



Nowtopia: Strategic Exodus?¹

Chris Carlsson

2844 Folsom Street, San Francisco, CA, USA;
carlsson.chris@gmail.com

Francesca Manning

907 Broadway, New York, NY, USA;
the.coat.and.general@gmail.com

Abstract: Nowtopia identifies a new basis for a shared experience of class. Specifically, the exodus from wage labor on one side, and the embrace of meaningful, freely chosen and “free” (unpaid) work on the other. A product of three decades of decomposition of the working class, nowtopians are different from “drop-outs” in general, or surplus populations that constitute the necessary “outside” to capital, in their conscious withdrawal from capitalist culture and concerted rejection of the value form. In emergent convivial “nowtopian” communities, largely grounded in unpaid practical work which creatively meets needs such as transportation (the bicycling subculture), food (urban gardening/agriculture), and communication (open-source communities), we see a gradual reversal of the extreme atomization of modern life. While facing the threat of corruption via re-integration into the system, this constellation of practices, if taken together, is an elaborate, decentralized, uncoordinated collective research and development effort exploring a potentially post-capitalist, post-petroleum future.

Keywords: decomposition of the working class, wage labor, use value, collectivity, work, atomization, capital

Introduction

In the relation of labour to capital . . . labour is not this or another labour, but *labour pure and simple*, abstract labour; absolutely indifferent to its particular *specificity*, but capable of all specificities. Of course, the particularity of labour must correspond to the particular substance of which a given capital consists; but since capital *as such* is indifferent to every particularity of its substance, and exists not only as the totality of the same but also as the abstraction from all its particularities, the labour which confronts it likewise subjectively has the same totality and abstraction in itself (Karl Marx 1973 [1857]:296).

The central figure of our society . . . is the figure of the insecure worker, who at times “works” and at times does not “work,” practices many different trades without any of them actually being a trade, has no identifiable profession, or, rather, whose profession is to have no profession, and cannot therefore identify with his/her work, but regards

as his/her “true” activity the one he/she devotes himself to in the gaps between his/her paid work (Andre Gorz 1999 [1997]:53).

Nowtopia is a term that attempts to describe the myriad efforts to reclaim and reinvent work against the logic of capital. Nowtopia identifies a new basis for a shared experience of class. Specifically, the exodus from wage labor on one side, and the embrace of meaningful, freely chosen and “free” (unpaid) work on the other. No longer can our waged jobs be assumed to define us, and no longer can they be the primary basis for politics. Precisely because so many people find their work lives inadequate, incomplete, degrading, pointless, stupid and oppressive, they form identities and communities outside of paid work—in spaces where they *are not* working class. It is in these activities that people, who are reduced on the job to “mere workers”, fully engage their capacities to create, to shape, to invent, and to cooperate without monetary incentive. They “work” or “labor” in a way in which the *particular* substance of their activity is *meaningful*. These communities may not look much like the working class organizations of the past two centuries, but it is important to recognize that in this topsy-turvy period of system breakdown and transition, new political forms are emerging to reshape the endless struggle between capital and humanity. In the face of widespread dismissal of nowtopian movements as “lifestyle” politics or irrelevant “dropout” culture, we argue that they are in fact new political forms that are addressing directly many immediate problems of capitalist society.

Today basic needs are going unmet for millions. Urgent efforts at long-term and medium-term planning to adapt to the increasingly visible collapse of natural systems are rejected out of ideological blindness. But individual human ingenuity flows over government and corporate obstacles. The solutions to social and ecological crises of our time are frequently coming from unwaged work that is done because people want and need it, rather than in hopes of monetary remuneration. Still at the margins of modern life for now, many people and communities are taking more of their time and care out of the market and making ways to live together, to get our needs met and desires engaged, by working together, working hard, and not working for money.

Nowtopians engage in a wide variety of labor-intensive projects, from organic gardening, bike repair, or coding software, to making music, writing fiction, producing radio shows, or painting a mural. Permaculturists, the quintessential nowtopian technologists, have initiated various epistemological challenges to basic scientific paradigms through their unpaid, passionate work. A semi-conscious war between these life-affirming, self-emancipating behaviors and the coercive domination of money, property, and survival is the kernel of a potentially revolutionary transformation.

Irrelevant Activity and Meaningful Work

This economic relation [of capital and labour] . . . therefore develops more purely and adequately in proportion as labor loses all the characteristics of art; as its particular skill becomes more and more abstract and irrelevant, and as it becomes more and more a *purely abstract activity*, a purely mechanical activity, hence indifferent to its particular form; a merely *formal* activity, or, what is the same, a merely *material* activity, activity pure and simple, regardless of its form (Karl Marx 1973 [1857]:297).

While not sufficient *in themselves* for the overthrow of capital, these nowtopian practices do, in their rejection of waged labor and the value-form, develop a form of life that is directly antagonistic to the internal logic of the capitalist mode of production, and as such are germane to a struggle to destroy capital. Further, they combat the isolation and atomism that has reduced so many social struggles to individualized resistance and consumer politics. This is the same isolation and atomism that produces “free laborers” as a necessary component of the reproduction of labor power for capital.

Attending to nowtopian practices sets in relief the basic violence at the heart of capitalist production: the process of turning creative, useful human activity into abstract labor dedicated to producing value for people other than those who labor. Marx articulated the “freed” laborer as someone stripped of all their deep implicit connectivity—free from the land and the tools of production, from sustained connections with other humans, and ultimately, from their own labor. And although *all* waged labor (and the threat of it, if one is un- or under-employed) is subject to this fundamental capitalist violence, anti-capitalists, Marxist theorists, and radicals of all theoretical and practical persuasions have tended to designate particular people and groups as more and less the victims of capitalism. There are undeniable differences in the way the hegemonic global force of capital affects peoples, but there is also a continuity in the global experience of capital. That is to say, there is a continuity to capital, even if it plays out very different moments of its own reproduction in different geographical locations such that it appears to be *actually a different entity* in different locations (it is important to recognize this geographical cunning of capital). Nowtopia helps us to understand a global continuity of capitalist violence despite geographical difference and uneven development—which is propelled by capital’s constant search for *spatial fixes* (Harvey 1990:196)—because nowtopians are responding to a violence of capital that is not usually considered when assessing the destructive forces of capitalist hegemony. A recognition of the political relevance of the nowtopian impulse is also an affirmation that everyone in capitalist society—regardless of location or lifestyle—has a reason to combat it.

Neil Smith (1984) draws out the tendencies of capital both to *differentiate* while simultaneously *equalizing* or *leveling* certain aspects of life. We are concerned here with the violence inherent in a central force of capital's equalization—the “universalization of the wage–labour relation” which is instigated by “the leveling of pre-capitalist modes of production to the plain of capital” (1984:114).

As Marx observed... the individual worker is transformed into a “crippled monstrosity”; the “Juggernaut of capital”, to use Marx’s phrase, drags workers down to a common level, and as far as the individual is concerned makes a “specialty of the absence of all development”. Human nature is leveled downward (Smith 1984:115).

However, despite the clear emphasis on the leveling effects of capital in terms of the wage relation particularly, many have emphasized the *differences* in Marx’s ontology of labor, particularly that between productive and unproductive labor, in order to deepen exclusions and divisions between the more and less revolutionary parts of the working class. Unproductive labor has been used pejoratively by orthodox Marxists to dismiss a wide variety of workers as politically irrelevant because they do not produce surplus value directly. This old orthodoxy has percolated into the current era among the descendents of Third-Worldist and identitarian movements. In a different move with a similar outcome, many contemporary social activists tend to dismiss so-called “middle class” or more affluent wage workers as political non-entities, because they appear as direct beneficiaries and active supporters of an oppressive social system.

David Harvie (2007:27) has suggested a different approach which is useful:

If we understand capital as the separating of worker and capital (or doing and done), and if productive labor is that which produces capital, then we can understand productive labor as those human activities which reproduce this separation and produce it on an expanded scale.

Whereas for most people, “unproductive labor” refers to inefficiency, or maybe to deliberate slacking, Harvie reclaims this concept to refer to work that is carried out primarily for practical purposes, purposes that are *not* those of capital—that is, what we have called nowtopian and what we might also call *activities responding to localized social need*. Unlike productive labor, unproductive labor can involve the subjective capacities of the worker to decide for herself what work is actually worth doing. In fact, Harvie (2007:161) concludes:

the working class (or better, humanity) struggles to be *unproductive*, to free its activities from value, to go *beyond value* . . . that worker who is able to reclaim from the boss minutes, hours, days of her life, that

worker who is able to produce as “the activation of his own nature” is a fortunate worker indeed.

We do not necessarily have to agree with Harvie’s redefinition of the terms “productive” and “unproductive” to recognize the importance of the distinction towards which they point. Anticapitalist movements often fail to address the significance of “unproductive” labor (labor towards goals that exceed and contradict those of capital) and the problems with “productive” labor (labor that continues to reproduce the value form). Both organized labor and governing socialist or communist parties abdicated decades ago any say over the *content* and *goals* of work, and implicitly the content and goals of science and technology, to the initiative of Capital. By the dawn of the twenty-first¹ century, this has led to the mind-numbing expansion of useless work, while social needs are neglected and most people’s creative capacities are left dormant. People are richly rewarded to create advertising, to invent new “financial instruments”, to design “anti-personnel” bombs, to analyze how to increase credit card debt, and so on. The same society will not spend meaningful resources on early childhood education and denies public schools of the most basic resources. Vast public subsidies pour into agribusiness and oil company coffers while urban gardens are bulldozed to make way for box stores and warehouses, and organic farmers have to sell their unsubsidized products at higher prices. Publicly funded highways continue to cover the land and most cities dedicate more than half their available acreage to parking or moving private automobiles, while public transit is starved of resources and the bicycle is treated as a childish toy instead of a legitimate transportation choice. This is all evidence of a society that in all instances strives to reproduce the dynamic of capital, the value form and waged labor, instead of attending to social need. Nowtopia is not simply a description of everything that is not waged (making breakfast at home is not necessarily nowtopian!), it is a term for work that is done for social and ecological reasons and explicitly *not for* the proliferation of capital. Of course, since our conception of society and the ecosystem is deeply informed by capitalism, the lines are never clear cut, but that is all the more reason to pay these activities some close attention.

What makes nowtopians different from “drop-outs” in general, or those communities and peoples that always must constitute the necessary “outside” to capital, is a concerted rejection of and resistance to the value form. It is *more* than a disdain for the spectacle, or monoculture, because nowtopians reject the preconditions of the reproduction of capital. Other movements that might be considered “drop-out” or “alternativist” that have arisen throughout the history of capital have usually rallied around principles that were tangential to capitalism—for instance, anti-hierarchy, or identitarian power struggles, or a primitivist

or Luddite view on technology, or the desire for better “management” of resources and the market. Where all of these phenomena have a deep connection to capital—capital uses and abuses hierarchy, divisions of identity, technological imperialism, etc in order to proliferate—opposition to them does not always pose a direct opposition to capital. The nowtopian impulse, while inchoate and generally blind to its growing political force, *cannot* be co-opted by capital because *it is not-capital*. It cannot be co-opted, it can only be destroyed. However, practices arising from the nowtopian impulse that are not in themselves nowtopian *can* be co-opted, and in so doing the nowtopian drive (the drive to engage, work, labor, without the mediation of exchange) is destroyed or debased. This differs from, say, anti-hierarchical organizing, which in itself can easily slide into the capitalist market in the form of, for instance, collectively owned business models. Nowtopia holds moments of a post-capitalist society (which may or may not have some kind of hierarchy, but *cannot* have waged labor), and materializes a pure anti-capitalism in the frustration that we cannot *truly* extricate ourselves from the capitalist system. When nowtopian sentiment grows resistant to its own destruction, when groups refuse en-masse to be pulled back into the realm of exchange, when it is no longer acceptable to support our nowtopian activities with our waged labor—this is when the nowtopian impulse might become revolutionary.

But it must be understood that wage and the value form are not the primary way in which *everyone* experiences the violence of capital. As mentioned above, capital also *differentiates*—the material effects of capital differ drastically over space, time, identity, socio-cultural differences, and much more, and these differences are essential to recognize—not because they are evidence of different capitalisms, but because they show that just as capital temporally and geographically separates different moments in its reproduction while still working in concert, so must all people develop differing strategies to wrest reproduction into their own hands while still working together against the *continuities* of capital. We have developed many concepts, particularly within the field of geography, to articulate the differences, particularly geographical and spatial differences, produced by capital. However, rarely do we understand how the resistance to capital across uneven geographical, temporal, cultural, political terrain might be linked and be able to function together without suppressing those differences. As Harvey (1982:445) writes at the end of *Limits to Capital*, “not only must weapons be bought and paid for out of surpluses of capital and labour, but they must also be put to use”. That is, it is not only the imperative of global capital to produce new sectors and spaces in which to proliferate its internal logic of the value form—capital also requires ongoing processes of violent dispossession in order to continue its ascension.

Nowtopians are a part of the working class with a specific experience of capital, whose struggle, if cognizant of its resistance to capitalism, can feasibly link with other struggles over a common enemy. We can find further refinement of our question of nowtopians and their specific role in revolution in Beverly Silver's distinction between Polanyi-type and Marx-type labor unrest, which are born of different experiences of capital domination:

By Polanyi-type labor unrest, we mean the backlash resistances to the spread of a global self-regulating market, particularly by working classes that are being unmade by global economic transformations as well as by those workers who had benefited from established social compacts that are being abandoned from above. And by Marx-type labor unrest, we mean the struggles of newly emerging working classes that are successively made and strengthened as an unintended outcome of the development of historical capitalism, even as old working classes are being unmade (Silver 2003:20).

Nowtopian struggles, we might say, are a Marx-type labor unrest of late capitalism, because they are born from a new shared experience of class under capital, as we will argue. We consider "class", or specifically, "the working class", in fairly straightforward Marxist terms—that is, the people who have the common experience of being forced to sell their labor in order to reproduce their lives (inclusive of those who do not currently labor but live within the threat of it—unemployed, welfare recipients, domestic workers, etc), and who do not own the means of production. In affirming nowtopian activity's political importance, we make the essential move of recognizing the value form and waged labor—those fundamental requirements of the capitalist mode of production, without which it would not be capitalism—as itself a violence (both on individuals who have to do it and society which is impoverished by the misuse of human energy that follows the system of waged labor). We can in this way include "nowtopians"—those who are most deeply and directly affected by the violence of the value form, of profound abstraction—within a broad, all inclusive definition of the working class that has the potential to unite across their different experiences, needs, geographies, against the capitalist mode of production. As Silver (2003:179) argues at the end of her book:

The ultimate challenge faced by the workers of the world in the early twenty-first century is the struggle, not just against one's own exploitation and exclusion, but for an international regime that truly subordinates profits to the livelihood of all.

The nowtopian experience is a class experience—specifically, that of a section of the working class who have a particular shared experience vis-à-vis capital, such that they decide to withdraw as much as possible

from the labor force on the basis that better, more fulfilling work can be done outside the waged dynamic. Despite a general discomfort with using class to explain social structures, the reproduction and expansion of capitalist society still produces capital at one pole and proletarians at the other. To understand the significance of nowtopia we need to take a look at the history of the concept of class.

Class Unmade

In the second half of the twentieth century, the US working class, having taken center stage during the turbulent 1930s, disappeared into the virtual mists of television, suburbia, and an endless expanse of shopping opportunities. It is not that people stopped working, or that they were suddenly all self-employed entrepreneurs—far from it! Rather, something had succeeded in convincing North Americans of the unprecedented notion that nearly everyone was in the middle class.

From the unique material rearrangement of society brought by the Fordist era, a complimentary consciousness took shape. The rise of television during the 1950s introduced a new dimension to social reproduction, described by the Situationists in the 1960s as the “Society of the Spectacle” (Debord 1994 [1967]).² In Spectacular society, lived experience seems less real than the received, edited representations of life through various media channels. Time is flattened into an endless *now*, as history itself disappears, leaving behind only a stream of nostalgic episodes and the souvenirs that accompany them. Spectacular society itself is the lone self-referential expression of reality; anything that contradicts its premises is ignored and soon forgotten.

Daily experiences at work and school became personal and particular, and when the received “truth” represented on television did not match people’s experience, they blamed their own personal failure rather than noticing they were shared, collective predicaments. If the TV said this was the best of all possible worlds, and you didn’t think your life was so hot, well, there must be something wrong with you rather than a systemic problem, since everyone *else* was apparently happy and prospering.

After a couple of decades of repetition and the careful excising of critical voices from mainstream media, far fewer North Americans saw themselves as part of a working class. An ability to buy the trappings of middle class life—occupy new homes in suburbia, drive a new car—all reinforced a superficial egalitarianism. This shallow equality was based on social competition and stood on an under-acknowledged foundation of class hierarchy defined by race, geography, and relative wealth. Working-class pride slowly gave way to an ideology of middle-class “professionalism”, a bludgeon used even on burger flipping “associates” in fast-food joints.

In the late 1960s, US businesses began to suffer falling profit rates as world market competition heated up, combining with the extraordinary social upheavals of the period, President Nixon abrogated the gold standard and unilaterally broke with the post-World War II Bretton Woods system of global economic regulation. This unleashed a massive capitalist attack on the working class in the USA, first with the sudden rise in the price of oil (Midnight Notes Collective 1992), and by the time Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, with the full blown deindustrialization of the once powerful Rust Belt. The Keynesian/corporatist “deal” between organized labor and the imperial state was broken, and the capitalist assault on living standards and the social safety net picked up speed during the next two decades. Not until the anti-globalization movement confronted the 1999 WTO ministerial in Seattle did deep opposition to the capitalist new world order would become manifest in the heart of the empire.

The decomposition of the working class wrought by three decades of global restructuring was met with opposition, but not in the usual sense of riots and strikes. Much of the opposition took the form of withdrawal, an individualized exodus from the terms set by capitalist culture. With the demise of the familiar blue-collar working class, and the earlier erosion of the honored category of “worker”, most people came to see themselves less in terms of what they *did*, and more in terms of what they *owned*.

With the shift in popular consciousness from a focus on what one *does* at work, to what one was able to *buy* after work, a subtle political shift took place, too. Instead of organizing at work to improve conditions or increase pay, or to challenge the nature and purpose of work itself, politics moved out of production and into other realms. Confronted with poor work conditions, most people simply quit and looked for another job. The political realm expanded to areas other than the workplace. Identitarian movements arose as a healthy antidote to the ponderous, dogmatic, work-based politics practiced by trade unions and left wing organizers who wrongly delineated a specific sort of wage-labor (for example) as *the* space of resistance to capital. These identity-based movements helped to reclaim political agency for a huge majority of the population that had been left out or pushed out by the Old Left paradigm that gave industrial workers a leading role in radical politics. However, the dominant trend in politics shifted so that the political became the realm of the individual person, rather than the complex connections between groups of people and the exploitative system of capital. The identitarian movements were then taken up by the mainstream in their most shallow manifestations. Feminism, anti-racism, and gay liberation, all of which had and have fervent anti-capitalist strains, were mutated through the Spectacle into atomistic, consumerist, or otherwise complicit political currents, contributing to an

individualized sensibility in which your political life was circumscribed by your identity. The analysis of both labor organizers and identity-based organizers shifted mostly away from the interlocking systems of capital and into the atomized activities of the individual human being. Checkbook liberalism triumphed, people ignored what they did all day at work in favor of political action *after* work, leading finally to the notion that one can change the world simply by shopping well (“responsibly”).

But as these processes flattened resistance and revolutionary movements, so also arose new kinds of collaborative, unwaged activity. In the wake of this generation-long shift of political emphasis from production to consumption, and from class to the individual, many people began to practice alternatives to transportation, food provision, fuels, and more. These initiatives have several interesting features. First, they are alternatives that *take a lot of work*. For the people who embrace them, however, it is mostly *enjoyable* work that engages them more fully than their paid jobs. Second, the alternatives are quite often technologically and/or creatively oriented, giving full reign to the tinkering and experimental instincts and skills. As such they are in marked distinction to the normal work experience within the capitalist division of labor—in which machinery sets the pace, embodies the skills, obscures the larger purpose, and limits the individual to dial reading, screw turning, and variations on the theme of deskilled drudgery. Third, the alternative projects are motivated and informed by a growing awareness of ecological dysfunction and waste. Whether making fuel from discarded waste veggie oil or resuscitating and rebuilding broken bicycles, or reclaiming vacant urban lots for organic gardens, a wide variety of these self-emancipatory initiatives draw material from the waste stream of modern life. In these emergent convivial communities, which are largely grounded in unpaid practical work, we see a gradual reversal of the extreme atomization of modern life. The adherents of this inchoate Nowtopian tendency are in revolt against social injustice, and keenly recognize the perilous ecological path global society is treading. They come almost unanimously from the “middle class”, and it is the development of the myth of the middle class that can be partially blamed for the destruction of an antagonistic working class and for the current nowtopian surge—and, importantly, for the sometimes vehement anti-political sentiments of those involved.

The Construction of the Middle Class

Put bluntly, the myth of the middle class is that it is not a part of the working class. What has come to be known as the “middle class” is a weak category, a brilliant marketing concept. People who consider themselves “middle class” identify with a prosperous lifestyle that seems fundamentally egalitarian. They exist in a world where politics is an

occasional annoying interruption to a real life which revolves around the next purchase or experience. But the middle class are wage laborers, and no amount of consumption changes that fact.

“Middle class” is a social mis-identity that has played a big role in neutering social conflict and stabilizing American society. Those who are categorized as “middle class” are neither owners nor consider themselves “working class”, and yet almost everyone in the middle class has a job. The strangest aspect of the ongoing idea of a middle class is that it is so hard to pin down. Who is in it? Who isn’t? Why? Where is the boundary between middle class and rich? Between middle class and working class? (For that matter, where is the boundary between working class and poor?) Can one be middle class by self-designation? Are there objective qualities that can be measured? Can one think oneself middle class and be wrong? Plenty of people in union jobs think of themselves as middle class because they own homes, have health insurance and are above the global mean income. Some argue that owning versus renting one’s home is a key distinction, but that glosses over the many affluent renters who are far wealthier than many poor homeowners. Whatever definition one settles on, the emergence of the category of middle class corresponded to a period of history in which a significant number of people were not desperate and poor but neither did they own the factories, stores, and offices (dare we say “the means of production”?). Some were “independent” professionals like doctors or lawyers, architects or programmers. Others are middle managers and bureaucrats of various types. Plenty more were self-employed, owning small shops, service businesses, or even doing various types of (usually white-collar) contract labor.

The ideology of “professionalism” arose with the emergence of the “middle class”. As Jeff Schmidt (2000:204) has written:

Professionalism—in particular the notion that experts should confine themselves to their “legitimate professional concerns” and not “politicize” their work—helps keep individual professionals in line by encouraging them to view their narrow technical orientation as a virtue, a sign of objectivity rather than of subordination.

Professionalism became one of the most powerful weapons against the demoralizing force of waged work. Fierce attachment to professionalism became one of the defining characteristics of “middle class” workers, in part to reassure themselves that they are not mere laborers. Professionalism came to be used as a blunt weapon in the workplace, such that denouncing a worker (regardless of the working hierarchy between the denouncer and denounced) for “unprofessional” behavior is often a powerful way to curb “unwelcome” speech or behavior.

In recent years, however, as the concept of “middle class” has increasingly engulfed almost anyone who previously considered

themselves “working class”, professionalism has been applied to countless working class jobs, from autoworkers being called “associates” to fast-food clerks who are admonished to behave “professionally” while dressed in ridiculous uniforms working for minimum wage. And while professionalism has never been a guaranteed vaccine against disillusionment, this expansion of the term has diluted its effects even more.

This declining efficacy of “professionalism” to quell alienation and dissatisfaction is another factor in the turn away from waged work, even people who are professionals by the earlier, more stringent standards. For instance, high-paid workers at corporations, hospitals, and respected universities, instead of finding “meaning” in their overwork, are opting for a more direct engagement with purposeful, unwaged work. Jeff Schmidt’s dissection of professionalism illuminates the powerlessness that characterizes crucial aspects of the careerist experience:

Professionals control the technical means but not the social goals of their creative work. The professional’s lack of control over the political content of his or her creative work is the hidden root of much career dissatisfaction . . . Professionals are licensed to think on the job, but they are obedient thinkers (Schmidt 2000:40).

Schmidt further argues that by leaving unchallenged the employer’s control of the political content of his work, the professional “surrenders his social existence, his control over the mark he makes on the world” (Schmidt 2000:208). This is central to the deep dissatisfaction experienced by many so-called successful professionals that pushes some of them to disengage and walk away from their “successful” lives.

It is also worth noting that whatever real security, prosperity, and flexibility was afforded the people who came to view themselves as “middle class” during the decades after World War II have been falling away. During the 1970s many writers sought to analyze the middle class, but it is no longer so easy to see the category at work in society. Barbara Ehrenreich, one of the best-known analysts of the middle class, began in the 1970s writing about the “professional-managerial class” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979), but Ehrenreich’s acute observations of late twentieth century North American life later led her to examine the mystifications and realities surrounding the whole idea of a middle class. With her best-selling *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (Ehrenreich 2005), she discovered with almost naïve amazement (artfully criticized in Tea, 2003) that the actual range of options for so-called middle class professionals is astonishingly narrow. In *Bait and Switch*, she set out to get a job as a \$60,000/year public relations specialist in corporate North America. She spent most of a year networking, getting made over, trained, coached, and cajoled, but

all for naught. Her efforts led only to two unsalaried sales jobs where commissions would only follow investment of time and money—and successful sales work. Along the way she met dozens of panicky and depressed people whose sense of entitlement to the “good jobs” of corporate North America was steadily eroding in the face of the everyday rejections and dead ends that most of them experience. For many former managers, a harsh world of low-wage employment has become the best they can hope for after falling outside the gated enclaves of upper-echelon corporate America.

Thus, the New Leftish attempts to analyze professionals and managers as a class have largely been dropped in the wake of the ruthless rationalization imposed by globalization. These kinds of theories are heard less in the early twenty-first century than they were in the 1970s, in no small part due to the rapid shrinking of the middle management layer during the recent decades of globalization.

Moreover, professionals in most fields have seen their autonomy and relative comfort whittled away through the old dynamics of capitalist consolidation. Today, doctors and lawyers have become employees of multinational firms. Programmers and other technical workers have been subjected to workplace rationalization, increasing the monitoring of their work and ostensibly, their productivity. Freshly minted PhDs have seen tenure tracks disappear just as they entered the market and many have been reduced to glorified temp employment as part-time lecturers. Old jokes about PhDs driving taxis are more true today than ever, except now with students carrying greater debt than ever before. The tremendous increase of personal debt imposed on college students is a structural way that graduates are now coerced into taking any work they can get in order to pay their debts. New relations of debt peonage dominate the lives of the “middle class” in the USA as much as they do whole countries in the global South. Comparable to company stores in coal towns in the nineteenth century, student debt forces potentially free and creative thinkers to work at jobs over which they have no control or say.

In fact, the difference between the lives of post-World War II “professionals” and those of people working in factories or offices as blue- or white-collar workers is shrinking all the time. The former professionals were in important respects just very well-paid workers, enjoying a period of history (approximately three or four decades) in which their skills were in short supply and hard to replace with technology or reorganization or by moving the work elsewhere. The “middle class” workers of North America are better understood as classic proletarians, as Beverly Silver (2003:34) explains:

... the “proletariat” consists of those who must sell their labor power in order to survive. The proletarian condition encompasses a range

of concrete situations, from those who possess scarce skills that are in demand (and hence have relatively strong marketplace bargaining power) to those who are unemployed. It includes those who are employed by private entrepreneurs and those who are employed by the state, for the latter are ultimately no more insulated from the pressures of being treated as a commodity than, say, workers in the internal labor market of a large firm. In both cases, when push comes to shove, the demands of profitability (and their links with tax receipts) can wipe away in short order whatever insulation from the labor market had existed.

The new period of offshoring and outsourcing is bringing the well-educated and technically skilled of the world into direct competition with each other. It is no longer so easy to move laterally from job to job. Instead, steady work is beginning to resemble musical chairs, and the great fear of professional workers is to be between jobs when the music stops. As Ehrenreich discovered, once you're out of the corporate work-world, it's very difficult to get back in, and the longer the gap between jobs grows, the more unlikely it is that you will ever be re-hired.

The 40-hour workweek is a relic of the Fordist past. These days, a successful professional is expected to work upwards of 70 hours a week and to defer indefinitely time off for vacation. Worse, a lot of that working time is unpaid. British journalist Madeleine Bunting describes a common corporate strategy in this era: "Don't employ more people, just devise an organizational culture which will ensure that people will give you their free time for free." And given that nearly 46% of men and 32% of women do so in the UK, clearly it's *working* (Bunting 2004:7). But just measuring the official work done fails to get the full picture. The British Mental Health Association has discovered that people spend an additional 11 hours a week working with cellphones, laptops or puzzling out work problems in the bath (Bunting 2004:10). The story in the USA is certainly comparable, if not more dramatic.

Under today's tightly managed schedules, the separation between personal lives and job demands has narrowed, and for all too many, vanished entirely, to the point that people live to work—which might be a good thing, if not for the radical suppression of human creativity, ingenuity, and passion discussed above.

The emergence of "assertive desertion" and various types of dropping is, as we have mentioned above, not new. But "professionalism" has lost its hold. Increasingly, people are walking away from the supposed benefits of the professional life, often precisely because of the narrowness imposed by the professional credo. The middle class, professional American Dream is the same dream that tantalizes the planet's starving millions with fantasies of comfort and satiation. Many

of that starving majority buy into that promise wholeheartedly, while many others immediately see faults and death riddled throughout. In relation to both perspectives, it becomes quite interesting when people who self-identify as coming from the affluent North American “middle class” begin to abandon it in significant numbers—not just for a different lifestyle, but because of exactly what the middle class life revolves around—professional, “respectable” waged work and consumer bliss. The rejection of professionalism and the middle class lifestyle goes hand-in-hand with the emergence of grassroots do-it-yourself communities, often sustained by the donated labor of former or coulda-been professionals who turned away in search of a more rewarding life. The rat-race was aptly named decades ago—it’s crazy, home-wrecking, hollow and thanklessly sacrificial. Many people opt out to reclaim their basic human dignity. Meanwhile, pressure mounts from below.

DIY, Autonomous Reproduction, Doing it Ourselves

The Do It Yourself [DIY] ethic seeks to overthrow the idea that we will be provided for. We will provide for ourselves, through educating each other, through collective decision making. It fits into this larger concept of an ideal society (Gillock 2003).

As with most subcultural phenomena co-opted by the mainstream, the term “DIY” has been exploited to the point of mediocrity by advertising agencies and corporate profiteers. Walk into any corporate chain hardware store and you’ll be bombarded by a DIY that has become a hollow, menacing mockery of the fervent DIY ethos that fuels much of the subcultural underground (Bravo 2005:1).

Like [DIY] zinesters, hobbyists are fleeing their alienated work experiences by creating their own product and sharing that experience with others . . . the fact that millions of “normal” Americans share the basics of a practice that distinguishes work done for money from work done for love, holds out the promise that such critiques of alienated labor are not the sole possession of underground malcontents (Duncombe 1997:185).

DIY, insofar as it really means “do it yourself”, long predates capitalism as a system. Human beings have always “done it themselves”. It is this vast field of normal human activity that became the raw material for capital to exploit, to channel or reduce to the commodity form. The re-emergence of do-it-yourself as a cultural movement, as a political rejection of expertise and authority, and finally as a practical way to meet basic needs, is one of the keystones of this period of class recomposition. The emergence of the concept itself is testament to the way capitalism has carved a trench between people and their labor, their

activity, creativity, their “do-ing”. Now we need a concept to remind ourselves that we are in fact able to do it ourselves! (see Trapese 2007).

Many waged laborers still learn skills on the job that enable them to do things themselves. Mechanics, plumbers, electricians, carpenters all have useful skills and exemplify a practical self-sufficiency that many yearn for, particularly the millions who can’t fix a thing because they’ve been running computers, working retail, in hotels, or with “information”. The new DIY broadly writ, which includes autonomous, anarchist, and communist projects of taking collective control over reproduction, is the early glimmer of a recomposing working class fed up with their de-skilled and deadening work.

Part of the new DIY’s ruling ethos is to solve problems without relying on pre-packaged commodities, corporations, or large sums of money. It is also founded on a creative search for sustainable solutions that can replace our dependency on the alienating social relations of mainstream society. DIY challenges the direction of science and technology from below. Instead of waiting passively for results from corporate and university laboratories that might actually be useful (which happens only accidentally, because there is no social mechanism to define or direct “useful” research) the protagonists of an autonomous technoculture are inventing practical technologies and developing and sharing everyday skills.

Frequently when DIY movements last long enough, they become co-opted back into the larger dynamics of the world economy, becoming a business or non-profit—effectively a type of “farm team” for capitalism. But autonomous grassroots technological initiatives give rise to new social constellations and self-directed practices, even if they eventually become businesses. Implicit in these efforts is the capacity to abruptly change direction, to shape the world consciously instead of reproducing it as it is.

DIY demonstrates an emerging, self-organizing working-class recomposition based on exodus, and as such can be seen as a large part of the content of nowtopian activity. Sometimes this subtle recomposition emerges from so-called advantageous or privileged positions, sometimes from so-called disadvantageous or oppressed positions. DIY tinkerers directly satisfy socially determined needs and desires without their work or its results being reduced to products for sale. This is where we might distinguish Home Depot’s DIY marketing from a nowtopic DIY practice—the latter kind of DIY is instigated by a burning desire to leave behind the realm of exchange for a realm of the social, the creative, the useful. One excellent example of this is the growing grassroots bicycle movement, which is expanding through the minds, hearts and hands of people working not for pay, but for the love of the craft, of the experience of bicycling, of the autonomy gained from it, and the community emerging from it.

Outlaw Bicycling

The new bicycling subculture is one of the prominent examples of the gradual re-composition of the working class in North America (although the emergence of the bicycling subculture is not limited to the continent). Bicycling has become a way of choosing a new path, that not only does a better job of moving you through cities (thus satisfying a necessary need), but also begins a process of connecting you to other human beings in new and different ways, through many kinds of nowtopian work. This does not mean that self-aware workers are embracing bicycles as a strategy of class resistance in a capitalist world. But bicycling subculture is an assertive desertion of some of the central spheres of capitalist society. It is also an arena where people who survive through selling their time and skills in “normal” jobs connect with each other creatively and productively outside of that process.

The best known manifestation of the outlaw bicycling subculture has to be Critical Mass, which gives bicycling a radical tinge by the fact that it puts into practice a new type of public commons, created and animated by human conviviality, the kind of life usually promised “after the revolution”. It escapes the logic of commodification entirely. No one has to buy anything to participate, and there is practically no hawking of wares around the event. Rolling down the street in a new mobile community, Critical Mass has pioneered network swarming as a political tactic, albeit a tactic employed to no instrumental purpose (Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001). Critical Mass’s amorphous and prefigurative qualities militate against making demands, declaring an agenda or seeking specific goals (at the same time, hundreds of political ideas, campaigns and slogans have been distributed during Critical Mass rides, new friends have been made, parties and other rides planned, etc.). Instead, an unpredictable number of citizens come together freely each month in cities large and small to begin living a different life, together.

Outlaw bicycle subculture’s shock troops provide the backbone of a growing network of under-funded, barely sustainable co-op and DIY bike shops. The women and men who find a way to survive on very low incomes, or who work at these shops after their paid gigs, are resourceful, politically engaged, and passionate. They challenge the transit and energy systems shaped by capitalism but crucially, they are making connections *in practice* between people of different races, classes, and genders, as well as connecting, again *in practice*, the patterns of urban life, the process of city planning, technological innovation and ecological reinhabitation.

San Francisco’s Bike Kitchen is an all-volunteer space and deliberately refuses to provide paid services. “It’s part of our policy not to do repairs for money . . . we’re here to show people how to do it,” says co-founder Jessie Basbaum (2004). “It’s definitely not a job,” emphasizes co-founder Catherine Hartzell (Basbaum 2004). In fact, if

it were to become a job, Hartzell wonders “how I would feel. I don’t think I would love it as much. When it’s required of you, and you’re not making the decision, you lose some sense of enjoyment.”

Basbaum described a cultural critique of wage labor without naming it as such: “[People have] this idea that you have a job, but whatever you really care about should be your hobby, it shouldn’t be your job, because then it becomes more mundane.”

Ben Guzman, co-founder of the Los Angeles Bike Kitchen (no direct relation to the San Francisco Bike Kitchen, but the same name), works on television commercials for a living. But as he put it, explaining the relationship between his paid work and the volunteer Bike Kitchen work:

... my work the last few years has just been a way to get to be able to do the things I want to do ... all my jobs, are just a means to get back to doing what’s important. While I’m at work I’m taking a pause from the rest of the stuff I’m doing (Guzman 2003).

The bicycling subculture, however, is numerically overwhelmed by the age-old urban agricultural practices that are experiencing a concerted and nearly political revival by people motivated by nowtopian desires. Through stories of these movements we can better locate nowtopia in the historical transformations that have taken place in urban centres worldwide. In the activities of these nowtopian gardeners and farmers, we begin to see a way of cultivating self-reproducing practices and developing collective trust and interdependence, both of which enable autonomy from the movement of capitalist accumulation, and develop strength that is needed to combat it.

Vacant-Lot Gardeners

... the urban community garden, with its potential for feeding households and generating local cottage industry, with its power to restore a measure of community life, and with its capacity to recycle organic wastes, is thriving throughout the world: in Karachi, La Paz, Hong Kong, Nairobi, Dakar, Dar es Salaam, and Bangkok, as well as in Philadelphia, Detroit, Newark, and Los Angeles. Globally, about two hundred million urban dwellers are urban farmers. Most of these farmers are women, and they provide food and income for about seven hundred million people. Is it so surprising that urban women of color would use community gardens to repair the fabric of our inner cities? Neither nostalgic for a pastoral past, nor Luddite in its sensibility, the inner-city community garden movement restores a nature banished from the industrial city, and offers a degree of self-sufficiency and neighborhood security, achievements that elude the master plans of urban planning experts (Hynes 1996:156).

The second half of the twentieth century saw a series of immense upheavals in the use and treatment of urban space. The Urban Renewal or “redevelopment” juggernaut, initiated largely by the Housing Act of 1954, leveled hundreds of previously inhabited inner city acres, displacing residents and often leaving the resulting lots vacant for years. Political riots in the late 1960s also flattened hundreds of urban acres. After Martin Luther King’s assassination, black communities rioted in many cities, burning hundreds of city blocks. Ongoing social discrimination and police repression in black communities provoked additional insurrections in the late 1960s. Large urban areas were devastated by fire, leaving empty urban swathes of rubble and trash. In the 1970s waves of landlord arson and abandonment afflicted many inner city neighborhoods in New York, Detroit, Newark, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, and more.

Depopulation, abandonment, and crumbling infrastructure frame the decomposition of the urban working class, most visible among urban communities of color, but also evident in the atomized white-bread “middle class” lives filling suburbs around the decayed cities. Decomposition, however, is not an end point, but a stage for new growth. Faced with the destruction of communities, livelihoods, and the neighborhood-based relationships that sustained earlier generations through tough times, resilient residents began slowly to reclaim their streets. Facing official indifference or open hostility, inner city residents had only themselves to rely on as they began to sow the seeds of class recomposition. Small acts of solidarity and neighborliness were the kernels of a direct approach to the system’s destructive policies. We might see this period as the beginning of a new kind of urban gardening movement in the USA that is growing still, and involves much activity and passion we might call nowtopian.

This movement is powered by the experience and knowledge of older generations. An important precursor to this contemporary urban gardening movement is the Victory Gardens of World War II. In Laura Lawson’s (2005:171) masterful history of community gardening she cites a 1944 US Department of Agriculture report:

By 1944, M.L. Wilson, director of extension programs for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, could report that between eighteen and twenty million families had victory gardens that collectively provided 40 percent of the total American vegetable supply.

The know-how developed by local gardeners during the war-time effort was not entirely lost as the parks and public grounds were returned to their previous non-garden uses after the war.

Many of the agricultural skills that help urban gardening to thrive can also be traced to recent arrivals from rural areas in the South, or the Caribbean, Africa, South America, or Asia (for example, Central

Americans and Mexicans in Los Angeles, Puerto Ricans in New York, Hmong tribesmen from Laos in Seattle, Washington, African-Americans from rural Alabama, Mississippi, or Georgia in cities from Detroit to New York to San Francisco, although it is true that newcomers and ethnicities from far and wide mix in all these places too). In a recent example, Annette Young Smith, a 66-year-old Alabama native who has lived in San Francisco's Bayview district for 34 years, applied her rural roots to the rock-hard median where she lives on the 1700 block of Quesada Avenue. Since she and her friend Karl Paige started removing debris and planting a garden in 2002, the entire block has been transformed. Neighbors all know each other now, and the garden that anchors the community has won awards and attracts visitors and helpers from all around. The block is a quintessentially San Franciscan street, "young and old. Gay and straight. Black, white, Asian, and Latino. Newcomers and oldtimers. Immigrants and native born." Gardening provides a common language and context in an urban environment that usually promotes private property and individualism.

Elders who have been gardening for 20 or more years, whose own forebears were often farmers, are sharing their know-how with younger generations to help extend the culture and knowledge across time and space. It is a sweetly reciprocal relationship as older gardeners say they have been reinvigorated by the young people who have gotten involved.

In Philadelphia's Glenwood Green Acres, a renowned four-acre farm with over 100 distinct plots among North Philadelphia's abandoned warehouses and factories, the elders share a common past as disciplined, hardworking children on farms in the South with close ties to the land. During and after World War II they joined the great black migration to the north, coming to Philadelphia to work in factories, warehouses, and other "city jobs". Now in their 60s, 70s, and 80s they are anxious to share their farming heritage, especially for traditional crops like sweet potatoes, cotton, and peanuts, which had been passed down to them by their grandparents (Hynes 1996).

On the East Coast a nonprofit organization called *Nuestras Raices* builds community in a Puerto Rican neighborhood that has long engaged in the practice of converting abandoned lots into gardens. Dan Ross, Executive Director of *Nuestras Raices*, said:

The heart and soul of the organization is the community gardens: all of our projects grow out of the gardens, and all of the projects are planned and implemented by the garden members. It's not just about food. It's about building community and building connections. It isn't just agriculture, it's culture. If you recognize that, you end up being more sustainable within a community because you build greater networks and you tap into a lot more resources (Woelfe-Erskine 2002:23)

Again and again we see communities establish gardens as anchors to rejuvenated neighborhood life. As the food grows, so do the human connections. A spokesman from the Detroit Agricultural Network (DAN) which formed in the mid 1990s sums it up: “The idea is to grow community, to grow people, and to grow food at the same time” (Woelfe-Erskine 2002).

The painstaking years-long efforts to bring community gardens to life have depended on countless hours of hard work. In a harshly capitalist society where unpaid work is dismissed as a hobby, but looking at the urban transformation wrought over the past generation of community gardening, we are compelled to understand this work as much more than a hobby. Gardeners are *working* to refashion their lives in tune with their own visions, know-how, and multidimensionality. The motivations of community gardeners are varied, but remuneration is seldom first among them. As we’ve seen, building community is a central goal, embodying a range of needs for friendship, camaraderie, mutual aid, and ecological intervention. Also, a new relationship to food drives a great many garden projects. But at the root, it is a different relationship to *work* that inspires and sustains many community gardeners.

Pam Pierce (2006), long-time urban gardener in the Bay Area, describes the difference:

What I wanted to do was investigate things. I knew early on that if you volunteer you can do more interesting things than on a job . . . When you volunteer, you get to try something different. If you sit around on a job and wait for someone to notice that you can do something and give you the opportunity to do it, you might sit there forever . . . if you have skills [or desires] you want to develop and you’re willing to do it for free, the sky’s the limit.

But nowtopian efforts, as they gain power, will ultimately come into conflict with some or another agent of the capitalist infrastructure. Urban gardening has experienced many such attacks. John Wright (1999:128–129) explains the politics underlying common city-led attacks on community gardens, particularly those in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1990s, though his words can be taken to apply to many assaults on gardens over the last three decades:

The war on gardens goes far beyond short-sighted urban planning policies and real estate graft. Community gardens are targets because they are liberated zones, areas free from consumption and mediation, at a time when the very idea of urban public space is under assault. Community gardens are as much community as garden . . . Gardens provide a rare public place for people to meet and socialize . . . Many of the gardens feature sculpture, murals, music, theater, dance and poetry, precious commodities as nonprofit arts spaces are priced out of the city. In a rapidly segregating city, gardens are some of the few spaces left

where people can transcend their narrow demographic boundaries in a common cause . . . In this world, gardens, despite their many benefits, are seen as nuisances, obstacles to profit and control, scary pagan groves that threaten the strict fundamentalism of the Market . . .

As if he were reading from the same book, then-Mayor Giuliani dutifully presented the mainstream argument in the press. In January 1999, Giuliani on his WABC weekly radio show says: “This is a free-market economy. The era of communism is over.” A year later, in 2000, the *New York Times* quoted him saying: “If you live in an unrealistic world then you can say everything should be a community garden.” Giuliani’s rhetoric is the logical continuation of the Reagan/Thatcher assaults on the public sector, embracing fully a market fundamentalism that insists on reducing everything to a commodity for sale.

But it wasn’t just a zealous mayor behind the attack on community gardens. A whole stratum of bureaucrats and planners understood the city they sought to engineer, based on upscale home ownership and a municipal economy fueled by luxury consumption, which was anathema to the gardeners who were bringing forth quite a different life. When asked at a public hearing about the notion of incorporating portions of the gardens into development plans, New York’s Department of Housing, Preservation and Development deputy commissioner Mary Bolton, responded that “open space is inconsistent with home ownership” (Ferguson 1999).

The destruction of community gardens was presaged by the total government de-funding of community garden programs in 1992, which in turn led to a complicated business-like turn in the structure of some community gardens. During the 1970s, the US Department of Agriculture had begun to fund an Urban Garden Program. By 1980, the federal Urban Garden Program had served nearly 200,000 urban residents, including approximately 65,000 youth. In 1982 alone, an estimated \$17 million worth of food was produced (Hynes 1996:216). The neoliberal globalization process and the Reagan Administration that backed it began to cut and shrink anything that could be termed “welfare”, including the Urban Garden Program. The end of government support forced gardens (along with a whole panoply of “non-profit organizations”) to turn to private philanthropy and foundations for support. This in turn drove many towards models of greater economic self-sufficiency, which also meant more business-like behavior, leading some to feel that gardens have lost some of their focus on actual gardening in favor of, for instance, youth employment programs and training.

Here we encounter one of the major threats to the nowtopian drive—the threat of co-optation and corruption of projects due to being re-integrated into the system in one of many ways. Gardeners are often

undogmatically willing to engage people and institutions in any number of ways, both through a “traditional” economy and through a radically decommodified gift economy, while still maintaining their sights on the goal of the garden and the food security, community connectivity, and collective living-together that it brings. But walking the fence between market or state influence and collective social goals is always tenuous. Urban gardeners across the spectrum have reacted differently to this problematic, and the answers are still in the making.

Steve Frillman (2006), current executive director of NYC’s Green Guerrillas advises: Stand your ground, pitch a tent, and invite people in who are willing to do hard work: wild-eyed idealists, pragmatists, activists, lawyers, planners. Don’t get too caught up on consensus, and don’t get discouraged by conflict. You can get a lot done together while disagreeing on important points along the way.

For lifelong city dwellers used to food arriving in cellophane, urban gardens are laboratories where they can (re)discover seasonal foods and local plants, along with the soil and waterways hidden beneath the concrete. Urban gardening opens up new terrain—gardeners alter land uses, people meet across cultures and ethnicities, and new ways of “doing politics” begin to emerge. Of course it remains tentative and experimental, as new relationships find their purposes, boundaries, and rhythms. But something new and important is growing in vacant lots that nourishes bodies *and* souls.

Nowtopians and Networks

Nowtopian efforts, gardening prominent among them, are good examples of the multiplicity of network forms that are reshaping the spatiality of politics and work in this era. Networks are usually characterized by self-organizing connections among people based on affinities. Sometimes those affinities relate to where we live, such as neighborhoods, or address a practical need, like food or Community-Support Agriculture (CSA) efforts. We see the network form in local urban gardening groups engaged in discussion not only face-to-face in the garden, but also by way of a dedicated email group or listserv. Networks appear in free software-based websites that facilitate connections among heirloom vegetable farmers and their potential buyers (see localharvest.org, slowfood.org), or in the connections that span the globe via the World Social Forum and its movement of movements (or network of networks). The forms that are called networks are not all the same. They straddle a range encompassing the simple needs of local individuals to connect with like-minded folks working on the same or similar projects, all the way to the emerging need of social movements on different continents to share skills, resources, and to coordinate strategy and tactics vis-à-vis global economic dynamics.

Unlike previous political forms that built national and international institutions, and then sought to affect policy from these non-governmental organizations, networks begin locally and often stay there. The form helps people living isolated daily lives begin to rebuild the social and human connections that are the indispensable starting point of any political challenge to the status quo. But prior to constituting themselves on such ambitious grounds, networks facilitate simple human relationships that were once commonly forged in shared workplaces and shared neighborhoods. The most resilient networks are rooted in practical daily lives and shared purposes that emerge from those material conditions. Also emerging from similar material conditions globally is a “network sensibility”, a tendency towards self-organizing and linking across boundaries—geographical, political, even metaphorical. In the wake of the decline of trade unions, the hollowing out of states (and shredding of social safety nets once assured by those states), and the increasingly business-like non-profit organizations (NGOs) that dominate social movements, slowly emerging networks eschew the roles and limits of the old organizational forms. Instead they focus on basic needs such as food, transportation, communications, self-determination. Similar networks are in gestation to address basic infrastructural needs like electricity and water, as well as shelter and clothing.

The backbone of the network form is communications. Though the prospect of a different organization of life in its totality is still a distant dream, the internet and its tools of popular participation are themselves products of countless individuals who dedicated themselves to creating it all, much of it without remuneration (Terranova 2004:94). As the Online Policy Group’s founder, Will Doherty, put it: “The open source community is pretty much tech support for the revolution, if you will, or tech support for the new society” (Doherty 2004). The motivation to contribute to this new world in formation has led thousands of people to dedicated countless hours to shaping and perfecting software tools and even sometimes hardware outside the wage-labor paradigm. The General Public License for Linux (and many other programs) has eroded the private ownership paradigm in the software and online worlds, but more importantly, it is rooted in a self-reinforcing and self-expanding work culture centered around goals *other than* monetary reward. This material experience of a different kind of work has influenced people far beyond the programmers who have contributed so much to it (Juris 2004). The daily experience of an online world largely free to use in turn shapes the imaginations of its participants, helping to frame a paradigm based on generalized abundance instead of scarcity, a part of life where there is more than enough to go around. The Internet also reveals a nearly limitless abundance that stimulates sharing and cooperation for its own sake, a digital commons reinforcing human interconnectedness

and interdependence. In a late capitalist world of numbing barbarism and alienated isolation, the powerful allure of meaningful communication inspires passionate engagement and remarkable time investments by millions. This participatory commons harbors every kind of human relationship, from the banality of buying and selling to the unconstrained sharing of poetry, art, music—any kind of expression that depends on communication. A post-capitalist life founded on generalized abundance is prefigured in self-expanding autonomous communications spaces online. But that is only one possible future, and far from inevitable.

There are two opposed visions of the Net that co-exist in tense mutual dependence. The internet can be stuffed into the tiny box we call the “Market” or it can prompt a revolutionary redesign of how we do what we do, and how it fits into an urgently needed planetary ecological renaissance. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, social forces are pulling in both directions. The internet—and the creative, often unpaid software work that makes use of it—is evolving amidst an epoch-shaping fight over the purpose and status of this new arena of human socializing. Prolific free communication on the net constitutes an ongoing material experience unlike anything available in pre-internet societies. Its practitioners are learning something new about cooperation, sharing, and collective and derivative social endeavors. Furthermore, the quasi-communistic results of free software production (even the more business-oriented open-source projects) are an ongoing affirmative “NO” to the shoddy quality and profit-distorted work undergirding commercial software produced at large corporations.

Slowly but surely the new transnational and asynchronous networks are shaping up as a real alternative to traditional political forms. The network form is increasingly the shape that political and social interaction depends on, and is in turn shaped by our experiences with the internet. The infrastructure provided by the internet has facilitated protests and movements while fostering radical decentralization and local control. Movements and campaigns that might have labored in total obscurity find a global network of interest and support. It is difficult to imagine, for example, the Zapatistas avoiding massacre without the global attention they gained through savvy use of the internet. The 15 February 2003 global anti-war protests brought out between 12 and 20 million people in what is widely acknowledged as the largest planetary protest ever held, an event self-organized largely through the internet. Fourth-generation warfare like the insurgency in Iraq shares “open source” characteristics, and has bedeviled advanced military machines unable to adapt to the new flexibility (Robb 2007).

The ultimate fantasy for many people today is that a technology will automatically solve our problems. For political radicals it’s all too easy to fall into this trap when it comes to the rise of Free-as-in-Libre and OpenSource Software (FLOSS). The gnarly drama of face-to-face

discussion, political disagreement, and class, racial, and gender conflict cannot be escaped by creating elegant software, no matter how open it might be. Networks are not replacements for politics, but rather emergent ways to reorganize political life. As Jamie King wrote in *Mute* 27 in 2004:

What the idea of openness must tackle first and most critically is that a really open organization cannot be realized without a prior radicalization of the social-political field in which it operates. And that, of course, is to beg the oldest of questions (King 2004).

What we see in the Free Software movement and the attendant rise of the network form is not a techno-fix so much as an evolving process of techno-creative collaboration. Rather than a linear process that establishes a technological foundation in which politics can become truly democratic, or a reverse linearity in which radical politics sets the stage for a new technosphere, we are in a confusing historic period characterized by a learn-as-we-go experimentalism. The radical political subjectivity that can make new use of an open technosphere emerges from the work that builds that apparatus, while that nowtopian work also reshapes the assumptions and expectations embedded in the broad cultural environment (for discussion of network as a political ideal, see Juris 2005). The steps taken now might make possible a post-capitalist, self-directed, networked society, hundreds of thousands of local communities knit together in essential cooperation across regions, continents, and the globe.

Is Nowtopia a Stop on the Road to Revolution?

Social revolution is not much talked about these days. The last great outpouring of revolutionary rhetoric was ultimately silenced by the failures and co-optation of national liberation movements, the demise of Soviet-modeled “socialism”, and the defeat and partial absorption of radical movements by a resilient capitalist world order. In the oppositional vacuum that appeared in the wake of (self-proclaimed) triumphant liberal capitalism, initiatives to change life that were borne of dissatisfaction and alienation went underground, burrowing into the interstices of daily life, where they are slowly raising their heads under the aegis of a broad range of autonomous initiatives.

Working for a wage reduces work’s purpose to an empty, abstract monetary reward. Work done for its own sake is fundamentally different. Defined by the person doing it, deemed good and necessary on its social and/or ecological (rather than financial) merits, un-waged work fulfills and confirms a multidimensional sensibility, providing a whole range of feelings and experiences beyond the narrow instrumentalism of work for money. Work that is not coerced through the need to make money is always more satisfying to do, when the reason and reward for your

work is not the ultimately empty abstraction of money, but comes from the multiple, complex intimate connections that we maintain and create through our work, our creative activity. The quality is “better” too, because everyone does their best work when determining their own purpose and pace.

Dissent may erupt into direct insubordination, but the nowtopian exodus from capitalism’s hollow “choices” often amounts to *non*-subordination. Nowtopic social movements are not creating alternate systems of “self-valorization” as much as they are removing the mediator of value from their engaged practices in the world. These movements go beyond hobbies like working on your own home or car (activities that remain within the logic of individual consumers). Community gardeners, alternative fuel innovators, anti-consumer bicyclists (to name a few of the nowtopian movements visible today) are producing communities and collectivities that embody a different sense of the individual and the group. Also, they represent technological revolts that have a more accurate and nuanced sensitivity to ecological practices and their relationship to local behaviours, because the goal is not obscured by the demands of the market or a boss. Taken together, this constellation of practices is an elaborate, decentralized, uncoordinated collective research and development effort exploring a potentially post-capitalist, post-petroleum future.

Slavoj Žižek recently made a curiously ahistorical assertion when he wrote “one of the clearest lessons of the last few decades is that capitalism is indestructible” (Žižek 2008:20). Žižek lists manifestations of “left reactions” to global capitalism in order to show that none of them take on the necessary task of making “finite demands” on those in power. One of his examples is similar to, but crucially different from the Nowtopian argument we have made:

[One left reaction] emphasizes that one can undermine global capitalism and state power, not by directly attacking them, but by refocusing the field of struggle on everyday practices, where one can “build a new world”; in this way, the foundations of the power of capital and the state will be gradually undermined, and, at some point, the state will collapse . . . (Žižek 2008:21)

Nowtopian behaviors certainly will not cause the state or global capitalism to collapse by themselves. These movements are vulnerable to a host of forces—importantly, cooption and reintegration into the capitalist system, a process that destroys their anti-capitalist dynamic. Nowtopians can only avoid such cooptation by finding a political voice and eventually, the social power to overthrow Capital—to put an end to “productive” labor once and for all. This will happen if enough nowtopian movements face the prospect of integrating themselves back into the economy in order to survive, and the people involved decide they

will not accept that re-insertion into a world they want to abandon. And this will entail connecting the political voice of nowtopia to other voices that combat capital for other reasons across very uneven geographical terrain, and across gulfs that separate radically different experiences we have all had. We begin to understand that our enemy is common even if it hurts us differently, and that we are stronger fighting it on all its different battlefields.

Nowtopians are not the beginning and end of social change, but they are an immanent part. Nowtopia *is* the fact that human beings are forever resilient in recreating patterns of behavior based on mutual aid, collaboration, and collective need, despite the forces working against those desires and impulses. Nowtopians do not preemptively set out the goal to *build nowtopia*, but they create it through their necessary activities. Nowtopia is not *utopia*—not Sir Thomas More’s unachievable ideal utopia, nor the utopia that intentional communities have attempted to calculate and construct. Nowtopia is a self-emancipatory process that *is happening*, continuously. Nowtopia is the reality that the market economy is antithetical to our needs and desires, and through nowtopian movements we realize again that we cannot survive without “unproductive” labor, that the more our activities are not circumscribed by capital, the more we will *do* and the more we will enjoy.

A movement capable of a revolutionary transformation cannot appear from nowhere, and it cannot depend on inevitable success. It has to emerge from daily practices among communities of human beings who trust each other and can take action together—in immediate practical ways as much as in far-reaching global ways. By reinventing a healthy relationship to self-activity, technology, and ecology, the emergent practices of Nowtopia constitute a foundation from which a revolutionary challenge worth its name might emerge. Without something to defend and protect, and without strong ties of solidarity, collectivity, or mutual respect and aid, we may not have the strength for a major struggle. Emergent practices of convivial, creative collectivities that address real needs are something we will be willing to defend, especially since we have come to them not only out of a desire to leave the old world, but because we can no longer survive without them.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper is partly based on material from Chris Carlsson’s new book *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists and Vacant-lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today* (AK Press, 2008).

² See also Debord (1996 [1987]).

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