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## Fragments on the Problem of Time

Sites and methods of resistance have traditionally been defined in terms of space. The goal of most resistant action has been to destabilize a limited physical space, on the assumption that power, like the society in which it is housed, is sedentary and confined to a fixed geographic location. However, recent technological advances have brought out the need to reassess spatial disturbance as the only productive form of resistance. To be sure, the nature of power itself has fundamentally changed. No longer intimately tied to state space, it has recentered itself in the free zone of time. Power has shed as many of its sedentary attachments as possible, so that where it is located matters less than the speed of its movement between temporary points of blockage, and the time needed to remove blockage. With the emergence of cyber

networks, authoritarian space can be folded and carried to any point on the electronic rhizome. The war machine has shifted its strategy away from the centralized fortress to a decentralized, deterritorialized, floating field. It has become disembodied. The ideology which parallels this economic shift has yet to really congeal; the ideology of the sedentary is still dominant. Given this situation, one of the key objectives of the resistant cultural worker is to disturb the solidification of the new ideology before it becomes a symbolic order of even greater tyranny than the current one, and to rechannel the convergence of hardware (video, telephone, and computer) into a decentralized form accessible to others besides the power elite. Before this nearly impossible task can be attempted, cultural workers must step back and use time, rather than space, as a frame for analyzing the priorities of resistance.

This is not a call for a return to historicism, or to any other modernist notion of time, as it is not really possible to differentiate between fiction and history in a period of information overload. The perpetually rolling avalanche of information has not clarified the current situation, but has confused it, leaving the once secure binaries of the dialectic in a state of ruins. History is no more: Only speculative reflection remains on what is now the fractal of time. The greater the speed, the greater the intensity of fragmentation. There are traces of modern thought linked to this discourse, since fragmentation was central to discussions of the complex division of labor, both general and specific, among theorists such as Marx, Weber, Adorno, the Situationists, etc. Yet the division of labor as a historical backbone at the macro level, or as critique of assembly-line oppression at the micro level, now is insufficient to describe and explain separation.

The notion of cultural lag has been a part of sociological discourse from its beginnings, since it has long been suggested that differing sectors of society move at different rates of speed. In the society of late capital, as in most societies, the economy—ever hungry for greater production efficiency and new product development—has traveled the quickest. The supreme economic value of maintaining an edge over competitors by advancing production techniques and distribution tactics, while shortening the duration of research and development, has become impossible to integrate with other value systems. Typically, ideology (state-sanctioned value systems) is just the opposite in its resistance to new values. Changes in ideology are very slow, since in the grandest sense ideology consists of master narratives that offer the illusion of stability and security necessary to make everyday life intelligible. There is a peculiar contradiction between economic and “moral” ideology, since the latter can act as a resister to the former. Many of the biblical master narratives, for instance, are at odds with the value of speed so essential to the economic sector. The explanation for this contradiction is found in the political sector. Its function is to mediate the contradictions. As an arm of the economy, the legitimized political sector has the unenviable task of keeping the economy as free of regulation as possible, while seeming to meet contradictory cultural demands. For example, the master narrative of the welfare state has been a key site of inertia in the United States. The idea that the destitute must be given a second chance, the sick be cared for, and the ignorant be educated, is antithetical to the construction and maintenance of bourgeois economy. The government’s role in this conflict is to maintain a symbolic order conducive to the perception that the welfare

state is functioning on behalf of its citizens, while allowing the business sector to follow its anti-welfare agenda. This can be done, for example, by suggesting small increases in the minimum wage, while signing free-trade agreements with third world countries which allow unrestricted colonization of their labor pools. Many times, administrations in the US change because there is a crisis in the perception that the demands of the welfare state are being met.

This discussion about the notion of cultural lag points out how different present-day institutions are simultaneously situated in different historical time zones. To complicate matters further, even the components of each institution are not necessarily in the same time zone. The US military is an example of an institution that has advanced the furthest into the future, a world alien to everyday life perception. The capabilities of its technology and the means of its deployment almost defy imagination. Such components are structured by nomadic values, using the idea of globalized control through absence as a master narrative. Yet beyond this one narrative, the ideological component in the military is extremely conflicted. Its inter-relationship with the government continually pulls it away from an ideology of globalization to one of the nation-state, and with that retrogression come all the questions about women in combat or the acceptance of gays in the military. In a time of alienated electro-mechanized war, flesh values would seem irrelevant from any perspective. But to admit this explicitly is too disruptive to authoritarian institutions still living under the symbolic order of imperialism; in this time zone racism and sexism still have a necessary function, as they benefit these institutions' exploitative aims (for example, to camouflage the corporate need to maintain a

reserve labor force), as well as justifying obscene re-appropriation. Consequently it falls to the government to seek a compromise between the two time fragments.

The fractalization of lived time occurs not only in abstracted macro institutions, but also exists at the micro level of everyday life, as well as at the intermediate level of social aggregates. To be sure, the constructs of race/ethnicity, gender, and class can also be factored in. The life-world of individuals in the technocratic class undoubtedly stands in marked contrast to those in the working class, partly because of extreme differences in production technology. While the former class works in an electronic environment that is constantly transforming, the latter still proceeds according to a model of production that at best has entered the time zone of post-industrial machine technology. In terms of mediated leisure, the two may share a similar time zone, since both have access to television, but this is more a by-product of the market continuum that intersects all time zones. Everyday life itself becomes a determined walk through given segments of history without ever leaving the present.

Much of authoritarian power now functions to control the time zones to which an individual has access, and this is precisely the problem when race and gender are examined. Frustration caused by the inability to solve spatial problems (which in turn are represented by imperialist ideology, such as prejudgment determined by spatial representation, or ghetto lock-downs) is not the only reason that race and gender relations have reached such a point of crisis; there is also the matter of temporal lock-down. Numerous social aggregates are caught in the time zone of imperialism. The colonial era of conquest is constantly replayed, even though

the conquest by interdependent economic and military superpowers is complete. There is no more territory to appropriate; it can only be re-appropriated (for example, family farms). Yet areas lacking premium value as market territories or as strategic militarized zones remain in the historical void of imperialism. Sexism and racism no longer act as justifications for expansion, but rather as justifications to mark these territories as sites for sacrificial waste inherent to the capitalist system. Time has stopped for those caught in these territories. The future cannot be accessed, although some narrow conduits out of these areas have been constructed. This is especially true for straight white women, as they have had more middle class support. However, the more that marginals advance toward the future and away from their previous temporal sites, the greater the expectations of those on the move as well as those who are left behind. With these expectations come the realization that full spectrum temporal mobility is highly improbable, thus dramatically increasing frustration and anger. Running parallel to this problem is that of splintering perspective. With each new time zone entered, new theoretical and practical considerations arise. (For example, in the time zone of imperialism, theorizing and implementing communal neighborhood defense systems is a necessity, while in the late capital time zone of cyberspace the theorization and implementation of cell attack strategies has a more viable function). As groups move through time, their perspectives fragment. This is why essentialist and nomadic positions can both seem to be true. The former lags behind the latter, but each has time zones in which it is ascendant. The essentialist position functions best in the time zones of early capital, while the nomadic position functions best in the time zones of late capital.

What should become clear from this discussion is that there is not a monolithic historical present. The present has been shattered into a thousand shards, all of which require different strategies for resistance. Now more than ever, an anarchist epistemology should be adopted, one that leads to situational knowledge. It must be one that tolerates research and exploration within any time or spatial zone. Resistance cannot be carried out from the safety zone of a single bunker. Those who are able must be free to move through time by any means necessary.

The situation of the resistant cultural worker in regard to the problem of a shattered historical present is quite peculiar. Here is a class of workers with relative autonomy in regard to the historical time zone in which they choose to work, and yet they tend to remain solely invested in a reductive resistance to imperialist ideology. From the position of the cultural worker, concerns are usually framed around questions of identity and colonization. There is no doubt that this is a key site of struggle, but too many resources have been deployed in this sector. The degree of redundancy and reinvention occurring in this time zone is unfortunate primarily because it offers a spectacle that implies that other time zones do not exist, or that they are irrelevant, and that no other problem can be solved or tended to until the imperialist mess of early capital is cleaned up. Consequently, authoritarian power is allowed to run unchecked in other time zones, constructing and reconstructing the worker and itself in a manner most beneficial to its concerns. From the perspective of past historical time zones, the idea of class analysis—still an incomplete project—has been severely undermined. This loss has removed a functional category for understanding marginalization beyond that which reduces the world to the



appearance of flesh. The recent appropriation of class critique by the Democrats, in an effort to dissolve the radical idea of class warfare under the sign of liberal reformism, demonstrates how much is being surrendered without resistance from the cultural worker in order to perpetuate a discourse of identity that now teeters on the brink of full-scale commodification. On the other end of the time continuum, these concerns about identity and power make explorations into technology and the emergence of electronic space seem unnecessary. It must then be asked, has identity politics become a code of entrapment? Is it a code of liberation or one of tyranny within the realm of cultural production?

One of the most well-rehearsed and routinized performances to arrive as fallout from identity discourse is the call and response ritual which asks, "Who created authoritarian culture?" and "Who benefits from this culture?" The response from the chorus is "The straight white male." Within this discourse and performance matrix, the identity of the straight white male is solely informed by his role as an irredeemable criminal. It is odd to think that whether one's perspective is from the margin or the center, evil is always incarnated in the flesh. This has been the primary failure of identity politics thus far. The Christian master narrative in which evil is reducible to flesh has kept its structure intact. Although the contingent elements of this narrative have been inverted—Eve as the innocent and Adam as the guilty—the original sin of the flesh continues ever onward. Everyone knows who the criminals are since they can easily be recognized; they are forever marked by the fleshy appearance of their genetic code. Such are the wages of sin, and such is the foundation for the ideology of exploitation.

Social solidarity among those of resistant culture cannot be based on the same principle as that of authoritarian culture. To do so is to perpetuate the mechanisms of exclusion and elimination, which in turn preserves the rush toward intolerant homogenization.

The question should not be who is guilty, as this implies that there are individuals with total autonomy over social institutions. Rather, the question should be: What are the institutional mechanisms promoting the current situation(s)? Macro structures, to a large degree, are independent of individual action. That combination of macro structures often termed the war machine by resistant culture is not in the control of a group of people, nor is it controlled by a cluster of nation-states. The very reason it is so feared is that it is out of control. It cannot be turned off, even when some of its uses to dominant culture have passed. Locating its life source is not so simple as saying that it is in the psyche of straight white men, or any other source solely constructed around the concept of agency. This is an absurd reduction that only misdirects resources toward reformist debates of minimal consequence, in that they will not change the structure or the dynamic of the war machine itself.

If the fetish for concretizing guilt and the need for genetic scapegoating can be sidestepped by leaving the bunker of imperialist ideology, it will again become possible to manufacture broad-spectrum events of disturbance. Not following the liberal code, however, does have extreme consequences. By refusing to act in accordance with the scripture of identity, one invites racist and sexist labels regardless of one's intentions. Once outside the liberal bunker, there is no security, since there are no certain enemies. No strategy

can be measured in terms of probability of success. There is only speculation in this time zone, where power is liquid, with no real certainty as to which way it will flow. Consequently, acts of disturbance are gambles. The situation could possibly be made worse, much worse, by such acts, but success without the restrictions of more reforms is also possible. It is frightening to think that radical action is built upon guesswork, but if there were assurances, by what means would this work be radical? This is the much to be desired end of the heroic myths of the radical leftist as visionary or progressive thinker. All that is left is the wager, and it doesn't take genius to gamble. All that is required is the ability to live with uncertainty, and the willingness to act despite the potential for unforeseen negative consequences.

Cultural workers have recently become increasingly attracted to technology as a means to examine the symbolic order. Video, interactive computer projects, and all sorts of electronic noise have made a solid appearance in the museums and galleries, and have gained curatorial acceptance. There are electronic salons and virtual museums, and yet something is missing. It is not simply because much of the work tends to have a "gee whiz" element to it, reducing it to a product demonstration offering technology as an end in itself; nor is it because the technology is often used primarily as a design accessory to postmodern fashion, for these are uses that are to be expected when new exploitable media are identified. Rather, an absence is most acutely felt when the technology is used for an intelligent purpose. Electronic technology has not attracted resistant cultural workers to other time zones, situations, or even bunkers that yield new sets of questions, but instead has been used to express the same narratives and questions typically examined in activist

art. This, of course, is not a totally negative development, as the electronic voice is potentially the most powerful in the exercise of free speech; however, it is disappointing that the technology is monopolized by interrogations of the imperialist narrative. An overwhelming amount of electronic work addresses questions of identity, environmental catastrophe, war and peace, and all the other issues generally associated with activist representation. In other words, concerns from another time zone have been successfully and practically imported into electronic media, but without addressing the questions inherent to the media itself. Again, this is a case of over-deployment and over-investment in a single spatial/temporal sector. An interrogation of technoculture itself has yet to occur, except when such investigation fits with more traditional activist narratives. As to be expected, a large amount of work is on media disinformation—the electronic invention of reality—but it is always tied to a persuasive argument about why the viewer should follow an alternative interpretation of a given “real world” phenomenon. Activists show no particular interest in questioning the cybernetics of everyday life, the phenomenology of screenal space, the construction of electronic identity, and so on.

And why should they? In the abstract sense, if power has gone nomadic, then ideology will eventually follow the same course. As speculative as it might be, with the rapid change in technology, the flowing shift of the locus of reality from simulated time/space to virtual time/space, and the undetermined speed with which this is happening, those concerned with the development of the symbolic order must ask: What are nomadic values now and what will they become? Because of cultural lag, asking questions about the

fate of sedentary culture is still useful, but only if other time zones are kept in mind. Even to formulate questions relevant to electronic nomadology is difficult, since there are no theories to exploit, no histories to draw upon, and no solid issues. It is so much easier to stay in the familiar bunker, where the issues (and the parameters of their interpretation) have solidified. Here the pain of leftist authoritarianism is most intensely felt. Even though addressing issues of nomadology is clearly urgent, one fears to invoke the wrath of sedentary liberal activists by making an “insensitive” error; that fear diminishes exploration into this topic, or any other outside the traditional activist time zone. Who is willing to venture on a high-risk endeavor, knowing that the result of failure is punishment from the alleged support group?

On the practical level, this problem becomes even more complex. The hardware of everyday life cybernetics is beginning to merge, and in the most advanced time zone, that of the cyberelite, it already has. The telephone, television/video, the computer and its network structure—all these are blending into a single unit. Each of these pieces of hardware is from a different time zone, and each is thus surrounded by different sensibilities. The oldest piece is the most utopian in terms of its practical consequences in society: The telephone represents the technology closest to a decentralized open-access communication net. In the West, almost everyone knows how to use a phone and has access to one. There are even indicators that the process of decentralization that determined access to the telephone was framed as a free speech issue.\* During this process, the telephone was the

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\*See Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown*. NY: Bantam Books, 1992, pp 8-12.

best hardware for information relay available. While it clearly still had a military function, the movement to decentralize it recognized that the need for open access surpassed the need for control. It is this type of sensibility and process that must be replicated as new technologies begin to merge.

Just the opposite process occurred in the development of video/television. Although the hardware for viewing is relatively decentralized, and the hardware for production is beginning to be decentralized, the network for distribution is almost completely centralized, with little indication of change. This state of affairs must be resisted: The ideology that sanctions control of the airwaves by an elite capitalist class cannot be allowed to dominate all technology, and yet this is precisely what will happen if more cultural resources are not deployed to disturb this ideology. Cultural workers must insist on making access to electronic nets decentralized. To lose on this front is to concede to censorship in the worst way. Whether or not an artist loses h/er NEA grant because a given project is antithetical to sanctioned imperialist ideology is insignificant, compared to the consequences of merging systems of communication. This struggle will be more difficult than the opening of the phone network, since the airwaves are perceived as a means for mass persuasion. In the time of telephone decentralization, radio and film suffered defeats (access to the airwaves was perceived not as a right, but as a business), causing repercussions which are still being felt. Television took the centralized form that it did partly because of these defeats.

There is a wild card in this situation. The computer could go either way. Access to hardware, education, and net-

works is currently being decentralized. Unlike the telephone or television, computers have not entered the everyday life of almost every class. This primarily elite technology has sunk a deep taproot down through the bureaucratic class. The electronic service class is growing, but is far from pervasive. Hence those in lagging time zones already realize that computers are not democratic technology, nor are they considered an essential technology. This sensibility damages resistance to centralization of communication systems, since such indifference allows the capitalist elite to impose principles of self-regulation and exclusion on the technology without having to go before the public. The technology is lost before the public is even aware of its ramifications. One of the key critical functions of cultural workers is to invent aesthetic and intellectual means for communicating and distributing ideas. If the nomadic elite completely controls the lines of communication, resistant cultural workers have no voice, no function, nothing. If they are to speak at all, cultural workers must perpetuate and increase their current degree of autonomy in electronic space.

There is a more optimistic side. The computer's linkage to the telephone is much greater than to the television. In fact, the computer and telephone will probably consume cable systems. If the sensibility of decentralization can be maintained, fiber optic networks will provide the democratic electronic space that has for so long been a dream. Each home could become its own broadcasting studio. This does not mean that network broadcast will collapse, or that there will be open access to data bases; but it does mean that there could be a cost-effective method to globally distribute complex grass-roots productions and alternative information nets containing time-based images, texts, and

sounds—all accessible without bureaucratic permission. It will be as easy as making a phone call.

Thus, developing systems of communication may provide another utopian opportunity. However, maintaining technological decentralization is crucial to exploiting this chance. Considering the history of utopia in ruins, the probability that this opportunity will be successfully used looks discouraging. None can predict how the technology will evolve, nor by what means the nomadic elite will defend the electronic rhizome from a slave revolt. Those engaged in electronic resistance may well be on a fool's errand, since the battle may already be lost. There are no assurances; there are no politically correct actions. Again, there is only the wager. If cynical power has withdrawn from the spectacle into the electronic net, then that is also where pockets of resistance must emerge. Although the resistant technocratic class can provide the imagination for the hardware and programming, resistant cultural workers are responsible for providing the sensibility necessary for popular support. This class must provide the imagination to intersect time zones, and to do so using whatever venues and media are available. This class must attempt to disturb the paternal spectacle of electronic centralization. We must challenge and recapture the electronic body, our electronic body! Roll the dice.



X

1872

even when this dream reality is most intense,  
we still have, glimmering through it, the  
sensation that it is mere appearance

even when this virtual reality is most intense, we  
still have, glimmering through it, the sensation  
that it is mere appearance

XI

1881

We operate only with things that do not exist:  
lines, planes, bodies, atoms, divisible time  
spans, divisible spaces. How should explanations  
be at all possible when we first turn  
everything into an image, our image!

We operate only with things that virtually exist:  
lines, planes, bodies, atoms, divisible time  
spans, divisible spaces. How should explanations  
be at all possible when we first turn everything  
into a virtual condition, our virtual condition!