

W.&.T.C.H.

ON THE RECENT #OCCUPATIONS

COMMUNIQUE FROM W.&.T.C.H.
HALLOWEEN 2011
BALTIMORE, AMERIKKKA

This occupation is inevitable, and yet we need to make it. There is no way for capitalism to continue its reign — this is clear. And yet, capitalism will not behead itself: we know that we need to struggle in some way if we are to overcome it. This statement is not a rejection of the recent occupations — as if occupy could be avoided, as if the present conditions were not so grave, as if we haven't all had enough. But there are things that need to be said. We submit this critique in the deepest solidarity with those people of color, women, queer, and trans* folx that have endured occupy encampments everywhere, while laboring on making them more livable from the inside.¹

Before anything else, we must frame this movement within a prior occupation: that of white settlers on Nanticoke and Susquehannock land. The genocide, expulsion, and dispossession of native peoples is foundational to the ascent of the US as a center of global capital.² As a settler colony, the US was founded on a logic of agricultural settlement that implies the commodification of land — an always-violent process. The early history of capitalism in North America is a bloody story: to establish a vast supply of arable territory and docile labor, capital coursed through colonial domination and enslavement. On this ground, we cannot

reclaim this country, but only acknowledge it as a unit of capitalist destruction.

At the same time, we want to caution against conflating colonialism and its resistance by flattening them into a single tactic — as in the debates within various encampments about whether “decolonization” ought to replace “occupy.” Occupation is, after all, a tactic often wielded by the oppressed. We recognize that in what follows, we fail to address the many contradictions latent in the potential to reclaim occupied land — but we would rather these contradictions be addressed and worked through than blotted out by another term.

“WE ARE THE 99%”

If we want to use this figure to underscore how far polarized the rich and the poor are today, fine. But those of us that don't homogenize so easily get suspicious when we hear calls for unity. What other percentages hide behind the nearly-whole 99%? What about the 16% of Blacks that are “officially” unemployed, double the number of whites? The 1 out of 8 Black men in their twenties that on any given day will be in prison or jail? The quarter of women that will get sexually assaulted in their lifetime? The dozens of queer, trans*, intersex, and gender-variant folks that are murdered each year, 70% of whom are people of color?³ Is a woman of color's experience of the crisis interchangeable with

1 We use trans* to encompass gender non-conforming and genderqueer individuals, as well as trans men and women.

2 We define capitalism as a mode of production in which commodity exchange and waged labour are dominant forms. Capital, by contrast, refers to a particular circuit of capitalist accumulation, a process of private profit through investment in production or financial speculation.

3 We use queer to describe any non-heterosexual and heteronormative sexualities, as well as those who do not conform to binary or cis gendered presentations. ‘Queer’ can also (with varying degrees of usefulness and political tractability) denote a separation from mainstream LGBT

that of the white man whose wage is twice hers? Are we all Troy Davis?⁴ As austerity grinds us down, who among us will go to prison? Who will be relegated to informal, precarious labor? Whose benefits will be cut, whose food stamps canceled or insufficient? Who will be evicted? Who will be unable to get health care, to get hormones or an abortion?

Don't get us wrong. We're not asking for better wages or a lower interest rate. We're not even asking for the full abolition of capital — *there's no one to ask*. For now, we are simply critiquing this occupation for assuming we are there, while we have so far been left out. Because we know that whatever is next will be something we make, not something we ask for. For this reason, even if we don't feel safe there, even if what little analysis and structure that has emerged thus far makes clear we are not a part of this movement, we radical feminist, anti-racist revolutionaries are going to keep bringing our bodies and ideologies to the occupation. And we do so in the same spirit as those women of color who continue to support and attend Slutwalk despite critiquing its white-centered politics: because we see potential here for building resistance and affecting material change.⁵ But for this potential to be realized, we have to work together in solidarity with the understanding that unity must be constructed with an analysis of difference, not just plastered blindly over inequalities. Consider this text a chip at the plaster.

movements, which characteristically advocate assimilation into heteropatriarchy and bourgeois society.

4 Troy Davis was executed in Butts County, Georgia, on September 21st, 2011, after serving 20 years in prison for the alleged murder of a white police officer. In the wake of his death, a trend to self-identify with Troy Davis emerged on Twitter, and whites would end their tweets with #IAmTroyDavis.

5 Slutwalk began in Toronto in April 2011, in response to police officer Michael Sanguinetti's comment during a visit to students at a York University campus Constable that to remain safe, "women should avoid dressing like sluts." Slutwalks rapidly cropped up around the country, prompting debate about the implicit (and ultimately, with a notoriously racist sign at Slutwalk New York, explicit) whiteness of the campaign's rhetoric and pro-sexual liberation assumptions.

ANTI-FINANCE OR ANTI-CAPITAL?

Nothing is more clear in the US debt-scape than the racial character of everyday finance. There is no better indicator that people of color cannot be assimilated to the faceless borrowers of the 99% than the strategic location of payday loan offices, taxpreparation outlets, and banks that specialize in subprime mortgages. But debt is sexed, too. And not only because women, like people of color, were disproportionately solicited for subprime mortgages (across all income levels). A map of foreclosures, of adjustable-rate mortgages, a topography of interest rates: all these overlap neatly on the demographics of racialized and feminized poverty, because race and gender are no longer grounds to deny credit, but indexes of risk. And as long as risk can be commodified, as long as volatility can be hedged against and profited from, our color and gender will be blamed for the inevitable collapse. This is the absurdity of everyday finance. *We* are the risk? *We* are the predators? Finance's favorite game must be the schoolyard refrain: "I know you are but what am I?"

We know that economic crises means less purchasing power for women, and thus more domestic labor — and more domestic labor means more work for women. Dreams of a "mancession" fade quickly when one realizes male-dominated sectors are simply the first to feel a crisis — and the first to receive bailout funds. In crisis, the patriarchal politics of fertility control and the ugly justification of welfare and social security "reforms" are insults added to the injuries of unemployment and unwaged overwork. Add to this the call to "save America's families," the culture war rhetoric that desperately amplifies heteronormativity, patriarchy, in the face of economic meltdown. Crisis translates politically to putting women in their place, while demanding queers and trans people pass or else. And the worse this crisis gets, the more the crisis is excused by a fiction of scarcity, the more the family will be used to promote white supremacy by assaulting women's autonomy under the guise of population control. The old

Malthusian line: it's not a crisis, there's just not enough – for them.⁶

Let us be clear: finance is not the problem. Finance is a precondition and a symptom, a necessary and contradictory part of capital. Deregulation, globalization, deindustrialization: none of these words can provide a substantial explanation for the present context. Each is only a surface phenomenon, an effect of capital's self-defeating tendency to make its own systemic reproduction increasingly difficult. Crisis and the reconcentration of wealth among capitalists are not only regular but necessary; the tendency to financialization has many historical precedents. Genoa in the period 1557-62 looks like the Dutch Republic in 1780-83; Britain in 1919-21 looks like the US today. But even if financial booms and busts are as old as mercantilism, there is a qualitative change to the nature of these crises since the 18th century, when capitalist production was imposed on the British countryside and the credit system emerged as its necessary lubricant. Capitalist production creates an unparalleled need for credit, an unprecedented need to consolidate and centralize capital, a grotesque scale of fungible assets that strives to make everything solid melt into the sophistry of mathematics. Asset-backed securities and credit default swaps didn't make this crisis, they only allowed it to heat up and billow out of control.

For those that recall the warm and golden age of US industrialism with dewy-eyed nostalgia: this crisis began with the failure of US industry in the late sixties. Real wages have been stagnant since then. The oil crisis of 1973 was the hinge; we are living in the declension of US global power. There's no going back, no exchanging unproductive finance for good old-fashioned productive exploitation. Or is there? Today, American industry is indeed firing up again, as capital that had long flown from its shores returns to find wages lower than the so-called third world. "Reshoring": a name for the farce that follows the tragedy of the post-war boom.

6 Thomas Malthus was a 19th-century English demographer who promoted an ideology of economic scarcity against state welfarism. Malthus argued that an inexorable tendency to deplete agricultural resources would lead to economic stagnation, providing a helpful check on population growth.

History insists on the eradication of capital as the only possibility of preventing crisis. Financial reform and "sanctions" are not enough: we will never see "the military industrial complex dismantled, the police disempowered, and the public sector fulfilling its obligations to the people" by redistributing wealth.⁷ Corrupt politicians and greedy financiers are only a superfluous, insulting layer on the thing that is truly condemned: capital, which in our time is inescapable. With this realization, we don't need to occupy Wall Street, or any bank. Why was Tahrir square chosen? Was it even chosen at all? We could occupy any corner, any room, any building, and it would carry the social significance of what needs to be either appropriated or destroyed. The better question to pose when deciding what to occupy is: what do we want to inhabit? On this point, it is worth mentioning that the tactic to occupy has evolved since its recent revival in the 2008 occupation of the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago. What struck students in New York, California, Puerto Rico, London, Athens, etc. about the occupation was that its strategy to reappropriate equipment, space, and organization could take place without recognition from authorities. Demands were auxiliary to the best part: the immediate process of retaking control over the means of production.

Whatever this occupation is, it is not a camping trip from capital – we are still in the patriarchy, still in a white supremacy, still in a transphobic and disability-loathing society. In these places, assuming we are unified will only obscure divisions that need to be confronted before anything else.

ON THE POLITICS OF THE OCCUPATION: LIBERALISM, POLICING, AND THE USES AND ABUSES OF EQUALITY

The "99%" rolls their eyes at anyone that takes offense to signs referring to the current economic climate as "Slavery 2.0" or asserting that, "the free hand of the market touched me in a bad place." Comparing (white) student debt to hundreds of years of violence and forced subjugation, entrenched as a system of enduring

7 Quote from the "Mortville Declaration of Independence," a manifesto issued by the queer camp at Occupy Baltimore.

systematic racism, mocking sexual assault for effect — these statements send a clear message to those of us subjected to such oppressive acts. While some are already bristling at the “identity politics” of those that are offended by racist, misogynistic, survivor-hating signage, the placards that have been denounced the most loudly are those that attack *capitalism*. Concerns about “public opinion,” about some centrist mass being able to identify and sympathize with our collective messages abound. These so-called debates actively skew the agenda towards the watered down, apolitical, and (com)modified. GAs play out as if we (the comprehensive “99%”) all endorse these views, but communist, anarchist, and anti-capitalist perspectives are in fact excluded before they are given a chance to be voiced. Meanwhile more privileged niche groups like (hella pro-capitalist) small business owners remain front and center. We who are “taking things too far” get left behind by the “99%.”

As a result of this policing, capitalism’s political ideology of liberal populism (with its values of individuated freedom and abstract equality) has dominated the occupation’s process, statements, and proto-demands. Or better, liberal populism tinged with a healthy dose of hippie New Age individualism (a vaguely countercultural disposition suits contentless politics perfectly). Capitalist apologists always deploy platitudes of “unity” and “equality,” not to insist that we should act in order to become unified and equal, but to say that we already are – and as such, should “put aside our differences.” Capitalism’s liberal framework cannot articulate how race, sex, and class are maintained as material and systemic social relations. Instead, these categories are reduced to individual attitudes. Any racism, sexism, or act of class war is fashioned into a story about perpetrators and victims; liberalism only registers and disciplines individual oppressors, never structures. In the process, the demands made by the oppressed for changes in their actual material conditions are ignored, or worse – appropriated, co-opted. (Take, for example, so-called “reverse racism”: the idiotic triumph of the liberal individual over history.)

THE POLICE ARE NOT “JUST WORKERS” AND THEY ARE NOT OUR FRIENDS

More than anything, the 99% will be divided by our relationship to the cops. They say: in the interests of “radical inclusivity” we should avoid anti-police messaging; the police, after all, are part of the 99% that have seen wages, benefits and pensions cut along with the rest of the public sector (if only it were true!). They say: we must remember that the police are people too, and not exclude them from our movement before they’ve had a chance to express solidarity with us. We say: just wait. These arguments assume that an individual can be separated from their institutional/social roles, that a police officer can be engaged within a purely personal sphere, completely distinct from their occupation as an arm of state repression. A classic liberal tactic is to humanize the oppressor, thus derailing a structural analysis of oppressive systems, and invalidating the anger of people experiencing institutional violence. Advocating a cooperative, amiable relationship with the police brushes aside the violence of widespread racial profiling, sexual assault with impunity, the murder of innocents, and the war on drugs by universalizing a white, middleclass position that believes the police really serve and protect.

And it’s not only about police brutality. How can there be non-violence when there are still police? We need to know that as soon as we present a threat to any element of capital — before this point, even — we will be violently repressed. A peaceful, lawful protest by no means guarantees immunity against arrest and brutality: we only have to look at the women who were penned and maced at Occupy Wall St. to know that. But unless this knowledge is at the forefront of our minds, the first to be arrested will be those who are most vulnerable to police brutality and to breaches of security. (A journalist in the room is a tip-off to immigration officials, not “good press.”) We must strive for solidarity among our comrades, especially the undocumented, those that are experiencing homelessness, the criminalized, and anyone else for whom contact with the police is never friendly or safe. However “nice” a police officer may be to you (FYI: police are often very “nice” to those from the right class and race) does not change the fact that the police are a powerful instrument of violent repression, deployed by a capitalist

state to enforce its interests: namely, white supremacy, male domination, ruling class power, and the limitless pursuit of profit.

WHY SAY "99%" WHEN YOU MEAN "ME"?

Perhaps other cities are different, but for all its rhetoric of "unity" and "inclusivity" Occupy Baltimore is really a movement organized by and for the white middle class. There is a reason why the people most besieged by capitalism are not coming down to McKeldin Square. When the organizers act like racism is a secondary issue ("We don't have time to talk about racism — we need to bring this back to the real issue: finance reform"), it becomes clear whose movement this is. Let's drop the false rhetoric: what's wrong with the system is not that it is unfair to the 99%, but that is unfair to a disappearing middle class, an almost vestigial group that reappears in occupy among the concrete environs of its former promised land, the business sector. At McKeldin, in the shadow of corporate high-rises, wedged between convention centers and the bourgeois playground of the inner harbor, Baltimore's middle class comes to better envision the jobs and upward mobility they desperately want. Don't get us wrong — there can be a lot of good in indignation, discontent, disillusionment. But we need to exorcise the living ghost of the middle class: the spirit of not giving a fuck who you fuck over. Why say "99%" when you really mean "me"?⁸

And you know how it goes: the neutral "me" is the white dude with all the time in the world (we have to say it: the ideal occupier). At Occupy Baltimore, whiteness and maleness have been duly reinforced as the not-so-secret standard at this occupation, in many ways. One example: an announcement made by a young white man at a GA that "everyone is accountable when they speak to media, because they represent the occupation as a whole" (FYI: there is no literature, no point person, no infrastructure to guide new members; only

8 It is true that over the course of the occupation, the demographics of occupy Baltimore shifted to include more people experiencing homelessness; however, the many eruptions of resentment towards homeless people "taking over McKeldin" or "abusing occupy for the food" signal the sharp difference between loudest voices at occupy and the poor.

judgment). The countless snaps and twinkles in support of such a statement demonstrated clear consensus. Those twinkles expressed a range of assumptions that people who are largely comfortable in their own skin tend to make. Being present in a space makes you in charge of its representation; most everyone agrees with you (and should). Those of us that have daily to prepare ourselves for an imminent bash, an imminent fight with hostile, privilege-denying strangers, an imminent insult (intended or not) — we take issue with this coercion into representation. We don't ask you to represent us (please god no). Don't fucking assimilate us into your views, and then make us responsible for them. We won't even mention how much and how loud white dudes have been speaking.

Rather than policing the radical voices taking anti-capitalist, revolutionary, and anti-police positions, we should give these voices space to be heard and listened to seriously. The anarchist in-joke "Make Total Destroy" is true: the real political agenda consists in destroying state power, capitalism, and all its forms of coercive social control. Why was this phrase deliberately excluded from the agenda cards read out during a GA, while such platitudes as "We are All One" and "Peace on Earth and Good Will to All" were deemed worthy to be shared? The liberal-or-else reformism of Occupy Baltimore is perfectly encapsulated by the *imposition* of goals of peace and love. Fuck peace: we need to formulate a coherent political analysis and a revolutionary agenda to destroy capitalism and dismantle state power. Rejecting outright the eventual need for an armed uprising reflects an unwillingness to pursue the logic of our own (proto)demands to their full extent.

Don't tell us to be "pragmatic," to focus on piecemeal reforms and wait for our day in the revolt. Because not revolution, but *reformism* is idealistic: reformism believes in democracy under capitalism, in the possibility of redistributing wealth that is systematically dispossessed from its producers. Our revolutionary desire to destroy capitalism is not at all utopian. Nor is it inactive: this aim is embodied in a multitude of actions towards different immediate *and* faraway ends. To us, this means that the revolutionary aim is not pure negation or destruction: we work to confront racism, sexism, and class war in our community as an immediate goal, without forgetting that we ultimately cannot live

like this anymore. For Occupy Baltimore, this means the 99% must relinquish its presumed equality and acknowledge division if it is to grasp the real conditions of society, and what must actually be done.

“THE 1% ARE WINNING EVERY TIME WE FIGHT AMONGST OURSELVES.”

When the excluded call out a movement, we are often told to put aside our differences: it's only common sense that to accomplish anything, we need unity. But this equality is only the thinnest commonality — the democracy of consumers — an abstraction that masks society, that papers over the distribution of violence with images of citizenship and rights. Already, in conversations with supposed comrades, our critiques have been met with concern that the “mainstream” won't get it, that the precious, delicate momentum will be stopped. Interventions into a whitewashed and patriarchal agenda (which is any agenda that denies the differential impact of capital on people of color and women) are always received as interruptions. At best, they are conceded to with invitations, with “outreach,” and with promises to be more inclusive. We say: inclusivity without an adequate analysis is just unstated exclusivity. *This is not identity politics: this is the anti-identity politics.* For it is capitalism that pushes us to rank facets of our identities, to select one group as the vanguard and press marginalized identities to choose which aspect of their oppression to make a priority. We refuse this choice: we know that our differences are daily produced and reproduced within capitalism's limits, and therefore cannot be erased within it. Our divisions were not invented by capital, but their integration in it is real (the most real), and thus should drive our analyses and our actions. No unity can be claimed until every social relationship is no longer defined by capital, but by us.

THE TYRANNY OF NON-VIOLENCE

At Occupy Baltimore, a commitment to non-violence is made clear by a list of rules posted around the space, half of which are prohibitions against political violence, illegality, and antagonizing the police. While certain abuses among group members of course hamstringing the cooperative functioning of the movement, and while a

struggle to overcome misogyny, transphobia, and racism, among other violences, is an everyday, ongoing, and necessary project for all movements, the political platform of non-violence in relation to the state raises serious concerns.

The doctrine of non-violence essentializes and polarizes political struggles into violent and non-violent movements, ignoring the fact that successful struggles use a variety of tactics that cannot be so easily categorized. Advocates of non-violence point to the civil rights movement in the US as a winning example of non-violent protest, refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Black Panthers' militant actions. Drawing a moral line between Martin Luther King's dream and Malcolm X's nightmare, pacifists fail to recognize the solidarity between civil rights struggles and black militants. It was in the interests of the white media and politicians to emphasize the conflict between the non-violent and militant factions of the movement, in order to divide and conquer Black resistance. Malcolm X was well aware of this white agenda when he said, “instead of airing our differences in public we have to realize we are all the same family.” While these leaders criticized each other's tactics, their understanding of racial oppression shared an analysis, and their political actions collaboratively contributed to the momentum of the whole civil rights struggle. Black activists all over the country used a variety of tactics to advance their political struggle, from the Black Panthers' Free Food program, to armed paramilitaries protecting Black homes and churches from racist attacks. Riots, armed resistance, and revolutionary rhetoric were as much a part of the struggle as the more cherished marches, sit-ins, and boycotts. This real diversity of tactics worked to strengthen communities, raise collective consciousness, develop analyses, and secure helpful (if inadequate) legal reforms. To attribute the power of the civil rights movement to non-violence alone is to manipulate history and occlude the totality of this struggle.

When Occupy Baltimore insists on non-violence without a critical analysis of their own position, they paper over what non-violence even means in this era. Pacifists rely on vague platitudes that fail to account for the ways in which political violence can be purposeful and constructive, as well as the myriad ways

in which peaceful action can reproduce and support an injurious status quo. This pacifism (largely a product of white middle class activism) appeals to a particular moral code that asserts itself as universal: violence is never the answer, ever, in any situation, and those who use violence to attain their goals will suffer the karmic consequences. Martin Luther King certainly prescribed non-violence as a strategy for resisting the institutional and social violence inflicted on Black populations daily. But he also considered it necessary to support the armed liberation movements in Palestine and Vietnam. His ideas had root in a specific history of oppression, rather than being theorized, abstractly, as the morally superior tactic.

A high ground of bourgeois morality is the secret platform of non-violence. Unchecked by an analysis of lived, everyday violence, pacifism turns up its nose at direct confrontation as immature and ignorant, while painting passive resistance as dignified and spiritually pure. Like the liberal insistence on cooperating with the police, this ideology speaks from a position of privilege: not everyone can choose whether or not to engage in violence. Pacifism often presupposes an emotional, physical distance from conflict. Should Palestinians daily besieged by the Israeli military not throw rocks at armed soldiers? Does such violence undermine the legitimacy of their struggle against Israel's political, economic, and cultural hegemony, and its occupation of their land? Shouldn't a woman who survives a rape inflict violence on her attacker? How are youth of color to respond to the police that violently, invasively, and with banal regularity stop and search their shit?

The pacifist claim that we should all be martyrs, that suffering the violence inflicted on us ennobles our cause, is incompatible with feminism. Under patriarchy, women are socialized to endure their sexual, cultural, and social subjugation to men. This subjugation is protected by violence against our bodies and minds. At the same time, people who do not conform to the gender binary are equally threatened with violence and disciplined to assimilate to gender norms. Non-violence leads to the conclusion that people should not form organized resistance against gendered violence, but suffer it nobly in the hopes of winning over the hearts and minds of (powerful) men to our cause. Placing the power to end gendered oppression in the

hands of those who benefit from it presumes that patriarchal power can be surrendered by persuasion, which reinforces the thoroughly patriarchal definition of men as arbiters and masters. Listen: we will not wait for men to decide we are human enough not to be brutalized. We realize that we have the power to challenge patriarchy with our organized resistance, and that this resistance must embrace violence as an effective political, defensive tactic.