





# MOMENTS OF EXCESS



We want to talk about ‘moments of excess’. We think this idea is timely because the tactics of militant protest have recently spread to the Countryside Alliance and Fathers 4 Justice, and this can make it seem as if the direct action movement of the 1990s and the anti-globalisation movement of the 21st century have been usurped or hijacked. By considering moments of excess we can see that, perhaps, what’s really happened is that our global anti-capitalist movement has kept its participants one step ahead. These days we are no longer satisfied with symbolic protest – which can almost be seen as militant lobbying. Our movement is leaning towards a more constitutive politics. People are beginning to work out what they want, what they are for, not

only what they are against. What is more, people are actually 'acting' for what they want: practice not just theory. Realising that 'we live in a world of our own making' and attempting to consciously (re)make it.

Since timing is everything, we think it might be useful to look at previous constitutive moments. Moments when similar questions have been raised. We call these 'moments of excess' to emphasise what these disparate times have in common: a collective creativity that threatens to blow open the doors of their societies. The ideas we discuss are relevant to activities we are and have been involved in, such as the series of European Social Forums, anti-G8 protests and, more locally, plans for a social centre in Leeds.



The phrase 'moments of excess' helps us make the connections between exceptional moments and everyday life. Work in a capitalist society automatically carries an element of excess because it is ultimately based on co-operation that can never be reducible to capital. Our abstract potential always exceeds and tries to escape the conditions of its production (that is, the capital relation). That's why we think there's 'life despite capitalism'; because as a living, breathing mass, our needs, our desires, our lives constantly transcend the limits of capital.

What do we mean when we say 'limits'? Capital needs to make a profit and to do this it needs to impose measure upon our activities, cramping our creativity. For example, most of us in work have some job description, however vague, laid down by

management. Yet if we restrict our workplace activities to those duties, nothing meaningful would ever get done; which is why a 'work-to-rule' can be so successful. Similarly, capital needs to codify everyday practice into laws which relate to sovereign, rights-bearing individuals, even though this contradicts the way that innovation actually occurs. In fact capitalist culture tends to reduce all collective products of creativity to the sole property of individuals. 'Brunel built this...', 'Farraday discovered that...' On top of all this we have to factor in our everyday (partly unconscious) refusal to be homogenised, flattened, measured or made quantifiable.

In the most obvious sense then, there is an excess of life. In work, at home, on the bus, we produce a surplus of collectivity. This is our humanity, and it is this which capital is constantly trying to appropriate, harness, regulate or contain. All this has become more obvious over the last half-century, as capital – capitalist social relations – seems to have leaked into every aspect of our lives. At the same time, and of course related to capital's colonisation, work – our daily activities – has become ever-more socialised. It's no longer just a matter of the extraction of surplus value in the workplace: capitalist production is now inserting itself deep into the texture of our day-to-day social existence, in such a way that it now makes sense to think that society itself functions as a factory. But this increasing socialisation of labour has opened up new possibilities for co-operative and creative collectivities within capitalism that seem to lead beyond it. As work spreads throughout life so does the co-operation it relies on and it is this excess of co-operation which makes transformation possible.



This leads us to the second, more profound type of excess. Every now and then, in all sorts of different social arenas, we can see moments of obvious collective creation, where our ‘excess of life’ explodes. In these ‘moments of excess’, everything appears to be up for grabs and time and creativity accelerates. From our own lives, we’re thinking of punk in the mid to late 1970s, and the struggle against the poll tax in the late 1980s/early ’90s, and the recent moments within the anti-globalisation movement. At these times, which may have spanned several years or literally a few moments, we have glimpsed whole new worlds. But we could also mention the 1960s underground, the free software community, the popular uprising in Argentina. All of these examples are specific to a certain time and place, but we can see a common thread: a collective, liberating creativity that delights in mixing things up and smashing through all barriers. And they constantly lead back to the fundamental questions: ‘What sort of lives do we want to lead? What sort of world do we want to live in?’. We don’t mean this in a utopian sense. Moments of excess aren’t concerned with developing ideal types or blueprints of how life should be lived. Instead they deal with the possible, and represent practical experiments in new forms of life.

In these spaces, there is a real sense of subversive energy, freedom and possibility. After Seattle we started talking about ‘fast track revolutionaries’ – the way that social struggles today appear to go directly and immediately to the heart of capital and its state: you can be reading Naomi Klein on Monday morning and hurling bricks at the police by Wednesday afternoon.

Perhaps the existence of 'fast tracks' is one of the defining features of all moments of excess. The concept of a 'fast track', though, is in itself too simplistic. It suggests a predetermined linear progression. Rather, moments of excess are points when time is compressed whilst the possibilities expand almost infinitely. These points are characterised by a breakdown in accepted theories and the 'laws' of capital or of political economy. In other words, 'normal' conceptions regarding what is possible in a given time and space are turned upside down. One question rapidly leads to another and the whole relation between capital and life is brought into sharp relief.

The recent anti-war movement contained 'moments of excess'. We saw people demonstrating who'd not been on a demonstration in decades, if ever. Across the UK schoolkids walked out of classes because they heard that 'something' was happening' in town. (Often, nothing was happening... until they turned up and started something!) These people were exposed to new experiences and brought new skills and attitudes, in particular a 'do what we want' mentality. They carried no baggage regarding 'what happens' on a demonstration and this frequently made such demos difficult to police (for both paid cops and organisers) because the new protesters had little knowledge of and respect for the 'rules'. As a result new subjectivities were produced.

Another defining characteristic of moments of excess is that existing methods of mediating people's desires and demands fail. People don't stop to think what's possible, what's realistic – and no 'expert' is there to help them keep their feet on the ground. Hence the Paris 1968 slogan 'Be Realistic, Demand The

Impossible'. In times of heightened activity we simply pose the only question worth asking: 'what sort of life do we want to lead?' Or even 'what does it mean to be human?'. And it's perhaps important to note that moments of excess are not just a modern phenomenon, they can be traced back through history. During moments of excess ('revolutionary' moments) we feel more connected to past experiments in new-world construction: to the Italian autonomists, the Naxalite rebels, the Paris Communards, the English Diggers. During bursts of revolutionary creativity we feel 'really' connected to our antecedents, not just warming ourselves with their memory.



But how do these moments of excess emerge from the 'everyday' excess, our daily surplus of life? Clearly it's not a question of pushing the right buttons, or aligning the right material forces. We can't engineer these situations. But it might be revealing to turn the question on its head and look at how these moments of excess subside and return to everyday 'normality'.

Some writers have used an analogy with geological formations. If moments of excess are about horizontal flows of energy and desire, there is a simultaneous pull in the opposite direction. A way of thinking about this is that possibilities are channelled in certain directions – towards static, vertical forms ('stratification' and 'striation'). One of the most exciting elements of punk, for example, was the way it broke down boundaries and identities. It was an excuse to reinvent yourself, with a new look and a new way of viewing things; this play with

identity was often topped off with a new name. Other boundaries were broken by bands having shifting and multiple line-ups, or by gigs where the split between band and audience became blurred. But there was a counter-tendency, towards identification and demarcation. All of a sudden you had to wear the right 'punk' clothes, you had to know who was in the band, and the stars were always on stage.

Of course it's not as simple as saying the first was good, and the second was bad. A certain amount of stratification is necessary to focus our co-operation and energy; without it the result would be entropy – the dispersal of energy. Stratification can have productive and restrictive moments. For instance, the way people look, talk, and hold their bodies can reflect a certain commonality and can help spread recognition of a shared antagonism. Moments of excess often produce their own common styles and common conducts. Our struggles aren't just struggles for bread and potatoes, but for new ways of being and the revolutionary movements with the most resonance (the Black Panthers, Zapatistas etc.) have understood this. Over time such styles and the attitudes they reflect can become rigid and begin to act as a conservative force. But just as you can still see the original lava flows in rock formations, traces of the moment of excess are always present and can always be 're-activated'. That's why many of the people who threw themselves headfirst into the early days of punk were people who'd lived through those moments in the late 1960s. And why so many who became involved in rave were old punks.

Stratification also occurs as a result of attempts to defend moments of excess. In the free software movement, for example,

hackers have adopted a legal framework (the GNU General Public License) in order to safeguard open-source code. They have tried to use copyright laws to lock software into communal ownership. This can be seen as a productive moment of stratification as it opens up a field of possibilities for cooperative production. However there is a danger that this could draw the free software movement towards legalistic ways of thinking. A more worrying tendency within software, and another example of stratification, is that towards homogenisation. Free software frequently mimics proprietary packages. For example Open Office, which runs on Linux, is an almost exact clone of the Microsoft Office suite of programs. But such software, although it may threaten Microsoft's profits, provides little in the way of real alternatives. These software projects 'may have freedom in the sense of free speech, but this speech is not the result of free thought. Their composition is determined by the submissive relation to the standards set by Microsoft. This is a deliberate abdication of the imagination'.

In political movements, stratification often appears as a turn to 'ghetto politics', where 'purity' is the driving principle. We lived through the anarcho-punk movement of the 1980s and it's a prime example (although by no means the only one). Capital was seen as an outside 'alien' force, rather than something that is inherent in all social relations. The 'ghetto' offered the illusion of solid foundations on which we could stand and cast judgement on other efforts to escape this world. As anarcho-punk collapsed and Class War (the organisation) grew, this grouping shifted from being a chaotic and uncontrollable force to one that was, on occasions, paralysed by its own over-

organisation, bureaucracy and fear of losing itself. There was a clear attempt to formalise and capture flows of energy, but it was done by defining boundaries and drawing lines in the sand which had the opposite effect from that intended. In fact, we witnessed a bizarre reversal in the 1990s, where much of our workplace life took on many of the traditional features of political action – communication, teamwork, independent and critical thinking directed towards common purpose. At the same time, ‘politics’ became more and more like work: a focus on ‘efficiency’, micro-management, directing of resources, performance targets, and so on. To put it another way, so much of ‘politics’ represents the very opposite of those moments of excess: space is compressed, while time expands infinitely (who’s never looked at their watch in a political meeting?).

This blinkered vision can also be seen in the holy grail of purity, beloved of many anarchists. There is an idea that one can be ‘pure’ in one’s politics. For example, one shouldn’t rent a building for a social centre – the only acceptable option is squatting. Of course, few, if any, of those arguing this position actually live in squats. Many have jobs and most make rent or mortgage payments, but this attitude derives from the misconception that ‘politics’ is somehow purer and separate from ‘everyday’ life.

We can even point to the contradictory tendencies at work in the European Social Forum. During the organising process the ‘horizontals’ have fought the ‘verticals’ to keep things open. In the process, however, people have come to define themselves as one or the other. In the past our strength has been our ability to be more than the definitions that are thrust upon us.



One way to think this through is to make a three-way distinction between majority, minority and minoritarian. In 1976 punk was minoritarian, it was undefined and open, it revealed a huge range of possibilities. But that initial urge to change, which was a process, got solidified into a never-changing state of being; a quarter-century on punk is an established minority identity. It's fine to be a punk, it poses no threat: you wear the right clothes, you mess up your hair a certain way, you listen to certain records. Capital can incorporate any identity because you aren't actually required to believe in anything for capitalism to function.

Another way of understanding the links between identity, individuality and collectivity is to look at riots. A common police strategy during big demonstrations is to (attempt to) create panic, by charging with horses, by driving vehicles into the crowd at high speed, by firing bullets (usually 'only' plastic in the North, frequently live bullets in the global South), in order to shock participants into an individual identity. Literally, 'shock tactics' whose aim is to disorient and then divide. The collective dissolves into competing individuals, all desperate for the quickest route to safety. A similar process can be seen in the days after such an event. For instance, following the Trafalgar Square Poll Tax riot of 1990, newspapers published pages of photographs of individual 'rioters': their aim to isolate through identification.

Still, it's important to note that when the police break up riots, they're not attempting to destroy collective organisation, per se. Rather, their aim is to re-order our collectivity in a way that doesn't challenge the capital relation – we're expected to go

home and consume, to work, to reproduce. It's a high risk strategy that's only used as a last resort: driving vans into a crowd will decompose our collectivity but there's no guarantee that it will be regrouped in a way that works for capital. Stronger and/or more numerous anti-capitalist subjectivities may just as easily be the outcome.

For example, at last year's G8 summit in Evian, we experienced two different responses to police tactics. A road blockade out in the countryside (at Saint-Cergues, on the road between Annemasse and Evian) involved several hundred disobedient and other 'activists' (for want of a better word). Despite hours of bombardment by tear gas, pepper spray and concussion grenades, our self-organisation and collectivity were too strong to be broken. For us, the experience felt liberating: we participated in 'spokes-councils' for the first time, we observed a fluidity of roles and almost complete absence of demarcation of militancy; we had great fun for many reasons (which included enjoying the sun and great views of the Swiss mountains). But in some ways the action was something of a 'set-piece'. Our subjectivities against-and-beyond capital were certainly strengthened, but not fundamentally altered. (Perhaps the most interesting interactions in this respect were those between blockaders and the sympathetic residents of Saint-Cergues, who brought coffee, food, biscuits and who opened up their houses so that people could collect water, wash off tear gas, use the toilet, etc.)

The following day in the centre of Geneva, outcomes seemed much more open, more unpredictable. Following police actions to intimidate and corral demonstrators, they themselves came under

pressure from outside of their cordon and found themselves surrounded. As night fell, this crowd outside became more chaotic and more menacing and the police were forced to turn their water cannon around to confront the crowd they'd created. In this urban setting, where troublemakers freely mingled with commuters, our collectivity was much weaker. On the one hand, it was easier for the police to disperse us with water cannon and plastic bullets, to push us out of the city, even if that meant moving trouble elsewhere. But, on the other hand, their actions also forced 'activists', angry but 'apolitical' youth, 'respectable' Genovese citizens into close proximity. In effect, city-centre Geneva that night became a cauldron of new subjectivities.

Yet again, we're not suggesting one situation is better than the other. In a sense, we need both. We do need to resist definition, to constantly challenge the limits they imply. But at the same time, having boundaries or identities can sometimes work in our favour, opening up other spaces for us to move into.

If shock tactics represent an excessive response to our excess, they're not restricted to riot settings. We can see the same criminalisation and demonisation at work against the free software communities. The US government is keen to claim that ripped-off corporate logos might be raising funds for terrorists. In 2001 Assistant US Attorney warned of the dangers surrounding DeCSS utility, a program which allows PCs running on Linux to read digital video disks, likening DeCSS to tools useful to terrorists, such as 'software programs that shut down navigational programs in airplanes or smoke detectors in hotels... That software creates a very real possibility of harm. That is precisely what is at stake here.'



It's easy to dismiss all of this as ephemeral, to do with 'superstructure', 'culture' or 'ideology', and thus far removed from the real forces in society. Or, in a different language, to criticise it for being just about subjectivities and not about objective conditions. You might think that by talking of moments of excess we're mixing together things that are actually different; that political revolts matter and cultural revolts don't. We reject all that. Capital is engaged in an attempt to appropriate our very capacity to be human: whether we're call centre workers, office cleaners, migrants or programmers, whether we're at work or at home, what is increasingly being exploited is our very capacity to interact, to communicate, to create, to be human. By subsuming the whole of life itself, production has effectively destroyed the division between 'inside' and 'outside'. There is nowhere that is not simultaneously capital, so it makes no sense to talk of 'politics' or 'economics' or 'culture' as discrete areas.

This clearly has important implications for our idea of 'revolution'. It's usually been understood as an 'event': the execution of Charles I, the storming of the Bastille or the Winter Palace, the election of Mandela and the ANC. As a consequence, many concerns are deferred: 'wait until after the revolution...' The period 'after the revolution' then assumes the status of 'heaven' in orthodox religious thought (whether of Christian, Islamic or Jewish variety). Be good, know your place, conform, suffer, make sacrifices and wait for your (eternal) reward in the afterlife. This is exactly the language used by many

revolutionaries. We are expected to suppress our own desires for the 'greater good' (of 'the people', 'the working class', 'womankind', whatever). We reject this notion of revolution and the behaviour it encourages. We much prefer Digger Gerard Winstanley's idea of a Republic of Heaven: heaven exists here on earth, we have only to create it!

But from another perspective, we are forced to ask 'Where is the rupture?' If all forms of action are socially productive, and if capital is amoral and infinitely malleable, isn't our resistance simply the creative cutting edge of capital? Will we turn round in ten years time to find that the things we're fighting for now appear against us? Will we close down Starbucks only to find a chain of organic fair-trade coffee houses clogging up our cities? Are we stuck in an eternal return where all struggles are recuperated? Do we have to give up millenarian fantasies of a mighty day of reckoning where the truth will out and the unjust shall be judged? We don't know. With no inside and outside, there is no solid foundation on which we can stand to make those judgements: all we know is that nothing is certain. Perhaps we won't even recognise rupture until after it has happened, especially if we're still looking for a winter palace to storm. In any case, 'recuperation' is itself a problematic concept, as it still works with an inside/outside logic, as if there is some place that capital can not penetrate: we'd rather think in terms of striation, where flows of energy are temporarily captured but always have the potential to 'unfreeze' and move again. This moves the problem from protecting pure spaces to keeping spaces open to the dynamism of new movements.

So what can we do to extend and expand these moments of

excess? There is a general conflict between, on the one hand, our collective productivity and the creative production of our subjectivity and, on the other, capital's attempt to dampen all of this and reduce it to the valorisation of capital. At certain crucial moments, a surplus of collectivity in one sector amplifies, and ripples right through a social formation. Why? The key seems to be resonance, the way that things 'make sense' at certain points in history. Seattle made sense to millions of us five years ago: time shrank and our horizons exploded so that everything seemed possible. We can't repeat Seattle, in the same way that we can't do punk again. But what we can do is keep on the same line of opening ourselves up, constantly turning outwards rather than in on ourselves. We need to keep open not only our ways of thinking, but also the related methods of organising, the tactics, techniques and technologies we use – it's a constant battle to ward off institutionalisation. That sense of openness and movement seems fundamental to a different way of life.

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## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Cyril Smith discusses our struggle to define our humanity in *Marx at the Millennium* (London: Pluto Press, 1996). The application of geological analysis to social movements and the language of stratification and striation (which freeze the horizontal energy flows of so-called ‘smooth spaces’) come from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), as does the majority/minority/minoritarian distinction. The Matthew Fuller point and quotation are from ‘Behind the Blip: Software as Culture (Some Routes into “Software Criticism”, More Ways Out)’, published in his collection *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003). The essay’s also available on-line at various sites, including [www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas\\_articles/pdf/fuller\\_sw\\_as\\_culture.pdf](http://www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas_articles/pdf/fuller_sw_as_culture.pdf). For an account of the anti-poll tax struggle, see Danny Burns, *Poll Tax Rebellion* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1992), while Jon Savage’s *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) is the best history of punk we’ve come across. For one perspective (ours!) on the group Class War and its demise and dissolution, see issue 73 of its paper (intended to be the final issue), available on-line at <http://www.spunk.org/library/pubs/cw/spoo1669/> and at [http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/last\\_cw.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/last_cw.html)







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