

## Intakes: Disaster communism



### AUFHEBEN'S INTRODUCTION

In *Aufheben* 19 we discussed the thesis that disasters can produce 'cracks in capitalism'.<sup>1</sup> This idea was based in part on evidence of 'the extraordinary communities that arise in disasters'. Such post-disaster communities are a well-documented phenomenon, and examples include those that emerged in the wake of San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, and Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, 2005. In each case, disaster served to produce micro-societies characterized by mutual aid, which were temporarily free from the control of capital and the state. In many cases, the forces of the state violently attacked these new communities – and in the case of Hurricane Katrina this was abetted by vigilantes. The parallel between disaster-produced communities like these and a communist world has led to the term 'disaster communism' being coined.

In this *Intakes* article, the *Out of the Woods* collective use the concept of disaster communism to address the relationship between climate change and these 'disaster communities'. Part of the political significance of climate change lies in what it means for the traditional view that 'post-scarcity' societies make communism possible, that communism is a product of abundance. If this traditional view is true, the corollary might be that, with increasing climate chaos,<sup>2</sup> scarcity (of dry land, clean water, food) makes communism less likely in the future: with insufficient resources for everyone to live comfortably, the idea of shared resources becomes unthinkable.

<sup>1</sup> Review article: Earthquakes, crack-heads and utopias *A Paradise built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters* by Rebecca Solnit *Aufheben* 19 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See The climate crisis ... and the new green capitalism? In *Aufheben* 21 (2012)

But this argument makes the same Hobbesian assumptions about human nature that the examples of disaster communities contradict so eloquently. Therefore, questioning this traditional view of the relation between abundance and communism, *Out of the Woods* suggest that climate crisis could also be an *opportunity* to create a new world.

The articles we publish as *Intakes* do not go through the usual *Aufheben* editorial process of being argued over, mauled and criticized until they approximate something all of us involved in the magazine agree with. Publishing an *Intakes* article means that while we think the article is useful and interesting, we may not agree with all of it. In the present case, we felt that *Out of the Woods* addressed climate change politics in a new way that is worth serious consideration. On the other hand, we also feel that in this article they are perhaps being a bit too soft on the structuralism of their opponents. There is structuralism in the argument that everything implicated in capitalist reproduction cannot be part of the abolition of capitalism. *Out of the Woods* certainly reject this, but they could have been stronger in their criticism. Part of the problem seems to be that the means with which they attempt to criticize structuralism is in fact borrowed from the same ideological heritage as structuralism.

Let us explain what we don't like about structuralism. In this perspective, exemplified in the work of Althusser, but more obviously by similar cruder theories,<sup>3</sup> structuralism depicts a world whose material conditions are entangled in the ideology reflected by these same conditions. As a result, it is problematic to theorise a way out of any historical condition or social formation. Sophisticated Althusserians had to invoke the concept of 'over-determinism' and do lots of intellectual acrobatics to justify the consistency of a theory which needed to be rescued from the trap of consistency. Another, simpler and more obvious, way out of structuralism was to theorise the revolution as a catastrophic and arbitrary change in the state of the world. This obviously brings about more problems: if the present conditions are swept away, do we need to start from scratch? Is our imagination of a new world doomed to be primitivist?

In the article by *Out of the Woods*, the 'solution' to this new problem - bricolage - seems

<sup>3</sup> Such as *Théorie Communiste*, popularised in the UK by Endnotes as the starting point for their own theoretical work. See our comments on and replies to *Théorie Communiste* in *Aufheben* 11 and 12.

to be unable to escape from the original structuralist trap and post-structuralist 'answer'. In response to climate catastrophe, people will be freed from capitalist ideology and connected technology. However, not all is lost, as they can 'reinterpret' the things created by capitalism in new ways, freed from past material and cultural constraints.

While post-structuralism can offer some interesting 'critical' ideas, we need to put them in context. Post-structuralism and post-modernism arose as the ideological shock troops of 'neoliberal' capitalism, celebrating fragmentation and denying the possibility of revolution. These academic theories turned into ideology the movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s; their concepts were devised explicitly to replace Marxian ideas about social change, not to develop what's good in them.

What's the alternative to structuralism and the rigid discontinuity it posits? It is dialectics. In dialectics, there is discontinuity as well as continuity, a togetherness of opposites captured in the notion of determinate negation. The basis of the next world is very much in the nature of this world, and we can see it in the negation entailed by class struggles.

If a totally new world *can* develop from the previous conditions through the actual practices of struggle and revolution, apparently weighty topics such as whether certain products of capitalism can be appropriated for a communist world risk becoming mere intellectual speculation, unless these topics are based on the concrete practice of people who are experimenting with forms of direct social relations world-wide.

In this light, the potential for theory based on concrete experience (and possibly on the practice of class struggle) is the aspect of *Out of the Woods*, and of their article, which we value, and which we think that should be considered with interest.

*Aufheben*

## DISASTER COMMUNISM

The following article was originally published in three parts on our libcom.org blog. It forms a preliminary fleshing out of a concept we'd used in previous articles, though not one we coined: disaster communism. Part one discusses the spontaneous communities of mutual aid typically formed in disaster situations. Contrary to the Hobbesian ideology of the modern state, life in such conditions is not solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, despite the obvious hardships. Rather, in the (temporary) absence of state power and market relations, mutual aid predominates. However, while this provides a practical critique of Hobbesian ideology, it does not offer a route to a

communist society. In fact, as Mark Neocleous has noted, in anticipation of real or imagined disasters the liberal state's logic of security tends to mutate into a logic of resilience.<sup>4</sup> Here, resilience is understood in the sense of the capacity of individuals and systems to *return to normality* following a shock. The US Department for Homeland Security's praise for New York's Occupy Sandy needs to be understood in this light.

Part two therefore shifts to a wider angle, considering the possibility of communism in a world soon to be, and perhaps already, committed to climate chaos. To do this, we turn to recent discussions around 'communisation', which stress that the communist character of various collective actions can only be considered at the level of capitalist social relations as a whole. This is helpful in getting away from the emphasis on particular forms - such as directly democratic assemblies - which often characterises contemporary horizontalism. And it helps to clarify that a communist society cannot be the sum of the proliferation of interstitial 'disaster communes', growing in the cracks of capitalism until it shatters. Direct struggle against capital remains essential, although the forms this may take in a rapidly warming world are fairly open ended.

Part three seeks to pull the micro moments of 'disaster communities' and the macro problematic of 'disaster communisation' together through an engagement with a recent debate over logistics. On the one hand, the partisans of communisation tend to view the extant infrastructure as inherently belonging to capitalist social relations. Here, the critique of self-management seems to lead to a rejection of expropriating existing infrastructure under collective control. On the other hand, critics have used the apparent necessity of taking over existing infrastructure to assert a corresponding necessity of continuing 'proper (hierarchical) management'. We argue that the necessity to abolish capitalist social forms - wage labour, value, private property etc. - can be reconciled with the need to expropriate the existing infrastructure bequeathed by capitalism. This can be done through the practice of *bricolage*, the art of making do with what is at hand. This ties the wider problematic back in with the kind of improvisational creativity seen in disaster communities.

### PART 1: DISASTER COMMUNITIES

*Tens of thousands of people showed that we don't need capital or governments to get things*

<sup>4</sup> Mark Neocleous (2014) *War power, police power*. Edinburgh University Press. Pp. 195-204.

*done. They demonstrated the will of people to take part in comforting each other, re-building, creating and moulding their own futures.*<sup>5</sup>

This quote is from a blog called Revolts Now. Libcom readers often see this kind of inspiration in strikes or uprisings, moments when the working class seizes the steering wheel, or stomps on the brakes (pick your metaphor). Revolts Now was talking about the aftermath of the Queensland floods. They write of:

*...efforts of communities hit by disaster that do not wait for the state, or allow capital to take the initiative, but instead 'negotiate with their hands', rebuilding their own communities and 'healing themselves', resulting in communities that are stronger. I call these efforts disaster communism.*

We think disaster communism is a useful concept for thinking about climate change. Although it's far from common, we can already identify at least two different meanings of the term. The first meaning is collective, self-organised responses to disaster situations. The second concerns the prospects for an ecological society based on human needs in the face of climate chaos, or to put it another way, the possibility of communism in the Anthropocene.<sup>6</sup> We can call this first sense 'disaster communities', and the second 'disaster communisation', and consider both of these as moments of the wider problematic of disaster communism.

### **Disaster communities**

Rebecca Solnit popularised the idea of disaster communities in her book *A paradise built in hell*. Solnit points out that the goal of the state in disasters is usually to re-impose 'order' rather than to assist the survivors. In the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the army were sent in, killing between 50 and 500 survivors and disrupting self-organised search, rescue, and firefighting efforts.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Nick Southall (2011) Disaster communism and anarchy in the streets  
<http://revoltsnow.wordpress.com/2011/04/10/166/>

<sup>6</sup> Jason Moore argues that "as a metaphor for communicating the significant – and growing – problem posed by greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, the Anthropocene is to be welcomed", but that in pinning the problem on 'anthropos' - humanity - rather than specific forms of social organisation - capital - it naturalises the problem and smuggles in neo-Malthusian assumptions. *Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*  
<https://jasonmoore.wordpress.com/2013/05/13/anthropocene-or-capitalocene/>

<sup>7</sup> This reminds us of the famous Freudian slip from Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, while defending police repression:

*The fires and booming explosions raged for three days. It sounded like war. When they were done, half the city was ash and rubble, more than twenty-eight thousand buildings had been destroyed, and more than half the population of four hundred thousand was homeless. Mansions burned down atop Nob Hill; the slum district south of Market Street was nearly erased. The disaster provoked, as most do, a mixed reaction: generosity and solidarity among most of the citizens, and hostility from those who feared that public and sought to control it, in the belief that an unsubjected citizenry was—in the words of [Brigadier General] Funston—"an unlicked mob."* (p.35)

For Solnit, the current social order requires constant effort to maintain. She likens it to an electric light, and disasters to a power cut. When the power goes out, literally or metaphorically, there is a spontaneous "reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative, and local society" (p.10). The repressive actions of the state – in San Francisco 1906 as much as Katrina in 2005 – are about re-imposing state power and capitalist normality.

The state sees localised self-organisation, collaboration and mutual aid as a threat to be crushed. Which is why the state is often quicker to provide its own citizens with hot lead than fresh water: order must reign. Solnit draws on the ground-breaking work of Charles Fritz, who studied numerous disasters and found that stereotypes of selfishness, anti-social individualism, and aggression were completely without evidence.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the opposite is true:

*Disaster victims rarely exhibit hysterical behaviour; a kind of shock-stun behaviour is a more common initial response. Even under the worst disaster conditions, people maintain or*

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"The policeman is not here to create disorder. The policeman is here to preserve disorder."

<sup>8</sup> *Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn From Disaster Studies* See:

<http://udspace.udel.edu/handle/19716/1325>. We're not claiming people are angels, only that the evidence consistently shows co-operative, pro-social behaviour is the predominant response. However, this solidarity is mediated by identity, and this means race is a major factor in who lives and who dies. The media like to focus on exceptional cases to fit a Hobbesian narrative of anomie wherever state order breaks down (e.g. see this *Daily Mail* piece, 'Mother whose two boys were swept out of her arms in superstorm was left screaming on street for 12 hours by neighbours who refused to help her' 1 November 2012 <http://tinyurl.com/c7jr95u>). But cases like this are perhaps better understood as the effect of racial othering – when a black person knocks at the door asking for help, white people don't necessarily answer, and maybe they even shoot them dead just to be sure.

quickly regain self control and become concerned about the welfare of others. Most of the initial search, rescue, and relief activities are undertaken by disaster victims before the arrival of organized outside aid. Reports of looting in disasters are grossly exaggerated; rates of theft and burglary actually decline in disasters; and much more is given away than stolen. Other forms of antisocial behaviour, such as aggression toward others and scapegoating, are rare or non-existent. Instead, most disasters produce a great increase in social solidarity among the stricken populace, and this newly created solidarity tends to reduce the incidence of most forms of personal and social pathology. (Fritz, p. 10)

Fritz also astutely notes that the distinction between disasters and 'normality' can "conveniently overlook the many sources of stress, strain, conflict, and dissatisfaction that are imbedded in the nature of everyday life."<sup>9</sup> The difference is that disaster situations suspend the institutional order, creating an unstructured situation amenable to change. Thus the privations felt in the disaster, as well as the stresses and strains of everyday life, can be addressed collectively. This provides both the psychological support and the collective power to restructure social life around human needs.<sup>10</sup>

### **An opportunity for social transformation?**

*People see the opportunity for realizing certain wishes that remained latent and unfulfilled under the old system. They see new roles that they can create for themselves. They see the possibility of wiping out old inequities and injustices. The opportunity for achieving these changes in the culture lends a positive aspect to disasters not normally present in other types of crisis. (Fritz, p. 57)*

<sup>9</sup> For example see this blog by Sometimes Explode, arguing that anxiety/nervousness is the dominant affective state in the contemporary 'society of stimulation': The nervousness of politics (April 2014) <http://libcom.org/blog/nervousness-politics-14042014>

<sup>10</sup> James Lovelock argues along these lines, linking anxiety to a sort of calm before the storm, which can only be resolved once the inevitable happens: "Humanity is in a period exactly like 1938-9", he explains, when "we all knew something terrible was going to happen, but didn't know what to do about it". But once the second world war was under way, "everyone got excited, they loved the things they could do, it was one long holiday ... so when I think of the impending crisis now, I think in those terms. A sense of purpose - that's what people want." James Lovelock (2008) 'Enjoy life while you can: in 20 years global warming will hit the fan' <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2008/mar/01/scienceofclimatechange.climatechange> We can't share the nostalgia for wartime, but a sense of impending doom certainly pervades contemporary culture.

Importantly, disaster communities are not intentional communities, drop-out communes, or activist temporary autonomous zones. They're self-organised, non-market, non-statist social reproduction under adverse conditions, not an attempt at voluntary secession from capitalism. However, they still suffer some of the shortcomings of such projects. First and foremost, they are typically short-lived, even if the experience changes the participants for life. Fritz points out that practically, such communities persist until some kind of basic societal functioning and stability is restored, typically a matter of weeks to months in peacetime disasters, or several years in wartime or in case of chronic or serial disasters.

This helps explain why a smart state has more options than just repression, and hence why the US Department of Homeland Security can praise the self-organised, anarchist-influenced Occupy Sandy relief efforts.<sup>11</sup> Since self-organised disaster communities are more effective than state agencies and market forces and responding to disasters, the state can simply sit back and let people suffer, then reassert itself when the community dissipates as normality returns. This is the state's interest in 'resilience', exposing proletarians to disaster, abandoning them to survive by their own efforts, and then moving in with the 'disaster capitalism' of reconstruction and gentrification once the moment of disaster has passed.<sup>12</sup>

Disaster communities alone, then, do not inherently pose a revolutionary threat to the capitalist social order – and may even be recuperated as a low-cost means to restore capitalist normality. If they can be called communist, it's in the sense of 'baseline communism', a term used by David Graeber to describe the basic sociality and free cooperation which makes *any* social order possible (including capitalism). How does this notion of disaster communism relate to a wider revolutionary, anti-capitalist dynamic?

<sup>11</sup> See Homeland Security Study Praises Occupy Sandy, With Murky Intentions in *Truthout* (April, 2014) <http://truthout.org/news/item/22837-dhs-study-praises-occupy-sandy-with-murky-intentions>

<sup>12</sup> As an article in the *Endnotes* journal comments, "resilience is only ostensibly a conservative principle; it finds stability not in inflexibility but in constant, self-stabilising adaptivity." In disaster communities, neither state power nor supposed entrepreneurial 'genius' can generate this adaptive self-organisation, rather they act once it has stabilised the situation. Jasper Bernes (2013) Logistics, Counter-logistics and the Communist Prospect, *Endnotes* 3. <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/21>

## PART 2: COMMUNISATION AND CONCRETE UTOPIA

Recently in the libertarian communist circles we are connected to, much of the recent discussion of what an anti-capitalist revolution would look like has taken place as part of discussions of 'communisation theory'. To our knowledge, little of this discussion has directly engaged with climate change. A definition given by Endnotes serves as a helpful point of departure for thinking about disaster communism:

*Communization is a movement at the level of the totality, through which that totality is abolished. (...) The determination of an individual act as 'communizing' flows only from the overall movement of which it is part, not from the act itself, and it would therefore be wrong to think of the revolution in terms of the sum of already-communizing acts, as if all that was needed was a certain accumulation of such acts to a critical point. A conception of the revolution as such an accumulation is premised on a quantitative extension which is supposed to provoke a qualitative transformation. (...) In contrast to these linear conceptions of revolution, communization is the product of a qualitative shift within the dynamic of class struggle itself.<sup>13</sup>*

This passage probably caricatures its unnamed opponents; however, it's a helpful way to think about disaster communism: no amount of disaster communities will lead to revolution. Revolution would only happen when the self-organised social reproduction of disaster communities came into conflict with existing property relations, the state, and so on, and overcomes these limits. That in turn is hard to imagine without the extension and linking up of different disaster communities, class struggles, and social movements.

Disaster communities are typically short-lived and tend to dissipate back into capitalist normality. Unless these communities compose themselves as antagonists to the prevailing social order, and link up with other struggles, they will be isolated and dissipate (either through repression, recuperation, or simply outliving the conditions of their formation). Both the intensive aspect (overcoming of limits within a struggle) and extensive aspects (spreading and linking up) matter: no local struggle can overcome its internal limits without extension. No widespread movement will become revolutionary without a

qualitative shift from an ameliorative to a transformative horizon.

This line of thinking also rules out any kind of catastrophist 'the worse, the better' approach: there is no reason to think disasters will lead to social transformation any more than austerity will inevitably lead to revolution. However, climate change does change the parameters for revolution. Things like rising food and energy costs, mass displacement, and water scarcity will increasingly stress the capacity of proletarians to reproduce themselves within the prevailing social relations. For example, hunger reflects distribution of income not absolute scarcity, and this will remain true even with significant climate-induced reductions in agricultural productivity, so social property relations will increasingly come into conflict with biophysical reproduction.

As Endnotes, umm, note, an activity is only communisation if it occurs at the level of the totality - that is, if it's part of a class- and social-system-wide attack on capitalism in the form of creating communist social relations. If it's not part of that, then activity is part of the totality of capitalist social relations and their reproduction (as we see in isolated disaster communities). The capitalist class and its governments are aware of this as well to some extent. Their responses to disasters are not only about the short-term situation but are about the long term as well.

Harry Cleaver writes in his article on the aftermath of the Mexico City earthquake that landowners and real estate speculators saw the quake as an opportunity to evict people they'd been meaning to get rid of for a long time, to tear down their quake shattered homes and put up expensive high rise condos. The Mexican working class fought back, successfully:

*...thousands of tenants organized themselves and marched on the presidential palace demanding government expropriation of the damaged properties and their eventual sale to their current tenants. By taking the initiative while the government was still paralysed, they successfully forced the seizure of some 7,000 properties.<sup>14</sup>*

Cleaver identifies two conditions that made this possible, the history of struggle prior to the earthquake and the ways in which "the earthquake caused a breakdown in both the administrative capacities and the authority of the government." The first is important for helping understand the conditions of emergence of disaster communities which might challenge state power or take direct action in their own interests.

<sup>13</sup> What are we to do? Endnotes  
<http://libcom.org/library/what-are-we-do-endnotes>

<sup>14</sup> Harry Cleaver (1987) The uses of an earthquake  
<http://libcom.org/library/uses-of-earthquake-cleaver>

The second is important for helping us understand how disasters can limit the forces of the state and capital that seek to keep society capitalist.

### The two moments of disaster communism

The apparent universality of disaster communities gives strong grounds to believe self-organised social reproduction will emerge wherever capitalist normality breaks down, whether that's due to disaster or social antagonism. Contra Endnotes, this means we are not restricted to purely negative injunctions:

*What advice [communization theory] can give is primarily negative: the social forms implicated in the reproduction of the capitalist class relation will not be instruments of the revolution, since they are part of that which is to be abolished.*

We disagree. We think that disaster communities offer a glimpse of what non-capitalist social reproduction can look like under abnormal conditions. Since a revolutionary movement is by definition abnormal, it would be as much of a mistake to dismiss disaster communities as to claim them as sufficient in themselves. This does not mean a simple quantitative accumulation of disasters adds up to communism – only that there are glimpses of non-capitalist social relations in disaster communities. Indeed, it would be impossible to account for disaster communities degenerating back into capitalist normality if they hadn't at some point operated on at least a partly different logic to that of value and capital accumulation. We argue this is a communist logic of self-organised production and distribution for human needs, without state or market mediation.

Furthermore, while it's true that capitalist social forms (wages, value, commodities...) can't form the basis of non-capitalist social reproduction, social forms do not exhaust the content of the current world. For example, David Harvey identifies seven 'activity spheres':

1. Technologies and organizational forms
2. Social relations
3. Institutional and administrative arrangements
4. Production and labour processes
5. Relations to nature
6. The reproduction of daily life and the species
7. Mental conceptions of the world<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Hartman (2011) David Harvey's "Mental Conceptions" <http://s-usih.org/2011/09/david-harveys-mental-conceptions.html>

The mistake Endnotes make is to take the totalising *tendencies* of capitalism for an already-totalised capitalism (for example: "What we are is, at the deepest level, constituted by this [class] relation").<sup>16</sup> We would surely hope that any revolution would see each of these seven aspects transformed: some abolished and/or replaced with altogether new social forms, others reorganised and reconfigured, as well as the emergence of novel ideas, forms, technologies and so on.

### Concrete utopia

If we take seriously Murray Bookchin's dictum that "we must escape from the debris with whatever booty we can rescue (...) the ruins themselves are mines", then we are not restricted to apophatic communism.<sup>17</sup> Of course, we cannot fully specify in advance 'what is to be done', nor would we wish to. That has to be worked out by the participants in the movement as it develops. But that doesn't mean we can't identify some of the constraints, the possibilities, and the latent potentials which are unable to be realised under capitalist social relations.

We wouldn't be going far out on a limb in saying that distributed renewable energy generation is more compatible with a libertarian communist society than centralised fossil fuel energy generation. That doesn't mean it's 'inherently' communist or necessarily prefigures communism – the solar panels appearing on rooftops around our cities show otherwise. Similarly, in the case of agriculture, there are biophysical parameters which constrain the possible (such as the carbon, nitrogen, and water cycles). We cannot say definitively what the communisation of agriculture would look like, but we can identify at least some of the constraints and possibilities, and even speculate as to how these might play out.

Disaster communities are informative in this regard – both in showing how present-at-hand technologies, knowledges, and infrastructure can be rapidly repurposed to meet human needs, and in how these emergent innovations can dissipate and be reabsorbed into capitalist normality.<sup>18</sup> We could go further still, and insist on the need to

<sup>16</sup> This point is borrowed from a friend in discussion on Facebook. It can be contrasted with Marx's position in *Capital* that "here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests" (our emphasis). The communisation argument would be that 'real subsumption' has subsequently advanced to the point that Marx's 'only in so far as' caveat has been rendered moot. We disagree, and think this caveat is vital to any theoretical analysis of capitalism.

<sup>17</sup> Apophatic theology attempts to describe God only by what it is not.

<sup>18</sup> A communist movement mirrors capital in this one sense – it must grow or die.

rediscover a concrete utopianism. Increasingly, it is capital which relies on abstract utopia - for instance building new 'clean' coal power plants with vast empty halls for carbon capture technology that doesn't exist. By contrast, a concrete utopianism looks to the already-present possibilities which are frustrated by the prevailing social relations.<sup>19</sup>

Labour-saving technology is everywhere but is experienced as speed-ups and unemployment. Industrial ecology is largely limited to a corporate social responsibility gimmick in a world ruled by value. Collaborative, self-organising, and co-operative forms of production are pioneered but often experienced as self-managed, precarious exploitation. Viable, sustainable, and low throughput agricultural practices exist but are marginalised in the energy-hungry world market. Biophilic cities and regenerative design are largely restricted to isolated demonstration projects or gentrifying urban spaces for the well-off, their potential constrained by class relations.

With Endnotes, we can say 'the determination of these potentials as 'communising' flows only from the overall movement of which they are a part, not from the things themselves'.<sup>20</sup> Against Endnotes, we can insist this gives at least some positive content to disaster communism, even if only as a broad outline of incipient, inchoate, yet concrete utopian potentials. In part three, we will try and tie the micro level of disaster communities to the macro level of disaster communisation via the example of contemporary logistics.

### **PART 3: LOGISTICS, REPURPOSING, BRICOLAGE**

#### **Debating logistics**

The purely negative approach to communism discussed in part 2 has already come under criticism from, amongst others, Alberto Toscano.<sup>21</sup> This has taken the form of a debate notionally regarding the politics of capitalist logistics — the global network of shipping, ports, warehouses, just-in-time production, stock control algorithms. Toscano argues that contemporary logistics is clearly a capitalist creation. However, he insists that a purely negative approach of sabotage and blockades overlooks the potential, or even the necessity, to take it over at least for a transition

<sup>19</sup> The distinction between concrete and abstract utopias comes from Ernst Bloch, who sought to show – against Marx's protestations – that Marx was in fact the greatest utopian thinker. Whereas the utopian socialists Marx criticised only posed abstract blueprints of future societies, Marx sought utopia through detailed analysis of concrete tendencies and latent potentials that are already present.

<sup>20</sup> Arguably Endnotes are simply paraphrasing classic Marx here: 'communism is the real movement that abolishes the present state of things.'

<sup>21</sup> Alberto Toscano (2011) *Logistics and opposition*, Mute.



period into a post-capitalist society. This is the real substance of the debate, with logistics standing in as a case study for the existing infrastructure of production and circulation in general. Toscano writes:

*Materialism and strategy are obviated by an anti-programmatic assertion of the ethical, which appears to repudiate the pressing critical and realist question of how the structures and flows that separate us from our capacities for collective action could be turned to different ends, rather than merely brought to a halt.*

This seems to echo our criticism of the purely negative advice put forward by Endnotes. However, there are some important differences which are worth teasing out. Toscano approvingly quotes David Harvey:

*The proper management of constituted environments (and in this I include their long-term socialistic or ecological transformation into something completely different) may therefore require transitional political institutions, hierarchies of power relations, and systems of governance that could well be anathema to both ecologists and socialists alike.*

Harvey's fallacy here is in moving from the (true) premise that a revolutionary movement inherits the old world and not a blank slate, to the unwarranted conclusion that 'proper management' means holding our noses and putting up with hierarchies and governance a lot like the old world for an unspecified transition period. If this sounds familiar, it's because this has been the core leftist-managerialist trope at least since the Second International (1889-1916). Workers! Listen to your betters! The orders are for your own good!

At the core of this trope is a deep distrust of workers' self-organisation, and a reflexive belief that the solution to complexity is hierarchical

command. David Harvey has made this argument explicitly with regards to nuclear power and air traffic control. Harvey's arguments rely heavily on straw men ('what if the air traffic controllers all had an endless consensus meeting while you were on a plane!!'), and are persuasively rebutted here.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, a response to Toscano by Jasper Bernes in *Endnotes* offers a very different objection to self-management.<sup>23</sup> The problem is not that workers are incompetent compared to technocrats, but rather that workers are only too capable. That would mean self-managing an infrastructure structurally hostile to their needs:

*For workers to seize the commanding heights offered by logistics — to seize, in other words, the control panel of the global factory — would mean for them to manage a system that is constitutively hostile to them and their needs, to oversee a system in which extreme wage differentials are built into the very infrastructure.*

The Endnotes piece offers a persuasive argument that taking over the logistics infrastructure is not desirable (or desired by the workers in question) — its purpose is to exploit wage differentials between core and peripheral zones — and probably not even possible — since logistical networks have been designed precisely to bypass disruptions such as strikes, occupations or natural disasters, seizure of any node would just see it cut off from the logistical network.<sup>24</sup> If you seize a just-in-time warehouse, you've seized an empty warehouse. "Capital attempts to route around these disturbances by building resilience and 'fault tolerance' into its financial, logistical and extractive systems", as a piece by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson puts it.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "I wouldn't want my anarchist friends to be in charge of a nuclear power station": David Harvey, anarchism, and tightly-coupled systems <http://libcom.org/library/i-wouldnt-want-my-anarchist-friends-be-charge-nuclear-power-station-david-harvey-anarchi>

<sup>23</sup> Jasper Bernes, *Logistics, counterlogistics and the communist prospect*, *Endnotes* 3.

<sup>24</sup> But see this piece by Ashok Kumar for Novara, which argues that "large suppliers have expanded horizontally across the supply chain to include warehousing, logistics and even retail. This development has led to the emergence of quasi-supplier monopolization, leading to greater value capture at the bottom of the supply chain (...) It is now extremely costly for companies such as Adidas and Nike to cut-and-run from large-scale suppliers such as Pou Chen." 5 Reasons the Strike in China is Terrifying! (to Transnational Capitalism) by Ashok Kumar (February 2015) <http://wire.novaramedia.com/2014/04/5-reasons-the-strike-in-china-is-terrifying-to-transnational-capitalism/>

<sup>25</sup> Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Nielson, *Extraction, logistics, finance: global crisis and the politics of operations*, Radical Philosophy. This piece compliments the Endnotes one and is

The disagreement here seems to centre on treating 'logistics' as a unitary whole (in philosophical terms, a 'totality'). The question is then posed as 'can we take it over, and should we?'. It is only in the final paragraph of the Endnotes piece that a solution to this impasse is hinted, though scarcely elaborated:

*This would be a process of inventory, taking stock of things we encounter in our immediate environs, that does not imagine mastery from the standpoint of the global totality, **but rather a process of bricolage** from the standpoint of partisan fractions who know they will have to fight from particular, embattled locations, and win their battles successively rather than all at once. None of this means setting up a blueprint for the conduct of struggles, a transitional program. Rather, it means producing the knowledge which the experience of past struggles has already demanded and which future struggles will likely find helpful.*

### Repurposing as bricolage

It is this notion of repurposing as bricolage that we wish to elaborate, as it seems to unify the localised mutual aid of disaster communities with the global problematic of disaster communisation. The term was introduced into social theory by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962, and developed by, amongst others, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari:

*Bricolage ( ...) the possession of a stock of materials that or of rules of thumb that are fairly extensive and at the same time limited; the ability to rearrange fragments continually in new and different patterns or configurations.*

Deleuze and Guattari, with their psychoanalytic hats on, are here concerned with elaborating schizophrenic cognition: the ceaseless connection and reconnection of seemingly unrelated words, concepts, objects. The translators' note to the quoted passage offers a more useful and plainly stated definition: "bricolage: (...) The art of making do with what is at hand." This is precisely the logic of disaster communism.

Toscano is therefore right to insist that "what use can be drawn from the dead labours which crowd the earth's crust in a world no longer

worth reading alongside it. The conclusion, proposing a 'counter-operations' echoes Endnotes' advocacy of 'counter-logistics'. The former arguably offers a richer concept in stressing not just cognitive mapping for the purpose of disruption, but also the generation of struggles, alliances, and subjectivities throughout the global logistical-extractive network.



dominated by value proves to be a much more radical question" than simply disrupting the logistical network of capital. But he's wrong to consequently endorse hierarchical 'proper management' as a necessary 'transitional' measure. The examples of disaster communities in Part 1 of this article amply illustrate this point: 'proper (hierarchical) management' pales in comparison to the efficacy of self-organisation.

This efficacy is premised on a pragmatic and improvised repurposing of whatever is to hand: bricolage. This in turn presupposes that logistics — and by extension, the existing infrastructure in general — need not be treated as an organic whole (a totality).

*Today, the main theoretical alternative to organic totalities is what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls assemblages, wholes characterised by relations of exteriority. These relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different.*<sup>26</sup>

What does this mean in plain terms? Simply that while logistics as a whole may well be irredeemably capitalist (as Bernes/Endnotes argue), it is made up of countless components at various scales: ships, trucks and trains; ports, roads, and railways; computers, algorithms and fibre optic cables; atoms, molecules and alloys; and not to forget, human beings. Just because the current organisation of these parts is optimised to the valorisation of capital does not mean there cannot be other configurations with other optimisations. Indeed, the possible configurations are practically infinite. It doesn't matter too much whether these wholes are considered as 'totalities' or 'assemblages' so long as this potential for reconfiguration is recognised. There's no necessary reason a new configuration would need resemble logistics at all.

Most obviously, warehouses trucks and trains can be put to other uses. So can ships — and not just the obvious ones. The current volumes of world trade probably don't make sense without the exploitation of global wage differentials. But ships can serve other purposes, from moving people, to being scuttled to initiate coral reef formation, to being stripped or melted down and

remanufactured into other items altogether.<sup>27</sup> Communications infrastructure is self-evidently multipurpose, and even the stock control algorithms may have potential uses if hacked, repurposed, and placed in the public domain.

It is clearly impossible to specify in advance whether trucks will be repurposed to deliver food to the hungry, retrofitted with electric motors, stripped for parts, and/or used as barricades. Disaster communities give us ample reason to believe that local, emergent bricolage can efficiently meet human needs even under the most adverse conditions. But emphasising the nature of things as potentially reconfigurable — and stressing the sufficiency of self-organisation to reconfigure them — also informs the wider problematic of disaster communication. In this way the question is not 'to take it over or to abandon it?' considered as a whole, but how to pull it apart and repurpose its components to new ends: an ecological satisfaction of human needs and not the endless valorisation of capital.

#### **Out of the Woods collective**



*Moby the frog made of mobiles*

<sup>26</sup> Manuel De Landa, *A new philosophy of society: assemblage theory and social complexity*, Continuum, p.10-11. We agree with Mezzadra and Neilson that "We are not without sympathy for these network and assemblage approaches that insist upon tracing the multiple and shifting relations that compose any social entity or form. But we are wary when such approaches are marshalled in ways that deny analytical validity to the category of capital."

<sup>27</sup> For example, a TV show recently attempted to upcycle an entire Airbus A320.