HIC NIHIL, HIC SALTA!

(a critique of Bartlebyism)

Research and Destroy

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[We offer up to our comrades the following critique of the nihilist turn in communist and anarchist thought, in part because we find some of its appeal mystifying and some of its appeal understandable. We hope that at very least it will provoke some conversation among friends and comrades sympathetic to this line of thought.]

After the jailings and beatings and trials; after the last-ditch efforts you knew wouldn't work, the surprising turn-of-events you thought just might, the labored attempts to force the situation; after the too-many meetings, the too-little sleep, the what-the-fuck-is-going-on-here; after the list of former friends has grown longer, after deciding there must be a snitch, after all the terrible things have been said and regretted and then said again and not regretted; after afraid, sad, tired, and after admitting, finally, sooner than some and later than others, that you failed, that it was over, that *they* won and that you can't just call it a day, give up, go home, because when *they* win, *they* don't just go home and feel happy and count their money and their votes and their weapons, they fuck your life up bad, they fuck up the people you love, they put them in jail or on probation, they take your money, they raise your rent, they wreck the place where you live, they kill and kill and keep on killing—after all this, it's natural to feel pretty depressed; it's natural to feel that everything you did was just stupid, that you were a fool, that you must have done something wrong or, better, that someone else must have done something wrong, even though you're up against an enemy who is stronger than you, and even though the history of every struggle ever is a concordance of failures, and even though no one has ever figured out how to succeed against such an enemy in any kind of consistent and repeatable manner. It's easier if there's someone to blame. It's easier if there was some mistake. If there was a mistake, then there was hope; if there was a mistake, then one can remain melancholically attached to the grim specter of *what might have been…*

The world is depressing enough as it is, of course. For many of us, it's the return to normality, the prospect of another year of the grinding everyday, that makes the end of a political sequence unbearable. Through the experience of defeat we realize that the quotidian is constituted by defeat; the normal functioning of capitalism is continuous counter-revolution. Depression and anxiety are forms through which this victory is secured, through which people are rendered compliant, isolated, but only when these moods are modulated by brief moments of hopefulness, relief, imagination, ambition. What capitalism wants is a continuous, low-level unhappiness. They want people engaged in a continuous process of emotional management – with images, with work, with sex, with commodities. Anything more extreme makes people unpredictable, and it's no surprise that communities that define themselves in opposition to the status quo are filled with the most wounded and miserable types. Once such feelings get politicized, once their political origins are disclosed, all sorts of problems result. Because these affects are the one thing that people in such communities are guaranteed to share, they tend to be valorized as a mark of authenticity; they become markers of an identity, something to hold onto, burnish, aestheticize, worship. Our feelings become not the motivation for our politics, not their energy source, but their object. The result

is miserabilism, a community formed by a shared unhappiness, whose reproduction secretly depends upon the continuous provision of more sources of unhappiness.

Most of the theoretical expressions that emerge from this confused condition share a fundamental misidentification of effects as causes. Identifying the source of their unhappiness in their own naïve optimism and commitment, their investment in some political project or process, they reason that, in order to spare themselves future suffering, they must cease to hope, to commit, to desire, they must treat each new event as dead from the start. They conclude not only that disaffection and pessimism will cause us to suffer less in the face of the failure of struggles, but that optimism, earnest commitment, investment, are the source of these failures. In other words, they reason that the reason we lose is because we keep trying, despite the fact that it is obviously the other way around. There are now dozens of accounts of how struggle against capitalist domination requires some form of withdrawal, subtraction, de-subjectivization, removal, impassivity, patience, slowness. In some cases, there may be real practical and psychological insights in these accounts, but each one makes, in our view, a fundamental mistake – it turns a political process into a psychological operation; it substitutes an ethics for a politics. Though it's true that capitalism uses our investments and passions against us all the time, the better to render us compliant, exploitable; the better to set us against each other; the better to keep us scrambling after illusory goals, capitalism has no problem mobilizing various forms of disaffection, indifference, and unfeeling. These moods quite obviously render one just as pliable as the excited, enthused worker; the passionate consumer; the overly sentimental parent; the enraged activist. Depression is not a weapon, it's a wound in the shape of a weapon.

These expressions go under various names – anti-political, nihilist, post-left. We call this phenomenon Bartlebyism because we think the best introduction to its misprisions can be had through an examination of the nearly identical claims made about the main character in Melville's duly famous story of clerical work, "Bartleby the Scrivener," by a whole generation of soi-disant left philosophers, from Badiou to Hardt and Negri, from Zizek to Agamben. Bartleby is a law-copyist, encharged with duplicating the various contracts and affidavits upon which 19th-century Wall Street depended, and so the story allegorizes not only the violence of the labor-capital relationship but the legal superstructure it requires, the intimate acquaintance of cop and boss. Bartleby is famous for defying his employer in a manner that stymies all response; rather than refusing outright the work he is asked to perform, he instead utters the famous reply, "I would prefer not to," when called by his employer. Readers of the story have been quick to note the peculiarly unanswerable quality of this answer, with its mixture of politeness and refusal. As his employer, the narrator of Melville's story, notes, "Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience of impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises." But the conditional character of Bartleby's utterance gives it a strange power that a more steadfast, indicative or future simple declaration would not have. In the contemporary political imagination, the passive

aggressive power of Bartleby's utterance circumvents the reactive, reflexive character of the destructive impulse, which as we so often know, often ends up sustaining the object of attack. Bartlebyism sees in this kind of phraseology a way of divesting the object of attack – here the work process – from any kind of cathexis. Bartebly is simply indifferent to work, and thereby work has no power over him. This is the core of the nihilist vision of struggle.

But in reality, this weak power is truly weak, rather than secretly strong. The law-copyist Bartleby ends his days, as a result of his curious workplace action, in a New York city jail, victim of the legal apparatus his refused scrivening would have sustained. Though Bartleby manages to occupy the office in a prefiguration of the sitdown strikes of the 20th century, defeating his employer's entreaties to either work or depart, and eventually forces the employer to vacate the premises and set up office elsewhere, the new tenant is not so obliging, nor is he flummoxed by Bartleby's bizarre actions. He calls the cops and Bartleby is sent to jail where, refusing all food, he dies.

This is not a promising model for a resistance movement. As Nikil Saval shows in his book on the history of the office, Melville may have been inspired here by an 1841 movement among New York dry-goods clerks to get the stores where they sold goods to close earlier. But rather than imitating the forms of struggle of manual laborers, who were at that time exploring the powers of direct action, these clerks remained entirely identified with the employers (whose seat they hoped some day to fill). Instead of making demands, "they sought a 'solicitation' of merchants good will and argued that a few hours of rest would make more "willingly devoted servants" in the store. The tone of Bartleby then is the tone of the refined, genteel clerk who prefers to struggle through diplomacy rather than confrontation. It may also be possible that Melville had in mind Henry David Thoreau's contemporaneous essay on "Resistance to Civil Government," which was published in 1849 and which he might have seen while writing those stories. Portions of Walden were published in *Putnam's Monthly*, where "Bartleby, the Scrivener" also appeared, and Melville caricatured Thoreau's friend and colleague Emerson, transforming him into the philosophical huckster Plinlimmon, in his weirdest of novels, *Pierre,* the book published right before "Bartleby." Intentional or not, the resemblances between the Bartlebyan and Thoreauvian mode of resistance are striking. In his outrage at the Mexican-American war, and the continuing horrors of slavery, Thoreau decides in his famous essay that the only admirable path for a person of conscience is to withdraw all support for the US government, chiefly by refusing to pay tax. The important political distinction which Thoreau articulates, and which was relatively novel, is that this is a form of resistance that concerns itself only with one's own participation in the detestable action: "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support." This is a doctrine of withdrawal rather than active contestation. Thoreau

imagines it as a method of peaceable social transformation; if such tax refusal were to spread it would mean a bloodless revolution:

> I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name — if ten *honest* men only — ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.

Bartleby himself might have been withdrawing from such a dreadful copartnership; as a Wall Street law-scrivener, the "rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds" which he reproduced would certainly have involved the deeds to slaves, given that almost all Southern planters were reliant on financing from Northern Banks. Like Bartleby, Thoreau's story natural ends in jail. It is jail where a man demonstrates his spiritual superiority to the law not to mention his solidarity with the humans in bondage under slavery: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principle... the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor." Thoreau even mentions that it may be preferable to give one's life than to participate in an unconscionable system.

As we know, Thoreau's essay and the Bartlebyan principles it systematizes has been enormously influential if not enormously effective. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are only two of the most famous names who have sought to convince would-be rebels that the path of withdrawal, noncompliance, and aggressive passivity is the way to success. Today, there is an entire industry built around systematic and technicized noncompliance as protest. Its ineffectiveness is legendary. Such routinize, scripted forms of nonviolent protest – instrumental non-compliance of various sorts, whether by locking one's neck to a tractor or locking arms and refusing to move – join a panoply of "violent" tactics to form the tactical repertoire of contemporary activism. These techniques are perfect for what is the usual social situation of activism – that is, protest by dedicated radicals in the absence of any kind of mass rebellion. These techniques carry very low risks; the consequence for being prosecuted for such forms of noncompliance are usually very low. And therefore despite their demonstrated ineffectiveness in most social contexts, people keep turning them again and again in situations where people want to do something, anything, to demonstrate their serious unhappiness with the world as it is. This is of course to say nothing about their use in situations like the Jim Crow South or India, where they were one set of tactics among many, in the context of mass rebellions that involved riots, bombings, the taking-up of arms, and constant exposure to deadly force from state and non-state actors. These situations simply can't be compared to the context in which the same tactics of noncompliance are used today.

There is an important difference between systematized noncompliance of the sort we see today and Thoreauvian civil disobedience: Thoreau concerned himself only with refusal of activities that were part of his daily routine, and which gave indirect support to the oppression of others. The activist, on the other hand, ignores Thoreau's proviso about interfering directly in the affairs of others. The activist is always rushing to the rescue of some oppressed entity somewhere else: the trees, the whales, the children, the workers. This is not to deride solidarity struggles and actions; actions undertaken on a moral basis. They are an important part of the way that political sequences unfold, and we engage in them routinely, but it is easily verifiable that the most powerful and successful struggles involve self-interested antagonists, fighting against the conditions that face them directly. Seen in light of this distinction, we immediately see what Thoreau's protests share with the activism of our day– they are still conducted on a moral basis, they are still undertaken on behalf of others, even if they refuse direct support, and only concern themselves with indirect complicity.

In the last 20 years, powerful critiques of the logic of activism have emerged from within the antagonist milieu, critiques we borrow from above. But as is so often the case, these critiques share more with their object than they are willing to admit. Both the activist tendency and its "passivist" critics share a common origin in Bartlebyan thinking. The best critiques, such as the one offered by the famous article "Give Up Activism" emphasize the importance of strategic context, pointing out that a series of tactics developed in order to affect the behavior of specific institutions, corporations, or state-actors, lose all effectivity when there is no longer a clear, well-defined opponent, as was the case in the so-called anti-globalization movement. The worst critiques, however, misconstrue the implications of their entirely accurate critiques of spectacularized and routinized activism. Rather than treating activism as a failed strategy against a formidable enemy, it becomes the enemy itself, as if protest itself were what sustained capitalism and as if enervated activism were itself one of the prime weapons in the arsenals of our enemy. In some sense, what we note here is a target of opportunity. Lacking any effect beyond the microscopic demimonde of their would-be comrades, they look for opponents they might actually vanquish. In reality, those preaching the gospel of St. Bartleby lack the courage of their convictions; if they didn't hang around the edges of the radical milieu and instead took their own advice, they wouldn't be able to enjoy the effects of their critique; instead they keep the necrotizing body alive in order to savor the truth of their diagnosis. Few are fooled, of course, since investment in preaching hopelessness to the true believers of activism is its own opiate and its own distraction. If they didn't doubt the wisdom of their own advice, they'd depart for good. But like Bartleby, they remain stubbornly encamped in the antilaw-offices of the radical milieu, weakly re-enacting their passive aggressions at each new turn of events, each new failure-to-come. This is a fundamentally therapeutic politics; a poli-

tics of feeling, that takes our own investments in things to be the problem; it proposes the dogma of certain failure as response to the pain of hope.

The most coherent of these contemporary nihilisms – the so-called *Nihilist Communism* of Monsieur Dupont – makes all of the above very clear. The authors (who use the collective pseudonym Monsieur Dupont) are to be commended for their comparative honesty and lucidity. What makes the authors interesting is that, unlike others who proudly claim the term nihilist, Monsieur Dupont believes that proletarian revolution is possible. However, such a revolution emerges as a fundamental discontinuity with all which precedes it; nothing we do or say today will hasten its arrival. The frantic to and fro of the active minority serves no purpose except to assuage our own anxieties and so the only meaningful response to activism's "desperate injunction to press every button to save the world" is the Bartlebyan "I would prefer not to." Once said, Monsieur Dupont confronts an immediate problem. If what they say makes no difference, why do they write at all? Some attempt to solve this apparent contradiction with reference to personal expression, enjoyment, the usefulness of the useless in an instrumentalized world, etc. But Dupont have a more sophisticated answer. The authors draw from the historical ultraleft a deep belief in political narratives of betrayal; they offer a cartoonish version of this story, in which proletarian self-activity was continually diverted, subverted, managed, contained and betrayed by the egoism, self-aggrandizement and incompetence of its would-be leaders. As such, while every attempt to hasten the arrival of such a revolution is useless today, tomorrow those selfsame activists will be an active hindrance. Therefore, the only meaningful activity that a group of communist writers can undertake in non-revolutionary times is to try to actively destroy the left, to neutralize their capacity to manage, contain or otherwise fuck-up revolutionary possibilities in the future (never mind the fact that "the left" committed suicide a few decades ago). All of this raises a deeper question: if the revolutionary proletariat that arises from some definitive future crisis can, in the view of Dupont, produce communism entirely on its own, without the meddling of intellectuals, professional revolutionaries, and other parasites, why can't it also resist the usurpation of its would-be friends, evaluate and reject the bad theory and strategy it receives from the past, and otherwise think for itself? It is a curious political theory that treats a revolutionary class as both profoundly gullible, on the one hand, and possessed of a unique, essential genius, on the other. There is therefore no reason whatsoever for Monsieur Dupont to continue writing, on the terms they've set for themselves, a fact they seem to have realized, retreating into spasmodic and convoluted orations on modernist art.

Other approaches fare much worse in trying to confront the contradictions of this approach, though they present deeper ambitions. A popular recent tract, *Desert*, attempts to marry the Bartlebyan perspective to Green Anarchism. They offer a "simple realization – the world will not be 'saved.'" As counter to a straw-man optimist, they bring the Bad News: "Global anarchist revolution is not going to happen. Global climate change is now unstoppable. We are not going to see the worldwide end to civiliza-

tion/capitalism/patriarchy/authority." They are right, of course, to stress that climate change is unstoppable. Any future revolution will have to contend with this, though it remains to be seen just how catastrophic its effects will be; it is of course true that different social structures will entail different mediations of its effects. Climate change is a social-natural phenomenon. But this seems as likely to be the cause of revolution – leaving aside for the moment the curious adjective "global" – as its foreclosure. The authors of *Desert* direct our attention to the psychic wounds that revolutionary hope produces, and propose, in its place, "active disillusionment." But true disillusionment, the removal of all illusions, would not mean supplanting one false certainty with another, supplanting the certainty of triumph with the certainty of failure. This is an avoidance rather than acceptance of the uncertain. What the authors offer, then, is not disillusionment, but therapy. And it is a therapy likely to fail, inasmuch as the authors want to remain actively opposed to the world as it exists, a stance that will cause pain as long as the world remains a world of pain. The only true therapy would be the one that could somehow effect a readjustment of person to the world, an acceptance of the status-quo, a return to normal and an abandonment of all talk of struggle. The authors attempt to split the difference, however, by suggesting that we look for the kinds of tactics that might lead to modest, meager success. What results is a kind of "nihilist reformism," an endorsement of partial, limited conservation struggles undertaken on an ethical basis, the creation of temporary zones of autonomy in unsettled places and frontiers where a few people might make a difference. They are therefore, despite their critique of activism, brought back to a fundamentally activist position.

The authors have no choice, of course, given their conclusions and assumptions. The most important of these assumptions is their commitment to the curiously ahistorical figure of the "anarchist" as the essential and determinative ingredient in meaningful revolution. Only anarchists – dedicated, self-conscious revolutionaries, opposed to capital and the state – can make an "anarchist" (that is, real) revolution. And because, as the authors conclude, anarchists will always be a minority, meaningful revolution is impossible. They devote one sentence to the obvious counter-argument here, the idea that anarchist (or antistate communist, as we think is largely synonymous) revolution can be made by people simply acting in response to the oppressions and miseries they encounter. Their argument: capitalism has indoctrinated people to prefer authoritarian and hierarchical structures. All "social movements" will always be thus. Never mind the obvious question of how "anarchists" become "anarchists." Never mind the possibility that experience of struggle might provide the impetus for an education in anarchism, might cause people to draw anarchists conclusions, to look for answers in anarchists texts. Never mind the fact that anarchism was itself born from historical experience, and not the unbroken transmission of a line of elite humanity, passing their enlightened ideas from person to person. The argument is foolish, obviously, but it is also indicative of the fundamental voluntarism of so many anarchists, who for the most part remain incapable of thinking revolution or insurrection or anarchy as anything but the action of the right people with the right ideas. This can lead to the most aristocratic con-

tempt for the common people, as with the nihilists of the "Conspiracy of Cells of Fire," who lambast the "resignation of the exploited, their herd mentality, their collaboration with the system." Drawing curiously from the language of Marxism, they describe capitalism "as a social relation in which all have their responsibility – and make or don't make the choice to fight against it." Once politics is submitted to the egodicy of choice, of the sovereign decision, it's impossible to retain any sense of strategy. The spectacular bombings of the CCF and its associated groupings are simply personal expressions, declarations of "I exist" detached from any sense of purpose. Occasionally, these groups commit solidarity attacks in the name of other like-minded groups, but if these have a social meaning, they don't have a political one. They have zero instrumental effect, and do nothing to help the imprisoned in Chile, Mexico, Indonesia, or wherever. They might as well send an email.

It's worth noting that this view, the one that stresses consciousness and the meaningfulness of decision in the here and now, is diametrically opposed to the position of Dupont, the would-be colleauges in nihilism of groups like the CCF and the authors of *Desert*. Dupont, of course, who insists that conscious decision is entirely meaningless at present. And yet, beneath this apparent opposition, there is a shared structure of feeling. Whether one thinks that consciousness is all that matters, or it doesn't matter at all, the result is the same, as one has failed to think consciousness and activity together. One has made one's feelings, one's attitudes, the object of politics. This kind of politics is therefore fundamentally *moralizing,* even when its emphasizes in a Nietzschean manner the transvaluation of all values. The questioning of value, the reduction of action to value, is not itself questioned. *Hic nihil, hic salta.*

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Bartlebyan politics emerge, as often as not, from a recognition that resistance is a motive force within capitalism, that capitalism benefits from its loyal and disloyal antagonists by using them to induce the sort of meaningful systematic restructuring that it needs in order to respond to ever changing historical conditions, new forms of crisis. After such a recognition, withdrawal seems promising. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is Melville's reflection on this problematic, but it's not his only reflection, and is best read, in our view, as an example of a failed response to such a dilemma. "Benito Cereno," the story published after "Bartleby" in *Piazza Tales,* offers a very different strategic outlook. It is also a story of rebellion, based upon an actual slave uprising on a Spanish ship in 1805. The putative leader of this uprising, Babo, shares with Bartleby more than a similar-sounding name (both names might be transforms of the word "baby"). Like Bartleby, Babo exerts power from a position of presumed weakness. The story begins when the American captain of another ship, the *Bachelor's Delight,* comes across the captured ship, *San Dominick* (the name of which suggests the colony of Santo Domingo, and the Haitian slave revolution which was broadly contemporaneous with the time of the story). Thinking the ship in distress, the captain of the *Bachelor's Delight,* Amasa Delano, who narrates the story, boards the ship to offer his services. There the mutinous ex-slaves, under the direction of Babo, perform servitude and enslavement for Delano,

pretending to follow the directions of the Captain Benito Cereno. Like Bartleby, the power of Babo and the other slaves is exerted from a feigned servility, and Babo, playing the part of Cereno's personal servant controls him as a puppeteer might a marionette. Much of the drama of the story involves the narrator's inability to read the scene, to interpret what he observes through the racial codes and logics of power of the US. Like the narrator of Bartleby, also American, and also characterized by a naïve trust in other humans, he fails to parse the ambiguities of what he sees according to established rubrics, just as Bartleby's employer fails to parse the ambiguous utterance, "I would prefer not to." Both Melville and Babo have a great deal of fun with the carnivalesque reversals and manipulations taking place on the page of "Benito Cereno" and on the deck of the *San Dominick*, presenting one of the ex-slaves, a former king, Atufal, in chains, where he is periodically brought before Benito Cereno, who asks if Atufal will apologize. Atufal refuses, proudly, of course, and so we have not only the performance of servility but the indication that servility can be no more than performance, that Atufal is possessed of a dignity and integrity indifferent to chains symbolic or otherwise. Then there is of course the scene in which Babo carefully shaves Cereno, performing a servile task that is, at every turn, a domination through threat of violence. On the bow of the ship, next to the figurehead on the bowsprit, cloaked in a sheet at the beginning of the story, are written the words "Seguid vuestro jefe" or "Follow your leader." Later we learn that the slaves have hung the skeleton of their former owner on the bow, and put the phrase up as warning to the crew, lest they think of resisting.

The brilliance of the phrase is that it suspends the question of leadership – the "leader" might be Babo, Benito Cereno, or the dead slavetrader Aranda. The resistance on the San Dominick is illegible through the established protocols and hierarchies that Delano expects. There are no longer leaders and followers as we might come to expect; Babo and the other former slaves take power without occupying the place of power, and thus they avoid the risk of becoming their own owners, of becoming liberal subjects. In the place of the legal, self-possessing subject, some other identity and organization of identities emerges, at least for a while, and it is this that allows them to successfully fool the Europeans. It ends poorly, of course (Melville is a man of the 19th-century, after all, and one can at the same time read this story as the exposition and subtle enforcement of all sorts of white supremacist logics); the ex-slaves are defeated and Babo brought before a tribunal and hanged. Like Bartleby, Babo ends his days in stubborn refusal, in this case refusing all speech when questioned by the judges. As Captain Delano recounts, "His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words." This is many regards the exact opposite of Bartleby, who speaks words because he can do deeds but won't. In Babo, we see a promising synthesis of passive refusal and active contestation, one that requires collective solidarity, cunning, active judgment, and discrimination. But there is no magic, here. This position risks failure as much as it risks success. There is more to come. Let's keep our wits about us.

Appendix: An open response

Thank you for writing this well written, cogent and stimulating essay, and for inviting a 'conversation' with those to whom it is addressed — I hope it elicits the response that you are looking for. Speaking as one of the authors of Nihilist Communism, I think there are a number of problematic issues with your reading of that book, and with what you seem to take to be its message. I also think your reading of the character of Bartleby may be underdeveloped and that this constrains your interpretation of the phenomenon of disengagement which is the object of your study. I will restrict my response to these two components of your essay (Bartleby and Nihilist Communism) and leave to the others whom you address to speak for themselves as they see fit.

It is now many years since the anti-politics project was in its heyday and as I am now an old man, it seems strange for me to revisit past controversies of dubious import. For this reason, I ask for your tolerance in my revisiting well-trodden ground and for the creaking in the bones of my argumentation. For old times sake, I am donning my dupontist hat and will speak as if Nihilist Communism was still the position that I am arguing from. I hope I remember the salient points by which 'anti-politics' on one side and Monsieur Dupont on the other developed in relation to the optimistic activism for which you appear to be advocates.

I will talk about Bartleby first. This character was discussed at some length within the 'glow worm salon' (a spin-off forum from the main anti-politics project). The question rested on whether Bartleby's remarkable manner was a stratagem, a cover for other and unknown purposes, or whether it was an authentic expression of a particular position in the world. The discussion occurred under the title 'Bartlebyism' and was commenced in February 2009 (it is true, there is nothing new). I made initial arguments against the politicisation of Bartleby on these terms: 'My first readings of Bartleby were positive as were my readings of 'Cock-a-doodle-doo' and 'Billy Budd'... at that time, I seemed to locate the presence of an innate and natural 'resistance' to positions of authority. However, later readings have caused me to reverse my earlier interpretations – I now see only a refusal of the social. I now 'prefer' the clerks (and even his employer) to Bartleby, they are at least socialised, communisable; Bartleby is a terrifying dead-end.'

I then made the argument that, 'Bartleby fails to intervene in his own life and this failure has something to do with the historical appearance of 'preference' as a relation to the world and something to do with quantifying 'compulsive' behaviours which come to the fore in mass society (compulsive preference for eating, for not eating, for avoidance or for display, for aggravation, for drugs, for sexual images, for hand washing, for object counting etc).'

I then go onto compare Bartleby at the level of 'agency' with the character of Shane (of the film of the same name) and the function in narrative of a messiah or avenging angel: 'It arrives at the critical point where vengeance is most called for, that is where the scene most resembles itself, the point where change appears impossible. However,

because it arrives from outside, the avenger has no comprehension at all of the co-dependencies inherent to the dispute that it faces and therefore it merely strikes out, like an automaton; its ministry has no intrinsic meaning. The effect of the angel is to cause the entirety of the relation of offenders and offended-against to discover in itself a transformation, which is a giving way, within the insularity of their feud – columns, beams, props erode and weaken. There is no resolution, only release, an intervention at the level of forces which fall back into a different array. The avenging angel lays out the intestinal convolutions of the feud, of the predicament, of the frozen relation – what was held in place by the tension in the relation, precisely the terms which are 'preferred' by all participants (these habituations to the relation) are released; nothing is the same at this place for these people again, they are moved sideways, this does not imply improvement or progress.'

The point here, is that Bartleby becomes an agency of a particularly malignant type. Whilst, the early expression of his non-participation individualises and humanises him in relation to work, the unrelenting continuation along the same path becomes anti-social and pathological. Beneath the series of 'prefer not to' iterations, there is an inhuman orientation to, and opening up before, something hidden in the world that he is an agency for, something morbid (as implied in the preferences of interactive social media) which will swallow him and threatens everybody else. On this reading the authors of Nihilist Communism can resolutely refute the accusation of bartlebyism. Bartleby, as an agent of destruction and de-socialisation, realising his programme of solipsistic preferences by process of elimination, is closer to the psychology of political campaigners and revolutionaries. Then, to the authors of HIC NIHIL, HIC SALTA! the authors of Nihilist Communism may riposte: *Bartleby, ce n'est pas moi; Bartleby, Ces't vous!*

Bartleby is the elevation of what belongs to the person to the level of social organisation, he ceases to function as a product of his conditions and becomes a tyrant over them. This is also the fate of social revolutionaries who take their subjective insights for objective truths and feel justified in instigating a reign of terror, at whatever scale, to forcibly arrange commensurability between what they want and what is. As Nietzsche observed, the true nihilist is the one who still believes. It was to this fatal condition of belief in agency and of agency as a motor for belief that Nihilist Communism addressed itself.

Nihilist Communism is a very simple book but it has the misfortune of making an argument that is both counterintuitive and unfamiliar. It begins by asking itself the question, 'what is the world' (and by world it means human social relations). It answers, 'the world is a product.' It asks a supplementary question, 'how is the world produced'? It hypothesises that there are two possible answers: 1. human agency; 2. social forces. It concludes that the produced world negates human agency whilst valorising productive process. By means of tautology it infers that the produced world is produced by productive forces. In accordance with marxist theories of social relations, it splits production between past labour solidified into machinery and the present

labours of currently existing human beings. It then goes on to assign greater significance to the automated processes of machines in producing the world than it does to 'living labour' (we are born into the world as it already is, we do not invent it according to our preferences). By small steps it goes on to argue that just as a worker is employed within an already existing environment and may only add to its quantity without altering its nature, so all activity within the produced world (again a tautology) is a product, and expressive of, the environment which employs it.

Once this basic mechanism of world-producing is established theoretically (the present is always the result of past productive activity which constrains presently employed humans to produce more of the same), Nihilist Communism asks the question: 'how does world-transformation' occur? It answers in accord with Hegel: changes in circumstances are the result of an accumulation of quantities of produced objects which, having saturated the social relations that constrain them, 'spill over' and begin to create new qualitative modifications to relations of power and ownership. Then, it asks, if the present is always constrained by forces developed from out of the past, how are those presently living going to break from what has gone before? It answers that this is wholly unknown, it speculates that such a rupture 'must' occur within the process of world-producing and specifically, if it is retain a human element, within the productive interface where past labour (machines) mingle with living labour. It further speculates that if those currently working halt the machines, then a rupture with the past will be effected.

However, Nihilist Communism also observes that halting machines is no easy task and that workers are structurally inhibited from choosing this 'option' — all struggles are self-limiting or coterminous with that which is struggled against. Nobody may truly strike against the world of which they are a product, they may prefer to suppress some tendencies that they have identified as unacceptable whilst at the same time realising others which they often to do not recognise.

> It is a curious political theory that treats a revolutionary class as both profoundly gullible, on the one hand, and possessed of a unique, essential genius, on the other. There is therefore no reason whatsoever for Monsieur Dupont to continue writing, on the terms they've set for themselves, a fact they seem to have realized, retreating into spasmodic and convoluted orations on modernist art

Not really. The human component of the forces of production may not choose against the productive process as that is literally unimaginable (cattle may not choose against pasture) but perhaps it might be duped, tripped up or otherwise bamboozled into acting against its own environmental constraints and thus find itself in a position where it has induced a crisis in the productive apparatus (in the way 'plagues' put pressure on that which has produced them). Baudrillard explores the dangers inherent to the logic of 'self-organisation' as a mechanism of escape:

Such is the prophetico-inert: prophecy fulfilling itself. On closer examination, it was the very tenor of the revolutionary slogan: the workers will liberate themselves. Except that this contained a dangerous mystification: it merely opened on to the practico-inert, on to the liveration of work as an end in itself.

So it is that whilst the proletariat may not subjectively demand its self-abolition (it tends, in revolt, to electively re-institute 'the practico-inert', the world of work as general societal principle) it might, in pursuing a narrowly self-interested path of raising wages and reducing work-hours thereby overcome the quantitive constraints on its own reproduction. Where world-producing is suspended or has entered a state of crisis, 'ideas' begin to take on a productive character. It is only at this point of crisis that subjective 'agency' has objective significance.

Well, what about us, those who are cursed with pseudo-agency and pro-revolutionary consciousness in the present? What about the elective opposition to world-producing? What about the agency of those of us already in opposition to the state of things as they are? As the author(s) of hic nihil hic salta you set the question of failure, and of blame:

> Most of the theoretical expressions that emerge from this confused condition share a fundamental misidentification of effects as causes. Identifying the source of their unhappiness in their own naïve optimism and commitment, their investment in some political project or process, they reason that, in order to spare themselves future suffering, they must cease to hope, to commit, to desire, they must treat each new event as dead from the start. They conclude not only that disaffection and pessimism will cause us to suffer less in the face of the failure of struggles, but that optimism, earnest commitment, investment, are the source of these failures. In other words, they reason that the reason we lose is because we keep trying, despite the fact that it is obviously the other way around. There are now dozens of accounts of how struggle against capitalist domination requires some form of withdrawal, subtraction, de-subjectivization, removal, impassivity, patience, slowness. In some cases, there may be real practical and psychological insights in these accounts, but each one makes, in our view, a fundamental mistake – it turns a political process into a psychological operation; it substitutes an ethics for a politics. Though it's true that capitalism uses our investments and passions against us all the time, the better to render us compliant, exploitable; the better to set us against each other; the better to keep us scrambling after illusory goals, capitalism has no problem mobilizing various forms of disaffection, indifference, and unfeeling. These moods quite obviously render one just as pliable as the excited, enthused worker; the passionate consumer; the overly sentimental parent; the enraged activist. Depression is not a weapon, it's a wound in the shape of a weapon.

Whilst depression and anxiety are the products of this society, I do not think it is quite right to say that these are the means by which the mechanism of exploitation is maintained (of course, I may be wrong about this but then, it is for you to provide the proof). My understanding is that anxiety and depression are affective conditions (indicating increasing sensitivity to environmental cues) that occur at the boundary of viable patterns of social reproduction, and are demonstrative of a crisis of faith in the continuation of these patterns. Nihilist Communism leaves open the possibility for the individual to live a good life and escape as far as possible social reproduction. It does not claim that depression is a weapon, nor that any subjective state is a weapon. It warns against conflating personal commitments with objective processes. Its confines its determinism to abstract social relations and makes the observation only that all acts, and all people, whether conformists or rebels, are all equally produced by, and expressive of, this world as it is and no other. Nobody speaks for the world that is yet to come.

The question here though is not one of failure (and depression) but of success (and optimism). If you accept a historical account of human beings (that is to say if you concur with the proposition that humans are the result of the social organisations which bind them), then by implication you also accept that no human individual fully possesses what they say or do, and still less can they be said to own the consequences of these. Again, we return to the question of the socialisation of Bartleby, and thus the degree of socialisation of all world-changing projects — to what extent is Bartleby driving and to what extent is he driven? Have you ever asked yourselves, as products of this world, how much your project furthers the values of the world as it is? The problem for all those who wish to see a communist transformation is not their failure to realise it, that was never their given task, but rather their success in realising those terrors of this world which otherwise would not have seen the light of day.

Thus, the problem of the proletariat's historical tendency in revolt to self-manage its own exploitation. Thus, the purpose of the armed struggle is not to asymmetrically confront remote power bases of the establishment but to subjugate the population it 'represents' and to see off equivalent rival gangs of exploiters. Thus, every left-wing government succeeds in delivering its constituency over to the programme of 'austerity' where its right-wing predecessors have failed. Thus, every national liberation movement succeeds in exploiting the 'liberated' social body which previously the colonial power could not reach. And so it is, every successive 'new left' reveals the hidden violence structured into the 'old left' but then each new, new left and its theory of privileges, by which it names such violences, also sets in motion other oppressions, other terrors, other levers of exploitation which (passing unnamed) are downplayed or go unregistered. That is the nature of left-power. You write:

> Few are fooled, of course, since investment in preaching hopelessness to the true believers of activism is its own opiate and its own distraction. If they didn't doubt the wisdom of their own advice, they'd depart for

> good. But like Bartleby, they remain stubbornly encamped in the antilaw-offices of the radical milieu, weakly re-enacting their passive aggressions at each new turn of events, each new failure-to-come. This is a fundamentally therapeutic politics; a politics of feeling, that takes our own investments in things to be the problem; it proposes the dogma of certain failure as response to the pain of hope.

This is only slightly true. One may continue to adhere to principles whilst refusing to get one's hands dirty by involving themselves in those projects which become gratuitous exercises in hand dirtying and nothing else. For the impossibilist-communist, if I may speak for this hypothetical being occupying the space at the end of the ultraleft trajectory that begins with the SI and SouB, the actions of activists and the left are the only object of ongoing concern. If capitalism is structurally opposed by its own inherent contradictions, as these are embodied within the proletariat, then the true enemy is 'the left' (or the lamb horned 'second beast'), i.e. that agency which by false prophecy in the moment of economic crisis will persuade the people of the Earth to return to the patterns of world-producing. There is no project of liberation which does not constitute itself at the same time as a regime of enslavement.

The problem then that confronts you is not your failure in changing the world but the likelihood of succeeding in committing acts of violence against innocent others and thereby sowing the seed of world-producing in those intimate locations where it has not yet taken hold. The problem is not one of social transformation but of realising that of this world which otherwise would have gone unrealised if you had not intervened. If you are an agent, then you are an agent of this world and no other, isn't that enough to induce you to run for the hills?

Or, to put it another way and to bounce the ball back at you, what you are proposing, 'turns an anti-political process into a psychological operation.' My worry about revolutionaries is that they are, at the very core of their being, cops by other means — the ongoing depletion in the variety of discourses in social transformation and its deterioration in quality (as this is exacerbated in social media) only confirms its ideological and mystifying character. For this reason, the strategy of withdrawal and disengagement is not constituted either as a depressive relinquishment or as a response to 'failure' but as an absolute refusal of success in a world where this means only the further extension of world-producing. Speaking for myself, giving up participating in the project of elective political change, and adopting an equable pessimistic outlook actually broadened and deepened my commitments and facilitated my thinking through of various forms of the unthinkable which were otherwise denied me. (I do not claim objective significance in this, only personal consolation).

Someone else, responding to your essay, and in defence of 'nihilism', puts this more succinctly than I:

> the point of nihilism is to a) acknowledge that nothing that has been tried has worked. b) that we don't know (therefore) what would/will work. c)

that it's entirely possible then that nothing (or at *least* nothing that we're capable of–which surely amounts to the same thing) *will* work. d) and that whatever action we take is in the face of that knowledge.some people think of that as a defeatist attitude [...] i consider it a call to bravery and beauty.

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Research and Destroy
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(a critique of Bartlebyism)
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