



# Limit Analysis and its Limits

As a mode of inquiry into the conditions of present-day and historical struggles, much recent output from the so-called ‘communisation current’ might be described as a kind of *limit analysis*. This mode is something more than the usual exercise in unhappy consciousness we have come to expect from the ultraleft. Rather, we are told, limits are the very condition of possibility for struggles. They are generative, the source of struggles’ dynamism as well as their transience and inevitable failure. The horizon of communisation, in this sense, appears through these impasses, just as the virtual depths of a painting appear as the thickening of paint on a canvas surface. Each historical moment, in this sense, has a form of transcendence specific to the limits it presents for proletarian struggles—communisation, then, is that form of overcoming which opens from the particulars of today’s struggles. In attending to the two-fold character of the limit—both barrier and horizon—such analysis shares something with dialectical thought in general, and its willingness to think two incompatible thoughts at once.

But there are limits, alas, even to the study of limits, which can all too quickly pass over into fatalism and theodicy—as if the tragic text of history were already written, and our task only to discover the fatal flaw present from the outset. When done well, however, this method is about the search for the new in history: a new given by struggles themselves and merely registered by theory, a new immanent to the ever-changing terms under which proletarians meet capital and its powers. To register these new developments, however, requires close attention to all of the forces at play in a particular moment. Otherwise, limit analysis is just a machine for affirming assumptions.

‘Under the Riot Gear’ exemplifies both the good and the bad of such a method. There is no little amount of insight into what happened in Oakland during 2011 and 2012, and it is certainly one of the most rigorous and engaged accounts we’ve read. There are numerous moments worth commending. The distinction arrived at in the concluding pages, between processes of *generalisation* and processes of *unification* is incisive and, even better, portable. But there is quite often a mechanical application of certain conceptual frameworks (a mechanisation with the ironic effect of naturalising its own assumptions, as we shall see later on). While we often agree with many of these frameworks, in whole or in part, we can’t help but feel that the way in which they are applied leaves something to be desired.

‘Under the Riot Gear’ follows the analytical schematic elaborated by Theorie Communiste in essays such as ‘The Present Moment’ and ‘The Glass Floor’, in which it is suggested that, for proletarians at present, ‘the very fact of acting as a class appears as an external constraint, a limit to be overcome’. This means that every time proletarians affirm themselves as a class—as labour power—they likewise must affirm and sustain capital. Under present crisis conditions, workers often struggle merely to keep their jobs; in other words, they struggle to maintain the capital–labour relationship as such. Minimal modifications and defensive struggles are the order of the day. As a result of the restructuring of labour, workers are compelled to make endless sacrifices, effectively adopting the standpoint of capital in order to preserve and extend their access to the wage. If previous generations might have imagined working-class struggle as a process of ‘self-valorisation’ in which workers gradually won for themselves an autonomy from capital, now the affirmation of class identity seems one and the same with an affirmation of the imperatives of capital and its right to manage. Action as a class becomes self-undermining.

This shift in the structure of the capital–labour relation has shattered the material coherence of the factory, of industrial production, in the formerly industrial core—via automation, off-shoring, disaggregation of productive processes, and the remaining litany of post-Fordism. Exiled from the factory floor, proletarian antagonism finds itself in the streets,

departing the space of production for the space of reproduction or circulation. The December 2008 uprising in Greece is a paradigmatic example of this displacement, in the reading given it by *Theorie Communiste*: the most explosive encounters occurred between precarious, marginalised proletarians and the state, while the formal, unionised working-class involved itself rather late and ambivalently. Once antagonism has been displaced in this manner, proletarians face off against the apparatuses which reproduce their class identity: the police, the schools, the trade union offices and various governmental agencies. The promise of such struggle is that, in attempting to negate the forms of class belonging which now appear 'as external constraint', it might pass into open insurrection that puts both labour and capital into question and affirms neither. The concomitant limit, conversely, is that such antagonism remains at a remove from the heart of production and is unable to bring the economy as such to a halt.

While sometimes insightful about the differences separating Oakland from Athens and Thessaloniki, 'Under the Riot Gear' applies this analysis to Oakland somewhat heavy-handedly. We read, for instance, that the unique contribution of Oakland and the other plaza occupations is that, there, the proletariat took in hand the question of its own reproduction. Unlike Greece, 'the space of struggle was no longer only contained in the face to face encounter against the police, but in the face to face encounter with the reproduction of the proletariat.' Nonetheless, for the authors, this direct engagement with reproduction brought its own challenges, naturalising an 'autonomisation' of the sphere of reproduction consequent on the growth of superfluous, unwaged proletarians. This makes it more difficult to examine the ways in which the materials for the mutual-aid based structures of the camps came from the surrounding capitalist economy (and were sometimes paid for with money earned from the sale of labour power).

This is where the piece displays its own taste for hyperbole, and we read, for instance, that as a result of this autonomisation, '[the Oakland Commune] never questioned the idea of production', a point contradicted shortly; the following pages largely concerns Occupy Oakland's

two blockades of the Oakland Port, and its intervention into the struggle of port workers. This discussion also stands in contradiction with the likewise hyperbolic claims that ‘Outside of the square, nothing could be attacked.’ As is well-documented, all sorts of things beyond the square were attacked in the many nights of rioting, disturbances that spooked the Oakland Business Association enough for it to speak to the press about declining sales and businesses which had chosen not to relocate to Oakland given its lack of security. However, we find ourselves in agreement with the spirit if not the letter of our correspondents’ wording, if by this spirit we are meant to understand that the Oakland Commune was unable to pass into a phase of sustained attack against the economic forms upon which it depended. It’s true that the Commune’s central feature was a fundamentally passive and defensive one: the camp, a space in which the reproduction of the proletariat was directly engaged through structures of mutual aid and free giving. Though this space was defended, the moments of open violence were responses to attacks on the camp, or alternately, responses to attempts to thwart its reestablishment. To overcome this limit would have meant the passage into open insurrection and the transcendence of the ‘camp-form’.

That said, we are compelled to linger over the categories of *strike* and *production* which ground the critique—not to defend the virtue of the encampment, but precisely to shake these matters loose from a static conception and bring them to life in the present situation. Without this there will be no understanding of the Oakland Commune, nor the terrain in which the practices of communisation may unfold.

### ***What Is a Strike?***

If such a passage to open insurrection were at all possible, it would have occurred during the climactic moment of the General Strike of Nov. 2, when the camp-form was left behind, briefly, for a moment of offensive expansion. This is where the authors’ application of the ‘class belonging as exterior constraint’ thematic becomes most interesting and, in our view, problematic. For the authors, the declaration of a general strike, which might further have meant the transformation of the struggle into

a form capable of challenging production as such, merely reproduced the externality of class belonging: ‘inasmuch as almost no one went on strike, the moment where the possibility to recognise oneself as a worker with her power became straight away a handicap. In other words, in the moment when class belonging was outlined, it was only produced as an external constraint’.<sup>1</sup>

But it is unclear in what way the labeling of this event as ‘strike’ was a handicap: 2 November was doubtless the high point of the movement. If it’s true that the term ‘strike’ was a false one, this seems to have been a generative rather than limiting delusion. In any case, we don’t believe the term ‘general strike’ meant what the authors imagine it meant for the participants – that is, we don’t think it was delusion. *As we remember it, to call for a general strike meant, rather, to call for a general attack on the economy as such; in other words, it was a call for an interruption of the capitalist economy, whether by withdrawal of labour power (individually, collectively), blockade, occupation, targeted sabotage or generalised rioting.* All of these tactical elements combined on 2 November. This sense of *strike* is neither new nor lost to history, as we shall see; it persists in dialectical relation to particular conditions. As the authors themselves note, the ‘strike’ as withdrawal of labour is merely one among the ensemble of elements which come together in the ‘general strikes’ of the past. If withdrawal of labour was the primary element in the general strikes of the past 130 years—which from the outset involved blockade, expropriation, sabotage—increasingly that role is now held by the blockade. These blockades have as their subject proletarians in the expanded sense that includes

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<sup>1</sup> Once again, the piece relies on hyperbole to make its point, since longshoremen walked off the job in the morning, and there was a ‘sick-out’ by Oakland Teachers which shut down many schools. Furthermore, many other workers took personal days or simply refused to report to work that day. Though one might not want to call such actions a strike, they are nonetheless effective in crippling workplaces. The immigrant strike of 2006, ‘el gran paro’—with which the authors contrast the November 2 General Strike—was largely accomplished this way, through the individual withdrawal of labour power and for this reason not referred to as a ‘strike’ either at the time or afterward.

not only labourers, but all those who are 'without reserves,' including the unemployed. The blockade is the form for an era of expanding superfluous populations, as the *piqueteros* of Argentina and more recently the *piquets volants* of France have already shown us.

### ***Where Is Production?***

In many respects, the participants in this new type of 'general strike' grasp something, organically and spontaneously, which 'Under the Riot Gear' misses. It is no doubt true that the spheres of circulation and reproduction depend upon the sphere of production and productive labour; however, the converse is also true. Production can be halted *from beyond*, by proletarians who are not productive labourers, through an interruption of the circulation upon which production depends. In the same manner, struggles in the sphere of reproduction might degrade capital's ability to find the labour power it needs. If the commodities (raw materials, half-finished goods, finished goods) and bodies which capital needs don't arrive at the factory, the warehouse, or the retail outlet, then all labour and all production of value stops.

Furthermore, production and circulation are today entangled in newly complex ways. Circulation is now internal to production. As noted above, with the supply-chain Taylorism of Toyotaisation and the related logistics revolution, the factory has been disaggregated, parcelised and distributed in planetary networks such that the production of a singled finished item might require the coordination of dozens of producers. These networks are highly brittle; the use of just-in-time transport schemes and sophisticated logistics protocols to accelerate and manage flows of commodities means that there is little room for error, as once-common stockpiles and buffers have been eliminated. Given the extent of these networks, disruptions of circulation at certain key chokepoints can have far-reaching effects on production. Finally, circulation is internal to production in the sense that, under the reign of Walmart and the new mega-retailers, production is driven by consumption in new ways. In the so-called 'pull-production' model, goods are not produced or shipped until data is received

from the retailer indicating that stocks have fallen. Items are pre-sold under such an arrangement, at least ideally, and consumption exerts a determinative effect on production.

In all regards, then, an intervention into the sphere of circulation is, at one and the same time, an intervention into the sphere of production. And while interventions into the sphere of circulation do not have seizure of the means of production as their horizon in the same way that interventions into production do, it's unclear that such seizures are even workable today, in most areas, where production is limited to peripheral or secondary items of little use beyond capitalist social forms.

### ***What Is Production?***

It proves significant as well that the authors misrecognise the character and present situation of productive labour. There is a risk of pedantry in all such discussions; the authors route around this by cherry-picking a partial idea from Marx, asserting that 'We can go as far as saying that any labour really subsumed by capital is productive.' Should the words of Marx be the measure, he himself refutes this in a dozen places; more significantly, his full assessment accords with the developments we have seen in the global economy, including rising volatility and declining profitability beyond the nominal price regimes of the Finance/Insurance/Real Estate sector. Such developments are consistent with, for example, Marx's careful analysis and verdict in Volume 2 of *Capital* regarding the non-productive character of work given over to transforming money capital into commodities or the reverse, said work which 'includes circulation, or is included by it'.

But suggesting that a certain labour is unproductive does not mean, at the same time, disputing the *social necessity* for such work: 'Just as the circulation time of capital forms a necessary part of its reproduction time, so the time during which the capitalist buys and sells, prowling around the market, forms a necessary part of the time in which he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as personified capital. It forms part of his business hours... The change of state costs time and labour power, not to create value, but



rather to bring about the conversion of value from one form to the other, and so the reciprocal attempt to use this opportunity to appropriate an excess quantity of value does not change anything. This labour, increased by evil intent on each side, no more creates value than the labour that takes place in legal proceedings increases the value of the object in dispute'. Seen in this light, banking, bookkeeping, advertising, and numerous administrative tasks are at one and the same time essential to the reproduction of capital and, nonetheless, unproductive.<sup>2</sup>

This distinction has become more rather than less significant to capital's struggle for its own reproduction. As it has restructured away from industrial production, capital has sought revenue increasingly in the sphere of circulation—for the given capitalist acts under the compulsion to seek revenue rather than to produce new value. This compulsion precisely constitutes an internal limit for capital, setting profit against accumulation and price against value, and must be understood as an immanent character of the present crisis. It is of little interest to chuckle over the capitalist's failure to have understood his Marx; rather, we simply note that the shift of resources and jobs toward the task of realising greater portions of decreasing surpluses, at an ever-quickenning pace, provides as well an opportunity for capital's antagonists.

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<sup>2</sup> Various passages in Marx are useful for grasping the relation between money capital and *productive* capital, between circulation and production, and between revenue and value. Consider for example *Capital* vol. 2, chs. 1 & 6; vol. 3 chs. 4, 16–19; *Grundrisse* Notebook 2 ('It is damned difficult for Messrs the economists to make the theoretical transition from the self-preservation of value in capital to its multiplication', 270–1); I.I. Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theories of Value*, Ch. 19 ('Thus the question of *productive labour* rests on the question of *productive capital*, i.e., on the well-known theory, in Volume II of *Capital*, of the "Metamorphoses of Capital". According to this theory, capital goes through three phases in its process of reproduction: money capital, productive capital and commodity capital. The first and third phases represent the "process of circulation of capital", and the second phase, the "process of production of capital". 'Productive' capital, in this schema, is not opposed to unproductive capital, but to capital in the 'process of circulation'). For a full discussion of the literature, see Ian Gough's 'Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour' from the *New Left Review*, 1/76.

Since capital sustains itself through the generation of value—and enters into crisis where the production of value falls below a certain level—antagonists will want to understand which sectors are value-generating and which are not. But this value-analysis is often taken to be a strategic analysis; Marxists are all too quick to assume that value-productivity equals strategic centrality, and that struggles in ‘productive’ parts of the economy will be more significant. This is quite simply untrue. As above, whether or not something produces value does not, in the end, determine its usefulness for the reproduction of capital. The banking and credit systems produce no value on their own. Nonetheless, the freezing of the credit-supply can bring the productive economy to a standstill in a matter of days. Value-analysis might be a necessary preliminary to a strategic understanding of capital, but it is no substitute for it.

It is no doubt the case that the restructuring of capital, such that the productive sector is ever harder to discern in places like Oakland, presents real difficulties. Rather than a value-analysis, we might instead orient ourselves toward the concomitant difficulty in finding the use-values necessary our survival; the looting of a circulatory entrepôt, after all, can provide only temporarily for material needs. The seizure of reproduction *from* capital would have remained inaccessible to the Oakland Commune even if had passed beyond its limits. At the same time, attacks on capital’s presently vulnerable nodes, where are aggregated the processes of transforming commodities to money, should be understood as a nascent and tentative advance in the tactics explored by the Oakland Commune. The question for us, then, concerns the elusive unity of practice in coordinating these twin imperatives: the destruction of capital’s self-reproduction and the command of our own. We take the practical discovery of this unity to be communisation.

### ***Class Belonging?***

Having forced the general strike rather unrelentingly into the mold of the Greek riots (perhaps because of its misunderstanding of the ways in which production and productive labour present a limit), ‘Under the Riot Gear’ misses the specific points of difference between the unfolding

of class belonging and antagonism in the Greek case and Oakland. If class belonging was an external constraint in Oakland, it was one actually *personified* by particular factions and groups. To understand this, though, one has to look in detail at some of the loathsome political maneuvering that accompanied both the port blockade on the day of the general strike and the subsequent blockade in December.

Though the ILWU (the longshoremen's union) wears proudly a legacy of radicalism stretching back to the 1930s and is typically much more combative than the majority of American unions, long since domesticated to the needs of capital, it tends to engage in 'political strikes' (which are illegal in the US) through a rather peculiar, legalistic mechanism. Because a clause in their contract gives longshoremen the right to refuse to cross a picket line—even a 'community picket'—they initiate work stoppages by inviting 'community activists' to picket at the gates of the port. This bit of theater is performed for the benefit of an arbitrator who perfunctorily declares working conditions 'unsafe,' allowing the dockworkers to stop work without risking sanction. This is a curious inversion of the 'class belonging as external constraint' thematic—the longshoremen exteriorise their antagonism in the form of a crew of outsiders because their own contractual identity as workers has become a fetter. Even when it originates with the workers themselves, antagonism must come at the workplace from the outside, through a strange political ventriloquism.

Though the idea of blockading the port on 2 November—in support of the call for a general strike—emerged from the exchange between community activists and ILWU union members, the size of the forces conjured up by Occupy Oakland made it something entirely different, a blockade rather than a piece of theater, as the workers had no chance of getting through to the port, regardless of how the arbitrator ruled. And though the blockade was later described as an intervention into the Longview struggle, for the most part, the tens of thousands of people that marched on the port that day had little knowledge of the Longview struggle. They marched on the port for the same reasons that people came out to the events earlier in the day—to protest the destruction of the

Oakland camp and the concurrent attacks on Occupy camps throughout the country, and more generally, out of solidarity with the invitingly vague political stance of the Occupy movement, which allowed people to protest against the various conditions of impoverishment, unemployment, and dispossession (often dispossession of the rights and privileges of the American middle class) that they experienced. For all the vagueness of Occupy, the attendees were there for themselves.

But as plans for a second blockade emerged in the following weeks, the entire narrative was rewritten such that the sequence of blockades became largely about lending support to the heroic but insufficient activity of the Longview workers, as well as to the incipient struggle of port truckers in Los Angeles. This had the result of domesticating the antagonistic forces which were unleashed by the General Strike, essentially making the Oakland Commune into the volunteer militia of port workers who, for the most part, would not act on their own behalf. Thus the external constraint appeared once again, a mirror image of the first time: with the help of some labour activists in the movement, the port workers—as image of class belonging—harnessed the combative energy of Occupy Oakland and diverted it away from any question of acting for itself, which would have meant acting against this image of class belonging and of the self-appointed activist leadership which facilitated the second blockade. Such an arrangement was paralysing for both sides: the longshoremen were rendered complacent by the externalisation of their capacity for antagonism, and the tatterdemalion mob from Occupy was directed away from the question of its own needs and toward the defense of this essentially passive class identity, one it couldn't even inhabit. The problem, therefore, is not that the assorted proletarians from Occupy deluded themselves that they were labour. Rather, the problem is that they accepted that such actions are only meaningful and potentially decisive when done *on behalf of* labour: that the labour strike must always subsume the strike of non-labour.

### *The Morality of Production*

But there is a risk, as we shall see, of identifying the Commune's reorientation toward traditional labour struggles as a tilt back toward some natural equilibrium. Instead, it registers an incomplete motion toward rearticulating the place of the strike. Though the temporality of narrative retelling underscores the sequence in which there were strikes at two different times (one in November, one in December), we might instead suggest that *the Oakland strike was always in two places*: the place of orthodox labour, to which the ragtag crowd brought some novelty, and the place of non-labour, to which the unions brought a pernicious element of moral legitimacy. This doubling too is a form of the moving contradiction, the two strikes grinding against each other as part of a larger dynamic through which the mode of struggle develops, moving against capital by moving with it. But neither position in the contradiction is itself stable, much less natural.

It is here that 'Under the Riot Gear' lurches perilously toward the error of recreating 'labour' as the natural state of the antagonists. This happens more than once, for example, 'As soon as a struggle that thinks of itself as being solely political (and economic) comes to confront one of its limits and goes through the process of transforming itself, then it is a *natural* feeling to acknowledge oneself as labour power [*Se reconnaître comme force de travail est un processus naturel*]. But, the transformation of this struggle into something else by means of acknowledging everyone as labour power could not, in this case, take place' (our emphasis).

Contrarily, if the antagonists had a 'natural' reaction on 2 November, it was to attack capital where it was accessible and vulnerable—not from an ideological self-identification, but as an objective measure of capital's own necessary expulsion of bodies from productive labour. This process includes both the production of surplus populations and the redistribution of jobs toward necessary but non-productive labour.

Theorie Communiste argue that programmatism should not be grasped as a colloquy of mistakes, but as an expression of the conditions of revolutionary possibility within the era we now designate as programmatist. We would argue in parallel that the strike in the place of

production, the strike of labour as hegemonic form of anticapitalist struggle, also belongs to an era. This era was inaugurated by the generalisation of the wage-form by the industrial revolution; now it wanes in parallel with the decline of the industrial wage and the receding primacy of production as capital's self-conception. Thus we see a corollary to the struggles of that earlier moment, both return and revision: the blockade, the strike beyond the sites of production, bears a genealogical resemblance to the 'export riot' of the eighteenth century. But now with a difference: if those struggles meant to prevent the departure of use-values, of the means of reproduction, from leaving the country, the blockade returns after the production of such use-values has long since fled. Instead it is capital's means of reproduction that come under attack. Capital, we must recall, has its own limits, and reforms itself in its drive to overcome them; it is precisely this we see in the intensified need to find revenue in circulation. The blockade is this present unfolding of capital's limits from the standpoint of the proletariat and expressed as immediate struggle. This was perhaps the best possible in the moment; it was not enough.

We would argue, consequentially, that the final inability of Oakland Commune to confront capital on an enlarged scale arises from, in addition to the overwhelming state force arrayed against it, a double dynamic. On the one hand there is the truth that the proletarians of Oakland are increasingly exiled from the abode of valorisation: an effect with an internal bifurcation between those who work elsewhere in the economy and those who do not work at all. On the other hand, there is the persistent moralising character which implies that every seizure from the state or from capital must have some appeal to liberal virtue: that an appropriated building must be a school or library, that a strike must receive a trade union imprimatur—as if somehow these gestures would allow for broad sympathy throughout the larger population, or might defer the blows of the batons.

Indeed, the sequence of events can't be understood without examining the moral assumptions people preserve concerning strikes and blockades. Because of the history of the worker's movement, it is commonly assumed that workers have *a right* to strike their workplace. Strikes are

legitimate because it is now widely understood that, even if workers do not *own* the means of productions, being the temporary caretakers of this property implies they rightly have some say over its disposition, while a random proletarian does not. Blockades of workplaces which do not involve the workers, on the other hand, are by the same token seen as illegitimate, which of course allows the state to respond with much greater ferocity.<sup>3</sup> In our view, these ideas about the legitimacy of the strike and the illegitimacy of the blockade are extensions of the logic of property in general. During the second port blockade, activists from Occupy Oakland sought out the legitimacy and shelter from attack which their association with the unspoken *rights* of the workers offered them, while not acknowledging in any way the dangerous preconceptions on which this legitimacy rested. This is yet another way in which class belonging—here as moral image—has become a constraint.

We return, finally, to the pivotal claim of ‘Under the Riot Gear’: that the Oakland Commune ‘almost never questioned the idea of production’. We do not think it is self-evident what it would mean ‘to expand the struggle to the labour process’, nor that this is a natural unfolding; it is a historical unfolding in a changed situation. Similarly, the claim that ‘The linking of the movement with school closures may have been another [effort toward such an expansion]’ discovers an important inflection-point in the struggle, but for the wrong reasons; in point of fact, the struggle was extended to the schools, including a fairly prolonged occupation of one venue. However, the turn to the schools did not discover there students intent on seizing the reins of their own intellectual reproduction. Contrarily, it found a coordination with parents and teachers to replace, in effect, the support withdrawn by the state apparatus and mitigate, somewhat opportunistically, against the bad press Occupy Oakland had received, by seeking out the legitimacy of parent-teacher associations and their sentimental politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, such blockades will have deleterious effects on the workers associated with the blocked site. But activists don’t treat these effects in the same way they treat the negative consequences—for potential allies—of any tactic. ‘Harming workers’ is seen as particularly unthinkable.

We believe that the ongoing disarticulation of population from productive labour will inevitably undermine the moral linkage between struggle and labour as understood in its bourgeois form, wherein it appears as natural; indeed, we understand the disclosure of 'labour power' as a historically constituted category—one in need of overcoming—to be a critical aspect of communisation. On the necessity of 'extending attacks from the heart of reproduction to the heart of production' we find only agreement. *La forme d'une ville change moins vite, hélas! que le coeur de la production!* But on the question of the structure of production today and the composition and tactical repertoire of the class that will stage such attacks, we found it necessary to add these comradely criticisms.

Research & Destroy, December 2012