

THE NECROSOCIAL:

**CIVIC LIFE,
SOCIAL
DEATH
& THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA**

Life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts, which as such acquire a political meaning precisely only through a decision.
Giorgio Agamben

Being president of the University of California is like being manager of a cemetery: there are many people under you, but no one is listening.

UC President Mark Yudof

Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor.

Karl Marx

Politics is death that lives a human life.

Achille Mbembe

expansion of markets and capital accumulation, the rule of property, the rule of exclusions based on race, gender, class, and domination and humiliation in general. They sell the practice through the image. We're taught we'll live the images once we accept the practice.

In this crisis the Chancellors and Presidents, the Regents and the British Petroleums, the politicians and the managers, they all intend to be true to their values and capitalize on the university economically and socially— which is to say, *nothing has changed*, it is only an escalation, a provocation. Their most recent attempt to reorganize wealth and capital is called a crisis so that we are more willing to accept their new terms as well as *what was always dead* in the university, to see just how dead we are willing to play, how non-existent, how compliant, how desirous.

Every institution has of course our best interest in mind, so much so that we're willing to pay, to enter debt contracts, to strike a submissive pose in the classroom, in the lab, in the seminar, in the dorm, and eventually or simultaneously in the workplace to pay back those debts. Each bulging institutional value longing to become more than its sentiment through us, each of our empty gestures of feigned-anxiety to appear under pressure, or of cool-ambivalence to appear accustomed to horror, every moment of student life, is the management of our consent to social death.

Social death is our banal acceptance of an institution's meaning for our own lack of meaning. It's the positions we thoughtlessly enact. It's the particular nature of being owned.

Social rupture is the initial divorce between the owners and the owned.

A social movement is a function of war. War contains the ability to create a new frame, to build a new tension for the agents at play, new dynamics in the battles both for the meaning and the material. When we move without a return to their tired meaning, to their tired configurations of the material, we are engaging in war.

It is November 2009. For an end to the values of social death we need ruptures and self-propelled, unmanaged movements of wild bodies. We need, we desire occupations. We are an antagonistic dead.

Talk to your friends, take over rooms, take over as many of these dead buildings. We will find one another.

on the limited spaces of recognition built between us. Here we are at odds with one another socially, each of us: students, faculty, staff, homebums, activists, police, chancellors, administrators, bureaucrats, investors, politicians, faculty/staff/homebums/activists/police/chancellors/administrators/bureaucrats/investors/politicians-to-be. That is, we are students, or students of color, or queer students of color, or faculty, or Philosophy Faculty, or Gender and Women Studies faculty, or we are custodians, or we are shift leaders— each with our own office, place, time, and given meaning. We form teams, clubs, fraternities, majors, departments, schools, unions, ideologies, identities, and subcultures— and thankfully each group gets its own designated burial plot. Who doesn't participate in this graveyard?

In the university we prostrate ourselves before a value of separation, which in reality translates to a value of domination. We spend money and energy trying to convince ourselves we're brighter than everyone else. Somehow, we think, we possess some trait that means we deserve more than everyone else. We have measured ourselves and we have measured others. It should never feel terrible ordering others around, right? It should never feel terrible to diagnose people as an expert, manage them as a bureaucrat, test them as a professor, extract value from them their capital as a businessman. It should feel good, gratifying, completing. It is our private wet dream for the future; everywhere, in everyone this same dream of domination. After all, we are intelligent, studious, young. *We worked hard to be here, we deserve this.*

We are convinced, owned, broken. We know their values better than they do: *life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness*. This triumvirate of sacred values are ours of course, and in this moment of practiced theater— the fight between the university and its own students— we have used their words on their stages: *Save public education!*

When those values are violated by the very institutions which are created to protect them, the veneer fades, the tired set collapses: and we call it injustice, we get *indignant*. We demand justice *from them, for them* to adhere to their values. What many have learned again and again is that these institutions don't care for those values, not at all, not for all. *And we are only beginning to understand that those values are not even our own.*

The values create popular images and ideals (healthcare, democracy, equality, happiness, individuality, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, public education) while they mean in practice the selling of commodified identities, the state's monopoly on violence, the

Yes, very much a cemetery. Only here there are no dirges, no prayers, only the repeated testing of our threshold for anxiety, humiliation, and debt. The classroom just like the workplace just like the university just like the state just like the economy manages our social death, translating what we once knew from high school, from work, from our family life into academic parlance, into acceptable forms of social conflict.

Who knew that behind so much civic life (electoral campaigns, student body representatives, bureaucratic administrators, public relations officials, Peace and Conflict Studies, *ad nauseam*) was so much social death? What postures we maintain to claim representation, what limits we assume, what desires we dismiss?

And in this moment of crisis they ask us to twist ourselves in a way that they can hear. Petitions to Sacramento, phone calls to Congressmen— even the chancellor patronizingly congratulates our September 24th student strike, shaping the meaning and the force of the movement as a movement against the policies of Sacramento. He expands his institutional authority to encompass the movement. When students begin to hold libraries over night, beginning to take our first baby step as an autonomous movement he reins us in by serendipitously announcing library money. He manages movement, he kills movement by funneling it into the electoral process. He manages our social death. He looks forward to these battles on his terrain, to eulogize a proposition, to win this or that— he and his look forward to exhausting us.

He and his look forward to a reproduction of the logic of representative governance, the release valve of the university plunges us into an abyss where ideas are wisps of ether— that is, meaning is ripped from action. Let's talk about the fight endlessly, but always only in their managed form: to perpetually deliberate, the endless fleshing-out-of— when we push the boundaries of this form they are quick to reconfigure themselves to contain us: the chancellor's congratulations, the reopening of the libraries, the managed general assembly— there is no fight against the administration here, only its own extension.

Each day passes in this way, the administration on the look out to shape student discourse— it happens without pause, we don't notice nor do we care to. It becomes banal, thoughtless. So much so that we see we are accumulating days: one semester, two, how close to being this or that, how far? This accumulation is our shared history. This accumulation— every once in a while interrupted, violated by a riot, a wild protest, unforgettable fucking, the overwhelming joy of love, life shattering heartbreak— is a muted, but desirous life. A dead but restless and desirous life.

The university steals and homogenizes our time yes, our bank accounts also, but it also steals and homogenizes meaning. As much as capital is invested in building a killing apparatus abroad, an incarceration apparatus in California, it is equally invested here in an apparatus for managing social death. Social death is, of course, simply the power source, the generator, of *civic life* with its talk of reform, responsibility, unity. A 'life,' then, which serves merely as the public relations mechanism for death: its garrulous slogans of freedom and democracy designed to obscure the shit and decay in which our feet are planted. Yes, the university is a graveyard, but it is also a factory: a factory of meaning which produces civic life and at the same time produces social death. A factory which produces the illusion that meaning and reality can be separated; which everywhere reproduces the empty reactionary behavior of students based on the values of life (identity), liberty (electoral politics), and happiness (private property). Everywhere the same whimsical ideas of the future. *Everywhere democracy*. Everywhere discourse to shape our desires and distress in a way acceptable to the electoral state, discourse designed to make our very moments here together into a set of legible and fruitless demands.

Totally managed death. A machine for administering death, for the proliferation of technologies of death. As elsewhere, things rule. Dead objects rule. In this sense, it matters little what face one puts on the university— whether Yudof or some other lackey. These are

merely the personifications of the rule of the dead, the pools of investments, the buildings, the flows of materials into and out of the physical space of the university— each one the product of some exploitation— which seek to absorb more of our work, more tuition, more energy. The university is a machine which wants to grow, to accumulate, to expand, to absorb more and more of the living into its peculiar and perverse machinery: high-tech research centers, new stadiums and office complexes. And at this critical juncture the only way it can continue to grow is by more intense exploitation, higher tuition, austerity measures for the departments that fail to pass the test of 'relevancy.'

But the 'irrelevant' departments also have their place. With their 'pure' motives of knowledge for its own sake, they perpetuate the blind inertia of meaning ostensibly detached from its social context. As the university cultivates its cozy relationship with capital, war and power, these discourses and research programs play their own role, co-opting and containing radical potential. And so we attend lecture after lecture about how 'discourse' produces 'subjects,' ignoring the most obvious fact that we ourselves are produced by this discourse about discourse which leaves us believing that it is only words which matter, words about words which matter. The university gladly permits the precautionary lectures on biopower; on the production of race and gender; on the reification and the fetishization of commodities. A taste of the poison serves well to inoculate us against any confrontational radicalism. And all the while power weaves the invisible nets which contain and neutralize all thought and action, that bind revolution inside books, lecture halls.

There is no need to speak truth to power when power already speaks the truth. The university is a graveyard— *así es*. The graveyard of liberal good intentions, of meritocracy, opportunity, equality, democracy. Here the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. We graft our flesh, our labor, our debt to the skeletons of this or that social cliché. In seminars and lectures and essays, we pay tribute to the university's ghosts, the ghosts of all those it has excluded— the immiserated, the incarcerated, the just-plain-fucked. They are summoned forth and banished by a few well-meaning phrases and research programs, given their book titles, their citations. This is our gothic— we are so morbidly aware, we are so practiced at stomaching horror that the horror is thoughtless.

In this graveyard our actions will never touch, will never become the conduits of a movement, if we remain permanently barricaded within prescribed identity categories— our force will be dependent