer of work, when no-one is allowed to sing, the moral is difficult to stomach. Already all those fictional accounts of hot and sticky summers, pink evening sunlight, human warmth and leisure – all of these collide with lived experience and disagree with it. It is now late autumn. Things are not so good.

Perhaps the ant knows that after many years his efforts will be rewarded not with mere survival, but with a gold-plated pension. Soon the gold rubs off, and beneath it, exposed is shit. The shit is composed of the memories of the minutiae of a life wasted toiling. Today's workers have superseded the consciousness of that primordial ant: already with the life of work belongs the premonition of its memory. Work today is nothing but the self-conscious wading through shit composed of the knowledge of the dreadfulness of any memories the present and future are

bound to inspire. We wade through shit in search of that flake of gold in the centre, and many of us know that it was never there. Young people today can expect to toil until they die. All that is secure is knowledge that the next year will be at least as awful as the last, and that there will be no singing.

Today, ‘official’ working class struggles no longer address the misery of present working class existence. Union leaders tell their memberships that pensions are the *only* issue upon which national action can be taken, and in doing so submit to and reproduce the ruling ideology, that to live comfortably in old age is enough to assuage present misery. Redemption is held firmly in the future; the present is already lost.

In a comparable sense, notions of risk under capitalism serve primarily as a means of controlling the future. To “rationalize” risk is to rationalize the conditions that are brought about by default and crisis. The discourse of risk protects the future (the risks which don’t pay off) from being considered anything but capitalism’s self-correction on its happy steady journey to eternal growth. Surrounded, as we currently are, by the aftermath (or process) of a crisis – that is, household defaults on mortgages and sovereign defaults on state debt – we find ourselves in a world in which the truth about risk, its realities and human impacts, extend well beyond the need to foreclose upon debts. This is – it should be obvious – about more than just mortgages.

We are told that foreclosures and austerity have to be accepted; that they are just the result of a risky debt, itself taken on decades earlier. We are told to accept the cuts because austerity was merely a risk incurred during the years while “we” were enjoying the boom-time.

Much of the motivation for the displacement of current misery is the financialisation of wages. Take, for example, the pension scheme, in which the salaries of workers are agglomerated and financialised. The *deferred* pay-off for the worker is a further contribution from her employer. In return, the worker hands over control of this money, which will then be invested in companies. It is promised that at a later date a part of the proceeds from the investment will be returned to the worker, who at last can live the comfortable life for which she was expected patiently to wait. The future comfort of workers is made contingent on their complicity with those structures used to immiserate them in the present. Unions which will only fight on pensions tighten the shackles of workers locked into a grand self-flagellation machine, from which profit is accrued elsewhere in the market (i.e through current exploitation of workers in production). These stockpiled assets of work become pools of liquidity used for market expansion.

In real terms, the sell-off of council properties through the ‘Right-to-Buy’ scheme functioned in a similar way. Workers themselves were to take on financialised risk with the promise of a comfortable future. Where



previously those living in council houses would be able to support themselves, albeit minimally, if they were made redundant, the acceptance of private mortgages threatened people with homelessness. Workers were given credit on the condition that they invested it in the assurance that they would remain profitable employees. Where these mortgages are foreclosed upon, the class motive becomes invisible: the fight for housing for all becomes a mere after-effect of risk, acquired at the same time as the mortgage whose final end is meant to be security.

The structure of the benefits of work under capitalism, whether they are wages, pensions, or access to credit, that which we are promised will sustain us through the winter of our lives, is always the same, insofar as they sustain our status as ants and never as grasshoppers. However much we work, there can be no summers of song.

All of this impacts on how we can discuss workers' struggles today. Moments of crisis expose a structure that can be taken two ways: as the vindication of the notion of risk that simply recuperates, self-corrects, and continues; or, alternatively, as the breaking point which shows that risk (or what is risked) is about more than the perpetuation of capital's expanded reproduction. The crisis offers itself as a point at which the shroud of ideology can be ripped away. But financialisation, both in pensions and mortgages, in effect suspended the working class and its consciousness. Proletarians have

been treated as the managers of their own destiny, but that destiny has been consistently predicated on their current immiseration. Their redemption as a class was placed in a future which they could never reach.

Marxists have always said that crisis provides the material basis for ideological demystification. This is true so long as it is understood that the “ideology” which is now demystified is not a set of bad ideas but the galling knowledge, felt every morning of every identical day, that the effort to live well depends on and cannot be achieved without the kinds of deferral from which capital has learnt to profit. With brutal simplicity, crisis spells out that the deferral we once relied on cannot promise heaven: that upwards ascent through years of toil was never anything beside the symptom of capital's spiral downwards - of its inability to valorise itself in the present. Right now the experience of the present in its true misery, without the palliatives of a feeble vision of “the future” hardly need be demanded, because that vision is crumbling under the pressure of its own contradictions. But the undeniable toxicity of the future shouldn't encourage us to dream of rolling back to a time of pre-financialisation (in which different mediations precluded the experience of now), because the toxic image of freedom from capital in a hardly specified future was generated directly out of the contradictions of the past. Can we realize, visualise, or experience with clarity the structures of ideological mediation that financialisation imposed upon us?

### *iii. Exhaustion*

The origins of contemporary labour hardly point us toward emancipatory conclusions. The advent of classical capitalism was accompanied with the notion of ‘fatigue’ and the human body’s incapacity to deal with the demands of industrial society. Accompanying the discoveries of nineteenth-century physics was the “the inevitability of decline, dissolution and exhaustion, the endemic disorder of fatigue – the most evident and persistent reminder of the body’s intractable resistance to unlimited progress and productivity.” Obliquely inherent in these attempts to restructure the understanding of the human worker in mechanical terms was an attempt to remove the temporal dimension from the individual’s experience: energy that never dissipated, and therefore had no chronology or fluctuation.

It is within this understanding of work – the perplexed frustration of an enlightened bourgeoisie when faced with the frail incapacities of human labour – that bourgeois responses to the crisis of capitalist deferral develop. The call for more jobs means nothing so long as it merely perpetuates a form of labour rooted in experiments in human mechanisation. More growth means nothing so long as growth means little more than the continual ruin of a life worth living. Without challenging the fundamental philosophy of work, escaping mechanization and of eternal enslavement, there will be little purpose in going forward, as anyone is

capable of feeling, whenever they slump into the sofa at six p.m, in preparation for the next day, and the next.

Salaries, as is well known, were originally the exchange of labour for salt. In exchange for labour-time, workers were offered the possibility of free time, in which they could suspend the decay of objects with the salt they earned. Today, the structure of time away from work has been radically transformed. The cigarette break, which once may have been the break that simply makes work possible, a basic condition, becomes the aim of work, or the pay off. After another half an hour of work, five minutes in the rain to intoxicate oneself is granted before a swift return to the office. We are made to rejoice over the restitution of our freedom for that minimum period of time; the provision of the minimum period of freedom maximizes the total life that can be stolen from us by our employers

Salt, which was to be used to suspend work, to allow for this free time, began to contaminate their conditions of life of workers. Now doused in the salt of their salaries, they were themselves suspended timelessly. And just as the salted meat becomes meat forever, never allowed to decay, the salted worker is preserved as worker forever, in the timeless state. Timelessness here is nothing more than the perpetual motion of a machine never allowed to grind to a halt. Timelessness here means never having a conclusion, never ceasing. The worker's salted meat becomes no more than a precondition for her own suspension in the time of capital. In contrast, with the

crisis of capitalist deferral, and with the resumption of capitalist *decay*, the possibility for a different life begins (perhaps, at last) to crystallise.



## 2. ANTI-UNION LEGISLATION AND STRIKE ACTION

### *i. The Symbolic Strike*

*“Large numbers on a picket line are also likely to give rise to fear and resentment amongst those seeking to cross that picket line, even where no criminal offence is committed. They exacerbate disputes and sour relations not only between management and employees but between the pickets and their fellow employees. Accordingly pickets and their organisers should ensure that in general the number of pickets does not exceed six at any entrance to, or exit from, a workplace; frequently a smaller number will be appropriate.”*

*Picketing Code of Practice,  
Department for Business, Industry and Skills*

Political action functions according to a fixed itinerary. Meetings prepare for marches; actions occur, flare, and dissipate; and leave behind them the rough spectacle of sensationalist photography, brainless op-ed commentary and police press conferences. The June 30th strike in

2011 (the first co-ordinated strike action in the current period of struggle) reversed the conventional sequence of events. It began as op-eds debated the rights and wrongs of mass strike action and as political leaders condemned union hostility whilst “negotiations were ongoing”, developed into a kind of action, as thousands of workers woke up, came out on strike, and picketed their workplaces, concluded at noon and proceeded directly into a meeting. Action lasted for a morning.

The day ends in Methodist hall, out of sight, far from the workplaces, far from any arena which might mistake action for antagonism.

What is the function of reversal here? Who plans these marches and what agenda do they serve?

Strike action has always been to some extent “symbolic”, at least until it reaches the revolutionary proportions of a general or mass strike. But glib assent to this truism refuses the idea of another kind of symbolism; of the strike enacted not simply to instantiate or to represent the collective withdrawal of labour, but instead actively to challenge the bourgeois state’s monopoly on violence, and to do so in a way which serves almost as a dress rehearsal for the revolutionary moment, where the state loses any claim over legitimate violence whatsoever. Today, strikes remain battle re-enactments – but re-enactments which exist *solely* within the realm of cathartic performativity. Institutionalised by the state, neutralised through anti-union legislation, strikes become dress rehearsals for nothing – since all claim to

challenging state violence has been forsaken. They can neither be ‘political’ (the assertion of labour against capital; the product of class consciousness) nor consecutive (where they could threaten infinitude). Reduced to the status of impromptu public holiday, defined by *action-as-symbolism*, the new strike abandons politics for theatre: a gesture not of antagonism but of conciliation, reinforcing its impotence in every moment of its articulation.

On its stage, then, the spectres of the past are permitted, so long as they remain spectres. History is invoked, but it is a stillborn history, already its own resting place, its contents ready to be packed up and sent off to the museum. The flags, placards and slogans are accumulated and sold back to the public through the usual culture industry outlets.

The mass strike on November 30, the second coordinated effort, revealed some resistance to the TUC method of pulling conflict away from the factory doors and into our civic shopping aisles, with many pickets lasting through the day and into the night. Nonetheless, a heaving demonstration of photogenic comrades still plunged its way through West London as expected.

## *ii. A brief history of anti-union legislation*

How did we get here? What are the main features of the social history that bind us to previous waves of (more



militant) strike action; and what are the differences between then and now? It is sometimes assumed that anti-union legislation is 'Thatcher's', and that prior to the epoch named 'Thatcherism' union organisation was unperturbed by repressive legislation. This is just risible utopianism. In fact the twentieth century is awash with repressive trade union legislation, advanced under Conservative and Labour governments alike, each just as much under the thumb of capitalist interests as the next.

This is a history of state efforts to disrupt and hinder the power of union bureaucracies (this is no surprise); but also, and more glaringly, it is a history of state efforts to hinder the effectiveness of grassroots action within union structures. It is a history of *state* efforts and not of *party political* efforts because throughout the century there has been a deep cross-party consensus on the type of anti-union legislation required, *if labour militancy is to be regulated according to the moderate doctrines of collective bargaining.*

In 1901, the Taff Vale railway company successfully sued the striking rail workers' union for £23,000 in damages. Rulings against butchers' and miners' unions followed. But the indirect result of this act of state-sanctioned repression was a rapid boost in support for the Labour Representation Committee, the embryonic organisation of the parliamentary Labour Party. By 1906, the election of 29 Labour MPs helped push through the Trades Dispute Act, effectively securing collective bargaining and the autonomy of strike action from the

law of Tort. Thus the establishment of the UK Labour Party was bound up with the legal defence of strike action.

What's worth remembering, each time someone with a megaphone in hand drones his enmity to Thatcher and her anti-union legislation, is that Union power was never a priority for Labour once it became a viable parliamentary force. The Trades and Disputes Act 1927 hit back against the General Strike of the previous year, the last general strike in the UK. The act criminalised sympathy strikes, mass picketing and incitement to illegal strike action. And despite successive Labour governments, this essence of that legislation has remained unchanged ever since.

This isn't to say that the Labour Party hasn't worked hard to further enfeeble the unions; the Industrial Relations Act of 1971, which provided ministers with new 'discretionary' powers to order ballots on industrial action, was the work of a Conservative government, but the substance of the Act had already been proposed in 1969, in the Labour Party White Paper 'In Place of Strife' (whose publication had helped to precipitate Labour's defeat in the election of 1970). Attempts to replace the show of hands with the ballot have been common to most anti-union legislation in the last fifty years, because that legislation has forever been intended to individualise choice and to corrode relationships of direct solidarity, of the kind stirred up most effectively not by union 'chiefs' (in the disparaging argot of bourgeois anthropologists,

surveying the natives) but by fellow workers; and the state's assumption has always been that in the secret ballot if nowhere else, man truly does become the self-interested rational chooser which neo-classical economics has always insisted he is. The opposite of 'strife' is harmonious self-interest pursued from the vantage point of a wooden box. Econometrics triumphs in that cage.

In the 1970s the Labour Party's repeal of the rules on balloting was made on the stipulated condition that the TUC not dispute a policy of sustained wage restraint. This is the Faustian pact now referred to as the 'Social Compromise'. The true nature of this compromise can be ascertained by jumping forwards a couple of years to mid-1976, when the state decreed that sober wage restraint would mean a cap on pay increases of 5% for the next twelve months. Five percent is without question a good, *strong* figure. But since in 1976 the rate of inflation increased to 15%, signing up to this 'social compromise' in effect meant agreement to a 10% pay cut. It was due to the TUC's collusion with the Labour government in enforcing this 'restraint' that the industrial action during the Winter of Discontent of 1978-79 was so unruly: after massive grassroots mobilisation, workers struck in workplace after workplace without waiting for the blessing of their National Union Executive, and the social convulsion which resulted was the direct and unanswerable repudiation of what the government and their union representatives "offered" to them in Place of Strife. What was "offered" to them was nothing more

than a programme for efficient immiseration, drawn up over the heads of workers in the dining room at 10 Downing Street.

The kind of anti-union legislation issued during the dismal eighties would no doubt have been pursued by Labour had it been re-elected. As it happens the Trade Union Act of '84 was Conservative legislation. Its familiar stipulations included, among other things, the edict that industrial action should be decided by secret ballots of the membership. Thatcherite legislation, in short, was original not in consequence of its content (which was venerable) but in consequence of its durability. It remains in place in 2011; and the Labour government of 1997-2010 showed no interest in overturning it, which is to say that they saw nothing to lose in *not* overturning it.

The summary is as follows. Juridical regulation of the unions in the UK has not been meant to proscribe political strike action, as if the state much cared about unions encroaching on the hallowed grounds of 'politics'. Rather, it has been meant to regulate as best as possible quick and *popular* resistance to regimes of austerity, and all the more so where that opposition has about it the electricity of spontaneous action. (The state recognises that spontaneous and militant action, outstripping the orders and the guile of bureaucratic union leaders, occurs more often where high-levels of organisation pre-exist.) Exgurgitating further anti-union legislation into the statute books would be a mistake. In the computing

jargon of economists, the 'cost' of permitting a few more one-day public sector strikes cannot outmeasure the 'benefits' of avoiding confrontation with a mobilised working class.

But this has left union leaderships with a dilemma. How to appear as though they are taking action whilst ensuring rank and file militancy remains curtailed? June 30 was a kind of model in dissent management by the official representatives of those who have occasion to express it. The children might get *hot and bothered* at playtime: before it got too much the whistle was blown, orderly queues were formed, and the pupils were marched back to the classroom to await their further instruction.

While this continues to be our mode of dissent, so also 'political action' will amount to little more than the question of to whose bureaucracy we defer: the boss or the union. Arbitration between the replicas doesn't add up to a project for emancipation. It's time to abandon ornamental disruption. Capital likes to be ornamentally disrupted. It enjoys the dishevelled look.



# 3. DEBT AND DECAY

## *i. The debt machines*

The commonplace of bourgeois thought would have us believe that 'our' community, 'our' society is deteriorated or broken down. But rather, it is broken apart. It exists as it has for centuries, as a fragmented arrangement of a class. Capital responds to the resistance of proletarians, and we see this response in the specifics of the technologies designed and produced for this purpose. To understand what has happened over the past year in the UK is to understand this class as it is destroyed by the technologies of capital which it has determined – and also the new form that the proletariat is taking.

If a narrative is meant to reinvigorate history and agency, and bring the past colliding into a broken present, then current analyses of class composition are unfit for purpose. This lack of precision – and the further, more insidious tendency of that lack, to evacuate from the class which is described all sense of its *agency* – stems from an unwillingness to examine production. The Italian *operaisti* proposed in the 1960s that the techniques of production and resistance peculiar to the factory had overflowed into all aspects of life; that society itself had

become akin to the factory proper. The generalisation of this concept (of the factory) is meant to respond to the complexity of contemporary valorisation processes – that is to say, to the complexity and the variousness of the means by which capital accumulates. It is a polemical generalisation: unless it feels stifling, it has no meaning. We reformulate the concept in this spirit, that is, polemically: capitalist society should now be considered a factory, and within its walls lie a million machines dedicated to the production of debt.

After the end of the 1936-45 war, Britain was still to face years of rationing, depletion and sickness. The welfare state was not, as it has been claimed, a working class achievement – a social institution which was fought for and won; it was not an act of appeasement for a working class pounding at the gates. We could point to the pre-war militancy, the Jarrow marches and the Communist MP of East London. But, the welfare state was, in truth, ‘given’ by a liberal elite to a working population grinding to a halt. A gift which, like all gifts, solicited something in return; and a benevolence which, like all liberal well-wishing, was in truth about the peace and security of a ruling elite (achieved in this instance through Keynesian investment), and which was not a transformation of society secured for the security of all. But it did get the working population working again, and the proletariat did accrue important material benefits from it. And all *without* mass strikes, political revolution - or street fighting. That came later.



It is often declared by the liberal left that the deficit of the UK was four times as high back when the Welfare State was being established as it is now, when it is being taken apart. But it should be added that (as well as war debt) part of the reason for the high deficit was that vast sums were being expended on the creation of the NHS. That this machine may function - that the entire population should either consider themselves healthy or actively be in a course of treatment - would require the entire economic resources of the country. To the Keynesians, of course, this seems as if a beautiful modernist dream, in which each is a slave to each other, gladly producing economic surplus in order to facilitate universal well-being and continual productivity.

What we have created, in truth, is not so far from this (though we might struggle to identify, amid the detritus of our productive industry, and amid the infinite bloat of our service sector, anything that quite corresponds to universal well-being). The ideological moralisation of servile industriousness is perpetuated by those who stand to profit from it; and those who are compelled to throw away their lives in miserable industry, just so that their mortgage bills might be paid on time, have their own reasons to believe in the ethics of labour (ethics, which the subordinated can have, is an acceptable substitution for happiness, which they can't).

But the creation of debt is a profit-making industry in the UK; and more recently the subject as debtor has also required construction. The debtor requires two aspects: it

requires legal entity (with all the enshrinements that now entails, whether these be life forms or a corporation sole); and it requires a debtor mentality. The first of these aspects relies on registration of bodies/citizens/potential-workers.

Under capitalism, the labourer has to sell her labour power itself to the capitalist. The alternatives are slavery (selling oneself) or destitution (withholding one's labour time). But the worker has to take in to account that this labour-power is within her own body, so the selling of that power equates to the lending her body to the factory for periods of time.

Debt now plays a similar function for the capitalist: The embodiment of risk in an asset, underwritten by the worker, can be sold on; bundles of debt freely flow around the world. But for the citizen-consumer, risk has to be held within those assets which also ensure her continued social reproduction: her house, her car, her television, her sofa. For the capitalist and for the state, to take on debt is the ability to immediately repackage it and sell it on, or to leverage it against some further investment; while for the worker to take on risk is to live with it, till amortisation or death do them part (and the etymology implies that these two eventualities might be more intimately related than first appears). Where the wage was once merely the minimal remuneration for the sustenance of life, today the citizen's purchase of the means of life is forever entwined with a form of speculation that undergirds her own fear and misery.

She may believe she owns her home, and if the mortgage is eventually paid off, she has the option either of living in it as she did before, or of selling it, thereby losing her home. An increasingly likely event in our current climate is neither: instead, the risk is deferred until eventually the true owner of the home, the bank, claims it back (against its will, for a mortgage, leveraged against future work, is more valuable to a bank than a house) only to reinsert it into the debt economy.

Along with the lumberingly ascendent financial sector came new kinds of work. As difficult as it is to generalise about the notoriously ill-specified ‘service industries’, we can note a few of their most common features. Unionisation was seen as abnormal, self-employment as desirable, and the availability of stable jobs was declared hostile to labour market flexibility (and therefore healthy growth.) To this shifting landscape of labour arrangements, we should also add specifics of the technological shifts which enabled it to function, and which separate out the daily financial life of the proletarian in the mid-1970s from now.

In Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1975 film ‘I Only Want You To Love Me’ – perhaps the greatest melodrama of European Social Democratic misery – there is an inadvertant visual transcription of the kind of development we’re describing. In the film, the central characters – deliberately mediocre stereotypes of a youthfully aspirational working class couple – attempt to

overleap the chasm which separates their position within the system of production (he is a low-skilled production worker; she is a receptionist) from the activity of bourgeois consumption towards which they are encouraged miserably to yearn. Without the means to improve their position in the labour-market, their standard of consumption can be raised only by increasing their labour time or by passing into debt; and when she becomes pregnant and is forced to withdraw from the wage-relation, the couple's debt-load becomes intolerable. The film plays itself out in the purposefully overblown anguish of their mental suffering and decline. But consumerism is not just a cause of this decline, but also the only permitted coping mechanism. It is a film very much concerned with the difficulty of expressing the cumulative weight (the duration and persistence) of misery in the capital relation.

But what interests us here is that much of the embarrassment which the film induces – a great proportion of its drama of humiliation – occurs in scenes in which the couple go shopping. In order to purchase furniture on credit, the couple – defined in the role as consumers – have to prove to the shop assistant their wages. From the vantage-point of 2011, this seems highly irregular: that in the incipient consumer economy of West Germany in 1975 – just after the crisis of 1973, but before the advent of financialisation – there are no technologies of automated credit-rating. Fassbinder's film reminds us that the emergent technologies of risk-assessment, impersonally administered (for a profit) by

the banking sector which owns them, has had an incalculably significant effect on the social-experience of debt and creditworthiness.

As appendages to the debt machine, registered entities become bearers of risk; but, as the registered entities of Western capital have acquired more and more risk (often to offset lower and lower real wages), privately owned technologies of risk assessment have been put to work in minimising its social visibility. Capitalism (and its advertising billboards) wants you to believe that ignorance is bliss, because it knows how to make your ignorance profitable; but then capital is blissfully ignorant of the despair and sickness which its rate of profit emblematises.

And so we shift to a second foundation of debt fabrication: the inculcation of a debtor mentality. For the creation of a class which accepts its technological master requires an investment. This investment by the state is, now, in a primary if not in an exclusive sense, the University. In the social factory, the university partly plays its role as a debt machine, but (and more importantly) it is a factory of debtors. The debtor mentality requires constant refreshing, particularly when wages increased again following the boom in the economy brought on by the deregulation of financial mechanisms. The student struggles in 1968 were preceded by an increasing awareness of the need for trade unions, and also their redundancy. The avant-garde cultural (i.e., consumerist) movement succeeded; the

political movement failed. But in the successive cultural movement came the spores of the future redundancy not only of the unions, but also of the universities. Students, no longer merely creators of capital, needed also to become the creators of debt. It is only in the 1990s, however, under New Labour, that the anti-elitist rhetoric of social democracy could be harnessed to encourage the debthood of half of the youth population.

Both university and work have become modelled around the need for society to produce both debtors and debt: this is its primary objective (society also needs to produce a tiny stratum of financial administrators, the creditors of the future; but for obvious reasons this is a more specialist activity arbitrarily assigned to the few).

In the debt-factory, there has been a mechanical efflorescence of technologies designed to advance the monitoring of citizens-debtors. The process has been met with acts of resistance. These acts, however, have approached information gathering as an act against citizen-consumers rather than against worker-producers. In order to reinvigorate the role of industrial action in the resistance to debt-fuelled austerity programmes, we need to imagine strategies that put our debt production (note, not our 'information' production) at centre stage.

The creation of debtors (both indebted workers and indebted corporations) requires the constant analysis and collection of information. Without this, credit ratings cannot be evaluated, and the cogs cannot run smoothly. This is not to say that the information gathering is to

allow the elimination of toxic debt, but rather just to allow it to be produced in the correct manner. These acts of data gathering, so exacerbated by current austerity policing, have at their core the need to create legal entities which can gather debt, and technology, as ever, has been driven by the productive needs of the machine. Just as the installation of cameras and time monitoring in a car factory helps the managers to facilitate the oppression of the workers, so too the CCTV and data mining of our society, the debt machine, oppresses us, on an everyday basis. The gifts of technology may return to us the semblance of gratification in our lives as consumers, but as debtors, technology binds and confines us. The popular reaction against counter-terror legislation and the attack on civil liberties is fundamentally not a reaction by consumers standing up for their freedoms, but of a body of debt-luddites, ludding their looms.

When idiot pundits criticised the August rioters as merely substandard consumers, 'shopping with violence' instead of credit, of course their criticism was disingenuous: their only real sympathy was for poor, besieged private property. But they also ignored something else. The bourgeoisie has divorced the technics of production (the class conflict and the coping mechanisms that it entails) from the creation of consumer culture. They want production and circulation without *consumerism*, which is merely its symptom. They want the illness without its fever.

Wages (and the late capitalist wage-form, debt) provide us with the only means to psychologically cope with the continual effects of the deferral ideology in which we find ourselves: consumerism, but in that same breath they are the sustenance of the system that keeps us trapped. Once consumerism has been rejected, the necessary options for any subject under capital can only be political commitment or oblivion.

In August, in the Pembury Estate in Hackney, one person climbed the lamppost to disconnect the CCTV cameras. After clambering up, he found himself without the right tools to do the job. In a moment reflecting Banksy's 'Salute to the Tesco shopping bag' daubed on Essex Road, the young rioter puts a Tesco bag over the camera. One nation watched over by machines of loving grace, and plastic bags. The security camera was obscured by the shroud of consumerism. For a few nights, the desire for proletarian shopping *outmanoeuvred* the collection of data. Two machines of the social factory came into conflict with each other.





## ii. *The financialisation of the housing stock*

No one could not by now be accustomed to the argument that Thatcher ‘destroyed’ the organised working class in Britain. On this point socialists and free market liberals squabble over the same hymn sheet. But what we need to anatomise is the *ensemble of material resources that allowed her to do so.*

In the wake of the crisis, the left have sought to cast light on some fairy tales of the 20th century. The light cast by those narratives is dim: more akin to the glow of a burnt out police car than the lick of a flame. It is the after moment, the grey trace.

Among these stories is the victorious creation of the welfare state; its subsequent destruction by Thatcher; the end of grand Industry; the rise of the financial sector, and with it the creative industries and their resident “creatives”. This process of degradation is represented as a smooth flow, whether the agents are “capitalists” or “bankers”. More often than not, these categories are viewed as interchangeable.

These stories are urgently in need of replacement. For us, the grand accomplishments of the Thatcher state apparatus are not just the index of capital’s ‘victories’, because, in a broad sense, those accomplishments are precisely what defines the weakness of the British state in its current phase of crisis management. The history of the 1980s is not the history of a victory for the British state over organised labour: it is the history of the contradictions of capital resources sliced and diced and sold off down the river to an all too certain future. We now occupy that future. It does not look good. What follows is an account of the material expenditure which was required for Britain to re-establish itself in the 1980s as a matrix for financial accumulation, during a period of sharp and as yet still intensifying capitalist crisis. The proposal is that Thatcher's 'victory' over the organised fractions of the working class was dependent on the incipient financialisation of the British economy; but that this financialisation involved the expenditure (that is, the loss) of those resources with which the state could superintend future social revolt, the first among these being housing.

In the early eighties, Thatcher's 'monetarism' involved a genuinely new programme for domestic capitalist development. Strict fiscal and monetary controls induced a shake-out of unprofitable capitals (and pushed up levels of employment); but the privatisation programme, especially the Right-to-Buy legislation, was calculated to create a new social type. This would be the petit bourgeois owner-occupier who lives the high life in his ex-council house, and who is committed to capitalist supply-side restructuring just as surely as he is to the mortgage which paid for his home and which he must work for his whole life to service.

Before 1979, mortgage lending was conducted by UK building societies organised into a cartel. The building societies were allowed to lend profitably at a level of interest lower than the market rate, but without encouraging banks to enter the markets. In order to cope with excess demand, the building societies imposed various forms of 'rationing'. Customers seeking a good mortgage could be held in 'queues' for several years at a time. No large-scale debt economy could emerge in these conditions. But in October 1979, six months after taking office, the Conservative government abolished exchange controls regulating capital movements between the UK and the rest of the world, allowing for free movement of British capital out towards the global village and its burning horizon of new investment opportunities (a.k.a, cheap, disorganised exploitable labour). One result of this early piece of Thatcherite free-market legislation

was that it ceased to be possible to regulate banks' interest bearing liabilities: banks could leverage their debt by lending through foreign owned subsidiaries (companies owned by other companies), bypassing domestic controls. In 1980, the regulations which had sustained the building society mortgage monopoly were dropped. Remaining tax exemptions were eroded over the following five years.

By making it profitable for banks to compete with building societies, the state allowed liquidity to gurggle into the mortgage markets. The uptake of Right-to-Buy throughout the 1980s depended on the deregulation of capital movements; or, in other words, deregulation was a remunerative first step on the path towards demutualisation (de facto privatisation) of the building societies, and a British financial services industry at last 'liberated' from the cruel authoritarian posturing of 'democratic socialism'.

At this point we begin to see what all the jousting between mutually antagonistic financial institutions *means*. Owner-occupancy increased more than 10% during the 80s. The number of households 'taking advantage' of Right-to-Buy peaked in 1982, when 214,000 homes were purchased from the state. At the same time, mortgage debt rose in swift and fateful strides. The average proportion of purchase-price (i.e., of the total cost of a house) funded by mortgage debt rose from 46% to 59% in just the four years between 1980 and 1984; and rates of repossession rose in quick and

predictable response. Where repossession rates never exceeded 0.1% during the 1970s, they increased precipitously throughout the 80s, hitting 0.32% in 1987 before exploding to 0.72% during the early '90s property crash.

What underlies and is occluded by all these statistics is widespread social suffering, higher than the percentage figures indicate because affecting a much larger proportion of 'households' who, though not subject to repossession, were forced during the recession to live under the permanent threat of it, in the debt cage on which accumulation relies.

The mortgage borrowers, though they didn't know it, or at any rate didn't need to, were contributing to an immense programme of class recomposition. Since 1980, around 2.5 million – half of the stock of council houses – have been sold. Working class people given the 'right' to buy a house in a slum have typically decided not to do so, even during periods when mortgage debt has been as freely available as oxygen. Their reticence illuminates the purpose of the whole sham: Thatcherite 'social mobility' was ultimately the freedom of temporarily or fortuitously 'affluent' working people to accentuate the differences in material conditions which separate them from the 'working poor', who in that process are thrust yet more violently to the social margin. The features of Thatcherite economic policy (tight money supply, controlled fiscal spending, low interest rates) were 'in the interests' of the stakeholder class her government had

created, because policies for a ‘dynamic’ private sector were attached to a programme of privatisation from which more affluent sectors of the British working classes could expect to benefit – even if only in the sense that their compulsory boredom at work was newly invested with a material justification.

We are now – no one who is not dead or insensate could fail to know it – neck-deep in the long-term consequences of the move to financialisation. Let’s ask ourselves, then, how things have changed, if at all, and whether the state is in a position to manage its ‘inherited’ crisis as the Thatcher regime managed the crisis that it too ‘inherited’, during the long Winter of Discontent that lasted, contrary to what we are told is ‘popular belief’, well beyond the wave of strikes that terminated in the early months of 1979.

### *iii. You can only asset strip once*

The devastation of social housing in the UK was absolutely central to the recurrent ‘mandate’ that the Thatcher government received for its anti-union agenda. In short, without the creation of a base of support by means of housing privatisation at a ‘discount’, and without the financial deregulation required to create the liquidity for the purchases, the ‘Thatcherite’ war on the ‘organised’ working class would have been conducted from a position of considerable weakness. But our thesis is that what allowed the victory of the capitalist state in

the 1980s is what makes it so enfeebled today. The British state in 2011, which has so much in common with the British state in 1981, cannot do what the British state did in the 1980s; because this kind of state restructuring *can only be performed once*.

In 2007-2008, after the dull explosion of the current crisis, four of the ten demutualised building societies dissolved into the bloodstream of the British state, each too big to fail and heavily leveraged with toxic mortgage assets.

On June 27 2011, Richard Banks, the Chief Executive of UK Asset Resolution, the state-owned holding company (or mortgage-graveyard) which controls the nationalised mortgage books of both Northern Rock and Bradford & Bingley, called for ‘tough love’ for mortgage holders who fall behind on their payment. UKAR, is currently the lender of 23,000 mortgages whose borrowers are six months behind on their payments.

Banks’s remark articulates a limit for the state management of social contradiction: that because the state can no longer engineer a precarious petty bourgeoisie to defend or buffer the interests of capitalists, it cannot gain from direct, avowed and theatrical confrontation with the organised section of the proletariat.

Evidence for this isn’t hard to adduce. Even the rhetoric of state opposition to union action is now muted. Thatcher wrote that “one union's excessive wage

settlement is a whole nation's hardship". Politicians who insist on muttering their scripted imprecations are today more equivocal. In reproach of 'selfish' striking workers, Thatcher's cries of pain in protest at the "hardship" suffered by working families is downgraded to remarks about "inconvenience". By June 25, the most passionately voracious representatives of bourgeois interests were already having their cake and eating it. "For all the undeniable inconvenience that public sector strikes can cause," writes one glutton, "the fact is that they quite often fail." In parliament on June 29, Education Secretary Michael Gove repeated the litany: strikes would cause "massive inconvenience to hard-working families".

If the new moderacy of tone does reflect the diminished strength of the organised working class (this is so obvious it hardly needs saying), it *also indicates the weakness of the state*. In the current round of economically necessitated class war, the state lacks the *economic* ability to create its own support. This is reflected in its 'politics'. Because the state cannot keep interest rates at zero without sooner or later inducing massive inflation, it is the owner-occupier class, the overworked foot soldiers of Thatcher's 'property owning democracy', who will soon begin to be dispossessed of their homes. The state might hope that the dispossessed owner-occupiers will delude themselves into signing up to state-propagated abuse of 'public sector' King Midases, just as they deluded themselves when they signed up to their mortgages in the first place, but it also



faces a new problem. Unlike in the 1980s, fiscal austerity cannot create as if ex nihilo a new class of property-owning beneficiaries. The state lacks the means. Whatever resources there were to be privatised in the 1980s have long since disappeared into the deep pockets of speculators and rentiers; and without the capital to 'revitalise British industry', reflationary policy (quantitative easing, low interest rates, a restored financial sector) can only resume the situation of British capitalism in 2007, including all of the contradictions that led to its slump.

This is why at the national level the British state can commit to reflation or die. There are no means of purchasing a new class base. Walk out into the theatre of social conflict, and we find that the disorder of proletarian opposition to capitalist immiseration is matched by the isolation of the state and the capitalist interests it represents.

Most people on the left have taken pleasure in exposing the 'Big Society'. We all know that the party slogan is patently an *austerity ideology*, and that its appeals to mutualism and to the value of community spirit are just so many sweet nothings, meant to acculturate their hearer to life without wages. But the state's adoption of this pacifying ideology *in particular* is not just the consequence of its malevolence, because it is also the product of a material situation where the integration of the working classes by means of 'ideology' cannot be backed up or underwritten by limited material benefits.

As a vision for the future, the Big Society Bank is Right-to-Buy replayed as farce; just as Nick Clegg's (now suppressed) promise to distribute shares in Lloyds Banking Group is a kind of preposterous re-run of the advertising campaigns which the state used to flog shares in national assets during the mid-1980s. The 1980s television ads encouraging 'citizen' share purchases during the privatisation programmes were a means of conscripting 'popular' support for financial deregulation. More specifically, since the profit for the 'winners' depended on oversubscription to the issue, the ads were a means of conscripting popular support *for market bubbles*. The ideology of 'popular capitalism' was shunted down the throats of everyone; but it did offer as its material guarantee some minimal wealth redistribution to the middle classes. In contrast, today's patiently suffering 'citizens' are *literally* rewarded with shares in nothing, which is all that Lloyds Banking Group, *including the nationalised building society Halifax*, is capable of offering.

We will put this schematically. The capitalist state has a mediating function between capital and labour. This is not because it is a neutral or 'pluralist' institution, obligingly aggregating the claims of competing 'stakeholders', but because it has a commitment to ensure stable accumulation at the national level – a commitment which is not shared by individual capitals or by the mouthpieces for their interests (e.g., the Confederation of British Industry).

This is to say that when the cog made flesh Ed Miliband announces via his script that “strikes are a sign of failure... on both sides”, he loses count of the number of sides. Perhaps his fingers are arranged so that he can never see more than two of them. What Miliband forgets is this: if the state cedes up all of its resources, it reduces its own agency as an institutional conciliator during periods of intensified antagonism between capital, labour, and the bulging fringe of surplus population reduced to subsistence reproduction. This is a point too enthusiastically repressed by those who claim that in the 1980s the British state tore through the organised working class and established ‘neo-liberalism’ on a dark throne studded with Tamagotchis and iPods. In the state management of resistance to capital accumulation, there are at least two parameters: the state must quash or indispose the immediate antagonisms of the exploited, this is true; but it must also ensure that it preserves the resources with which it can ensure class decomposition in future periods of social crisis.

This is exactly what the British state failed to do. The British state did not *only* defeat the organised working class in the 80s. It also made what political pundits and financial speculators would call a gamble. The gamble was that developed, financialised capitalism operating in a nation *without an organised labour movement* would abolish the need to maintain the power of the state as an economic mediator, acting in the interests of accumulation at the national level. Amid the inflated rubble of the financial services sector, whose treatment

in the 2000s has been as gentle as the treatment of manufacturing (workers) in the 80s was brutal, no one would contend that the gamble succeeded. The state, hoping to administer financialised capitalism without an organised labour movement, is now positioned *without the economic means of conciliation* between declining financialised capitalism, on the one hand, and a disorganised proletariat, on the other.

Two things to note about the current period of state asset divestment. First, it is not a section of the class which is being bought off (as with an aspirational petty bourgeoisie and Right-to-Buy), but an oligarchy. Only multinationals and their immediate circle can benefit financially from the ripping apart of the state health and education sectors (as also, more recently, from the announced “loan” of state-owned real estate to developers who cannot otherwise afford to purchase it). Second, the effects of the health and education sell-off will only be felt in the next recession. We know this because it is only now that the effects of the last round of neo-liberalisation is taking its real toll, first and foremost in housing.

These are both important points; but the most important *consequence* of the alienation of state assets cannot be understood in isolation from the total position of global capital accumulation. The state softens the effects of crisis (and, it hopes, stimulates the development of new models of accumulation) by transferring its own assets to the “private” sector at sub-market rates. But in a world

where crisis continues to reassert itself with ever more vehemency and speed, each new bust leaves the state with fewer resources to manage riotous domestic opposition. Where this leaves us now ought to be clear. The state lacks the economic (though not the repressive) means to pacify a largely disorganised (i.e., casualised, highly exploited or unemployed) workforce, just as its programme for resumed capital expansion staggers haltingly towards the date when social suffering ('austerity') will be inflicted with maximum savage intensity. Even Britannia, with her moral, regulated liberty and illustrious tradition of primitive accumulation elsewhere, is now reduced to managing *domestic* social contradiction by the single means of violent suppression.



# 4. ACCUMULATING FEAR

## *i. Speculating on fear*

Why will an unmanned drone be flying over the London Olympics next year in 2012?

Similarly why is CCTV on every street corner in the UK? Is it a vast 'Big Brother' conspiracy? Why do European countries have less CCTV than the UK? Is the UK uniquely likely to sleepwalk into a nightmare? Perhaps. Or are these other countries just more committed to that oxymoron, 'civil liberties'?

For the answer we must consider resistance in a civil war. The institutions of power in different European territories did not face the same form of resistance as the UK at the same time. The exponential rise of CCTV was at first a reaction to IRA bombs on the mainland, prompting increased surveillance of city centres; and the poverty, 'lawlessness' and occasional rioting of housing estates in the North of England of the early 90s brought them to the residential parts of the nation. In August 1995, the world's first official police surveillance scheme

in a residential area opened in Newcastle's West End, with this explanation from Labour Councillor Peter Thompson:

*"It's to do with the kind of community you have there. You have a problem of loose families. Single mothers, men who drift around. There is a dislocation from normal expectations, from normal manners [...] a breakdown of basic rules and social codes. What do you do with working-class men who no longer have any possibility of a job and no means to earn self-respect? They have lost any sense that there are social boundaries. To some extent, I suppose, the cameras are a form of containment. People who live there are overwhelmed by a fear of crime, but it's a fear that is not really substantiated by the facts."*

Social control, conflict and fear. The 'containment' and continuation of civil war. Marx observed that our labour's value is endless. So, it seems, is our fear. Speculation on risk is well established in the financial industry; the security industry, its still nascent counterpart, trades off the more specialised forms of risk represented by humans, and, while profits might not be limitless, they are at least – and this can't be said of much else in UK plc – expanding. The technics of the security industries are so acceptable and visible to the public because they feed from the same font of fear; they threaten, soothe, frighten and assure. Things are getting scarier, but *don't worry*, because there's no shortage of outsourcing specialists ready to superintend a new crop



of prisons or reinforce all the fences. The security industry is set for a bumper year.

Police and police ideologies are disposed of as the secondary weapons for a state which has lost the ability to make a class deal on the basis of *material* resources. The public is assured ‘if you’ve got nothing to hid you’ve got nothing to fear’, while continuously being instructed to be fearful of ‘others’ from outside ‘our community’, a fear only the state can quench. It’s not privacy that needs to be protected, an equally idiotic response to the above riposte, but people’s position as protagonists in civil war. We *are* the ‘others’ – so long as we aren’t the bourgeoisie, who own the cameras and who bid for the contracts to install more of them.

The process, as with capitalist development more generally, is as follows: resistance to the state compels innovation by the state in techniques of pacification and control. Technologies are produced by the ‘Security Industry’ which in turn speculates on the development of new technologies (and on fear). The feedback loop completes itself in the technology fayre, where showcased technics are advertised to the state’s representatives.

Identical technics will not be prevalent across different territories of power globally, but the technics themselves generalise themselves in line with the generalisation of the capital relation, its crisis, and the fierce resistance which that crisis prompts. The wind that will carry an

unmanned drone to fly over the London Olympics next year can be traced back to public revulsion at high (American) body counts in Vietnam, central American insurrections and war by proxy to Palestinian Intifadas, the Helmand Province and the Green Zone in Baghdad, to UK urban riots and corporate sponsorship deals incorporating the whole of East London. Resistance, innovation, speculation. This process will develop apace following the wild English rioting, as global and colonial technics – in the standard phrase – ‘come home’.

The first stage in ‘solving’ anything is to reveal this conflict. The UK state-without-resources, now bereft of the means to barter for social peace, and infatuated with commissioning a dynamic private-sector to ‘risk manage’ its intransigently demanding population, is already encountering resistance. Non-engagement, criminality and generalised disobedience are the counter-practices which intensified policing give rise to. As Mark Duggan takes his place in the register of names of victims of police brutality, and as the August riots take their place in a history of immediate popular response to it, a generalisation suggests itself: Where social peace can be ensured only by the police, because, in the long duration of financialisation, the state has impoverished itself, the class struggle is converted ever more definitely into a situation of war. This is not a metaphor: the war does not proceed (it does not always proceed) from an explosion; but it exists as a permanent and growing state of social recalcitrance; and increasingly acute and undeniable sense of where the lines of antagonism fall.

A sign on the London underground encapsulates the current predicament. It says, with magnificent, idiotic simplicity: “Report Anything Suspicious”. We want to report the sign. But to whom?

## *ii. Insecure security*

While the UK counts down to fully implemented austerity, watching in anticipation and fear the social convulsions occurring in Greece and elsewhere, we need to find the means to explain a deeper inertia. Capitalist politicians have no utopian visions to communicate. Thatcher’s ‘property-owning democracy’ is now no more than a fatuous dream; as the ordinary owners of property are turned out onto the street and property ownership falls to levels not seen in 30 years, it cannot be otherwise. In 2011 the property ladder only leads *down*.

The lack of capitalist utopias is not due to a failure of imagination but to the incorrigible material decline of the global capitalist economy, and especially of its finance outlet, on whose fate the British state has so resolutely gambled.

Yet, without action the gamble may pay off. As we have claimed the only means left by which the state can pacify the class is suppression. One method of suppression we have identified is fear. Yet we do not mean this as exclusively through the means of the police, although

this plays a significant part, but also through fear created by indebtedness, which in turn is capital.

The newly created mortgaged working class are, we have seen, the most at risk of falling into arrears and repossession. The desire for home ownership in the '80s was not an aspirational desire in the Thatcherite sense (purely material) but an aspiration for autonomy and security. The state provided security without autonomy in the form of social housing, the mortgage market pretends to offer both whilst offering neither. Security in this sense comes in the form of indebtedness (through mortgages); and this indebtedness in turn creates an insecurity that is assuaged only by working harder and more obediently (risking your job through strike action is harder when the bank owns your home). This fear is cashed in through suppressed wages and a more obedient work-force.

Giving people 'a stake' (being indebted to the state or financial institutions for their security) is meant to make them live in fear of loss – the loss, that is, in case we need to spell it out, of one essential need: a secure home. In the wake of the riots, even local councillors awakened to this basic banality, at the moment it became clear to them that they might evict rioters and their families from the homes which they (the council) owned. Take this as a kind of grim confirmation of our thesis, that the state's alienation of its assets is irreversible and depletes its ability to regulate its subjects.

The 'propertied' working class do not need this overt threat: fear of repossession is the aetiology and basis of their servility. The debtor mentality, so vital to the debt-orientation of the social factory, reproduces itself through the simple, though also brutal, fact of mortgages. This propertied section of the class, recomposed and atomised into the nether regions of the property market, can no longer be bought off; instead it is coerced into *anxious* obedience to 'the economy' and the remedies salaried experts prescribe for it. But if the economy fails again, and if the propertied proletariat (with nothing to lose but their debt-secured homes) are repossessed, then this will mean nothing at all.



# 5. TEMPORAL AUTONOMY

This piece has tried to sketch out the lineaments of capitalist development in the UK; its contemporary structure of deferral; the superexpansion of psychologies and technics of social administration which it has used to supervise and regulate that structure; and, at last, the nightmares of this structure. It is now clear (it has been clear for some time) that there will be no *successful* return to the model of debt-led accumulation, at least not here in Britain; though this is not to say that there won't be *any* return to it, because the options for domestic accumulation are now so exceptionally reduced.

State-supervised class decomposition by means of the domestic carrot (for example, bribery utilising the housing stock) is no longer possible, at least not on the scale it once was; and it is no longer possible because the transition to a financialised model of accumulation was already a response to a crisis in British capital accumulation; and because the state could not assure the transition to that model without shedding its assets. The crisis of deferral (the debt crisis) in which capital now finds itself is the deferred crisis of the early eighties. There is no exit from it except by exiting capital. And so our analysis reaches its concluding remarks, the nature of which will always seem insufficient to the task it has set

itself. We do not claim here to offer a final word even on our own ideas, let alone anyone else's. We look forward to further reflections and response: little else is worth waiting for.

In case the fact has become void through abjuration, let us repeat as mantra: the welfare state of the UK is suffering the most severe and fastest policies of transfer from governmental to private sector control since its creation. And yet the ideological nomenclature of the Big Society - no more than New Labour on Ritalin - continues to be smeared across the advertising hoarding which decks out our 'public' institutions.

Resistance hitherto has, on reflection, been *too* reactive to clocks, calendars, policy and dogma. From Millbank to local Town Halls, West End bank smashing, to the picket lines, this was all good action – necessary and positive. But it remains reactive: to dates, and to a dominant economic narrative that is dictating the terms of our debate, fitted into a predetermined timetable, waiting for policy to be announced and fighting it within the logic of capitalist 'austerity', as presented to us as the unfortunate appendix to an economy that still idiotically and delusionally insists on the possibility, nay the inevitability, of growth. Alternatively we understand that capitalism *is* austerity. And austerity is not a policy, a stack of papers held in a grey office on Whitehall, but the unseen motor of social reproduction in the form of the destruction of life.



Despite the fact that the jury is perpetually out on the UK's (austere) fiscal policy, capital accumulation requires, in order to resume its upward vector, a good investment climate; and the best (and probably the only) way for that climate to be conjured up by the Treasury and the Bank of England is through the whole gamut of policies which take "austerity" as their cover concept: that is, labour market "flexibility", reduction in corporate tax rates, increased taxation on consumption (i.e., workers' wages), reduced social welfare spending, and reduction in whatever state expenditure is least productive for the private sector.

The other way of "promoting growth" here in 2011 is not by means of platitudinously fantastical "green investment" (of all "programmes" the most truly farcical) or Keynesian pump priming but instead wholesale devalorisation, shakeout, destruction and culminant reconsolidation, where competition spreads across state borders to induce a figurative war for position, and where that figurative war leads to massive international tension, protectionism, offensive/defensive trade and military bloc formation, and, ultimately - potentially - to unimaginably destructive and radiantly hateful forms of real, literal war, where, as usual, proletarians are the primary victims.

All pleas that we 'step outside' of the austerity narrative obfuscate this eventual chain, even where their authors would wish to agree with it, because they substitute for an exit from capital for an escape merely from a

‘discourse’, which just carries us right back to the heart of the miserable matter. Union leaders and bureaucrats across generations can often be heard to urge a ‘wait and see’ attitude, ‘let’s wait for the right time’. Wait and see how *our* institution is affected before we decide to act, wait and see how *our* pension scheme is altered by government policy and then we’ll decide on industrial action. Could this ever have been enough?

Consciously or not, we do not yet think and act outside of austerity ideology that the right has impressively imposed - and we wait for that ideology to be manifest in policy before acting. We are presently 'anti-cuts', but we are losing ground month by month as cuts arrive. We are protesting the cuts as they come to pass and moving on to the next cut. Cameron has announced he intends to sell virtually every single public service except the police and courts. The circles are becoming tiny. And we stand around, waiting for policy.

We are told by state ideologues and the press that “we are in a time of austerity”. By this they mean to demarcate our specific historical era as one that begins with a crash and recession, and which, we are promised, ends with a return to growth. We *are* in a time of austerity but our analysis demands we talk about what sort of temporality that is, what time is like under the conditions of capitalist decay. The time of austerity is the time of deferral. We are not interested in the edges of the historical plain, in the crash which we knew was inevitable and the projected return to profit. The end of

this era, from the point of view of the ideologues, is the moment when ideology once again subsumes reality. The end of the time of austerity, from the standpoint of the ideologues, is nothing more than the acceptance of further immiseration, more death, and greater suffering, all strung together in the colourful bunting of “growth”.

Being purely reactive (‘anti-cuts’) can be readily dealt with. Students' energy explodes and subsides in exciting but manageable ways as term times comes and goes and cuts are forced through. The summer presented itself as an *aposiopesis* to students, a dramatic pause before the autumn storm. And so the ebb and flow of political turmoil becomes predictable enough; and our enemies continue to do what they do best. ‘Anti-austerity’ relies on its own conception of time: and that concept of time, like capital's, is incapable of grasping continuity; so that just as the working day is spliced into its component hours, each with its discrete value, anti-austerity discourse cuts the pre-crisis boom free of the historical context in which it properly exists, isolates it, and then insists that this is the *moment* to which we ought to return.

Capital sets a value on a unit of time; and so does anti-austerity. Capital decrees, authoritatively: no going backwards and forwards at will as if historical process were controlled by a joystick. Anti-austerity discourse stops up its ears and fails to realise that by doing so it merely acquiesces lifelessly to capital's mode of duration. Despite what anti-austerity as a mode of 'discourse'

might say about itself, in truth it does absolutely nothing but wait for the next boom, as powerlessly servile and complacent as any avid reader of the Financial Times.

Capitalism, and the current mode of anti-capitalism, carries with it its own notion of time, as does every historical period. There are clearly activities in which we must engage in order to deal with our political situation: trade unionism, eviction resistance, solidarity with others who suffer, and the constant dispersal of the most basic left wing critiques which help us convince each other to engage in such actions. But these are not the thing itself; they contain nothing which can change our approach to time or offer an exit from deferral.

This is a philosophical problem, with all the urgency such a disjuncture demands: When we seek material autonomy, we achieve nothing but material disruption; temporal autonomy would be revolution. The acts in which we currently engage are at best reformist, and it is a damning truth of our times that in general it is those acts which are commonly dubbed extremist and criminal which have, for proletarians, the ability to bring about effective reforms (increased wages, respect of human rights, holding 'representatives' to account), never mind revolution. So why engage in these act? The only generalisation we can make is that engagement is a matter of psychological survival. Perhaps at some point we can do more than this. At the beginning of this piece we described how salt was once a means by which people extracted time from meat, and took it for

themselves. As workers, however, it is we who have become encased in salt. The hardened shell must be cast off and dissolved. Perhaps one day the salt can be useful again, to defer some other object, or rip its time-form away from it.

For now, the crisis has crunched the capitalist time of deferral against the demand for a temporal immediacy. Our work is not to defend one against the other but to render this contradiction concrete and absolute. Time away - the cigarette break, the strike day, the 25 years to pay off a mortgage - will always be a mirage of freedom, one which moves further away from us the closer we get to it, our passage toward it gradually constricting our existence. A revolutionary time-form, a time away from time as we know it, cannot be described in anything but negative terms. It is not exhaustion and industry, but neither is it free-time and leisure in the current ways those ideas can be understood. It cannot be merely a return to the labour of salting meat, any more than it can be the wage-labour of contemporary salt mines.

There is no golden age to be inspired by, or glory days to which we should seek to return, and waiting for an imaginary future determined by economic factors to bring us our utopias is equally mad. Despite salt, time is passing. Despite austerity, we must think again. Deferral must be disrupted by our practical antagonisms to the real contradictions of our life's reproduction: How we live, how we subsist, how we work. Time must be interrupted by us. Not Eden, not Heaven. Now.





# ESCALATE COLLECTIVE

## JANUARY 2012

[WWW.ESCALATECOLLECTIVE.NET](http://WWW.ESCALATECOLLECTIVE.NET)

