THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT?
TOWARD A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE FUTURE

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“As you watch the world crumble, try taking your Armageddon with this sprinkling of irony: Over the last three decades, business has got virtually everything it wanted, and its doomsday scenario from the 1970s has come true because of it.”
—Thomas Frank

One reason I began the title of this collection “The End of the World…’ is because I’m not filled with optimism about the prospects for the kinds of deep changes I desire in the ways we live and organize our lives. And even beyond my desires, there are also simple questions of survival at stake. The risk of nuclear annihilation is still real and the world’s owners don’t seem particularly moved to rid ourselves of it. One former Secretary of Defense (William Perry) and a former Assistant Secretary of Defense (Graham Allison) have both estimated the chance of a “nuclear attack…at more than 50% over the next ten years.” In 1995, Russia “mistook a meteorological rocket launched from Norway for an American submarine launched ballistic missile, and the Russian ’nuclear football,’ used to authorize a nuclear
attack, was opened in front of President Boris Yeltsin.” Luckily he didn’t use it—this time.

As well, we’re living in what looks like the beginning (or perhaps the middle) of an environmental collapse. In a capitalist system based on constant growth and rooted in the fossil fuel economy, we may find ourselves dealing with this collapse instead of finding some way to avoid it—particularly if capitalism is allowed to continue to run rampant, commodifying everything in its path, and reducing the entire nonhuman world to instruments for human use and profit. This year, we have already seen a summer arctic ice cap almost completely decimated. Scientists suggest that, in just twenty years, the ice cap will be gone.

The science behind global warming is so overwhelmingly accepted that even business press magazines like The Economist readily admit, “there is no serious doubt about the basic cause of the warming. It is, in the Arctic as everywhere, the result of an increase in heat-trapping atmospheric gases, mainly carbon dioxide released when fossil fuels are burned.” In the same article, the authors go on to warn us that “it is hard to exaggerate how dramatic this is. Perhaps not since the felling of America’s vast forests in the 19th century, or possibly since the razing of China’s and western Europe’s great forests a thousand years before that, has the world seen such a spectacular environmental change. The consequences for Arctic ecosystems will be swingeing.”

But never fear—this calamity could also bring about profits:

In the long run the unfrozen north could cause devastation. But, paradoxically, in the meantime no Arctic species will profit from it as much as the one causing it: humans. Disappearing sea ice may spell the end of the last Eskimo cultures, but hardly anyone lives in an igloo these days anyway. And the great melt is going to make a lot of people rich…. The Arctic is already a big source of minerals, including zinc in Alaska, gold in Canada, iron in Sweden and nickel in Russia, and there is plenty more to mine… The Arctic also has oil and gas, probably lots.

Spoken like a true economist! Given the challenges we face, given the sociopathic obsession of capitalists with profit, given their virtual
ownership of our governing institutions, and given our continued failure to constitute any real and substantial threat to their suicidal culture, it’s easy to find hope a rare commodity indeed.

Nonetheless, there is a distinct difference between discussions about *probability* and discussions of *possibility*. It seems much more **probable** that capitalists will either bring us to ruin through some nuclear disaster or through environmental devastation, than that humanity will wage a successful war on capitalism’s institutions of profit-making-at-all-costs and end the separation of humanity into competing nations based on glorified lines drawn on maps. I’m not attempting to motivate anyone here to act out of “catastrophism.” But I *am* attempting an honest assessment of the very real risks we’re dealing with at present.

However, there are also **possibilities**—a myriad of possibilities in a historical moment such as ours. And, despite a feeling of pessimism, there are still plenty of reasons to support anticapitalist efforts and engage in those efforts ourselves. Life is, after all, a process of meaning-making. It is an attempt to make our own sense of the senseless, to find and make meaning in the face of absurdity. And no matter how hopeless we might feel, the forms of life that are available and coherent under capitalism are fundamentally alienating, violent, boring, monstrous, and unethical. I don’t want to live in a world where some work to live, while others live just by virtue of owning things. And I don’t want to live in a world where people are reduced to work, commodities, and other objects. Further, I don’t want to live in a world where we take this boring and alienated state of affairs and attempt to manage it ourselves or run it democratically. This means that there is a lot to be done and it also means recognizing the possibilities we’re given and acting on them—because to do so is to *make meaning*.

So, there are issues of basic survival that are arguments in themselves for dismantling our prevailing systems of domination. There are ethical reasons and, perhaps more fundamentally, reasons of making life *meaningful* in an absurd and meaningless world. But Marx was right all those years ago, in saying that there are also issues of material interest (which are also wrapped up in issues of ethics, survival, and meaning-making). Do you want to live in a world designed in such a way that you can be turned into a commodity, rented, exploited, surveilled, ruled over, expropriated, and then beaten and tossed in a cage for resisting these designations? I don’t.
If we can agree on that, then that leaves which lessons we might take from the latest round of crisis, ruling class attacks on workers, and movements against. I can’t distill all of them and have absolutely no interest in providing a political “line” or “program” (which I’m not sure are ever all that useful). I think the chapters in this collection speak for themselves, so I won’t summarize them—readers are encouraged to take what’s useful from those contributions, and reject and critique what isn’t so useful. But I do want to close with a few modest lessons that I think have been made obvious by contemporary anticapitalist practice and its limits, all of which, too, should be scrutinized, critiqued, and perhaps, in places, rejected.

**THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF “PUBLIC” SPACE**

A central aspect of many of the movements against has been the occupation and use of “public” space—where we can meet, where groups can make decisions, where we can plot together, and where we can experiment in some limited fashion in social relations of our own choosing. This has obviously been a powerful tactic that was easily generalized, evidenced by the fact that square occupations were central tactics in the movements against all over the world and involved millions of people.

The strengths of this particular tactic are pretty obvious. For one, it provides a physical space for people to meet up and for unaffiliated folks to “plug in.” Secondly, it provides a space for confrontation with the state (when they attempt eviction) and these confrontations can provide valuable lessons in and of themselves. As Matthew Adams explains in his chapter, it’s “notable how many liberals became radicalized after experiencing a police beating”—never mind the experience of actually temporarily winning in these confrontations. This also calls attention to just how un-public these spaces are. Rather, “public” spaces are owned, operated, and controlled by the state (in the case of Zuccotti Park, it was a “privately owned public space”) and when that control is made obvious, it allows us to imagine what a real “commons” might entail—something we simply do not have in existing society.

The main weakness of public square occupation is, perhaps ironically, also that it is public. That is, our daily lives typically put us in
apartments/homes, workplaces, schools, all sorts of bureaucratic offices—for hours and hours at a time. Although many of us spend a bit of time in public squares, the bulk of our daily lives are spent elsewhere. And what is the purpose of struggle if not to change daily life? What might occupation look like as a tactic applied to the spaces where we spend most of our daily lives? What kinds of possibilities might that provide? This isn’t a new insight either—note, for example, the many offshoots of the various movements to occupy public squares. Shane Burley’s analysis of Take Back the Land and Occupy Our Homes and Jorell A. Meléndez Badillo’s examination of los rescatadores de terrenos in Puerto Rico both provide examples of people taking living space. Or consider Marianne LeNabat’s cataloguing of student organizing in New York City, catalyzed by Occupy. These examples point to ways to extend the “movement of squares” into daily life.

**GIVING UP ACTIVISM**

**DEVELOPING ANTAGONISMS AROUND SO-CALLED PUBLIC SPACES, WHILE LEAVING DAILY LIFE UNTouched, SHARE SOME OF THE PROBLEMS THAT ANDREW X DETAILED IN HIS PIECE, “GIVE UP ACTIVISM,” FOR THE ECO-RADICAL MAGAZINE, *DO OR DIE*?** Written shortly after the Battle of Seattle, this piece was a reflection on the successes of various activist mobilizations and a critical assessment of their failure to launch any substantive threat to capitalism. At that point in time, it seemed we had some traction—after all, we’d successfully stopped the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference from taking place, effectively shutting down one of the most powerful capitalist organizations in the world with street theater, some minor property destruction, and a whole lot of bodies in the streets. This seemed like a good time to step back and start taking critical stock of ourselves.

What lies at the center of Andrew X’s critique of activism is an examination of what he calls “the activist mentality”:

> By “an activist mentality” what I mean is that people think of themselves primarily as activists and as belonging to some wider community of activists. The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career. In the same way some people will identify with their job as a
doctor or a teacher, and instead of it being something they just happen to be doing, it becomes an essential part of their self-image. The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change.\textsuperscript{10}

Activists, then, are people who see themselves as specialists in “social change” or “social justice” or some other, more or less, meaningless abstraction. There really isn’t a theory behind activism—it exists for its own sake—but the locus for “social change” (or whatever) comes from activists. It is a politics of specialists, by specialists, for specialists, and typically relies on strategies of recruitment. Activist politics typically take place in public spaces, where the specialists meet to “do actions” or protest in order to “speak truth to power” and so on, tendencies Abbey Volcano critiques in her chapter on gender and sexuality in the movements against.

The alternative is locating antagonisms in our daily lives. Instead of going “out there” to “do actions” with fellow specialists, we might intervene in our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods—places where we actually spend most of our daily lives. We might find co-conspirators among people outside of tiny fringe ideological groups, and the movers of history might be ordinary people who don’t need to be led by activists, political organizations, or other self-appointed representatives. We might give up activism.\textsuperscript{11}

**WHAT IS IT WE WANT?**

Part of the problem with vague terms like “positive social change,” “social justice,” or their many variants, are that they’re more or less devoid of any real meaning. The same might be true at present of socialism—take a look around the world, particularly in Europe, at what the various socialist parties are doing. If they are, indeed, socialist, then a capitalist is certainly not required in order to put into place lethal austerity measures, and then set the police to beating
anyone who complains too loudly. But it might make sense to have some larger conversations about what we want, how we articulate that, and the dangers in a) being indecipherable; and b) becoming pandering populists.

Mark Bray analyzes this problem in his treatment of the way Occupy Wall Street articulated the decline of American Empire and the kinds of alternatives they put forward. Antonis Vradis describes how meaning itself seems lost in Greece, while Yesenia Barragán shows how the ruling class has successfully recuperated the discourse of sustainability and the “green” movement.

But what concerns me most is when we seem to mistake a certain kind of form for a certain kind of content. This is common when antagonists call for things like a “consensus society,” “radical democracy,” or “self-management.” Calls for consensus or democracy—without considerable elaboration—elevate the form of decision-making over the content of the decisions made. The same is true of self-management or calls for democratizing production or work. The rhetoric, although easy on the populist ear, can often lead listeners to believe that all we are asking for is to take what exists and run it ourselves. But I have absolutely no interest in “self-managing” my job. I would imagine most workers feel that way—it’s not as if liberation just entails making democratic decisions about the miserable and boring workplaces we’re assigned to, in order to make a life under capitalism. These sorts of calls require, at the least, elaboration. Better, perhaps, would be different terminology altogether.

Indeed, much of the liberatory rhetoric we inherited from the past is centered on the means of production. A decent society would certainly produce things, but in the industrial juggernaut in which we currently live, much of what we produce is useless shit we’re conditioned to want by an advertising industry that manipulates our desires. Surely a liberatory project wouldn’t just mean seizing society as it exists and self-managing it. It would also mean destroying much of the means of production we have produced—those which serve little purpose except to perpetuate a society organized around commodity and spectacle. This means rethinking productivism (a mentality obsessed with production and output) and capitalist technology and technique. Seizing the proverbial “factory” may provide less radical potential than ridding ourselves of it.
MAKING THE END OF THE WORLD THE END WE WANT

I made the case earlier that we live in a time of a myriad of possibilities, but not all of those possibilities are all that pleasant. We have seen widespread resistance to global capitalism and the state in the age of austerity. People all over the world have started taking to the streets to register their discontent—in some cases, this has involved overthrowing governments (though replacing them with new ones); in others, it has involved confrontations with power and privilege; and in some rare cases, it has involved some minor concessions from the ruling class. But most of the stories about contemporary uprisings, if we’re going to be honest, are stories of loss. Luckily for all of us, these stories last decades, if not centuries, and the current wave of revolt can be situated in a long history of struggle and self-activity.

But we live in a time where our rulers have developed a spying apparatus so great that they can record our interests, our networks, and our desires to degrees that were previously unimaginable. Their methods for manipulating those interests, networks, and desires have also become more sophisticated and complete. And in many cases, this has created a situation where the dispossessed come to support and participate in their own exploitation, oppression, and confinement.

This makes the act of revolutionizing society all the more complicated. In order to do so, we need more snapshots, more collections of stories and analyses from social antagonists. We need criticism and self-criticism in our process of altering our institutions and our selves. So, an honest engagement with possibilities for the future is one wrapped up in our present condition. Under austerity and under the eyes of economists and politicians, social life is something that happens to us. Under those eyes, history is seen as a progression of political and economic processes affecting anyone without power, rather than processes of struggle that produce the present and have the capability of creating a different future. And although things might look bleak—the probabilities can be overwhelming, weighed against the many possibilities—an understanding of the future that does not give in to debilitating catastrophism and contains some degree of confidence that ordinary people can do extraordinary things presents us with a contemporary situation ripe with prospects. The trick, perhaps, might be learning to articulate our desires, without accepting
anything less than the conscious creation of our daily lives, and the destruction of those things that create social misery.

ENDNOTES


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


10 Ibid.