

## **THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE: *The Future is [Self-]Organised***

### **Part 2**

#### **Reclaiming Self-Organisation**

Part one of our text, 'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED' (TINA1), was first published in 2005, a period when the 'animal spirits' of unlimited accumulation were still drunk on their own sense of infallibility. At the time, we couldn't fail to notice a similar over-confidence and arrogance in the attitude of the political, managerial and professional classes that were moving deeper into cultural and educational institutions.

We therefore felt unsure about accepting an invitation to speculate on self-organisation by an institutional commissioning body that had only recently staked a claim in this tendency and its discourse. The organisation in question, the Nordic Institute For Contemporary Arts (NIFCA) had itself become vulnerable when the progressive programming for which it had become internationally renowned fell out of sync with the increasingly localised and insular interests of its political backers. Without broader consultation it was closed in 2006 – its funds redirected to a more 'manageable' organisation without significant public opposition or protest.

In TINA1 we sought to rethink self-organisation, a term that had gained currency as a means to disguise organisational restructuring, manage critique and enhance professional careers. The text sought to place self-organisation back within its oppositional and revolutionary vocabulary, also setting it off against 'self-help' and 'self-enterprise', terms with which self-organisation had become confused and whose tendency was to stabilise and extend rather than challenge institutional hegemony.

That was 2005 – a world away – before the systemic contradictions started to become more pronounced and exploded with such frequency, and with such blinding force and violence, that the animal spirits faded, the image of eternal growth was shattered and, for most, the ruins beckoned.

#### **The Coming Resurrection**

In the midst of a period of intense struggle, violence and social upheaval, who needs economists and pundits to remind us that this is the worst financial crisis since the last? As bad as the 1990s, 1980s, 1970s, the late 1920s? Isn't the evidence all around us all the time? In the intensities of labour struggle and workers' suicides in China and South East Asia, the further dispossession of the poor in the US, or the punishing effects of austerity measures imposed everywhere, particularly in those neoliberal European economies once regarded as exemplary, like Greece, Italy and Spain.

For decades, the catastrophic consequences we now find ourselves living through were deferred by fostering rapid market expansion and contraction, boom and bust. Here, crisis played an integral part in the seductive, syncopated rhythm of 'creative destruction'. Bust was deferred by selling it as boom – which no doubt displayed a certain creativity. A formula of almost redemptive proportions was devised to cover up the wreckage while the supposed necessity of uninhibited free market expansion could be relied upon to sanction even the most blatant acts of global plunder. In tandem, novel ways of shifting, shunting, bundling and repackaging otherwise problematic phenomena, allowed *everything* – even debt and poverty – to continue to serve capitalist accumulation.

An early response to the financial collapse of 2008 was the slogan 'We won't pay for their crisis', which later gave way to the more trenchant statement 'Capitalism is Crisis'. This underlined the realisation that the most vulnerable are not only paying a high price for the crisis, but that crisis is implicit in a system where such violence, such destruction is part and parcel of its reproduction. A distinction must here be made between economic and ideological crisis. The former is integral to the logic of capitalist accumulation, which in its neoliberal mode has contended that 'free' markets have a tendency towards self-regulation and can therefore construe crises as a temporary manifestation of that principle. The latter is a consequence of the former; a rupture in the *belief* in capitalism compounded by deep social crisis. The more established middle classes, for example, have been thrown into self-doubt, having lost their sense of global hegemony and the material securities they took for granted for decades. The world's poor, meanwhile, are, as ever, pushed further down into the mud.

It is this congruence of the economic *and* ideological crisis, which has exacerbated misery everywhere – and, with it, conjured potentially revolutionary forces now appearing on the surface. As the ranks of the newly immiserated and proletarianised continue to swell, the former middle classes now sit cheek by jowl with those whose hopes of escape they may have once embodied.

But could it be said that this re-composition is part of a more generalised revolutionary process? What we see instead is that the coming resurrections of zombie tendencies are already fully

compliant with capitalist logic: nationalism, populism, xenophobia and an obsession with security – to be flanked by propaganda, surveillance, dictatorial, and/or mafia type structures.

Disciplinary austerity is presented as a necessary corrective, an emergency response to the economic crisis and global market crash. Should that fail to convince, there's always the tale of 'public sector over-spending' and 'living it large' – a popular profligacy to justify the collective sacrifice. After all, 'we're all in this together'. These narratives are typical of capitalism's meager offering of legitimating excuses.

### **Under the Wheels**

In recent decades we have seen a very close integration of market dynamics and culture. We have witnessed the rise and rise of the Creative Industries. These promised the liberation of Marx's alienated workers in a process of creative self-realisation and autonomy. Through creativity of the hands and the hearts, they would grant capitalism a human face. Artists, with their idealism, flexibility and enthusiasm to work even under precarious circumstances, became the role model for a new concept of capitalism, leading its 'triumphant procession around the globe'. The hopes for this spectacle were twofold: it would strengthen belief in capitalism's new formula, and it would disguise the fact that, like so much else wealth generated under the sign of creativity, it was the product of a proliferation of speculation, and increasing indebtedness. Meanwhile, under the procession's grinding wheels, the sweatshops, child labour, privatisation of commons and all other disasters that accompany the economic warfare of rich versus poor, continued unabated.

*As workers in the cultural and educational sector we have to acknowledge that what passes for critique and politicisation, particularly within the contemporary art community, has proven to be even more toothless than feared. Mimicking the strategies of corporate management, art institutions adopted the rhetoric of social responsibility and ethical governance as a means to appear progressive. Under the guise of art trends like relational aesthetics and the new institutionalism, and state agendas like social inclusion, the privileged continued their merry dance. Political agendas were de-politicised, struggle was taken out of politics as glamorous institutions dressed up as community centres, and corporations as charities. While this may not have entirely convinced the progressives and radical reformists, they still singularly failed to expose a deeper process of de-structuring, organisational hollowing out and the consolidation of existing power relations.*

With the recent economic collapse, and the ideological crisis of capitalism, the more progressive branches of the cultural institutional landscape entered a void, displaying both panic and paralysis. In some cases institutional surfaces became more porous and open, while in others they congealed and contracted further, becoming ever more rigid and conservative. At the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, New York's Artist's Space, for example, demonstrated how both processes can occur simultaneously. Here, management initially supported its own 'occupation' by artist-activists. But the progressive dream scenario of participation 'from below' suddenly turned undesirable, when 'lack of clear demands' was cited as cause to call security and remove the occupiers from the building.

In 2008, similar institutional confusion and violence marked the 28th São Paulo Biennale, where the ground floor of the massive exhibition complex was left open 'for the community'. When urban graffiti crew, *pixadores*, entered the space with their spray cans, as might be expected, they were forcibly evicted by security and police. This was not the right kind of 'participation'. Students of Berkeley University occupying Wheeler Hall in 2010 fared no better: faced with nothing more than a sit-down protest, Administration called the UC Berkeley police, which used pepper spray to drive the students from their institutional home violently.

Where antagonisms are not successfully negotiated or suppressed, institutions tend to lay low – either reproducing the state narrative that the crisis is an anomaly that can be overcome, or quietly scrambling for ways not to be cut or shut.

*If we can be sure of anything at this moment, it is this: there will be no bailout for us. In fact, it is much worse – communities, homes, workplaces and organisations have again been called upon to facilitate the next phase of capitalist development. The question is: what are we going to do about it? Which is only interesting insofar as it could equally be, what can we do about it? That is, while we remain subject to a system geared towards squeezing cash even out of the rubble it generates, the task, as we see it, is to remind ourselves that this rubble might offer a relative but significant opening: namely an*

*awakening sense that there is no neoliberal future to build, and that we're no longer compelled to compete as individuals for a piece of the free market world. Against this backdrop, we can measure those in the art system as it stands and by what it is they have to offer in the preparation of a post-capitalist society.*

### **Race to the Bottom**

It remains urgent to examine how institutions learnt to simultaneously demand their subjects (workers, students, consumers) accept less (wages, resources, support) while having to pay more (fees, free and voluntary labour). This would include the intensification of 'hollowing out', where institutions outsourced large swathes of their activity bar the baseline cultural programming, which continued to legitimise their existence. And, more recently, the rhetoric of 'de-institutionalisation', which, removed from its original context of mental health and community care, gained some currency among art professionals as part of a pragmatic institutional response to austerity agendas.

The bogus consultative mode associated with this discourse is now widespread, demonstrating that an increased 'openness' to exterior (and critical) forces can alleviate the immediate impact of dwindling funds and gaps in programming by effectively securing free input into everything, from content to strategic organisational development. By way of illustration, London's ICA, on the verge of collapse in late 2009, gathered representatives from the 'critical art community' for an invitation-only discussion forum, The Reading Group. Its framing questions, albeit generalised, clearly also possess a strategic function: 'What work can we do?', 'How do we find alternative ways of thinking about production and labour?' and 'How can we act collectively?'

*How, then, do we begin to relate the material impact of the 'race to the bottom', which can be seen everywhere – all competing against all, all the time – with what appears to be a personal and simultaneously institutional need for, and indeed desire to, cooperate, work together, self-organise? To counter this apparently unassailable dynamic, we must continue to define the system's key characteristics and patterns, especially as these develop and change. Do we have any choice but to ally ourselves with the explosive rage this has triggered on the streets, directed so decisively at symbolic sites of knowledge, wealth and power?*

*What role do cultural and educational institutions play during this period of rapid change? Given the current scale of cuts and devastation, these places, where some of us happen to work, study, breathe, pose an unenviable choice: do we self-organise, break the relationship, fight it out among the ruins and accelerate the process of collapse, destruction? Or do we take on more traditional forms of opposition, slow down the process in the search for a temporary haven in the violent storm? These questions follow us into the ruins, a crumbling landscape where the terms may have changed, but the struggle, which remains a class struggle, continues.*

*As we move into the ruins, can art production, the art system and its institutions, for example, play a part in unlearning capital? Can it feature in a more generalised process of de-education and unlearning? Can it contribute to the exit, the movement out of capitalism? Can those in the cultural and educational sector situate notions of collectivity and communism beyond the specialisation that capitalist production continues to impose? Can these struggles be connected, widened? Can they contribute to post-capitalist, de-specialised spaces, which enable cultural production and engagement in the wildest sense?*

Those of us with a need to continue to self-organise will do so in relation to the specific contours and tempos of our respective struggles. Some of us self-organise because we still can, and because we have no choice, while some self-organise to survive, to resist. Self-organisation relies on a dominant form of organisation only to depart from it. Whether it's workers on the factory floor or artist-revolutionaries elsewhere, the desire to self-organise is first and foremost caught in the contradiction that it both affirms and breaks with the dominant order. If we, then, accept that self-organisation serves a specific purpose at a specific point in any given struggle, we might also ask: at what point is it possible to move beyond self-organisation? And what would this 'beyond' look like?

### **Into the Ruins**

There is no reason to be afraid of the ruins, among which some of us now find ourselves, because they could represent the end of capitalist relations and the dissolution of its opaque administrative bodies. It's difficult to feel concerned about the ways in which the term self-organisation has been re-purposed

by those who rely on its aura of radicality to prop up their ailing power. The desired outcome of self-organisation is not the affirmation of the self, the individual, the institution – it's in the negation of these relationships.

*Take over the factory (again!), occupy the schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, rip up management dictats, diss reforms, take over all public transportation, dismiss self-help, head-lock entrepreneurs, outflank the bosses, cancel all dodgy contracts, drop ownership, turn over directors, managers, curators, administrators, break into their offices, liberate their 'resources'.*

In all its forms, self-organisation is a basic and necessary social process that relies on an initial binding condition or problem, which is then addressed collectively. It is a collaborative tool, a means to mobilise skills, experience, support, resources and knowledge. Looking back (and forward!), we see its role in the formation of council democracies (soviets, Räte, councils), where politics developed at the level of the factory, kindergarten, neighbourhood – and people came together to organise, practically, artistically, intellectually.

But it should be noted that decision-making and debates about executive and legislative processes can produce larger, more complex structures – a union of councils. In order to gain broader impact for different experiments in self-organisation, it will eventually become imperative to join forces, organise and unite beyond various specific and singular interests.

*Issue impossible demands, make no demands, say nothing, deny everything, wreck classrooms, put social knowledge to work, re-deploy those wasted years of education, construct new tools, question and undermine normalisation, tear apart populism and nationalism, take space, refuse reform, refuse negotiations, refuse explanations, no demands in their language, anti-normative, anti-hegemonic, pain in the ass, fragile, refuse their language, scream, shout, dance, riot, smash, fuck, make noise, remain silent.*

As we've seen in recent struggles, it is necessary to work against the tendency to cut off self-organised processes from a potentially revolutionary mainstream in order to gain momentum. The framework and infrastructures for such connections are everywhere, at all times. But how can they be brought together in such a way as to maintain 'difference', and allow for tensions, antagonism and disputes to be productive? In the process of its own negation, then, self-organisation should continue to question terms like consensus, alliance, solidarity and democracy.

*Try out, flow, keep on, moving with others, enjoy failure, camps, communication, interaction is production, rewrite history, redefine identity, unlearn property, make demands in another language, redistribute the sensible, de-specialise, re-specialise, re-imagine the present, socialise depression, make new dictionaries, vocabularies, lexicons, indexes, catalogues, new maps.*

Continuing to produce culture, despite the dominance of capital and its institutions, is not a call for a placebo utopianism, or to prepare for a separate form of life outside of production and the creation of surplus. Instead, it means testing new forms of collaboration and developing a different measure and grasp of value. Here, production embodies mutuality, togetherness, new and dynamic social relations, all of which continue to occur among the ruins, helping to accelerate the expansion of the commons and a total transformation of social relationships.

*Block, parry, side-step, strike, counter, dig out, confront, tear up, get your shit together, your guts together, boycott, complete dissent, proletarian shopping, hit and run, critique, purge, find unexpected comrades, abolish, destroy money, watch the bullshit fall apart, dance among the ruins.*

A key task now is to derail capitalist restructuring, continue to widen the cracks, block all attempts at reform wherever possible. We need to build, protect and defend the communes and commons that will make up post-capitalist life. As we've seen, most states and their institutions can switch into emergency mode at a moment's notice, unleashing levels of extreme violence that are commensurate only with their own fear – not with any actually existing threat. New warfare is underway everywhere –

on the Internet, in the street, private and public sphere; all are either in a state of emergency, or threatened by impending incursions. We have to maintain the alliances and continue to develop the destructive language that shapes the exit.

*Merge, get organised, disorganise, flow together, join forces, exchange experiments, experiment with yourself, get rid of yourself, slowly, start synthesising, synchronising, syncopating, shaping structures, play with weapons, stray research labs, converging forms of communication and collaboration, anti-property, no-property, property-less, non-proprietary, non-patriarchal education, self-educate, co-educate, experiment, dump your expertise, experiment, no programme, force open the archives, inhabit histories, dig the bones out of the rubble, re-animate the long, long memory of political struggles, victories and defeats, activate conflicting utopias, realise oneiric knowledge.*

END

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'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED' Part 1, June 2005, can be found here:

[http://societyofcontrol.com/library/culture/davies\\_dillemath\\_jakobsen\\_TINA1\\_future\\_selforganised.htm](http://societyofcontrol.com/library/culture/davies_dillemath_jakobsen_TINA1_future_selforganised.htm).