

No Blood For Oil!

Energy, Class Struggle, and War, 1998-2004

George Caffentzis

Department of Philosophy
University of Southern Maine
P.O. Box 9300
Portland, ME 04104-9300 USA
caffentz@usm.maine.edu

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Preface

The following essays are the product of the last six years of work. They were all written either for talks in anti-war and anti-globalization forums or for a variety of movement journals or books published in the US, Italy, France, Spain, and Britain.

Although I did not plan it, they all are reflections on the slogan: “No Blood for Oil!” When I first heard this slogan chanted during the demonstrations against the US-Iraq war in 1990-91 I was not impressed with its message of refusal. But over the years I've increasingly seen that there are many important political meanings occluded in it needing to be released. I have gathered together these essays because I think that they better reveal what we mean when we chant, “No Blood for Oil!” in the many demonstrations, sit-ins, and strikes demanding the end of oil wars.

The basic claim of this book is that the common measure of the antiwar movement's two political liquids, blood and oil, is class struggle in a capitalist society. This might be surprising to some, but why should it be? If I was writing about coal, I could not but speak of coal miners and their families in coal towns struggling against the Company. The peculiar conditions of oil production (especially the fact that relatively few workers are *directly* working to bring the oil from the depths of the earth to the surface) have made it easy for most conventional and even radical historians of the oil industry to avoid discussing the working class involved in producing and distributing oil throughout the planet. Most of their histories are filled with the sagas of capitalists, corporations and government leaders or with the logic of capital and money operating in an abstract economic space far above the heads of the workers in the oil regions. The working class rarely appears in these histories in its own name. This invisibility of workers in the story of oil, however, is a prestidigital trick of capital that must be exposed in order to understand our present political situation.

In this book I start with an essay that traces the development of my conception of class struggle. The following essays are snapshots of the oil wars since 1998, from the Clinton bombings of Iraq in 1998, to the 1999 NATO-Yugoslav war, to September 11, 2001, to the current invasion and occupation of Iraq. I apply the notion of class struggle in the US and Iraq to the analysis of contemporary oil wars. Indeed, one need

only look at Iraq today to see how many workers are *actually* involved in producing and distributing petroleum, for, when they refuse to cooperate, that production and distribution stops dead in its tracks.

The essays are arranged chronologically and have only been slightly edited to eliminate obvious errors and stylistic infelicities.

Introduction

Class Struggle Through Three Conceptual Revolutions: A Personal Account

I have been a student of class struggle for most of my life of almost six decades. But the object of my study has changed at least three times in my mind. My present view of class struggle is not the grand, but limited vision of that I had when I first read Marx and tried to describe the civil rights and the anti-war movements of the 1960s directly in the categories of surplus value, wages and profit. Working class and capitalist class were then for me two institutionally defined titans who were fighting from the picket line to revolutionary battlefields for the control of society. The outcome of that titanic struggle determined the extent of exploitation throughout society as expressed by the average rate of profit.

The Micro-Struggle of Class and the Refusal of Work (Zerowork)

The first conceptual revolution came when I began to see the class struggle as diffused throughout the labor processes of social production and the refusal of work being the “hidden variable” explaining why “things” “breakdown” and “things” “bite back.” Long before Michel Foucault and John Scott drew the learned world’s attention to the “micro-physics of power” and the “weapons of the weak” respectively, pieces like Watson’s “Counterplanning from the Shop Floor” alerted anti-capitalist militants to the fact that a micro-struggle was taking place in a million places throughout a capitalist society “twenty-four/seven” between workers and bosses. This struggle was unofficial, often non- or even anti-union and was motivated by the hatred of alienation and everyday oppression that is essential for the turnover of capitalist production and reproduction. This conceptual revolution dissolved the struggle between homogeneous class titans into a diffuse “subterranean” struggle of tendencies and forces arrayed across the length and breadth of society. Moreover, there was a recognition that this struggle was not external to the barriers of class, but penetrated the very essence of

capitalism in a variety of ways. Indeed, both “sides” interpenetrated each other and politics and economics were inseparable; for work is oppression and must continually be imposed through a thousand and one tricks and a million forms of violence while the refusal of work appeared on the social surface in an infinite variety of expressions for the most part not recognizing and not recognized as being “class struggle.”

This insight had the impact of a religious or scientific vision for me, since it revealed the hidden forces of the social universe much like the recognition of the nuclear force or the gravitation field. But such forces were not easily “harnessed,” and, if anything, the capitalists have been most self-conscious in responding to them than the “organizations of the working class.” For class struggle in the labor process and the refusal of work have provided motive forces for capitalist development (in a social-historical amplification of the famous “No pain, no gain” adage). The diffused class struggle (even more than the overt and institutionalized one) created the energies that made the ever more intensifying investment in technological repression (often called “progress”) a necessity.

This insight was crucial in my involvement in the *Zerowork* project which took off at the beginning of the first oil crisis.

The Discovery of the Manifold of Work: From *Wages for Housework* to *Midnight Notes*

The second conceptual revolution in my mind took place with my introduction to the work of the feminists who developed the wages for housework perspective. They demonstrated that the wage did not demarcate the borders of the working class and that exploitation (and the working day) was not limited to the venues of waged labor: factory, office and farm. They pointed out that the unwaged, especially women working without a wage at “home,” were central to the creation of surplus value; for their work was even more essential in creating and recreating the labor power that is “directly” exploited by capital in the factory, office and farm. The wages for housework perspective not only allowed me (and many, many others) to see the feminist struggle as a crucial sector of the class struggle, but it also was the basis of my understanding of “the manifold of work.”

I use that phrase to contrast this view with the standard Marxian one-dimensional view of labor, in the sense that it describes labor as temporal phenomenon. It presumes that waged labor “freely” contracted is the dominant type of labor in a

capitalist society that determines the rate of profit and exploitation. But in actual fact, labor in a capitalist society has *at least* four modalities:

1. “free,” legal and waged labor (paradigm: assembly line work);
2. “free,” legal and unwaged labor (paradigm: housework);
3. “unfree,” legal and unwaged (paradigm: chattel slavery);
4. “free,” not legal and waged (paradigm: working in a cocaine lab).

A complete accounting of valorization in a capitalist society would require an integration of at least these dimensions of the manifold of work. Similarly, a general account of the class struggle would require an account of the kinds of struggles being made within all these dimensions of the manifold of work (which is also a manifold of struggle).

This multi-dimensional approach to the class struggle, of course, showed how capital used not only the hierarchy of wages to divide the working class, but also used the different dimensions of the manifold of work to even more decisively divide the working class into different “species.” The major political-theoretical problem with the Marxist analysis of capitalism has been its inability to deal with racism and sexism which have their roots not only in the hierarchy of wages, but in the creation of wageless categories (like housewife and slave). In these categories can be found the creation of “quality”-divisions (like race and gender) within the working class, not only “quantity”-divisions.

This recognition of the manifold of work and its consequences for the divisions and decompositions within the working class became the basis of my work with the Midnight Notes Collective beginning in the late 1970s with the second energy crisis and the anti-nuclear power movement.

Africa, the Zapatistas and the Internet: Commons, Enclosures and Class Struggle (*New Enclosures to Auroras of the Zapatistas*)

The effort to bring these two conceptual revolutions together was the basis of my thinking with that of my comrades in the Midnight Notes Collective all the throughout the 1980s. We insisted on our peculiar brand of “vulgar Marxism” which still read the physiognomy of class struggle in the profits/wages numbers and the manifold of work in antagonism to the various forms of post-modernism on offer then. But new

experiences and struggles began to broaden the conceptual horizon pointing to a deeper level of struggle than the “wage struggle” (however broadly defined) and the manifold of labor. The increased repression of the early Reagan years drove my comrades in Midnight Notes and myself to the ends of the earth and to the ends of time. (Repression in this case *did* result in development.) A number of us began to see in the land struggles in Africa and the Americas, in the water struggle in Palestine, in the squatters’ struggles in the Zurich, Amsterdam and Berlin, in the struggle for keeping the parks and collective gardens of New York open to all, the deep structure of the generalized wage struggle which had two sides.

On the one side, there would not have been a wage struggle unless there were waged workers. But waged workers are not natural beings, they have to be historically made (as indeed were unwaged workers). For if one has access to a *common*, i.e., plentiful subsistence and a powerful community around him/her, s/he is not likely to go to look for a miserable wage from an inevitable boss (much less accept unwaged criminalization, enslavement or dependency on a male wage). Waged and unwaged workers were created simultaneously by being driven out of subsistence (which we call “enclosures”). For you can not be an unwaged worker if the wage relation did not structure subsistence in your society.

The simple logic of enclosures is engraved in “letters of fire and blood” in the basic texts of the anticapitalist tradition (not only Part 8 of *Capital I*). Indeed, one can say that the anti-capitalist struggle (in the form of a struggle to keep capital from becoming the dominant social force) began long before 1492 and the resistance to the enclosures, colonization, the witch-hunt and slavery in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

But in our travels we saw that this process was far from over. Indeed, it was being reintroduced in Africa by the World Bank and IMF in the form of structural adjustment programs as if it had never ravaged the continent hundreds of years before, first with the Atlantic slave trade and later with colonialism.

On the other side, waged workers have not been content to remain waged workers. They have continually attempted to recreate environments and networks of mutual support where they are not totally dependent on the wage. In fact, they have tried to recreate ways of subsistence and access to wealth that is not mediated by the wage. These efforts, when successful, give waged workers more power to refuse work and to shape a life that is beyond capital long before capitalism is transcended.

These two sides express a contemporary reality, but the first points back to the beginning of capital, while the second points to its end. This too is an element of the class struggle. Capital (in all its embodiments) is always anxious to extirpate the original subsistence existence and is continually carrying on search-and-destroy efforts to do so. Similarly, capital is ever watchful to enclose any new commons that has been constituted by workers.

In order to find a language that could express this deep structure of struggle below the wage we did not believe that terms like “autonomy” and “self-valorization” were appropriate. They were too freighted with philosophical assumptions we found questionable. The vocabulary of commons and enclosures were more evocative and historically rich for us, since it speaks of a place where Marxism, ecology, feminism, and indigenous and anti-slavery struggles (including the struggle against the prison-industrial complex and the death penalty) meet. In the *New Enclosures* the last part of *Capital I* merged with self-reproducing automata, the striking paper workers in Jay, Maine, the squatters in the Lower East Side of New York and Zurich, the Palestinian struggle for land and water, the movement for black political autonomy in the US, African farmers struggling against Structural Adjustment Programs, and the trans-Atlantic ties connecting the struggle for the commons in England and the abolition of slavery in the Americas.

Our choice of vocabulary turned out to be prescient, at least. A decade after the publication of the *New Enclosures* “commons” and “enclosures” have been used as a way of describing anything from the copyrighting of software and the patenting of human genes to the shortening of public library hours. This vocabulary has also served as a way of articulating an alternative to the neoliberal apotheosis of the market in the era of the apocalypse of the socialist state.

The image of class struggle that arises from *The New Enclosures* is a complex one. It starts with the formal (contractual, monetarized and “free”) wage struggle. But this is embedded in a much wider struggle involving unwaged (i.e., non-contractual, non-monetarized or “coerced”) labor in its manifold forms (from housework to slave labor). Finally, the generalized wage struggle is continually widened by capital’s often genocidal efforts to enclose old and new commons and narrowed by the construction of new and the preservation of old commons.

This dynamics allowed us to talk about a “global *intifada*” in the late 1980s in the following sense. In the first *intifada* the *land war* aspect of the struggle was made plain for the world to see. Palestinian youths were throwing stones at and being killed by

Israeli tanks that were occupying their physical space in order to enclose Palestinians' means of subsistence (access to water being the most important). These youths were refusing to have a foreign state apparatus (either Israeli or Palestinian) negotiate the place where they live and sustain their life. They wanted to fight for their common space with their own hands. We saw that this direct defense of the commons was increasingly a feature of struggle around the planet against globalization even though it took on many different forms. This was because capital itself was intensifying the attack on old and new areas of common subsistence ranging from the *ejidos* of Mexico to the pensions of Western European workers.

That is why in the subsequent years Midnight Notes devoted so much attention to the Zapatista revolt and the subsequent antiglobalization movement. For they embodied the struggle not so much for a better wage deal with capital, but they refused the neoliberal world that aimed to commodify and enclose all aspects of life (at whatever the wage level). Slogans like the Zapatistas' "Everything for everybody, nothing for ourselves" and the antiglobalization movement's "This world is not for sale" succinctly express the struggle for the commons and against enclosure on a planetary level. For all the problems and limitations of both movements, we argued for them against their Marxist and/or anarchist detractors because we saw them as directly articulating age-old anti-capitalist proletarian demands.

These struggles do not negate the wage struggle, but they do remind us that it is based on the endurance of a precapitalist natural and social commons (from geology to history and language) and the continual construction of new postcapitalist commons (from cyberspace to social security benefits). Capital's thinkers have often been very sensitive to these "other" aspects of the struggle that are often termed "ideological." But the human and natural past is not an "idea" any more than petroleum is an idea of ancient forests. For example, many of capital's custodians were very upset with the 1992 reversal of the role of Columbus and the Indigenous and the recent recognition that the Irish Famine of the 1840s was the product of Paleo-Liberalism. For these reversals and recognitions made the present fossilized energies of these events more available to workers as is seen most vividly in the reparations movement that is energizing struggle from Chicago to Haiti to Namibia.

If time is a site of contention, space is more so. In the introduction to the *New Enclosures*, the Midnight Notes Collective took Marx and Engels to task over their indifference to spatial considerations not to participate in then fashionable denigration of Marxism. We wanted to make clear that land, for example, was not a negotiable

commodity in the context of class struggle in the way that Engels seemed to understand it. Land can be the basis of a power that emanates from its historic or its strategic location. This is recognized by capital's thinkers in their design (and destruction) of cities, factories and roads. We thought it was important to bring it to the attention of those who might have been tempted to bargain away land rights for access to wages.

This point, however, now is common knowledge on the basis of the struggle of indigenous people across the planet and the theoretical work of people like David Harvie.

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