

Materialien

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Letter to the Midnight Notes Collective and Friends

Dear Friends,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Materialien Group. We are people engaged in various sorts of issues, mainly antimilitary, social security claims, and refugee issues. Some of us have previously worked in the editorial collective of Autonomie N.F., a „post-operaist“ magazine edited until 1984.

Some of us were in the audience when Silvia and George held their workshop in Lueneburg last week. Also they have met Oskar Schlaak on the Vernetzungstreffen, and arrangements to meet you in Cologne have been made. We are very pleased that you intend to broadly discuss your Promissory Notes, and we appreciate the idea to develop this paper into a sort of Supranational Manifesto against the Crisis. For this end, you would have to define this manifesto as a work in progress, and open up a platform where to discuss the central issues. Our Materialien Group intends to translate some of our papers in order to take part in this discussion, the center of which is best situated in the heart of the States. So please open up a platform where this discussion of the various parts and aspects of the Manifesto can take place, possibly on a global scale.

Promissory Notes is already being translated by the friends of BUKO. If not so, we will do it. Indeed, we share most of the positions of your paper. Especially we share the position that the current crisis is a major one, and nothing will be the same afterwards. We do also share your opinion that it is struggles and bottlenecks that cause the crisis, and that capital has learned to use crisis since the 1930s. We do share the opinion that discussing the financial crisis as a fact of its own will not be of much use, and that a New Deal in its classical aspects is not likely to be set in motion. We share the position that the use of credit from below was a specific and new form of class struggle, and it was a very special form of self-valorization of people of color in the US. Like you, we know well that millions of people are „superfluous“ from capitals point of view, and that this aspect is fundamental for a re-formulation of any sort of a „Communist Manifesto“. We also agree that demilitarization is an essential aspect to stand up against very harmful trends of military war against poverty, for which we have used the term of social world war since the beginning of the 1990s.

There are many things more that we have in common, so let me turn to some things which we think should be exposed for discussion from our point of view. Among these are:

- The designation of people as „workers“ or „working class“,
The aspect of technology and crisis,
The aspects of power / value and crisis,
The discussion about the commons.

Working Class:

The designation of people as working class, even if defined on a world scale, is not sufficient. The “Many-Headed Hydra” is not made of workers, E.P. Thompsons or G. Rudé’s people were a lively crowd of non-workers, and you certainly share the point that the Russian revolution made by female peasant-workers and by peasants; today the dagongmei in China do not refer to themselves as workers but persons on the move, leaving the countryside with aspirations, and returning to their villages with new concepts of how to live (see e.g. the brilliant work of Pun Ngai, Made in China, or a book like the one by Aihwa Ong, Spirits of Resistance); Pancho Villa was not a worker and the Zapatists are not either. Remember Herbert Gutmans studies on European migrants in the US, and you will certainly share the opinion that a labeling of these people as „workers“ is too much a reduction. Although any perspective of organizing should have some heliotropism towards IWW, people are no longer to be seen as workers-in-perspective.

Also we find it an important aspect that more and ever more people are defined as superfluous in the global capitalist system, and their work will never be exploited, but nevertheless their demands have the same relevance as the demands of any one of us, and they must not be seen as workers nor as victims. The term „world proletariat“ might be suitable, but we are not sure whether the people that a Manifesto is trying to find correspondence with will be happy with this term. Presumably, a new term has to be found.

Technology:

Having in mind the Italian roots of Zerowork in the mid 70s, we find it surprising that the paper does not mention technology at all. We suppose that you also think that there are dynamics of technology and crisis. Like the 1930s were the crisis of implementation of chemistry, electro, Taylor and Ford, pushing through new structures of society finally by means of war, we now face the crisis of the implementation of IT in a worldwide scale. Discussing this means to visualize an immense terrain of struggle. To be a bit more precise, the key sectors of the 20s were brought to crisis by struggles on a worldwide scale, in Mexico, Russia, and East- and Southeast Europe as well as in US and West- and Central Europe, and the present crisis is a crisis of bottlenecks and blockades all over the world. You have mentioned a lot of this in your paper. But there is more than that. Since 2006, there has been a stagnation of investment in the key sectors, and at the same time a boom of consumption (see e.g. the papers of Raghuram Rajan on www.imf.org/). The IT-bubble was a failing breakthrough of the new key sectors, just like the 1920s were a failing breakthrough of the then key sectors. We will translate a forthcoming paper by Detlef

Hartmann in order to point out these views.

We do have to keep busy with these new technologies. Like Taylorism plus Keynesianism shaped the metropolitan societies after WW2, these new technologies of control, new virtual forms of substitution of the social, and new controls of production will shape the new age of capital, if we can not prevent it. We have to bare in mind that the then shaping went through a process of two world wars and endless sufferings and killings, and there is a significant fraction of capitalist strategies which demand for a new epoque of wars in the present times.

Our times are characterized not only by IT, but there is also a new grasp on the subject. In a way, capital has learned from Foucault. Let me put it this way: The „1968 World Revolution“ (Wallerstein) was a revolution of subjectivity against the mechanistic and taylorist forms of command. As a response, capital has learned to use subjectivity as a virtual source of value. A new stratum of production has been established. This stratum could not yet rule the stratum of old material production, hence this crisis. For our approach to to the new grasp on subjectivity, see Detlef Hartmann, Gerald Geppert, Cluster. Die neue Etappe des Kapitalismus, Berlin / Hamburg (Assoziation A) 2008.

Power / Value

Remembering the contribution of Mario Montano in the first issue of Zerowork, we could well favor a point of view that we should not bother too much about the Marxist discussion on value. But actually, there is something interesting going on. Capitalist command in the times of mass production depended on a significant overlapping of value production, and capitalist power. Maybe you agree that the definition of value is a historical construction, and not one of eternity. The concept of value is itself a product of class struggle. In our times, there is a transformation of value which tends to valorize knowledge and structure, and devalorize the classically productive lively work. The actual crisis is a crisis of this transformation, and maybe it will last 50 years of struggle until this transformation will be overcome, or it will lead into the next capitalist disaster.

Still, power is continually being executed, and the politics of the Dollar, as we are trying to understand them, are not just deliberate politics to beggar the neighbors, but they are indeed a means of valorization of military control. Antiterrorist war, seen from this point of view, was a medium of this transformation. Security, Structure, and Control turn to be value, payable in dollars. I suppose we have to do a lot of thinking about both of this: grasp on subjectivity, and new politics of value, in order to understand, and fight against, the capital of the future.

Commons

It seems to us that the concept of the commons has a high use value as a medium of obstructing the various ways of enclosure, and it also gives emphasis on the topic of walls and fences – the walls of Baghdad and Palestine, those of the US Mexican boarder, those of the gated communities, and those of the terrains of global interest,

etc etc – tearing down the walls and fences will be one of the lead motives of all revolutionary songs. Also, the dialectics of reproduction and of migration can be spelled out in terms of the commons. However, we have to be quite clear about the fact that we are not the ones to edit the new revolutionary terms and slogans, but they will be developed in the struggle itself.

Still, we do have to anticipate and suggest. Our own way of dealing with all this is less based on the British / US tradition of the commons, but more based on the „droit de subsistence“, which comes from the Age of Revolutions in continental Europe (see Ahlrich Meyer, Die Logik der Revolten, Berlin und Hamburg 1999).

Anyway, all of us agree that there must be a way to build up a grand movement to ensure the subsistence of all sorts of people in the various regions all over the world. Our terms and efforts must correspond to this maximum world problem.

I apologize for the insufficiency of my English, and in the course of discussion it may ameliorate. We are looking forward to your answer.

On behalf of Materialien,
Eberhard Jungfer