Anti-Capital Projects

November 2009

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No Capital Projects but the End of Capital

18 November 2009.

The University of California is occupied. It is occupied as is the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and the Technical Institute of Graz; as were the New School, Faculty of Humanities in Zagreb and the Athens Polytechnic. These are not the first; they will not be the last. Neither is this a student movement; echoing the factory occupations of Argentina and Chicago, immigrant workers occupy forty buildings in Paris, including the Centre Pompidou. There is still life inside capital's museum.

We send our first greetings to each of these groups, in solidarity. We stand with everybody who finds themselves in a building today because they have chosen to be, because they have liberated it from its supposed owners — whether for the hint of freedom's true taste, or out of desperate social and political necessity.

This declaration and this action begin with contempt for those who would use their powers to cordon off education, cordon off our shared world, those who would build "opportunity" on the backs of others who must inevitably be exploited. This is why it begins here in this building with its Capital Projects, its Real Estate Services, its obscenely named Office of Sustainability — it begins in the corridors of accumulation, the core of the logic that privileges buildings over people. But it also begins with love for those who would refuse such enclosures, who are committed to the deed rather than the petition, who are committed to *deprivatization* as an act. This antagonism cannot be negotiated out of existence. We make no demands but the most basic one: that our collective life shall admit no owner.

Whoever has watched the disease of privatization, precaritization, and financialization spread through the University of California will not fail to recognize it as the plague of neoliberalism insinuating itself into every corner of the globe, every minute of our lives. In the most recent revelation, we have discovered the obscene student fee increases are being used not for education but as collateral for credit operations and building projects. This is the Regents' will. If bonds aren't repaid, the fees — that is, our days and years of work, extending into an empty future — must be used for repayment.

There is a grotesque irony to this. Student fees are being securitized and repackaged exactly like the toxic assets that triggered the latest economic collapse. Four years ago it was subprime mortgages; now it is "subprime education," as Ananya Roy says. The very strategies and schemes that bankrupted millions of lives, and that showed the bankruptcy of the economic sphere — it is to these that the university has turned for its salvation, *even after such strategies failed spectacularly*. The Regents reveal themselves not simply to be dishonest, venal, and indifferent; they are too stupid to learn the most basic lessons of recent history. Or perhaps this is

their idea of solidarity: that all members of the university community (save them, of course) must join the nation and the world in its immiseration, must be battered equally by a nightmare economy built on real human lives. We say to them: if you summon forth such solidarity, do not be surprised when its power escapes you.

The arriving freshman is treated as a mortgage, and the fees are climbing. She is a future revenue stream, and the bills are growing. She is security for a debt she never chose, and the cost is staggering. Her works and days are already promised away to raise up buildings that may contribute nothing to her education, and that she may not be allowed to use — buildings in which others will work for less than a living wage, at peril of no wage at all. This is the truth of the lives of students, the lives of workers (often one and the same). This is the truth of the relation between them and the buildings of the university, in the eyes of the Regents and the Office of the President.

No building will be safe from occupation while this is the case. No capital project but the project to end capital. We call for further occupations, to pry our buildings and our lives from its grip. We call for a different university, and a different society in which this university is embedded. We call for a different relation between lives and buildings. We do so freely. *We are the power.*

Anti-Capital Projects: Questions & Answers

Why Occupation?

Why occupation? Why barricades? Why would an emancipatory movement, one which seeks to unchain people from debt and compulsory labor, chain the doors of a building? Why would a group of people who deplore a university increasingly barricaded against would-be entrants itself erect barricades? This is the paradox: the space of UC Berkeley, open at multiple points, traversed by flows of students and teachers and workers, is open in appearance only. At root, as a social form, it is closed: closed to the majority of young people in this country by merit of the logic of class and race and citizenship; closed to the underpaid workers who enter only to clean the floors or serve meals in the dining commons; closed, as politics, to those who question its exclusions or answer with more than idle protest.

To occupy a building, to lock it down against the police, is therefore to subtract ourselves, as much as possible, from the protocols and rules and property relations which govern us, which determine who goes where, and when, and how. To close it down means to open it up — to annul its administration by a cruel and indifferent set of powers, in order that those of us inside (and those who join us) can

determine, freely and of our own volition, how and for whom it is to be used. *The university is already occupied — occupied by capital and the state and its autocratic regime of "emergency powers."* Of course, taking over a building is simply the first step, since our real target is not this or that edifice but a system of social relations. If possible, once this space has been fully emancipated, once we successfully defend ourselves against the police and administrators who themselves defend, mercilessly, the inegalitarian protocols of the university, the rule of the budget and its calculated exclusions, then we can open the doors to all who wish to join us, we can come and go freely and let others take our place in determining how the space is used. But we stand no chance of doing so under police watch, having sat down in the building with the doors open, ready to get dragged out five or six hours or a day later. Once our numbers are sufficient to hold a space indefinitely, then we can dispense with locks.

Our goal is straightforward: to broadcast from this space the simple truth that, *yes, it is possible* to take what was never yours, *yes, it is possible* for workers to take over their workplaces in the face of mass layoffs; for communities where two-thirds of the houses stand empty, foreclosed by banks swollen with government largesse, to take over those houses and give them to all who need a place to live. It is not just possible; as the current arrangement of things becomes evermore incapable of providing for us, it is necessary. We are guided by a simple maxim: *omnia sunt communia*, everything belongs to everybody, as a famous heretic once said. This is the only property of things which we respect.

If possible, we will use this space as a staging ground for the generalization of this principle, here and elsewhere, a staging ground for the occupation of another building, and another, and another, for the continuation of the strike and its extension beyond the university. Then we can decide not *what we want* but *what we will do*. If we fail this time, if we fall short, so be it. The call will remain.

Why Now?

It is true that the upcoming vote at the Regents meeting — an almost certain ratification of the 32% fee increase proposed by Mark Yudof and the UC Office of the President — is merely the latest in a long litany of insults and injuries. But it is also the moment where the truth of the UC is undeniable, where its ostensible difference from the violence of the larger society vanishes. The hijacking of student fee money for construction bonds tells, in capsule form, the larger story of our enchainment to debt: credit card and mortgage debt, student loans we will spend our lifetime paying off.

We want students to see this increase for what it is: a form of exploitation, a pay cut from future wages at a time when widespread unemployment already puts

those wages in jeopardy. Let's be honest: aside from all its decorations, university study is a form of job training. We pay now in order to attain a better wage in the future. It is *an investment*. But the crisis of the university and the crisis of employment means that, for many, the amount they pay for a degree will far exceed the benefits accrued. We could, at the very least, conclude that it is *a bad investment*.

But stepping back for a minute, what would it mean to restore the public university to its former glory as an engine of class mobility, as a sound investment in the future? It would mean the restoration of a system which, while ensuring that some individuals, here and there, ascend the rungs, also ensures that the rungs themselves remain immovable. The best we can hope for is that *different people will get fucked next time*. There is no escape from this fact. The university can't be made accessible to all without the absolute devaluation of a university degree. To save the university means to save poverty, pure and simple. *It means to save a system in which some people study and some people clean the floors…* The same goes for the entirety of the education system — there is no way to reduce the inequality in K-12 education without a total transformation of society. The schools are designed to produce this inequality. If they were equally funded and equally administered and we still lived in a class society, then the education received there would be meaningless as a claim on future livelihood. *There has to be an underclass*. This is the truth of education. And it is the one thing we are supposed to never learn in school, the one thing which, despite all the gestures of solidarity, divides the campus student movement from the most exploited university workers.

This is why we must seize these spaces — spaces that were never ours — and put them to new uses. If there is any value to the university it is its centrality as a point of transmission, an instrument of contagion, in which struggle is broadcast, amplified, and communicated to the society at large. If we achieve this or that reform along the way — save wages and salaries, lower fees — this will make us happy. We understand how meaningful such achievements are for the people who work and study here. But we also understand how meaningless they are for the society at large. Sometimes saving the university is a stop on the way to destroying it. There is no insoluble contradiction, then, between us and the larger movement. We are one face of it.

Why No Demands?

First, because anything we might win now would be too insignificant. Countless times past student struggles have worked months and years — striking and occupying buildings and mobilizing thousands upon thousands of people — only to win back half of what they had already lost, a half that was again taken away one or two years later. But in any case, we are as yet far too small to win anything on a

scale remotely close to the mildest of demands — a reduction or freeze of student fees, an end to the layoffs and furloughs. Even these demands would mean only a return to the status quo of last year or the year before — inadequate by any but the most cowardly measure. If we set our horizons higher — free education, a maximum salary differential of, for instance, 3 or 5, a university managed by faculty and students and workers — then we must realize, immediately, that nothing short of full-scale insurrection could ever achieve this. And if we were strong enough to bring the existing order tumbling down around us, why would we stop short and settle for the foregoing list?

The process of negotiation — the settlement of demands — is a dangerous one for a movement. It often signals its death. We have no illusions about this. We understand that, if we were to become powerful enough, and if we remained steadfast in our refusal of all negotiation or settlement, someone, some group, would step in and begin negotiating for us. There is no avoiding that. Once we become a threat, then the bargaining will begin. If the first or second set of demands seems a worthy terminus, then we have a piece of advice. Become a threat first. You just might win something. But you'll never become a threat by determining to fight over the crumbs.

The whole theory of demands as it currently exists seems to rest upon a fundamental misconception. The demand is never really addressed to the existing powers. They can't hear us — everyone knows that. And, in any case, they've never responded to petitions or requests, only force. The real addressee of the demand is on our side, not theirs. A demand defines those who utter it; it sets the limits of the struggle, determining who is and who is not in solidarity with a given fight. And such demands are, invariably, bound to exclude some party or group. We recognize, of course, that they can be useful in this respect — useful as a means to constitute and unify body in struggle, but this body can only be partial, fragmentary, divided from further support. Some groups attempt to get around this problem by making their demands an eclectic laundry-list, but such solutions always end in absurdity. This is why we make no demands. Because we want to be in solidarity with all who are oppressed and exploited. We will not say who they are in advance. They will define themselves by rising up and standing with us.

Why This Building?

Well, it's perfect, isn't it? As the UC levies students with ever-steeper fees and drives workers further into poverty in order to continue with its inglorious expansion — football stadiums, high-tech research centers, new administrative buildings, $1.35 billion in new construction during a supposed crisis — we can see no better target than one of the nerve centers of this strategy of accumulation, one of the

routing points of this logic which privileges buildings over people. *Capital Projects* indeed. Even if the university is not, in a strict sense, profit-seeking like a capitalist corporation, the leveraged transformation of ever-greater levels of personal debt into new buildings, the congealment of our living activity into dead matter designed to react back upon us, to become the newest labyrinth of our unfreedom, is nothing less than a little blazon of the *project of capital* itself: capital which is nothing if it is not growth, expansion, multiplication, investment, and which continues along this path without the slightest regard for human needs. This is no less true of the UC, which will grow and build at any cost. Any growth is good growth, as the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* tells us. Gross Domestic Product knows no qualities. A pile of guns is the same, to it, as a pile of anti-malarial drugs. It is a system which *must grow or die*, which requires more and more resources and energy, more and more workers, regardless of what this work is doing. This is why no patchwork of reforms and technology and consumer morality could ever address the growing ecological crisis — a crisis, at base, of a system which knows no limits. And so we take our stand here, at the Office of Sustainability, Real Estate Services, Capital Projects. We will not create more of what people do not need. Not today. Here, in this building which coordinates the acquisition of property and the optimization of real estate assets, we refuse to be subordinate to the logic of accumulation. And we call upon all of those in solidarity with us to take over other spaces on campus, in their communities, to take over their workplaces, to refuse the rule of things, the rule of dead matter. It is easy enough. Countless buildings lie ready for the taking. We can, all together, chant *Whose university? Our university!* And we can really mean it.

The Neoliberalization Of Higher Education: What's Race Got To Do With It?

As the California population has grown more ethnically diverse, the privatization of the public sphere has been sold to the electorate through a seemingly endless parade of racist bogeymen: immigration, affirmative action, bilingual education.

For children of immigrant parents, for immigrants themselves, for the first to attend college in their families regardless of their ethnicity, skyrocketing fees and cuts occur at a time when we can least afford it. We have been told that the real responsibility for the current crisis of education lies elsewhere: in Sacramento, in a larger economic crisis not caused by Wall Street speculators and bailed out investment banks but somehow by minority communities themselves.

We are told to divert our attention toward our legislators and away from the extreme bureaucratic waste and disastrous internal budgetary priorities of university administrators. We are told to write yet another petition by leaders who simply ignored the minimal demands of the 9/24 walkout and numerous alternative budget proposals.

Senior administrators, many with deep ties to the same Sacramento politicians they have asked students to petition, have refused to submit to an independent audit to prove that student fees are not in fact being used to finance construction projects instead of basic instruction and services. In other words, we have been told to "share the pain" but never the power to democratically decide how public funds are spent and by whom.

Last year UC paid $4.2 billion dollars to its management, or 21% of the systemwide budget, as opposed to the 8% devoted to instruction. Senior executives regularly cite "market competitiveness" as a justification for excessive compensation packages which are not determined by any "market" but by insulated boards which possess the extraordinary power to raise their own salaries.

The internal budgetary priorities of California public universities thus mirror those of the state. In California alone corporate profits have risen 580% since 2001 while for the past 30 years "strategic deficits" and regressive taxation have been used to "starve the beast" of spending on basic public needs like food, affordable housing, education and health care. According to the logic of privatization, none of these public goods should exist.

While fee raises and cuts have disproportionately affected communities of color, we have once again been told that the responsibility for this lies elsewhere. Demands for racial justice and equality are assumed to be incidental or "niche" issues which do not affect "the average student" or "the average worker."

For decades the UC administration has attempted to isolate the most "diverse" constituency on campus: the service workers. As some of the most courageous and outspoken critics of current university policies, these workers have the most to lose and continue to demonstrate the astonishing power of collective action.

Routinely used as exhibits of victimization and vulnerability, students of color are often viewed as passive and frightened objects rather than radical political subjects who have a crucial role to play in transforming a broken institution.

Shared culture is no guarantee of political solidarity. And so we stand together with all those who are working to build a democratic mass movement powerful enough to challenge the twisted logic of privatization which makes structural racism routine. Neither students nor workers can accomplish this task alone. Current UC leaders are counting on the fact that we remain isolated from each other.

As formerly insulated middle-class communities face economic upheaval and "fear of falling," they experience what most underrepresented working class com-

munities of color have confronted for quite some time: systematic underinvestment, hyperexploitation and structural barriers to equality written off as individual failure or cultural pathology.

We encourage everyone to join the public conversation about the future of the movement and to take immediate action. We also call on all students, workers, teachers, parents, and their organizations across the state to massively mobilize and organize for a general strike in education beginning on March 4, 2010.

The Necrosocial

Occupied UC Berkeley, 18 November 2009.

> "Being president of the University of California is like being manager of a cemetery: there are many people under you, but no one is listening."
> — UC President Mark Yudof
>
> "Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor."
> — Karl Marx
>
> "Politics is death that lives a human life."
> — Achille Mbembe

Yes, very much a cemetery. Only here there are no dirges, no prayers, only the repeated testing of our threshold for anxiety, humiliation, and debt. The classroom just like the workplace just like the university just like the state just like the economy manages our social death, translating what we once knew from high school, from work, from our family life into academic parlance, into acceptable forms of social conflict.

Who knew that behind so much civic life (electoral campaigns, student body representatives, bureaucratic administrators, public relations officials, Peace and Conflict Studies, *ad nauseam*) was so much social death? What postures we maintain to claim representation, what limits we assume, what desires we dismiss?

And in this moment of crisis they ask us to twist ourselves in a way that they can hear. Petitions to Sacramento, phone calls to Congressmen — even the chancellor patronizingly congratulates our September 24th student strike, shaping the meaning and the force of the movement as a movement against the policies of Sacramento. He expands his institutional authority to encompass the movement. When students begin to hold libraries over night, beginning to take our first baby step as an autonomous movement he reins us in by serendipitously announcing

library money. He manages movement, he kills movement by funneling it into the electoral process. He manages our social death. He looks forward to these battles on his terrain, to eulogize a proposition, to win this or that — he and his look forward to exhausting us.

He and his look forward to a reproduction of the logic of representative governance, the release valve of the university plunges us into an abyss where ideas are wisps of ether — that is, meaning is ripped from action. Let's talk about the fight endlessly, but always only in their managed form: to perpetually deliberate, the endless fleshing-out-of — when we push the boundaries of this form they are quick to reconfigure themselves to contain us: the chancellor's congratulations, the reopening of the libraries, the managed general assembly — there is no fight against the administration here, only its own extension.

Each day passes in this way, the administration on the look out to shape student discourse — it happens without pause, we don't notice nor do we care to. It becomes banal, thoughtless. So much so that we see we are accumulating days: one semester, two, how close to being this or that, how far? This accumulation is our shared history. This accumulation — every once in a while interrupted, violated by a riot, a wild protest, unforgettable fucking, the overwhelming joy of love, life shattering heartbreak — is a muted, but desirous life. A dead but restless and desirous life.

The university steals and homogenizes our time yes, our bank accounts also, but it also steals and homogenizes meaning. As much as capital is invested in building a killing apparatus abroad, an incarceration apparatus in California, it is equally invested here in an apparatus for managing social death. Social death is, of course, simply the power source, the generator, of *civic life* with its talk of reform, responsibility, unity. A 'life,' then, which serves merely as the public relations mechanism for death: its garrulous slogans of freedom and democracy designed to obscure the shit and decay in which our feet are planted. Yes, the university is a graveyard, but it is also a factory: a factory of meaning which produces civic life and at the same time produces social death. A factory which produces the illusion that meaning and reality can be separated; which everywhere reproduces the empty reactionary behavior of students based on the values of life (identity), liberty (electoral politics), and happiness (private property). Everywhere the same whimsical ideas of the future. *Everywhere democracy*. Everywhere discourse to shape our desires and distress in a way acceptable to the electoral state, discourse designed to make our very moments here together into a set of legible and fruitless demands.

Totally managed death. A machine for administering death, for the proliferation of technologies of death. As elsewhere, things rule. Dead objects rule. In this sense, it matters little what face one puts on the university — whether Yudof or some other lackey. These are merely the personifications of the rule of the dead, the pools of investments, the buildings, the flows of materials into and out of the

physical space of the university — each one the product of some exploitation — which seek to absorb more of our work, more tuition, more energy. The university is a machine which wants to grow, to accumulate, to expand, to absorb more and more of the living into its peculiar and perverse machinery: high-tech research centers, new stadiums and office complexes. And at this critical juncture the only way it can continue to grow is by more intense exploitation, higher tuition, austerity measures for the departments that fail to pass the test of 'relevancy.'

But the 'irrelevant' departments also have their place. With their 'pure' motives of knowledge for its own sake, they perpetuate the blind inertia of meaning ostensibly detached from its social context. As the university cultivates its cozy relationship with capital, war and power, these discourses and research programs play their own role, co-opting and containing radical potential. And so we attend lecture after lecture about how 'discourse' produces 'subjects,' ignoring the most obvious fact that we ourselves are produced by this discourse about discourse which leaves us believing that it is only words which matter, words about words which matter. The university gladly permits the precautionary lectures on biopower; on the production of race and gender; on the reification and the fetishization of commodities. A taste of the poison serves well to inoculate us against any confrontational radicalism. And all the while power weaves the invisible nets which contain and neutralize all thought and action, that bind revolution inside books, lecture halls.

There is no need to speak truth to power when power already speaks the truth. The university is a graveyard — *así es.* The graveyard of liberal good intentions, of meritocracy, opportunity, equality, democracy. Here the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. We graft our flesh, our labor, our debt to the skeletons of this or that social cliché. In seminars and lectures and essays, we pay tribute to the university's ghosts, the ghosts of all those it has excluded — the immiserated, the incarcerated, the just-plain-fucked. They are summoned forth and banished by a few well-meaning phrases and research programs, given their book titles, their citations. This is our gothic — we are so morbidly aware, we are so practiced at stomaching horror that the horror is thoughtless.

In this graveyard our actions will never touch, will never become the conduits of a movement, if we remain permanently barricaded within prescribed identity categories — our force will be dependent on the limited spaces of recognition built between us. Here we are at odds with one another socially, each of us: students, faculty, staff, homebums, activists, police, chancellors, administrators, bureaucrats, investors, politicians, faculty/ staff/ homebums/ activists/ police/ chancellors/ administrators/ bureaucrats/ investors/ politicians-to-be. That is, we are students, or students of color, or queer students of color, or faculty, or Philosophy Faculty, or Gender and Women Studies faculty, or we are custodians, or we are shift leaders — each with our own office, place, time, and given meaning. We form teams, clubs,

fraternities, majors, departments, schools, unions, ideologies, identities, and subcultures — and thankfully each group gets its own designated burial plot. Who doesn't participate in this graveyard?

In the university we prostrate ourselves before a value of separation, which in reality translates to a value of domination. We spend money and energy trying to convince ourselves we're brighter than everyone else. Somehow, we think, we possess some trait that means we deserve more than everyone else. We have measured ourselves and we have measured others. It should never feel terrible ordering others around, right? It should never feel terrible to diagnose people as an expert, manage them as a bureaucrat, test them as a professor, extract value from them their capital as a businessman. It should feel good, gratifying, completing. It is our private wet dream for the future; everywhere, in everyone this same dream of domination. After all, we are intelligent, studious, young. *We worked hard to be here, we deserve this.*

We are convinced, owned, broken. We know their values better than they do: *life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.* This triumvirate of sacred values are ours of course, and in this moment of practiced theater — the fight between the university and its own students — we have used their words on their stages: *Save public education!*

When those values are violated by the very institutions which are created to protect them, the veneer fades, the tired set collapses: and we call it injustice, we get *indignant.* We demand justice *from them, for them* to adhere to their values. What many have learned again and again is that these institutions don't care for those values, not at all, not for all. *And we are only beginning to understand that those values are not even our own.*

The values create popular images and ideals (healthcare, democracy, equality, happiness, individuality, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, public education) while they mean in practice the selling of commodified identities, the state's monopoly on violence, the expansion of markets and capital accumulation, the rule of property, the rule of exclusions based on race, gender, class, and domination and humiliation in general. They sell the practice through the image. We're taught we'll live the images once we accept the practice.

In this crisis the Chancellors and Presidents, the Regents and the British Petroleums, the politicians and the managers, they all intend to be true to their values and capitalize on the university economically and socially — which is to say, *nothing has changed*, it is only an escalation, a provocation. Their most recent attempt to reorganize wealth and capital is called a crisis so that we are more willing to accept their new terms as well as *what was always dead* in the university, to see just how dead we are willing to play, how non-existent, how compliant, how desirous.

Every institution has of course our best interest in mind, so much so that we're willing to pay, to enter debt contracts, to strike a submissive pose in the classroom, in the lab, in the seminar, in the dorm, and eventually or simultaneously in the workplace to pay back those debts. Each bulging institutional value longing to become more than its sentiment through us, each of our empty gestures of feigned-anxiety to appear under pressure, or of cool-ambivalence to appear accustomed to horror, every moment of student life, is the management of our consent to social death.

Social death is our banal acceptance of an institution's meaning for our own lack of meaning. It's the positions we thoughtlessly enact. It's the particular nature of being owned.

Social rupture is the initial divorce between the owners and the owned.

A social movement is a function of war. War contains the ability to create a new frame, to build a new tension for the agents at play, new dynamics in the battles both for the meaning and the material. When we move without a return to their tired meaning, to their tired configurations of the material, we are engaging in war.

It is November 2009. For an end to the values of social death we need ruptures and self-propelled, unmanaged movements of wild bodies. We need, we desire occupations. We are an antagonistic dead.

Talk to your friends, take over rooms, take over as many of these dead buildings. We will find one another.

> "Life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts, which as such acquire a political meaning precisely only through a decision."
> — Giorgio Agamben

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