

draw X addresses the problem.... The 'role' of the activist is not simply 'self-imposed;' it is also socially-imposed. Capitalist society produces activists the way it produces other specialists, the way it produces, for example, that close cousin of the activist, the intellectual." Thus, while Kellstadt states that we need to operate within the tension between the subjective and the objective, her/his critique often falls back significantly into an overly objectivist position. While committing "role-suicide" won't make the social position of "the activist" disappear, there are always openings to different types of self-organization. We may not be able to kill the role, but we are not stuck in it either; and, if we are to rid ourselves of capitalism we need to struggle in a different way and not celebrate the role of the activist.

Certainly "giving up activism" isn't revolution in itself; it won't make the social roles that are conditioned by our historical circumstances disappear. Nor will it allow us to "truly appropriate an authentic self." Struggling to organize ourselves in a qualitatively different manner, however, can open the potential of insurrection to overthrow capitalism and the state. For such a potential to open, hope lies not in cheer-leading, but in a much more critical and reflexive understanding of our practices and forms of organization.

These and other writings available via the internet at the Insurrection, Organization, Activism and Anti-Politics webpage:

[http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/ioaa/ioaa.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/ioaa.html)

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# *A Critical Discussion on the role of Activism*



*A Collection of Essays*

**Give Up Activism**

**Andrew X**

**The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism**

**J. Kellstadt**

**"Activism" and "Anarcho-Purism"**

**sasha k.**



# GIVE UP ACTIVISM

By Andrew X

One problem apparent in the June 18th day of action was the adoption of an activist mentality. This problem became particularly obvious with June 18th precisely because the people involved in organizing it and the people involved on the day tried to push beyond these limitations. This piece is no criticism of anyone involved--rather an attempt to inspire some thought on the challenges that confront us if we are really serious in our intention of doing away with the capitalist mode of production.

## Experts

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.

Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour--it is a specialised separate task. The division of labour is the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour. The division of labour operates, for example, in medicine or education--instead of healing and bringing up kids being common knowledge and tasks that everyone has a hand in, this knowledge becomes the specialised property of doctors and teachers--experts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts jealously guard and mystify the skills they have. This keeps people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchical class society.

A division of labour implies that one person takes on a role on behalf of many others who relinquish this responsibility. A separation of tasks means that other people will grow your food and make your clothes and supply your electricity while you get on with achieving social

Movement" ([http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/foaa/pracideo.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/foaa/pracideo.html)) from Undercurrent (<http://www.anti-capital.net/undercurrent/>). I will not repeat all their arguments here, but hope to push the discussion forward.

In "Give Up Activism," Andrew X critiques activism as a specialized role separate from society and leading to an inadequate practice. Andrew X argues, therefore, that the practice of activism must be given up. "[Attacking capitalism will require not only a quantitative change (more actions, more activists) but a qualitative one (we need to discover some more effective form of operating)."] This is the problem at the heart of Dixon's argument: it relies solely on getting more people involved, more people organizing and organized, but lacks the reflection necessary to begin to move us towards a qualitatively different practice. If anything, Dixon's arguments reinforce and celebrate the specialized role of the activist as one who stands outside and above the masses--the famous real people--to be organized. But, to use Dixon's words, "we can do better." As Andrew X states, "The 'activist' is a specialist or an expert in social change--yet the harder we cling to this role and notion of what we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire. A real revolution will involve the breaking out of all preconceived roles and the destruction of all specialism--the reclamation of our lives. The seizing control over our own destinies which is the act of revolution will involve the creation of new selves and new forms of interaction and community." Andrew X, however, suggests that breaking out of the role of the activist is no easy task, especially during low points in the struggle against capitalism, but we must "...constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations and constraints."

In "The Necessity and Impossibility of 'Anti-Activism'," J. Kellstadt is supportive but critical of Andrew X's discussion, thus the title of the article. While Kellstadt also sees the limits of activism, s/he argues that it is also impossible to simply give up activism. The most suggestive aspect of Kellstadt's article is that it both notes the subjective elements of choice involved in being an activist and the objective conditions of society that limit our ability to simply give up activism: "I think that a rather high degree of ambivalence and the ability to live the tension of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions is central to the problems of formulating an 'anti-activism' and 'anti-politics.'" In short, I argue that we must embrace simultaneously the necessity and the impossibility of 'giving up activism.'" Kellstadt critiques Andrew X for being too subjective (that we could simply 'give up activism'): "...the collective human dynamics by which social groups and professions (cops, priests, or activists) emerge out of the division of labor cannot be denied or thrown over by acts of individual will, which is the level at which An-



won't run to sign up any day soon.

That said, it is also a simple fact of language that those who want to reform the present system are called reformists. There are also many people who wish to end the rule of capital and the state but unwittingly use means that can only bring about a reform of the present system. It is, therefore, obviously important to come to a clear understanding of the results of our actions; this is what theory and critique are for, and it should not be turned into a pleasant game of compliments. Yet, as anarchists, we can work with them towards intermediate aims, while always remaining clear as to how such aims tally with our ultimate goals. There are, however, important limits-limits that are obscured when we hold only an abstract conception of social change. Working to "demand authentic control over the police" might be a small step for social change in some general sense, but ultimately it is a step backwards as it strengthens the legitimacy of the police and of imposed decision. That is of course, unless one's goal is nicer police and "democratic control over our lives"-the term 'democratic,' which we hear repeated over and over by activists these days, is another term usually left unthinkingly abstract. "Direct democratic control over our lives" might make a nice slogan, but it is vague enough for most politicians in Washington to use.

Secondly, working with those who attempt to limit my activities, my power of acting, is a combination that would not work well. Strangely, it is most often the activists who try to restrict the actions of others-one only needs to look at D.A.N.'s role in Seattle, believing that they could set rules of engagement for others. This is the ethical question always posed to anarchists; when does combining with others multiply our power to act towards our goals and when does it not? It is an important question, not one to be ignored or vilified. None of this means that there is only one way to act, but that just acting without any thought is more often than not counter productive.

Maybe the investigation of white privilege needs first to turn its gaze on the activist/organizer's role as a specialist in social change. Perhaps it is not that activists have been organizing the wrong people or around the wrong issues, as Dixon's article suggests, but that organizing people is the wrong way to bring about a truly different world. There has, however, been a discussion brewing on "activism" especially since the J18 protests. Some of the more interesting articles include Andrew X's "Give Up Activism," <[http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/foaa/guactivism.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/foaa/guactivism.html)> J. Kellstadt's "The Necessity and Impossibility of 'Anti-Activism'" <[http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/foaa/necessity.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/foaa/necessity.html)>, and "Practice and Ideology in the Direct Action

change. The activist, being an expert in social change, assumes that other people aren't doing anything to change their lives and so feels a duty or a responsibility to do it on their behalf. Activists think they are compensating for the lack of activity by others. Defining ourselves as activists means defining \*our\* actions as the ones which will bring about social change, thus disregarding the activity of thousands upon thousands of other non-activists. Activism is based on this misconception that it is only activists who do social change--whereas of course class struggle is happening all the time.

### Form and Content

The tension between the form of 'activism' in which our political activity appears and its increasingly radical content has only been growing over the last few years. The background of a lot of the people involved in June 18th is of being 'activists' who 'campaign' on an 'issue'. The political progress that has been made in the activist scene over the last few years has resulted in a situation where many people have moved beyond single issue campaigns against specific companies or developments to a rather ill-defined yet nonetheless promising anti-capitalist perspective. Yet although the content of the campaigning activity has altered, the form of activism has not. So instead of taking on Monsanto and going to their headquarters and occupying it, we have now seen beyond the single facet of capital represented by Monsanto and so developed a 'campaign' against capitalism. And where better to go and occupy than what is perceived as being the headquarters of capitalism--the City?

Our methods of operating are still the same as if we were taking on a specific corporation or development, despite the fact that capitalism is not at all the same sort of thing and the ways in which one might bring down a particular company are not at all the same as the ways in which you might bring down capitalism. For example, vigorous campaigning by animal rights activists has succeeded in wrecking both Consort dog breeders and Hillgrove Farm cat breeders. The businesses were ruined and went into receivership. Similarly the campaign waged against arch-vivisectionists Huntingdon Life Sciences succeeded in reducing their share price by 33%, but the company just about managed to survive by running a desperate PR campaign in the City to pick up prices.<sup>1</sup> Activism can very successfully accomplish bringing down a business, yet to bring down capitalism a lot more will be required than to simply extend this sort of activity to every business in every sector. Similarly with the targeting of butcher's shops by animal rights activists, the net result is probably only to aid the supermarkets in closing down all the small butcher's shops, thus assisting the process of competition and



the 'natural selection' of the marketplace. Thus activists often succeed in destroying one small business while strengthening capital overall.

A similar thing applies with anti-roads activism. Wide-scale anti-roads protests have created opportunities for a whole new sector of capitalism--security, surveillance, tunnellers, climbers, experts and consultants. We are now one 'market risk' among others to be taken into account when bidding for a roads contract. We may have actually assisted the rule of market forces, by forcing out the companies that are weakest and least able to cope. Protest-bashing consultant Amanda Webster says: "The advent of the protest movement will actually provide market advantages to those contractors who can handle it effectively."<sup>2</sup> Again activism can bring down a business or stop a road but capitalism carries merrily on, if anything stronger than before.

These things are surely an indication, if one were needed, that tackling capitalism will require not only a quantitative change (more actions, more activists) but a qualitative one (we need to discover some more effective form of operating). It seems we have very little idea of what it might actually require to bring down capitalism. As if all it needed was some sort of critical mass of activists occupying offices to be reached and then we'd have a revolution...

The form of activism has been preserved even while the content of this activity has moved beyond the form that contains it. We still think in terms of being 'activists' doing a 'campaign' on an 'issue', and because we are 'direct action' activists we will go and 'do an action' against our target. The method of campaigning against specific developments or single companies has been carried over into this new thing of taking on capitalism. We're attempting to take on capitalism and conceptualizing what we're doing in completely inappropriate terms, utilizing a method of operating appropriate to liberal reformism. So we have the bizarre spectacle of doing an action 'against capitalism'-an utterly inadequate practice.

#### Roles

The role of the 'activist' is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest--a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others. The 'activist' is a specialist or an expert in social change--yet the harder we cling to this role and notion of what we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire. A real revolution will involve the breaking out of all preconceived roles and the destruction of all specialism--the reclamation of our lives. The seizing control over our own destinies which is the act of revolution will

"self-appointed bearers of a radical standard." And the use of "self-appointed" is telling. In the activist world one needs to claim some authentic, democratic position in order to take on the role of "activist," "organizer", or "theorist." The question is, 'who do you represent?' for you can't just represent yourself. But we don't need expert, specialized "theorists," we all need to be reflexive and theoretical in our understanding of social change, not as some vague concept but as something intimately connected to our own desires for a different life. Unfortunately, it is to just such experts that Dixon turns to bolster his argument: everyone he quotes is either an "activist," "organizer," or, god forbid, "theorist"; only one of his expert witnesses is even an anarchist, yet he is still identified as a specialist--as if this were some academic paper--he is an "anarchist writer."

But who is an anarcho-purist? What is anarcho-purism? It is a term that gets thrown about quite often these days, particularly in activist circles. We should, therefore, try to make our thinking clear on this matter. An anarcho-purism is always a morality as opposed to an ethics. Morality is a statement, such as "thou shalt not," instead of a question posed in the moment. It is a set, blind standard that rules over behavior. Anarcho-purism is a morality that tries to keep anarchism pure and separate from certain tactics or from working with certain groups for the sake of purity. Dixon's use of the term "purist anarchists," however, suggests not only that anarchism shouldn't be a morality--a suggestion that I would definitely agree with--but that it shouldn't be an ethics as well. In fact, following Dixon's logic one would have to conclude that anarchism should have almost no meaning at all.

An anarchist ethics is an affirmation, an affirmation of the creativity, desire and power of the individual; it is an affirmation of the ability of individuals to come together and decide their own fate without the need of any imposed decision coming in from the outside whether in 'totalitarian' or 'democratic' form. As an ethics, it is both a way of living and a way of relating to others: how can we come together--combine--in a fashion that doesn't restrict, limit and suppress the desire, creativity and active power of each other? This ethical question is at the heart of anarchism. And it is just such a question that Dixon wipes out as he wipes anarchism clean of any content. As an ethics, anarchism recognizes that there is no escape from social life; the anarchist ethic, after all, grows out of the movement of the exploited and excluded, and it only remains vital within that movement. Living this ethic will mean that one will come into conflict with imposed social order, with hierarchy, with any archy or cracy. To live this ethic is thus not always an easy choice, we can't make it into a Snickers Bar; anyhow, no matter how drained of content anarchism becomes the masses



U.S. over the last year or so it is that more people have begun to see themselves as opposed to capitalism in its totality. Yet if we add up a bunch of single-issue campaigns we don't get an anti-capitalist movement, but a reformist movement full of contradictions and led by activists. The movement of the exploited and excluded, which is antagonistic to capitalism and the state, can't be built by welding together a bunch of single issue groups; it is a movement that grows out of our present social conditions and our desires for a different world.

However, it seems that to build a movement led by activists any tactic or goal will do, no matter how contradictory. Dixon lists a set of demands and goals of which none suggest any serious critique of capitalism and the state in their totality: they include, "fighting reactionary ballot measures," "demanding authentic public oversight of police," "building art installations," and "painting graffiti...." As Dixon states, "we all choose a variety of tools, tactics, strategies, and demands based on our circumstances and objectives." And when one's objectives remain vague enough any tool, tactic, strategy or demand will do fine; in fact, they can be "seen as complementary." They can be "seen" as such when we remain abstract and unreflective, but in reality the contradictions remain. Yet for the activist it is the spectacle of unity that is important.

If our tactics and strategies are truly to be "based on our circumstances [the capitalist social relations we are enmeshed within] and our objectives"-for anarchists, presumably, the ending of capitalism and the state, not just some general idea of social change-we should be especially critical of tools, tactics and strategies that contradict these objectives, that lead us in a different direction, or that reproduce the very thing we are trying to eliminate from society. For Dixon, however, the "critical" in his "critical hope" is a criticism of being theoretical or reflexive in our understanding. He is critical of making any distinction that might question the abstractness of his conception of social change, any distinction that might force one to make difficult decisions. While Dixon does state that a more theoretical understanding of capitalism is important, for him this seems to remain a separate project from that of organizing; thus practice and theory become two separate worlds, as if one could be done without the other.

Dixon cuts off the very type of reflexive and theoretical discussion on tactics, strategy and, above all, goals that we now need through the coupling up of the rhetoric of white privilege with charges of anarcho-purism. If you disagree with him it is probably because you are a "white, middle-class" male-and probably an anarcho-purist to boot-so you have no right to talk. Such "purist anarchists" are also critiqued as

involve the creation of new selves and new forms of interaction and community. 'Experts' in anything can only hinder this.

The Situationist International developed a stringent critique of roles and particularly the role of 'the militant'. Their criticism was mainly directed against leftist and social-democratic ideologies because that was mainly what they encountered. Although these forms of alienation still exist and are plain to be seen, in our particular milieu it is the liberal activist we encounter more often than the leftist militant. Nevertheless, they share many features in common (which of course is not surprising).

The Situationist Raoul Vaneigem defined roles like this: "Stereotypes are the dominant images of a period... The stereotype is the model of the role; the role is a model form of behavior. The repetition of an attitude creates a role." To play a role is to cultivate an appearance of the neglect of everything authentic: "we succumb to the seduction of borrowed attitudes." As role-players we dwell in inauthenticity--reducing our lives to a string of clichés--"breaking [our] day down into a series of poses chosen more or less unconsciously from the range of dominant stereotypes."<sup>3</sup> This process has been at work since the early days of the anti-roads movement. At Twyford Down after Yellow Wednesday in December '92, press and media coverage focused on the Dongas Tribe and the dreadlocked countercultural aspect of the protests. Initially this was by no means the predominant element--there was a large group of ramblers at the eviction for example.<sup>4</sup> But people attracted to Twyford by the media coverage thought every single person there had dreadlocks. The media coverage had the effect of making 'ordinary' people stay away and more dreadlocked countercultural types turned up--decreasing the diversity of the protests. More recently, a similar thing has happened in the way in which people drawn to protest sites by the coverage of Swampy they had seen on TV began to replicate in their own lives the attitudes presented by the media as characteristic of the role of the 'eco-warrior'.<sup>5</sup>

"Just as the passivity of the consumer is an active passivity, so the passivity of the spectator lies in his ability to assimilate roles and play them according to official norms. The repetition of images and stereotypes offers a set of models from which everyone is supposed to choose a role."<sup>6</sup> The role of the militant or activist is just one of these roles, and therein, despite all the revolutionary rhetoric that goes with the role, lies its ultimate conservatism.

The supposedly revolutionary activity of the activist is a dull and sterile routine--a constant repetition of a few actions with no potential for



change. Activists would probably resist change if it came because it would disrupt the easy certainties of their role and the nice little niche they've carved out for themselves. Like union bosses, activists are eternal representatives and mediators. In the same way as union leaders would be against their workers actually succeeding in their struggle because this would put them out of a job, the role of the activist is threatened by change. Indeed revolution, or even any real moves in that direction, would profoundly upset activists by depriving them of their role. If \*everyone\* is becoming revolutionary then you're not so special anymore, are you?

So why do we behave like activists? Simply because it's the easy cowards' option? It is easy to fall into playing the activist role because it fits into this society and doesn't challenge it--activism is an accepted form of dissent. Even if as activists we are doing things which are not accepted and are illegal, the form of activism itself the way it is like a job--means that it fits in with our psychology and our upbringing. It has a certain attraction precisely because it is not revolutionary.

#### We Don't Need Any More Martyrs

The key to understanding both the role of the militant and the activist is self-sacrifice--the sacrifice of the self to 'the cause' which is seen as being separate from the self. This of course has nothing to do with real revolutionary activity which is the seizing of the self. Revolutionary martyrdom goes together with the identification of some cause separate from one's own life--an action against capitalism which identifies capitalism as 'out there' in the City is fundamentally mistaken--the real power of capital is right here in our everyday lives--we re-create its power every day because capital is not a thing but a social relation between people (and hence classes) mediated by things.

Of course I am not suggesting that everyone who was involved in June 18th shares in the adoption of this role and the self-sacrifice that goes with it to an equal extent. As I said above, the problem of activism was made particularly apparent by June 18th precisely because it was an attempt to break from these roles and our normal ways of operating. Much of what is outlined here is a 'worst case scenario' of what playing the role of an activist can lead to. The extent to which we can recognize this within our own movement will give us an indication of how much work there is still to be done.

The activist makes politics dull and sterile and drives people away from it, but playing the role also fucks up the activist herself. The role of the activist creates a separation between ends and means: self-

## "Activism" and "Anarcho-Purism"

by *sasha k*

"After Seattle" (words that launched a thousand articles) there has been much talk about how to keep "building the movement." In "Rethinking Radical Activism and Building the Movement," [http://www.geocities.com/rlk\\_abacus/loaa/hope.html](http://www.geocities.com/rlk_abacus/loaa/hope.html) Chris Dixon adds his thoughts on the matter. After reading the article one is prompted to ask what of "activism" is rethought and what is the movement to be built? In fact, very little is rethought and a critical look at "activism" is entirely absent from Dixon's celebratory piece. Dixon focuses his discussion around hope, a hope that he calls "critical", unfortunately, the hope in Dixon's article is mostly self-congratulatory and contains almost no critical reflection.

The article contains two "criticisms": 1. the movement, which for Dixon started in Seattle, not in the third world, is mostly white, and 2. Dixon is critical of any theoretical reflection on the contradiction of the movement, what he calls "purist" anarchism. In linking these two criticisms together, Dixon cuts off any discussion of tactics, strategy, goals and, above all, of the role of the activist/organizer.

There has been much discussion in Europe and especially England about the role of activists within society; in the U.S., due in a large part to the anti-intellectual nature of the radical milieu, such a discussion has mostly been precluded. (Time is certainly ripe for this discussion in the U.S.) This untheoretical approach allows Dixon to talk in extremely abstract terms. The most glaring example is his use of the term "social change/transformation". In Dixon's article social change can mean anything at all: it can be change in any direction for practically any goal as long as it is progressive: more or better of something. But this abstractness is not an accidental omission; it is central to the logic of his argument, it is central to the logic of the activist mentality. The more abstract we are in our goals the more that people join our parade: it is the mentality of numbers. This is the Clintonification of anarchism--Clinton made the Democratic Party so bland and middle of the road that even some Republicans could applaud or join it and Dixon proposes doing the same for anarchism.

We need to ask what is the movement that Dixon wants to build? The movement that Dixon is so enthused about is a movement of activists, of specialists in social change, who stand above and outside of the communities they organize. And for the most part this movement is a collection of single-issue groups. If anything has been inspiring in the



ferent from the attitudes and values of the society the revolutionary wants to destroy. The militant attitude is indeed counter-revolutionary, in so far as it splits the individual into two, separating his needs, his real individual and social needs, the reasons why he cannot stand the present world, from his action, his attempt to change this world. The militant refuses to admit that he is in fact revolutionary because he needs to change his own life as well as society in general. He represses the impulse which made him turn against society. He submits to revolutionary action as if it were external to him: it is fairly easy to see the moral character of this attitude. This was already wrong and conservative in the past; today it becomes increasingly reactionary." < <http://www.skatta.demon.co.uk/eclipse/eclips01.htm> >

sacrifice means creating a division between the revolution as love and joy in the future but duty and routine now. The worldview of activism is dominated by guilt and duty because the activist is not fighting for herself but for a separate cause: "All causes are equally inhuman."<sup>7</sup>

As an activist you have to deny your own desires because your political activity is defined such that these things do not count as 'politics'. You put 'politics' in a separate box to the rest of your life--it's like a job... you do 'politics' 9-5 and then go home and do something else. Because it is in this separate box, 'politics' exists unhampered by any real-world practical considerations of effectiveness. The activist feels obliged to keep plugging away at the same old routine unthinkingly, unable to stop or consider, the main thing being that the activist is kept busy and assuages her guilt by banging her head against a brick wall if necessary.

Part of being revolutionary might be knowing when to stop and wait. It might be important to know how and when to strike for maximum effectiveness and also how and when NOT to strike. Activists have this 'We must do something NOW!' attitude that seems fuelled by guilt. This is completely untactical.

The self-sacrifice of the militant or the activist is mirrored in their power over others as an expert--like a religion there is a kind of hierarchy of suffering and self-righteousness. The activist assumes power over others by virtue of her greater degree of suffering ('non-hierarchical' activist groups in fact form a 'dictatorship of the most committed'). The activist uses moral coercion and guilt to wield power over others less experienced in the theology of suffering. Their subordination of themselves goes hand in hand with their subordination of others--all enslaved to 'the cause'. Self-sacrificing politicians stunt their own lives and their own will to live--this generates a bitterness and an antipathy to life which is then turned outwards to wither everything else. They are 'great despisers of life... the partisans of absolute self-sacrifice... their lives twisted by their monstrous asceticism.'<sup>8</sup> We can see this in our own movement, for example on site, in the antagonism between the desire to sit around and have a good time versus the guilt-tripping build/fortify/barricade work ethic and in the sometimes excessive passion with which 'lunchouts' are denounced. The self-sacrificing martyr is offended and outraged when she sees others that are not sacrificing themselves. Like when the 'honest worker' attacks the scrounger or the layabout with such vitriol, we know it is actually because she hates her job and the martyrdom she has made of her life and therefore hates to see anyone escape this fate, hates to see anyone enjoying themselves while she is suffering--she must drag everyone down into the muck with her--an equality of self-sacrifice.



In the old religious cosmology, the successful martyr went to heaven. In the modern worldview, successful martyrs can look forwards to going down in history. The greatest self-sacrifice, the greatest success in creating a role (or even better, in devising a whole new one for people to emulate--e.g. the eco-warrior) wins a reward in history--the bourgeois heaven.

The old left was quite open in its call for heroic sacrifice: "Sacrifice yourselves joyfully, brothers and sisters! For the Cause, for the Estrabished Order, for the Party, for Unity, for Meat and Potatoes!"<sup>9</sup> But these days it is much more veiled: Vaneigem accuses "young leftist radicals" of "entering] the service of a Cause--the 'best' of all Causes. The time they have for creative activity they squander on handing out leaflets, putting up posters, demonstrating or heckling local politicians. They become militants, fetishizing action because others are doing their thinking for them."<sup>10</sup>

This resounds with us--particularly the thing about the fetishizing of action--in left groups the militants are left free to engage in endless busywork because the group leader or guru has the 'theory' down pat, which is just accepted and lapped up--the 'party line'. With direct action activists it's slightly different--action is fetishized, but more out of an aversion to any theory whatsoever.

Although it is present, that element of the activist role which relies on self-sacrifice and duty was not so significant in June 18th. What is more of an issue for us is the feeling of separateness from 'ordinary people' that activism implies. People identify with some weird sub-culture or clique as being 'us' as opposed to the 'them' of everyone else in the world.

#### Isolation

The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different. People tend to think of their own first person plural (who are you referring to when you say 'we?') as referring to some community of activists, rather than a class. For example, for some time now in the activist milieu it has been popular to argue for 'no more single issues' and for the importance of 'making links'. However, many people's conception of what this involved was to 'make links' with \*other activists\* and other campaign groups. June 18th demonstrated this quite well, the whole idea being to get all the representatives of all the various different causes or issues in one place at one time, voluntarily relegating our-

[www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/foaa/guactivism.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/foaa/guactivism.html) <guactivism.html> or <[http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18\\_reflections.html](http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_reflections.html)>

2 This was addressed, however, in a good article in another publication out of Brighton, *undercurrent* #8, in their article "Practice and Ideology in the Direct Action Movement." Available at the *undercurrent* website: <<http://www.anti-capital.net/undercurrent>> or on the KKA website: <[http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/foaa/pracideo.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/foaa/pracideo.html)>

3 Unfortunately Price's anti-activist impulses lead him to shy away from acknowledging the necessity of his own theoretical efforts. At the end of his impressive article, he advances a proposal for networks of small groups organized around attention to "everyday" struggles, workers inquiries, and local newsletters incorporating the CLR James-style "full fountain pen" approach. But *Collective Action Notes* itself as a publication and a project - stands distinctly outside the scope of Price's proposals. CAN's self-consciously "theoretical" and communicates mostly with various "militants" rather than with "ordinary workers" (whatever those might be). In other words, Price's proposals make no mention of this important aspect of *his own actual, concrete practice*. Why not? To be consistent, Price ought either to cease publishing CAN or else recast his proposals to make room for the theoretical work which, after all, he's already doing. (We certainly hope he chooses the latter option.)

4 Let no one venture here on that silly-sinister etymology which equates "totality" with "totalitarian." Certainly I reject the idea that one's individual point of view can yield up some kind of absolute truth to which others must bow down. I think that we need to acknowledge that our efforts towards "totality" will necessarily be *radically incomplete approximations* which need to be complemented and contrasted by many others' theoretical approximations of "totality." But neither does that absolve us of the responsibility to make the effort. A certain amount of skepticism about the empirical status of the "big picture" is healthy, but may be taken to debilitating extremes. Ultimately, the real "totality" is the class itself, constituted in its practical movement rather than in a "program" or panoptic "world-view."

5 Davu! himself, in the Foreword to the original edition of *The Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, still affirms the necessity of this task: "In spite of its shortcomings, the Situationist International has shown - among other things - what Marx had explained more than 100 years ago: It is not only important to understand the historical movement and act accordingly, but also to be something dif-



autonomy ends up by creating an elite of those who know *how to make themselves autonomous*."

My own reading of Dauv's position is to seize upon his assertion, quoted above, that within our present alienated society "positive utopia" can remain revolutionary "as demand, as tension." I take this to mean that the project of "living differently" is not simply to be discarded, tossed aside as simply impossible until "after the revolution," nor that we must simply resign ourselves to pursuing the "end of alienation" by "alienated means."<sup>12</sup> Thus we should not simply throw up our hands and unquestioningly fulfill the conventional role of activist or militant, nor should we swallow the whole pill and become leading cadre in the Workers Revolutionary Communist Vanguard League of Bolshevik-Leninist Internationalists.

Rather, one ought to continue to try to live differently, to function differently and in "non-alienated" and non-hierarchical ways in one's practice. But one should do this "as (and in) tension," all the while accepting the *functional impossibility of doing this successfully in the present*, of doing this in any but the most tentative and prefigurative rather than fully realized or "non-alienated" - way.

To put it another way: I think there is much to be learned by hurling ourselves, again and again, against the bars of our cage. It is in our *necessary failures* as much as in our partial, modest, and always fragile successes that we learn how this society has crippled us, what it strips from us in terms of dignity and fulfilled desire. But we shouldn't pretend that we're liberated when we're not, which could only turn us into a priggish aristocracy of the "authentic" and "un-alienated."

The fact is that even the folks in the various groups which are trying to develop an "anti-activist" and "anti-political" approach to anticapitalist revolution--from KK/Collectivities in Faridabad, India to the Insubordinate collective in Baltimore--are *simultaneously* workers and "not-workers," workers and "activists," even workers and - horrors! - *intellectuals*. And the most dangerous thing for people in that position to do is to lose sight of their fundamentally *cleft* nature, their "dual" social existence, and pretend that they're "just" workers. Because then they will truly have no way to keep tabs on their "other" side and its inherently elitist potentialities. And then they'll begin to erect a new layer of social elites--this time under the rubric of the "anti-activist," of the "authentic," the "unalienated," the "real" proles. And all the old crap will come flooding back again.

1 The text of "Give Up Activism" can be found on the web at: <<http://>

selves to the ghetto of good causes.

Similarly, the various networking forums that have recently sprung up around the country--the Rebel Alliance in Brighton, NASA in Nottingham, Riotous Assembly in Manchester, the London Underground etc. have a similar goal--to get all the activist groups in the area talking to each other. I'm not knocking this--it is an essential pre-requisite for any further action, but it should be recognized for the extremely limited form of 'making links' that it is. It is also interesting in that what the groups attending these meetings have in common is that they are activist groups--what they are actually concerned with seems to be a secondary consideration.

It is not enough merely to seek to link together all the activists in the world, neither is it enough to seek to transform more people into activists. Contrary to what some people may think, we will not be any closer to a revolution if lots and lots of people become activists. Some people seem to have the strange idea that what is needed is for everyone to be somehow persuaded into becoming activists like us and then we'll have a revolution. Vaneigem says: "Revolution is made everyday despite, and in opposition to, the specialists of revolution."<sup>11</sup>

The militant or activist is a specialist in social change or revolution. The specialist recruits others to her own tiny area of specialism in order to increase her own power and thus dispel the realization of her own powerlessness. "The specialist... enrolls himself in order to enroll others."<sup>12</sup> Like a pyramid selling scheme, the hierarchy is self-replicating--you are recruited and in order not to be at the bottom of the pyramid, you have to recruit more people to be under you, who then do exactly the same. The reproduction of the alienated society of roles is accomplished through specialists.

Jacques Camatte in his essay 'On Organization' (1969)<sup>13</sup> makes the astute point that political groupings often end up as "gangs" defining themselves by exclusion--the group member's first loyalty becomes to the group rather than to the struggle. His critique applies especially to the myriad of Left sects and groupuscules at which it was directed but it applies also to a lesser extent to the activist mentality.

The political group or party substitutes itself for the proletariat and its own survival and reproduction become paramount--revolutionary activity becomes synonymous with 'building the party' and recruiting members. The group takes itself to have a unique grasp on truth and everyone outside the group is treated like an idiot in need of education by this vanguard. Instead of an equal debate between comrades we get



instead the separation of theory and propaganda, where the group has its own theory, which is almost kept secret in the belief that the inherently less mentally able punters must be lured in the organization with some strategy of populism before the politics are sprung on them by surprise. This dishonest method of dealing with those outside of the group is similar to a religious cult--they will never tell you upfront what they are about.

We can see here some similarities with activism, in the way that the activist milieu acts like a leftist sect. Activism as a whole has some of the characteristics of a "gang". Activist gangs can often end up being cross-class alliances, including all sorts of liberal reformists because they too are 'activists'. People think of themselves primarily as activists and their primary loyalty becomes to the community of activists and not to the struggle as such. The "gang" is illusory community, distracting us from creating a wider community of resistance. The essence of Camatte's critique is an attack on the creation of an interior/exterior division between the group and the class. We come to think of ourselves as being activists and therefore as being separate from and having different interests from the mass of working class people.

Our activity should be the immediate expression of a real struggle, not the affirmation of the separateness and distinctness of a particular group. In Marxist groups the possession of 'theory' is the all-important thing determining power--it's different in the activist milieu, but not that different--the possession of the relevant 'social capital'--knowledge, experience, contacts, equipment etc. is the primary thing determining power.

Activism reproduces the structure of this society in its operations:

"When the rebel begins to believe that he is fighting for a higher good, the authoritarian principle gets a flip."<sup>14</sup> This is no trivial matter, but is at the basis of capitalist social relations. Capital is a social relation between people mediated by things--the basic principle of alienation is that we live our lives in the service of some \*thing\* that we ourselves have created. If we reproduce this structure in the name of politics that declares itself anti-capitalist, we have lost before we have begun. You cannot fight alienation by alienated means.

#### A Modest Proposal

This is a modest proposal that we should develop ways of operating that are adequate to our radical ideas. This task will not be easy and the writer of this short piece has no clearer insight into how we should go about this than anyone else. I am not arguing that June 18th should

national,' is particularly sensitive to the hidden elitism in the SI's critique of the militant. In *The Revolution in Everyday Life*, writes Dauv', Vaneigem has produced "a treatise on how to live differently in the present world while setting forth what social relations could be. It is a handbook to violating the logic of the market and the wage system wherever one can get away with it." But, Dauv' argues, this perspective becomes a form of moralism:

*Vaneigem's book was a difficult work to produce because it cannot be lived, threatened with falling on the one hand into a marginal possibilism and on the other into an imperative which is unrealizable and thus moral. Either one huddles in the crevices of bourgeois society, or one ceaselessly opposes to it a different life which is impotent because only the revolution can make it a reality. The SI put the worst of itself into its worst text. Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses. The positive utopia is revolutionary as demand, as tension, because it cannot be realized within this society: it becomes derisory when one tries to live it today.*

Instead of revolutionary critique, argues Dauv', Vaneigem slips into moralism, and "like every morality, Vaneigem's position was untenable and had to explode on contact with reality."

Dauv' goes on to spell out both the causes and the consequences of this moralism. The former he locates in the narrowing of the SI's perspective to the realm of appearance and consumption, at the expense of production. In its theorizing of the revolutionary movement, says Dauv', "the SI does indeed start out from the real conditions of existence, but reduces them to intersubjective relations. This is the point of view of the subject trying to rediscover itself, not a view which encompasses both subject and object." I would argue that this is precisely the problem with Andrew X's critique of the activist, which likewise adopts only "the point of view of the subject trying to rediscover itself" rather than considering the subject in the context of its complex, objective social mediations.

According to Dauv', the consequence of this exclusively subjective point of view was that the Situationist International became "an affirmation of individuals to the point of elitism." "Against militant moralism," writes Dauv', "the SI extolled another morality: that of the autonomy of individuals in the social group and in the revolutionary group. Now, only an activity integrated into a social movement permits autonomy through an effective practice. Otherwise the requirement of



alienation of the individual's "private life" under capitalism:

*"Private" life is defined primarily in a formal context. It is, to be sure, engendered by the social relations created by private appropriation, but its essential form is determined by the expression of those relations. Universal, incontestable but constantly contested, this form makes appropriation a right belonging to everyone and from which everyone is excluded, a right one can obtain only by renouncing it. As long as it fails to break free of the context imprisoning it (a break that is called revolution), the most authentic experience can be grasped, expressed and communicated only by way of an inversion through which its fundamental contradiction is dissimulated. In other words, if a positive project fails to sustain a praxis of radically overthrowing the conditions of life -- which are nothing other than the conditions of private appropriation -- it does not have the slightest chance of escaping being taken over by the negativity that reigns over the expression of social relationships: it is co-opted like an inverted mirror image.*

I wish in particular to underline the importance of that last sentence: short of overthrowing "the conditions of private appropriation" themselves, all attempts at "authentic" and "un-alienated" existence will become simply another part of the spectacle. One's "positive project" - to stay with Vaneigem's terms - *must* "sustain a praxis of radically overthrowing the conditions of life," or else it won't stand "the slightest chance" of escaping alienation. The "break" that allows one to truly appropriate an authentic self is thus not "giving up activism," it is instead "a break that is called revolution" -- which is necessarily the *collective* project of the oppressed. Activism can't be "given up" by the individual; it must be *superseded* in the collective process of overthrowing capitalism and creating communism.

At its best, the situationists' version of "anti-activism" was originally integrated into a holistic perspective of total revolution. Vaneigem moved further and further away from this integrated perspective and more towards something resembling lifestyle or individualist anarchism (hence his works, severed from their original context, become holy writ for a publication such as *Anarchy! Journal of Desire Armed*).

#### Criticizing the Critique

It is for this reason that a few of the SI's more perceptive critics have seen the critique of the militant as one of the weaker aspects of the SI's overall theory. Gilles Dauv[il], in his "Critique of the Situationist Inter-

have been abandoned or attacked, indeed it was a valiant attempt to get beyond our limitations and to create something better than what we have at present. However, in its attempts to break with antique and formulaic ways of doing things it has made clear the ties that still bind us to the past. The criticisms of activism that I have expressed above do not all apply to June 18th. However there is a certain paradigm of activism which at its worst includes all that I have outlined above and June 18th shared in this paradigm to a certain extent. To exactly what extent is for you to decide.

Activism is a form partly forced upon us by weakness. Like the joint action taken by Reclaim the Streets and the Liverpool dockers--we find ourselves in times in which radical politics is often the product of mutual weakness and isolation. If this is the case, it may not even be within our power to break out of the role of activists. It may be that in times of a downturn in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution become marginalized and come to be seen (and to see themselves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in struggle when we won't be weirdos and freaks any more but will seem simply to be stating what is on everybody's minds. However, to work to escalate the struggle it will be necessary to break with the role of activists to whatever extent is possible--to constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations and constraints.

Historically, those movements that have come the closest to destabilizing or removing or going beyond capitalism have not at all taken the form of activism. Activism is essentially a political form and a method of operating suited to liberal reformism that is being pushed beyond its own limits and used for revolutionary purposes. The activist role in itself must be problematic for those who desire social revolution.

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#### Notes

1 Squaring up to the Square Mile: A Rough Guide to the City of London (J18 Publications (UK), 1999) p. 8

2 see 'Direct Action: Six Years Down the Road' in Do or Die No. 7, p. 3

3 Raoul Vaneigem - The Revolution of Everyday Life, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Left Bank Books/Rebel Press, 1994) - first published 1967, pp. 131-3



- 4 see 'The Day they Drove Twyford Down' in Do or Die No. 1, p. 11
- 5 see 'Personality Politics: The Spectacularisation of Fairmile' in Do or Die No. 7, p. 35
- 6 Op. Cit. 2, p. 128
- 7 Op. Cit. 2, p. 107
- 8 Op. Cit. 2, p. 109
- 9 Op. Cit. 2, p. 108
- 10 Op. Cit. 2, p. 109
- 11 Op. Cit. 2, p. III
- 12 Op. Cit. 2, p. 143
- 13 Jacques Camatte - 'On Organization' (1969) in This World We Must Leave and Other Essays (New York, Autonomedia, 1995)
- 14 Op. Cit. 2, p. 110

If this were a strictly individual "vic" of the author's, there wouldn't be much cause for worry. But the anti-theoretical (or at least a-theoretical) bias of many anti-activists goes hand in hand with this sentimentalization of "real, popular life," a misplaced belief that, somewhere on the other side of a great divide, "real" workers are somehow leading less alienated and more authentic lives.

Andrew X's argument relies on this dichotomy between "real" or "ordinary" people on one side and "alienated" activists on the other. He writes, "Our activity should be the immediate expression of a real struggle, not the affirmation of separateness and distinctness of a particular group." Citing Raoul Vaneigem, Andrew X says that "as role-players we dwell in inauthenticity." Further on he adapts one of the situationists' central ideas: "You cannot fight alienation with alienated means."

Much of this does indeed come from situationist critique of the self-sacrificing militant. Placed in its proper context, there is much of value in this aspect of the situationists' work. It usefully criticizes the residual christianity of much of the left, the martyr syndrome that guilts others into becoming passive followers. The critique includes a refusal of the self-denying work-ethic, and it attempts to formulate (with necessarily limited success) some kind of resistance to the specialization, separation, and alienation that are endemic to spectacular capitalism.

Certainly no one engaged in trying to bring down capitalism should be doing so because they "should," because it is their "duty"; nor should they be doing so "for others." They should engage in this fight first and foremost *for themselves*, for their own radical pleasure and as an outlet for their love and rage.

But there are two related points about this aspect of situationist theory that I would like to make. The first is that this was part of a *total* (and *totalizing*) critique and practice, one which respected the unity of theory and practice and the necessity of theory as well as (and in constant interaction with) practice.<sup>(4)</sup> The second is that, when removed from this context which I am calling "total critique," the Vaneigem refusal of the role of the alienated militant can become both puerile and elitist (which is indeed what happened with Vaneigem himself).

Let me draw the reader's attention to something Vaneigem himself wrote in "Basic Banalities (1)" (*Situationist International* #7, 1962), several years before the publication of *Revolution in Everyday Life*. In this passage ("thesis" #12), Vaneigem addresses the essential falseness and



cial process that creates them in the first place, rather than simply urging individual activists to "give up" their role. Cops and priests, activists and intellectuals--doing away with all of these social groups will be the collective work of oppressed people acting in their own interests. "Activists" can help or hinder this process in varying degrees (and let's not overestimate their ability to do either), but what they cannot do is simply wish or will themselves out of existence as a social category.

The "role" of the activist is not simply "self-imposed"; it is also socially-imposed. Capitalist society produces activists the way it produces other specialists, the way it produces, for example, that close cousin of the activist, the intellectual. The efforts of some individual activists to commit "role-suicide" will not put a significant dent in the overall existence of activists as a social group. Andrew X, throughout his argument, returns again and again to the central insight that capital is a social relation. Well, as someone once said, you can't blow up a social relation. And if you can't blow it up, you certainly can't wish or will it away. Activists, like intellectuals and other specialists, will not disappear from society until the division of labor itself disappears.

I'm not arguing that we should all just sit tight and wait until "after the revolution." Such "objectivism" would be nothing more than the flip-side of Andrew X's subjectivism. It would foster only fatalism and passivity, waiting for the revolutionary dawn for any chance of human dignity and putting up with all kinds of alienating crap until that time (which would then be sure never to arrive).

Instead, I think we should try to get beyond both a simplistic "subjectivism" and a simplistic "objectivism." What's needed, I think, is to keep both the subjective and the objective poles of this problem in mind and sustain the contradiction (i.e., live the contradiction in all its painful ambiguity and antagonism) throughout one's theoretical and practical activity rather than one-sidedly suppressing either of its extremes.

#### Nobody Here But Us Workers?

I think that Andrew X's voluntarist approach to abolishing activism (individually "wishing/willing" a social relation out of existence) points towards a false contrast between "inauthentic" activism and some imagined form of "authenticity"--a fantasy of non-alienation--which has an incipiently elitist dimension. It represents, in fact, a "return of the repressed" of the elitism that Andrew X tried to exorcise in the first place.

## The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism

By J. Kellstadt

*For my part, I do not believe there is 'one solution' to the social problems, but a thousand different and changing solutions in the same way as social existence is different and varied in time and space.*

--Errico Malatesta, 1924

*Revolution is the communizing of society, but this process is more than just the sum of direct actions.*

--Gilles Dauv', 1973

This article responds to issues raised in "Give Up Activism," a critique of the [j18](http://www.infoshop.org/june18.html) <http://www.infoshop.org/june18.html> protests in England by Andrew X. "Give Up Activism" [guactivism.html](http://www.guaactivism.html) has been getting some attention lately on this side of the Atlantic: the editor of *Red & Black Notes* brought it to my attention some time after it had been posted on the Mid-Atlantic Infoshop's webpage of [j18 critiques](http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_critiques) [http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18\\_critiques](http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_critiques), and it was also reprinted in the latest *Collective Action Notes*.<sup>1</sup>

I think there are two main reasons for the article's timeliness. The first is the sense of "diminishing returns" which have followed the sequence of "post-Seattle" protests, from A16 in DC to the Republican and Democratic national conventions in Philly and LA. There's a feeling afoot that what was new and striking about Seattle might now be growing a little old and stale--not to mention thoroughly anticipated by the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state. The second reason, a little closer to home, is the formation of the NorthEastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC), which appears to be operating in the more or less conventional mode of direct-action activism. Will efforts such as NEFAC be able to offer something useful to those in struggle, or do such efforts lead only to the dead-end of "activism for activism's sake" and the spectacle of militancy?

Andrew X offers "Give Up Activism," as, in his words, "an attempt to inspire some thought on the challenges that confront us if we are really serious in our intention of doing away with the capitalist mode of production." It is an attempt to open the debate rather than to be conclusive, and it's in the same spirit that I offer these remarks. No doubt



some readers will find my position frustratingly ambivalent, but I hope that this is not simply the result of confused thinking on my part. Rather, I think that a rather high degree of ambivalence and the ability to *live the tension* of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions is central to the problems of formulating an "anti-activism" and "anti-politics." In short, I argue that we must embrace simultaneously *the necessity and the impossibility* of "giving up activism."

### The Limits of Activism

There is much of value in Andrew X's critique, particularly the points raised in the "form and content" section. In this section the author points out the limits of conventional activism when applied outside of the context of single-issue campaigns. Such activism, writes Andrew X, is totally useless for the task of bringing down capitalism as a whole. "Activism can very successfully accomplish bringing down a business, yet to bring down capitalism a lot more will be required than to simply extend this sort of activity to every business in every sector." In other words, capitalism won't be brought down by the mere quantitative addition of "actions" (or the number of activists); instead, a *qualitative* transformation of some kind is required.

Andrew X also shows how even the purported "successes" of single-issue activist campaigns are open to recuperation by capitalism, for example by helping the bosses figure out better ways to stifle opposition or by assisting "the rule of market forces" in driving weaker companies out of business. The section's conclusion merits quotation in full:

*The form of activism has been preserved even while the content of this activity has moved beyond the form that contains it. We still think in terms of being 'activists' doing a 'campaign' on an 'issue', and because we are 'direct action' activists we will go and 'do an action' against our target. The method of campaigning against specific developments or single companies has been carried over into this new thing of taking on capitalism. We're attempting to take on capitalism and conceptualizing what we're doing in completely inappropriate terms, utilizing a method of operating appropriate to liberal reformism. So we have the bizarre spectacle of 'doing an action' against capitalism - an utterly inadequate practice.*

In the main, however, "Give Up Activism" is taken up with a critique of what the author labels "the activist mentality," and it's here that the argument's greatest weaknesses are to be found. Activism, I would argue, has both a "subjective" and an "objective" dimension, and both

insecure they'll sound like elitists or petty-bourgeois academics if they engage in theoretical reflection and debate. And, anyway, "ordinary" workers don't do theory, right?

At least that's how activists think about workers. But Marx was pleased that the first French translation of *Capital* was going to appear in serial form because he thought this would make it more affordable for "ordinary" workers, who would then be more likely to read it. Obviously Marx didn't think it was beyond their capacities, nor that its contents were irrelevant to their everyday struggles.

Perhaps Andrew X's inability to identify theory as the real weakness of the activist movement measures the extent to which the author of "Give Up Activism" remains himself locked in the "activist mentality." This timidity about theory is a hidden carry-over from activism which still afflicts many of those who are trying to break with activism.

The kind of theory I have in mind can be found, for example, in various examples of "class composition" analysis, including the works of Sergio Bologna, the earlier Tony Negri, and the Midnight Notes collective, Loren Goldner's *The Remaking of the U.S. Working Class*, or, more recently, Kolinko's investigations of call centers in Germany and Curtis Price's article, "Fragile Prosperity? Fragile Social Peace? Notes on the U.S." (the last two published in the latest *Collective Action Notes*).<sup>[3]</sup>

One of the first examples of "class composition" theory may have been Frederick Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1845.

### You Can't Blow Up a Social Relation

These analyses are a far cry from the economic determinism of much Marxist "theory." It's from the perspective of this kind of class-composition analysis that I speak of the "historical necessity" which conditions the existence of social groups. This necessity is, ultimately, *humanly-generated*, but it appears in an alienated form because it is hijacked by capitalist commodity production. We are not the slaves of impersonal forces--the "economy" or whatever. But nevertheless, the collective human dynamic by which social groups and professions (cops, priests, or activists) emerge out of the division of labor cannot be denied or thrown over by acts of *individual* will, which is the level at which Andrew X addresses the problem.

I fully believe in the ability of people collectively to change the conditions of their lives in the most radical ways. But to abolish specific social groups such as activists requires a serious theoretical as well as practical attempt to come to grips with and intervene in the *whole so-*



ganizations, but as individual workers.

X-Ray Specs

However, there's also the question of just what sorts of things constitute "struggle." From an "activist" perspective, no doubt such things as bigger and rowdier "carnivals against capital" and ever more militant and dramatic public demonstrations signify evidence of what Andrew X calls "a general upsurge of struggle." But this perspective overlooks a whole layer of more "everyday" forms of resistance - from slacking off, absenteeism, and sabotage, to shopfloor "counter-planning" and other forms of autonomous and "unofficial" organizing - which conventional activists and leftists (including most anarchists) have a bad track record of acknowledging. And this still leaves out all of those modes of struggle which take place beyond the shopfloor, such as various forms of cultural and sexual revolution. Maybe in such places we can find the groundwork of the class power and solidarity that burst forth during the periods of "general upsurge of struggle."

Furthermore, for different groups of workers, there are very specific forms of "everyday" resistance and autonomous organizing which have a close relationship with the very specific ways that surplus value is being extracted from their labor. Perhaps, then, the first steps towards a genuine anti-activism would be to turn towards these specific, everyday, ongoing struggles. How are the so-called "ordinary" workers resisting capitalism at this time? What opportunities are *already* there in their concrete struggles? What networks are *already* being built through their own efforts?

Having a perspective which recognizes this and even orients towards it requires something which doesn't get much mention in Andrew X's article: the need for a *theory* to go with one's practice, a theory that can *think the "subjective" and "objective" simultaneously*, seeing them in all their mutually-conditioning relatedness. In his entire critique of the J18 movement, Andrew X never seems to consider that its inadequacies might be attributed, in part or whole, to the weakness (or outright absence) of its *analysis*.<sup>(2)</sup>

We all know that one of the main characteristics of the traditional activist is a disdain for theory--they aren't called *activists* for nothing. We've all heard from those who want to "get on with it" and "build something" or "do something" rather than waste time niggling and nit-picking over something as irrelevant as theory. This is particularly prominent in the United States, where traditional anti-intellectualism (a deeply conservative ideological force in this society) makes activists

need to be taken into account. Andrew X himself acknowledges the "objective" side of activism in the opening of his critique, observing:

*Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour--it is a specialised separate task. The division of labour is the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour. The division of labour operates, for example, in medicine or education--instead of healing and bringing up kids being common knowledge and tasks that everyone has a hand in, this knowledge becomes the specialised property of doctors and teachers--experts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts jealously guard and mystify the skills they have. This keeps people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchical class society.*

After this, however, the "objective side" of activism as a concrete social and historical phenomenon is relegated to the background (at least until the author bumps up against it again in the concluding paragraphs), and the "subjective side"--the cast of mind, attitudes, and beliefs of the individual activist, the "activist mentality"--takes center stage.

#### Going Mental

The activist, writes Andrew X, "identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career . . . it becomes an essential part of their self-image." According to the author, the activist's specialized self-image inevitably brings with it a sense of "being somewhat 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."

Later on the author writes that the biggest problem confronting the activist "is the feeling of separateness from 'ordinary people' that activism implies. People identify with some weird sub-culture or clique as being 'us' as opposed to the 'them' of everyone else in the world." He continues, "The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different!"

The author seems more interested in how individual activists *see and experience themselves* than in *what position they actually occupy in society*. Activists suffer from a *feeling* of separateness, they *identify* with cliques, their isolation is *self-imposed*, their roles are *taken on*,



etc. This rhetoric runs throughout the critique, representing its pre-dominant point of view. Certainly Andrew X considers the consequences of these attitudes, such as the tendency to self-serving recruitment to raise one's own level within the group, the reproduction within the group of the oppressive structures of the larger society, isolation of activists from the larger communities of the oppressed, and ultimately the recuperation of struggles back into capitalist social relations. But given the author's emphasis on the subjective side of the equation, these consequences come across as the secondary effects of a primary cause: individuals assuming the stereotyped and elitist attitudes of the "activist" role.

The critique's greatest weakness is this one-sided emphasis on the "subjective" side of the social phenomenon of activism. The emphasis points to an obvious conclusion implicit throughout Andrew X's argument: If activism is a mental attitude or "role," it may be changed, as one change's one's mind, or thrown off, like a mask or a costume. The author warns us that "the harder we cling to this role and notion of who we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire." The implication is clear: cease to cling, let go of the role, "give up activism," and a significant impediment to desired change will be removed.

This subjectivist emphasis leads the author to advance some fairly questionable formulations, in particular the following: "The role of the 'activist' is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest - a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others." I don't doubt that being part of the armed fist of the bourgeois state carries with it a psychological "role" that the individual cop "identifies" with, but from any kind of perspective that seriously wants to get rid of cops (and the state) altogether, this has got to be a pretty trivial consideration. The author has slipped here into a bourgeois, individualist way of viewing the question, in which social groups such as cops, parents, and priests come about because some aggregate of individual people have "chosen" to become them (in the "free marketplace of roles," no doubt).

### Hitting the Wall

Social groups of whatever kind--be they cops, priests, and parents, or anarchists and activists--come into existence through complicated social processes. There is a powerful element of *historical necessity* in the existence of cops (i.e., every state *needs* cops; only a stateless society will not need them). Individual "choice" plays a part in these processes, but these choices are always made within highly constrained and conditioned circumstances. We can't get rid of cops by making a moral

appeal to the police to abandon their cop "roles."

I'm sure that Andrew X does not believe this about the police; my point is that he loses this perspective when thinking about activism and activists. I also realize that Andrew X does not blithely assert that all the problems of activism will be magically solved by a simple "change of heart." Indeed, by the end of his article Andrew X acknowledges the objective difficulties of his case, but in a way that is simply not integrated into the main body of his "subjectivist" argument.

In the article's concluding paragraphs, the author speculates that

*we find ourselves in times in which radical politics is often the product of mutual weakness and isolation. If this is the case, it may not even be within our power to break out of the role of activists. It may be that in times of a downturn in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution become marginalized and come to be seen (and to see themselves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in struggle when we won't be weirdos and freaks any more but will seem simply to be stating what is on everybody's minds.*

I would say that there's no "maybe" about the fact that groups espousing "revolutionary" politics find themselves in a marginalized minority during periods when class struggle is at low ebb. Thus, to a certain extent, it is something that can be anticipated and dealt with without the need for much hand-wringing and soul-searching.

Such has been, for example, the position of many council communists and left communists, who recognized the necessarily minoritarian character of their existence throughout this century's middle decades. An article by Sam Moss entitled "The Impotence of the Revolutionary Group," published in the council communist publication *International Council Correspondence* in the 1930s, is representative of this point of view. In the article Moss writes:

*The working class alone can wage the revolutionary struggle even as it is today waging alone the non-revolutionary class struggle, and the reason that the rebellious class conscious workers band into groups outside the spheres of the real class struggle is only that there is as yet no revolutionary movement within them. Their existence as small groups, therefore, reflects, not a situation for revolution, but rather a non-revolutionary situation. When the revolution does come, their numbers will be submerged within it, not as functioning or-*