



*the committee for the study of
desert alchemy*

THE UNDERCOMMONS

FUGITIVE PLANNING & BLACK STUDY

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The crisis of the credit crunch caused by sub-prime debtors, the crisis of race in the 2008 US elections produced by Reverend Wright and Bernie Mac, the crisis in the Middle East produced by Hamas, the crisis of obesity produced by unhealthy eaters, the crisis of the environment produced by Chinese and Indians, are all instances of incorrect and uncorrected participation. The constant materialisation of planning in such participation is simply the inevitability of crisis, according to the deputised, who prescribe, as a corrective, hope for and hopefulness in correction. They say that participation must be hopeful, must have vision, must embrace change; that participants must be fashioned, in a general imposition of self-fashioning, as hopeful, visionary, change agents. Celebrating their freedom on lockdown in the enterprise zone, guarding that held contingency where the fashioning and correction of selves and others is always on automatic, the participant is the deputy's mirror image.

Deputies will lead the way toward concrete changes in the face of crisis. Be smart, they say. Believe in change. This is what we have been waiting for. Stop criticising and offer solutions. Set up roadblocks and offer workshops. Check ID's and give advice. Distinguish between the desire to correct and the desire to plan with others. Ruthlessly seek out and fearfully beware militant preservation, in an undercommons of means without ends, of love among things. Now's the time to declare and, in so doing, correctly fashion yourself as the one who is deputised to correct others. Now's the time, before its night again. Before you start singing another half-illiterate fantasy. Before you re-sound that ongoing amplification of the bottom, the operations on the edge of normal rhythm's soft center. Before someone says let's get together and get some land. But we're not smart. We plan. We plan to stay, to stick and move. We plan to be communist about communism, to be unreconstructed about reconstruction, to be absolute about abolition, here, in that other, undercommon place, as that other, undercommon thing, that we preserve by inhabiting. Policy can't see it, policy can't read it, but it's intelligible if you got a plan.

PLANNING AND POLICY

not only in the structures and affects of endless war but also in the brutal processes and perpetual processing of peace.

Governance, despite its own hopes for a universality of exclusion, is for the inducted, for those who know how to articulate interests disinterestedly, those who vote and know why they vote (not because someone is black or female but because he or she is smart), who have opinions and want to be taken seriously by serious people. In the mean time, policy must still pursue the quotidian sphere of open secret plans. Policy posits curriculum against study, child development against play, human capital against work. It posits having a voice against hearing voices, networked friending against contactual friendship. Policy posits the public sphere, or the counter-public sphere, or the black public sphere, against the illegal occupation of the illegitimately privatized.

Policy is not the one against the many, the cynical against the romantic, or the pragmatic against the principled. It is simply baseless vision, woven into settler's fabric. It is against all conservation, all rest, all gathering, cooking, drinking and smoking if they lead to marronage. Policy's vision is to break it up then fix it, move it along by fixing it, manufacture ambition and give it to your children. Policy's hope is that there will be more policy, more participation, more change. But there is also a danger in all this participation, a danger of crisis.

When those who plan together start to participate without first being fixed, this leads to crisis. Participation without fully entering the blinding light of this dim enlightenment, without fully functioning families and financial responsibility, without respect for the rule of law, without distance and irony, without submission to the rule of expertise; participation that is too loud, too fat, too loving, too full, too flowing, too dread; this leads to crisis. People are in crisis. Economies are in crisis. We are facing an unprecedented crisis, a crisis of participation, a crisis of faith. Is there any hope? Yes, there is, say the deputies, if we can pull together, if we can share a vision of change. For policy, any crisis in the productivity of radical contingency is a crisis in participation, which is to say, a crisis provoked by the wrong participation of the wrong(ed). This is the third rule of policy.

philosophers will hold conferences on new utopias, bloggers will debate, and politicians will compromise here, where change is policy's only constant. Participating in change is the second rule of policy.

Now hope is an orientation toward this participation in change, this participation as change. This is the hope policy rolls like tear gas into the undercommons. Policy not only tries to impose this hope, but also enacts it. Those who dwell in policy do so not just by invoking contingency but by riding it, and so, in a sense, proving it. Those who dwell in policy are prepared. They are legible to change, liable to change, lendable to change. Policy is not so much a position as a disposition, a disposition toward display. This is why policy's chief manifestation is governance.

Governance should not be confused with government or governmentality. Governance is most importantly a new form of expropriation. It is the provocation of a certain kind of display, a display of interests as disinterestedness, a display of convertibility, a display of legibility. Governance is an instrumentalisation of policy, a set of protocols of deputisation, where one simultaneously auctions and bids on oneself, where the public and the private submit themselves to post-fordist production. Governance is the harvesting of the means of social reproduction but it appears as the acts of will, and therefore as the death drive, of the harvested. As capital cannot know directly the affect, thought, sociality, and imagination that make up the undercommon means of social reproduction, it must instead prospect for these in order to extract and abstract them as labor. That prospecting, which is the real bio-prospecting, seeks to break an integrity that has been militantly preserved. Governance, the voluntary but dissociative offering up of interests, willing participation in the general privacy and public privation, grants capital this knowledge, this wealth-making capacity. Policy emits this offering, violently manifest as a moral provocation. The ones who would correct and the ones who would be corrected converge around this imperative of submission that is played out constantly not only in that range of correctional facilities that Foucault analysed – the prisons, the hospitals, the asylums – but also in corporations, universities and NGOs. That convergence is given

Let's get together, get some land
Raise our food, like the man
Save our money like the mob
Put up the factory on the job

James Brown, "Funky President"

The hope that Cornel West wrote about in 1984 was not destined to become what we call 'policy.' The ones who practiced it, within and against the grain of every imposed contingency, always had a plan. In and out of the depths of Reaganism, against the backdrop and by way of a resuscitory irruption into politics that Jesse Jackson could be said to have both symbolised and quelled, something West indexes as black radicalism, which "hopes against hope...in order to survive in the deplorable present," asserts a metapolitical surrealism that sees and sees through the evidence of mass incapacity, cutting the despair it breeds. Exuberantly metacritical hope has always exceeded every immediate circumstance in its incalculably varied everyday enactments of the fugitive art of social life. This art is practiced on and over the edge of politics, beneath its ground, in animative and improvisatory decomposition of its inert body. It emerges as an ensemblic stand, a kinetic set of positions, but also takes the form of embodied

notation, study, score. Its encoded noise is hidden in plain sight from the ones who refuse to see and hear – even while placing under constant surveillance – the thing whose repressive imitation they call for and are. Now, more than a quarter century after West's analysis, and after an intervening iteration that had the nerve to call hope home while serially disavowing it and helping to extend and prepare its almost total eclipse, the remains of American politics exudes hope once again. Having seemingly lost its redoubled edge while settling in and for the carceral techniques of the possible, having thereby unwittingly become the privileged mode of expression of a kind of despair, hope appears now simply to be a matter of policy. Policy, on the other hand, now comes into view as no simple matter.

What we are calling policy is the new form command takes as command takes hold. It has been noted that with new uncertainties in how and where surplus value is generated, and how and where it will be generated next, economic mechanisms of compulsion have been replaced by directly political forms. Of course for the colonial subject this change is no change as Fanon understood; and as Nahum Chandler has pointed out, the problem of the color line is neither a matter of a new nor an old primitive accumulation. The problem is nothing other than the way the difference between labor and capital remains prior to its remainder and is made abundant or into abundance. Moreover what we are calling policy comes into view now not because management has failed in the workplace, where it proliferates as never before, but because economic management cannot win the battle that rages in the realm of social reproduction. Here management encounters forms of what we will call planning that resist its every effort to impose a compulsion of scarcity through seizing the means of social reproduction. In the undercommons of the social reproductive realm the means, which is to say the planners, are still part of the plan. And the plan is to invent the means in a common experiment launched from any kitchen, any back porch, any basement, any hall, any park bench, any improvised party, every night. This ongoing experiment with the informal, carried out by and on the means of social reproduction, as the to come of the forms of life, is what we mean by planning; planning in the undercommons is not an activity,

flight in putting their feet on the ground, differences escape into their own outer depths signalling the problematic essentialism of those who think and act like they are something in particular, although at the same time that something is, from the perspective of policy, whatever they say it is, which is nothing in particular.

To get these planners out of this problem of essentialism, this choreographic fixity and repose, this security and base and bass-lined curve, they must come to imagine they can be more, they can do more, they can change, they can be changed. After all, they keep making plans and plans fail as a matter of policy. Plans must fail because planners must fail. Planners are static, essential, just surviving. They do not see clearly. They hear things. They lack perspective. They fail to see the complexity. To the deputies, planners have no vision, no real hope for the future, just a plan here and now, an actually existing plan.

They need hope. They need vision. They need to have their sights lifted above the furtive plans and night launches of their despairing lives. They need vision. Because from the perspective of policy it is too dark in there, in the black heart of the undercommons, to see. You can hear something, can feel something present at its own making. But the deputies can bring hope, and hope can lift planners and their plans, the means of social reproduction, above ground into the light, out of the shadows, away from these dark senses. Deputies fix others, not in an imposition upon but in the imposition of selves, as objects of control and command, whether one is posited as being capable of selfhood or not. Whether they lack consciousness or politics, utopianism or common sense, hope has arrived.

Having been brought to light and into their own new vision, planners will become participants. And participants will be taught to reject essence for contingency, as if planning and improvisation, flexibility and fixity, and complexity and simplicity, were opposed within an imposition there is no choice but to inhabit, as some exilic home where policy sequesters its own imagination, so they can be safe from one another. It is crucial that planners choose to participate. Policy is a mass effort. Intellectuals will write articles in the newspapers,

So how does policy attempt to break this means, this militant preservation, all this planning? After the diagnosis that something is deeply wrong with the planners comes the prescription: help and correction. Policy will help. Policy will help with the plan and, even more, policy will correct the planners. Policy will discover what is not yet theorized, what is not yet fully contingent, and most importantly what is not yet legible. Policy is correction, forcing itself with mechanical violence upon the incorrect, the uncorrected, the ones who do not know to seek their own correction. Policy distinguishes itself from planning by distinguishing those who dwell in policy and fix things from those who dwell in planning and must be fixed. This is the first rule of policy. It fixes others. In an extension of Michel Foucault's work we might say of this first rule that its accompanying concern is with good government, with how to fix others in a position of equilibrium, even if today this requires constant recalibration. But the objects of this constant adjustment provoke this attention because they just don't want to govern, let alone be governed, at all. To break these means of planning, and so to determine them in recombined and privatized ways, is the necessary goal and instrumentality of policy as command. It wants to smash all forms of militant preservation, to break the movement of social rest – in which the next plan always remains potential – with a dream of settled potency. This is now what change means, what policy is for, as it invades the social reproductive realm where, as Leopaldina Fortunati noted three decades ago, the struggle rages.

And because such policy emerges materially from post-fordist opportunism, policy must optimally allow for each policy deputy to take advantage of his opportunity and fix others as others, as those who have not just made an error in planning (or indeed an error by planning) but who are themselves in error. And from the perspective of policy, of this post-fordist opportunism, there is indeed something wrong with those who plan together. They are out of joint – instead of constantly positing their position in contingency, they seek solidity in a mobile place from which to plan, some hold in which to imagine, some love on which to count. Again, this is not just a political problem from the point of view of policy, but an ontological one. Brushing the ground beneath their feet, finding anti- and ante-contingent

not fishing or dancing or teaching or loving, but the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible. It is these means that were eventually stolen by, in having been willingly given up to, state socialism whose perversion of planning was a crime second only to the deployment of policy in today's command economy.

Of course, the old forms of command have never gone away. The carceral state is still in effect and strategic wars on drugs, youth, violence, and terrorism have even given way to logistic wars of drones and credit. But horrible as such state command remains, it now deputises and delegates its power to seemingly countless and utterly accountable and accounted for agents who perform contemporary internal versions of the knightriders and settlers of earlier state violence deputisations. Or rather, since knightriders and settlers never really went away, deputised for segregation, anti-communism, migration, and nuclear family heteropatriarchy in much of the Global North, what policy represents is a new weapon in the hands of these citizen-deputies. Stand your ground – because man was not born to run away, because his color won't run, because again and again the settler must incant the disavowal and target the epidermalised trace of his own desire for refuge – is only the most notorious iteration of this renewed dispersal and deputisation of state violence, aimed into the fugitive, ambling neighbourhoods of the undercommons.

Content neither with abandoning the realm of social reproduction nor conditioning it for the workplace, the two always related moves of the relative autonomy of the capitalist state, today capital wants in. It has glimpsed the value of social reproduction and wants control of the means, and no longer just by converting them into productivities within formal industrialisations of care, food, education, sex, etc. but by gaining access to and directly controlling the informal experiment with the social reproduction of life itself. To do this, it has to break up the ongoing plans of the undercommons. And here, with bitter irony, is where the hope West could still speak of in 1984, which has subsequently gone back underground, is conjured as an image whose fecklessness is also its monstrosity. What we talk about, in its survival,

as planning appears, in its waning, as hope, which has been deployed against us in ever more perverted and reduced form by the Clinton-Obama axis for much of the last twenty years.

Planning is self-sufficiency at the social level, and it reproduces in its experiment not just what it needs, life, but what it wants, life in difference, in the play of the general antagonism. Planning starts from the solidity, the continuity, and the rest of this social self-sufficiency, though it does not end there in having placed all these complex motion. It begins, as this disruption of beginning, with what we might call a militant preservation. And these are its means. Policy deputises those willing to, those who come to want to, break up these means as a way of controlling them, as once it was necessary to de-skill a worker in a factory by breaking up his means of production. And it does this by diagnosing the planners. Policy says that those who plan have something wrong with them, something deeply – ontologically – wrong with them. This is the first thrust of policy as dispersed, deputised command. What's wrong with them? They won't change. They won't embrace change. They've lost hope. So say the policy deputies. They need to be given hope. They need to see that change is the only option. By change what the policy deputies mean is contingency, risk, flexibility, and adaptability to the groundless ground of the hollow capitalist subject, in the realm of automatic subjection that is capital. Policy is thus arrayed in the exclusive and exclusionary uniform/ity of contingency as imposed consensus, which both denies and at the very same time seeks to destroy the ongoing plans, the fugitive initiations, the black operations, of the multitude.

As resistance from above, policy is a new class phenomenon because the act of making policy for others, of pronouncing others as incorrect, is at the same time an audition for a post-fordist economy that deputies believe rewards those who embrace change but which, in reality, arrests them in contingency, flexibility, and that administered precarity that imagines itself to be immune from what Judith Butler might call our undercommon precariousness. This economy is powered by constant and automatic insistence upon the externalisation

of risk, the placement at an externally imposed risk of all life, so that work against risk can be harvested without end.

Policy is the form that opportunism takes in this environment, as the embrace of the radically extra-economic, political character of command today. It is a demonstration of the will to contingency, the willingness to be made contingent and to make contingent all around you. It is a demonstration designed to separate you from others, in the interest of a universality reduced to private property that is not yours, that is the fiction of your own advantage. Opportunism sees no other way, has no alternative, but separates itself by its own vision, its ability to see the future of its own survival in this turmoil against those who cannot imagine surviving in this turmoil (even if they must do so all the time). The ones who survive the brutality of mere survival are said by policy to lack vision, to be stuck in an essentialist way of life, and, in the most extreme cases, to be without interests, on the one hand, and incapable of disinterestedness, on the other. Every utterance of policy, no matter its intent or content, is first and foremost a demonstration of one's ability to be close to the top in the hierarchy of the post-fordist economy.

As an operation from above designed to break up the means of social reproduction and make them directly productive for capital, policy must first deal with the fact that the multitude is already productive for itself. This productive imagination is its genius, its impossible, and nevertheless material, collective head. And this is a problem because plans are afoot, black operations are in effect, and in the undercommons all the organizing is done. The multitude uses every quiet moment, every sundown, every moment of militant preservation, to plan together, to launch, to compose (in) its surreal time. It is difficult for policy to deny these plans directly, to ignore these operations, to pretend that those who stay in motion need to stop and get a vision, to contend that base communities for escape need to believe in escape. And if this is difficult for policy then so too is the next and crucial step, instilling the value of radical contingency, instructing participation in change from above. Of course, some plans can be dismissed by policy – plans hatched darker than blue, on the criminal side, out of love. But most will instead require another approach to command.