

God Only Knows What Devils We Are

an apologia for the black bloc from the community that has no community

The Institute for Experimental Freedom

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Have you ever worn the mask one-two one-two,
☒(M) to the (A) to the (S) to the (K)
☒Put the mask upon the face just to make the next day,
Feds be hawkin me ☒Jokers be stalking me,
I walk the streets and camouflage my identity,
☒My posse in the Brooklyn wear the mask.
☒My crew in the Jersey wear the mask.
☒Stick up kids doing boogie woogie wear the mask.
Yeah everybody wear da mask but how long will it last.
-The Fugees

That's why I live illegal
All my life I live illegal
Don't give a fuck bout the law
☒When my pockets reaching zero
☒I'm fresh out the ghost town similar to your town☒
I'm probably where it goes down☒
Keepin' ten toes down
☒-Ski Beatz & Freddie Gibbs

For thirteen years, for over a decade, I have donned the black mask. “Seattle”—that word still means “the days the world stood still” to me. “Genoa” still holds more terror and perversity than the North American September 11. In experiencing anonymous collective force, I have gained far more than a diversity of tactics in my tool box. The black bloc is not merely a tactic, as so many anarchist apologists claim; it's more of an aesthetic development in the art of street confrontation. The black bloc is a methodology of struggle; it goes beyond a single color, and its intelligence reaches beyond the terrain of protests. The black bloc is irreducibly contemporary because only in its opacity can a ray of light from the heavens finally reach us. Allow me to explain.

I.

It's the summer of 2000. Many of us have given up on both Democrats and Republicans. The sense is that “anti-globalization” poses the only alternative to advanced capitalism. The Democratic National Convention: I am marching, drenched in sweat, through the catacombs that hosted the Rodney King riots. Sadly, the only remnant of those fateful days is a militarized police force that anticipates our every move.

We walk into an enormous play pen—the “free speech zone”—surrounded on all sides by a sea of navy blue wielding pepper balls and batons. Amid the most dreadful speeches and rebellious

rock music, we find each other: the stupid, isolated, alienated, and utterly lost children of capital, just beginning our downward spiral—just beginning a precarious life, without promise and without hope.

We organize ourselves at the center and proceed to the margin, where things are unpredictable. Someone climbs the tall fence, reaching the limit of free speech; and then another, and another. A black flag is unfurled, and a figure waves it with pride, claiming this as a site of freedom with that stupid gesture. The pepper balls crash against your skin; they collide against your frail bones, exploding on impact and releasing a furious burning that traps itself in your oily clothes and sweat. The crowd collectively gains intelligence and transforms the signs bearing socialist slogans into shields for cover. We brace each other and press the signs against the fence. Shot with pepper balls, a figure falls from the apex of the fence; arms and femur bones snap against the concrete.

That putrid smell, the eyes glossed over in tears, the stomach churns and nausea overwhelms you. Vinegar-soaked rags help to soak up the poisonous clouds, but you can hear screaming everywhere as the blue tide comes rushing in, and your nerves twist and vibrate as the CS gas and police mutate into a single hostile terrain.

Suddenly, I am with six or ten people. I don't know who. We've found a large road sign and we're lifting it slowly. Plastic bottles soar impotently overhead. A small rock or two hits an officer. We press with what was once our labor power, straining to hurl the worthless product of our grandparents' toil back at our overseers. The object tilts over the fence and falls to other side: *clong*. We cheer and revel in our functionless gesture. "Fuck the police" resounds throughout the night, however foolishly. A few bank windows collapse in glittery confetti. Spray paint decorates a wall. We journey to the end of the night; at its perimeter, we share drinks and laughs over our absurd gestures. Finally, back at the union hall, we crash in our sleeping bags, exhausted and dehydrated, to dream of the abolition of capitalism.

I am irreparably transformed.

II.

Lets rewind. Sixteen years ago, I am an adolescent teenager. I have entered Alcoholics Anonymous—somewhat earlier than most of my family. There, I witness one friend's overdose, another friend's relapse and subsequent incarceration for manslaughter, and the spread of methamphetamines throughout my neighborhood. I watch *Requiem for a Dream* some years later, horrified by the cinematic juxtaposition of "normal" and "marginal" addiction—it feels so familiar.

I am watching *20/20*, an episode exposing Nike sweatshops. Through some extended leaps of logic, I recognize a link between those exploited by sweatshops and my own condition. With this heightened sensitivity, I conclude that

- 1) addiction has an economic function
- 2) the economy includes industries that tend to harm people—through exploitation, alienation, and immiseration, the reproduction of addiction being a subset of the last of these
- 3) the economy tends to hurt people generally.

My initial moral indignation passes; my sensitivity shifts from a moral compass faulting individuals for their choices to something more like class consciousness. The broke-ass cars in the

yard appear starker. The drive-by shootings in our neighborhood gain a new meaning. The empty refrigerators' sad grumble reverberating in our empty stomachs, my many stepbrothers' sweet mullet haircuts—these bring me a certain revelation: I am white trash.

Seattle: the anti-globalization summits and corresponding riots. The beautiful rhythm: work, misery, chaos. They kill Carlo and we meet at the intersection of Colfax and Broadway to block traffic, frantically trying to show our tears and rage. The war. My sister is deployed to Iraq. We wear helmets and anachronistically chant “Bring the war home!” We spray slogans and burn effigies. We block the flows of the metropolis. As if to baptize our newfound agency, we are showered in pepper spray. Tear gas spreads across entire continents. We go from basement hardcore shows to warehouse parties. Our friends learn to DJ. Cocaine comes back into style and claims two victims; heroin gets a few more. The boredom and stupidity is suffocating. We attempt to wrest the noose from our necks. Democracy sweeps Bush back into office. We're trashing a gentrified district of Adams Morgan. My friend records an MP3 of her heartbeat, shouts and heavy breathing accentuated by shattering glass and anxiety.

In the US, we hit a lull. Everywhere else the world burns.

As we get older, we find new ways to survive. A small meeting of coworkers transforms into an ambitious conspiracy. Without making any demands of the boss, we increase our pay and our quality of life. We eat well, we can afford cigarettes, we travel where we want to: Scotland and France, Italy and Germany. Can't stop the chaos.

In Europe, the black bloc means “no media!” I watch a snitch in a tie go down among the kicks and punches of the hooded ones. A car burns. As the police battle two thousand rock throwers, a couple hundred advance through the marketplace, smashing everything. “Tremble Bourgeoisie!” is scrawled across a temp agency service.

Back home, our own temporary involvement in the economy—our precarious life—is reflected in the windows of the temp agency, the retail shop, and the café. The image of our desire is captured in the commodities to which we have no access. Our needs are displayed in advertisements that sell us happiness and grocery store aisles that mutate our tastes and relations to other living beings. Smashing, burning, and looting make sense to us in this context like nothing else could.

III.

What Chris Hedges fails to understand about black bloc activity is that it arises from a real *need*. The “cancer” that Chris finds so disturbing—the contagion of an anonymous collective force—is precisely why and how it continues to outlive every social movement from which it emerges. These generations—we who fantasized about Columbine and now only know metal detectors at school; we who expected September 11 and now only know the politics of terror; we who grew up as the world crumbled all around us and now only know the desert—we *need* to fight, and not just in the ways our rulers deem justified and legitimate.

As workers, we're excluded from unions, from collective arrangements of any kind. When we manage to find employment at all, it is meaningless labor that corresponds to our own superfluousness in the economy. We were raised by a generation so thoroughly defeated that it feared to pass on its history. We are the inheritors of every unpaid bill, of every failed struggle, the products of the insanely selfish individualism of advanced capitalism in North America.

Our entire environment feels hostile. Hence our hostility.

Chris Hedges cannot understand this because he misses the real historical conflict expressed in contemporary struggles. As David Graeber points out, his exhumation of the decrepit journal *Green Anarchy* shows how out of touch he is. The black bloc spreads because of a real need to take back *force*, which has been monopolized by the police. The black bloc spreads because it is a living practice of collective intelligence, redistribution of wealth, and improvisation; it spreads because it interrupts the ways we are confined in our identities as *subjects* within capitalism. The black bloc is tuned to the uneasy pulse of our time.

A paradigm of life is coming to an end. The black bloc is irrevocably contemporary because our age of unrest is reflected in this gesture. Populations everywhere are becoming ungovernable and doing so by casting off the fundamental assumptions of government, the techniques of policing, and laws of the economy. The paradigm of sovereignty is collapsing.

To see what is changing, we have to understand the nature of sovereignty. The modern state is founded upon an anthropological fiction of human nature and the *surgical extraction* of violence from living beings. Thomas Hobbes argued that the establishment of the civil state conveyed the human being from the state of nature—a war of each against all—to the loving arms of the sovereign, rendering him a citizen-subject on the condition that he leave “nature” at the door. But this discourse separates each being from collectivity: the subject of sovereignty is always already an isolated individual. And the arrangement keeps war at the center of the state, as the sole dominion of the sovereign. Ironically, what the subject lays down in return for security—the capacity to use force—is precisely what the sovereign must wield in order to ensure it: and this is wielded above all *against subjects*.

The form of sovereign power shifted as democratic governments replaced autocracies, but the content of state sovereignty remains. The modern state has shifted from techniques governing territory to techniques governing populations.

It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between totalitarian and democratic governments, as *policing* is identical under both. The police have the power to let live or take life—*biopower*—and the distinction between democratic and totalitarian becomes even more muddled as management and medicine also gain this power, determining who can access fundamental human needs. The mediation of capital creates a hellish environment in which practically everyone is integrated into a single hostile terrain, subject to its violence and its *justice*. If the *cause du jour* is enunciated as “fuck the police,” this is because the police are the living embodiment of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, the state that keeps us at arm’s length from our own potential.

“The police” includes all who police; *policing* is an array of techniques, not all of which demand uniforms. Hedges’ cancer metaphor exposes his penchant for order, translating it explicitly into the language of biopower. Remember how Oakland’s Mayor, Jean Quan, and other authority figures used the discourse of health and risk to justify the repression of occupations around the US? Hedges continues this work of *policing* with his metaphor of an unhealthy social body in need of *surgery*. Whenever the basic assumptions of sovereignty and capitalism are called into question by those who defy state violence and the sanctity of property, the police are mobilized to discipline them. This *disciplining* is carried out by both the armed wing and the necktied wing of the police. It’s not a coincidence that Hedges invokes biopolitical language just as a portion of the population is beginning to discover the power of their bodies.

Less than seven years ago, in New Orleans an entire population was forced into a concentration camp by militarized police forces acting on a juridical state of emergency. The ones who did not obey this order could be gratuitously shot down. The justification given during Katrina was the

health and well-being of the population. One can't help but notice this same paradigm at work, albeit with less racialized brutality, in the violent evictions of the occupations. Safety, Health, Security: *Necessity knows no law*. These police actions only deviate slightly from the norm in terms of intensity, frequency, and grammar of "protection." The deaths of Oscar Grant and Sean Bell attest to the murderous day-to-day operations of the police. The other casualties, the forgotten, continue to haunt every city block, where the police function to eliminate useless surplus—either out of economic utility or biopolitical necessity.

There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism, as Walter Benjamin spells out in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. It is terrifying to face the wreckage of history that constitutes the present. One loses count of the tragedies. Despair, recoded as "happiness," runs through every aspect of social life, increasingly reflected by Hollywood and ironic television sitcoms as if to anesthetize us.

The arguments for orderly, passive demonstrations by Hedges and other liberal pundits miss all this. *One doesn't sweep the floor in a house falling off a cliff*. In a world that feels absolutely hostile and alien, every element of social life acquires a sinister glow. In this light, the black bloc appears as a ray of optimism because it creates an opening that leads through to the other side of despair.

The new struggles increasingly take place outside of legitimate and traditional venues. When the factory was the contested site, the workers' movement was the most vibrant and decisive space of contestation. During the shift from a factory-centered economy to an economy integrating social life, we saw the emergence of social movements contesting social spaces. Now that social life has been fully subsumed within capitalism, the mutant offspring of the proletariat and the counterculture is appearing outside the legitimate parameters of the old movements. This explains the spread of anti-social violence, anomic play, self-destructive revolt, *irony*. Chris Hedges may wish to turn away his gaze, but society is imploding.

We accept our conditions and get organized accordingly. Compared to the *fatal* and fatalistic strategy employed by school shooters, terrorists, and isolated individuals marked as insane, the black bloc, rioting, and flashmobs are collective and *vital* forms of struggle. The Left is obsolete—rightfully so, as it still clings to this collapsing society at war with its population. Society is decomposing and nothing will or should bring back the the good ol' days—the days of slavery, hyper-exploitation of women, apartheid, homophobic violence, Jim Crow. We wager that organizing our antagonisms collectively and attacking this society where we are positioned, without anything mediating our force, is our best chance for a life worth living.

Remarking on how the black bloc assaults the sanctity of property, Chris says "there's a word for that: criminal." Even here he is behind the times. Once, it seemed that crime designated specific transgressions of the law, such as breaking a window. Today, this fiction is evaporating as crime is openly integrated into the economy. The black market, the gray market, the war on drugs, the war on terror. Branding criminal is not simply a maneuver in a public relations war—though it is that too; *crime is the excess of law*. Security cameras and Loss Prevention are not there to *stop* shoplifting and workplace theft any more than borders exist to stop illegal immigration. The designation of criminal is simply one more tool for managing populations, another line along which to divide and exploit.

The cynicism of the justice system is surpassed only by capitalism itself. There's not enough money circulating any more for us to be fully integrated, so entire economies of ultra-flexible, superfluous, and precarious work have arisen. We don't do anything that appears to matter, but

somehow we have to do it *all the time*. Just to count as *people*, we have to gain all sorts of stupid commodities—a cellphone, a laptop, a specific knowledge of culture. Because our wages are so low and we work so much, our only options are illicit. Petty drug dealing, sex work, and pirating movies and music have become at once a normal practice for us and a constant opportunity for the police to rein us into the justice industry. The black bloc makes sense to us because it offers an intelligent way to do *what we always have to be doing* without getting caught.

If Chris Hedges is really concerned about crime, perhaps he shouldn't praise *anything* in the movement of occupations. What attracts us to the black bloc is exactly what draws us to the occupation of a public square: all the different people with different experiences coming together to steal back the time stolen from us by work and the spaces stolen from us by ownership and policing, the *collective crime of revolt*. Hum the national anthem all you want and sing "dissent is patriotic" to the media, but the reality is that anything that breaks with the way things are is categorized in the same sphere of crime as "violence" and treated accordingly. So why not *do it together and with intelligence?*

IV.

Above all, the black bloc is contemporary because it is a site of self-transformation. Even the abused corpse of Gandhi is in accord: if we want to change the world we must change ourselves. To take this further, we might say we have to *abolish ourselves*.

Capitalism has only managed to stave off revolution by constantly reordering and diffusing social antagonism. At the center of the economy, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between citizens and police, yet at the same time they appear to be at war with each other. At the margins, everything that once made antagonistic groups into "revolutionary subjects" is extracted—think of the fate of the Black Panthers—and the remaining husk works to gain entrance to the center or manage the disorder of the margins. Only an immediate break with the process by which we become subjects can open a window of potential. This self-transformative gesture is where tactics and ethics meet. If liberal commentators can't handle the implications of this, this just shows the widening abyss between those who would defend citizenship and those who refuse to be governed.

Allow me to elaborate from our side of the barricades.

The black bloc is an anonymous way of being together. Anonymity allows me to shed the mask I have to wear at school, at work, in your parents' house, in casual conversations at the bar. The black bloc enables us to interrupt the processes that make us into subjects according to race, gender, mental health, physiological health. Here, we can cease worrying about how power will extract the truth from us, and we can reveal truth to each other.

The black bloc assumes an intense ethics of care. Hedges alleges that it is "hypermasculine." Not everyone who dons the black mask reads feminist and queer theory—Bell Hooks, Judith Butler, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Guy Hocquenghem—but these are extremely influential on our discourse. Had Hedges taken the time to research his subject, he would have found multiple discussions about the gender of anonymity.

Via the black bloc, we open the space to play with power. We radically reverse its operations on our bodies. Casting off the assumption that our bodies need to be protected, that we should give them over to the care of the state, we collectively re-inscribe them as a source of power. We

also reverse the notion that freedom ends at the boundaries of individuals. *I want you to put me at risk*: in this axiom, we find the basis of love, friendship, and death, the three irreducible risks of life.

The black bloc is the site for a new *sentimental education*: a political reordering of our sentiments. We learn new sensations of love, friendship, and death through the matrix of collective confrontation. In the obscurity of the black mask, I am most *present* in the world. This unfamiliar way of being compels me to focus and intensify my senses, to be radically present in my body and my environment.

In the black bloc, I have to reconceptualize geographies. The event of the riot gives us a new mobility and space, a laboratory in which to experiment with public space and the relations of property and commodities. Moving through a one-way street backwards, I note how a slight displacement causes the flows of capital to malfunction. The metropolitan environment ceases to appear as a neutral terrain: suddenly I can identify all the ways it functions to channel all activity into a very narrow range of possibilities.

Drifting thus through urban centers, I become attuned to all the apparatuses at work and to how they can be caused to break down. Newspaper boxes and dumpsters can be moved into the street, blocking police from entering the space we are creating. Cars—the individualizing apparatus *par excellence*—can be put to collective use. All the pretty commodities in the window, usually the breadth of an entire social class away from me, are now a mere hammer’s distance from my proletarian hands. I can move through these spaces in which I am not authorized to be, transforming them. I can dance with mannequins or use them to smash out the windows of a storefront. I can trade the insanity of everyday misery for a collective madness that devastates the avenues of wealth.

For those of us who were excluded from the community of good workers, there is the black bloc. Like the myth of the historical proletarian community, it has no single organization, no membership, no written constitution. Through the black bloc, we find collective power, a sense of camaraderie, a historical tradition of living and fighting. It offers the possibility of immediately changing our conditions and immediately changing ourselves. Those who say it doesn’t act in the workplace misunderstand the forms work takes today and where it takes place. The black bloc has been instrumental in the recent port blockades on the West Coast and in the occupations of universities through Europe, the UK, the US, and Chile; the method is constantly being appropriated and adapted. When coworkers outsmart the cameras to take money from the register to share—when the hungry pocket goodies from an expensive health food store—when Anonymous strikes the credit card companies—wherever we use anonymity offensively, there is *black bloc*.

As I write this, Greece burns yet again, and more of the flexible, unemployed, and immigrant populations appropriate the tactics of the hooded ones—and *vice versa*. The black bloc can’t be cut out of the movement of occupations: there is no surgery that can extract the need for redemption from history, and there is no method better tuned to that task than this *vital opacity*. On the contrary, the so-called cancer will grow, spread, and mutate—and the movement of occupations, like other movements, will increasingly be indistinguishable from the black bloc.

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