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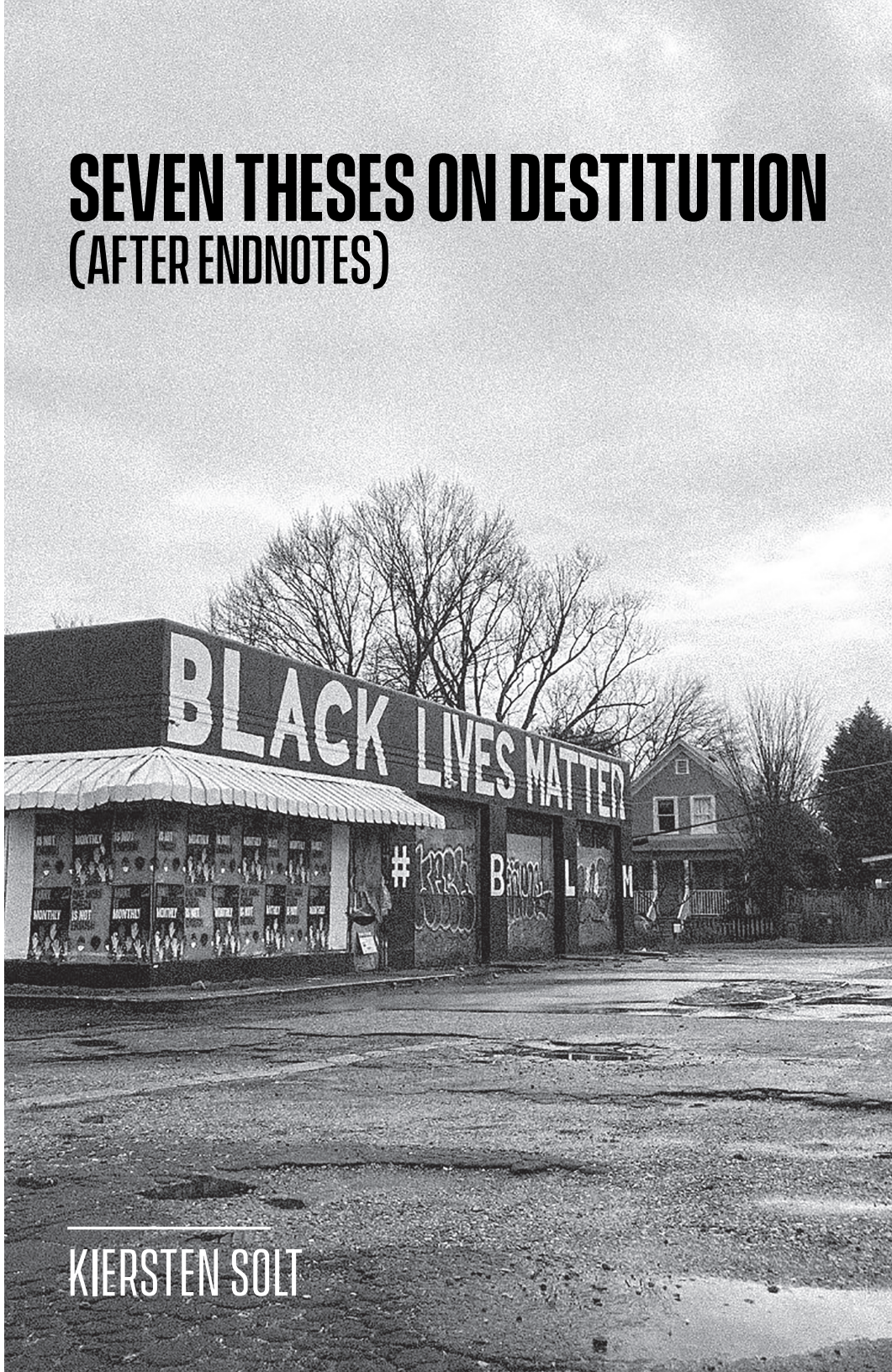
SEVEN THESES ON DESTITUTION
(AFTER ENDNOTES)



KIERSTEN SOLT

struggles, a position I suspect I will yet again erroneously be charged. I assert that the powers that compel us lie indeed within those life-forms that facilitate, emerge in, and are transformed by the upheavals of our time. Our task is to forge links in order to cultivate — from here, and not from elsewhere — an ensemble of forces capable of abandoning themselves to the event.

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SEVEN THESES ON DESTITUTION
(AFTER ENDNOTES)

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There will be no new universal. There will be no new unity. There will be no convergence of struggles that will organize itself into the shape of a subjective agent of revolution that will take the capitalist state by force. This is due neither to the collective weakness of a communist endeavor in the face of a catastrophic regime, nor to a fictional "end of history." On the contrary, it is perhaps because such new universals, new unities, new movements, new commons, and new differences are already emerging— in the plural. It is because there is a power in these "feeble alliances," alliances we have elsewhere called "unholy." They are not merely the weakened political forms of our time that must be "transcended," but the stuff of a new politics, well suited to an era marked by confusion and disorder on every level.

Our task is to demarcate these points of density—between those which harbor possibilities for novel ways of being and those which can only result in the proliferation of forms amenable to the state. Herein lies the difference—which is, in fact, a battleline—between, on the one hand, the new popular parties with their socialist or fascist agendas, the revolutionary struggles that culminate in territorial battles or fights for recognition on the international political stage, the military dictatorships and the coups and, on the other, the molecular becomings of dropouts and frontliners, sideshowers and artists born in and transformed by conflict. If the classical social movements, universalisms, and constituent potential belong to the former, a conceptual vocabulary of destitution, opacity, insurrection, evocation, and consistency belongs to us.

To affirm the transformative character of our liminal epoch means to affirm that we live among experimental endeavors. Some will succeed; others will be crushed by constituent tendencies, the organization of capital, and the biopolitical crises of our times; others still will fade away for reasons of their own. None of this is to suggest that all is perfectly well, nor to deny the limits of our movement. Nor is it to assert that revolution is a mere accumulation of

THESIS 7: The revolutionary forces of our time will not develop in the form of a new unity, a new subject, or a new universal. On the contrary, strategic thought begins as a demarcation within contemporary upheaval and the polarizations that take shape within it.

the point where structuralist dialectics can only conclude: on the terrain of the event itself. If we are seeing the proliferation of destituent movements across the world—provided we have in mind the Chilean riots and soup kitchens, and not the vote—then we will be called to develop a more fine-grained image of how they proceed. To each her fragments. To state the point more decisively: the failure to demarcate what I here call constituent and destituent forces leaves us with an ambition toward revolution as nothing other than a never-ending cycle of violence, consigning another century to the fatal failures that structure our present.

and have for the most part been subordinated to constituting tendencies. Destituent forces are intrinsically difficult to see.

Destitution spreads power without accumulating it. It is the process by which events and singularities make use of forces and powers they neither possess nor embody. Destitution unravels both nations and states by dispersing the powers they marshal back into the world, dismembering and disaggregating armies and riches alike.

Endnotes objects that the term "destituent" is too broad. "*Every* power is becoming destituent," they write. Every power is destituent "even when they lead to a (potentially) new constitution as in Chile... [T]he vote [for a new constitution written by members other than current politicians] itself was arguably a vote against the political system." (54 fn. 38) Stretching a concept beyond its usual reach can lead to its development, but it can also, as with any lifeform, consign it to demise. It is Endnotes that has broadened the category beyond utility. And no one needs to take *our* word for it, because the French authors have explained it themselves. A few lines below the Invisible Committee's aforementioned distinction between constituent and destituent insurrections, they write: "Despite all that was cool, lively, unexpected, *Nuit debout*, like the Spanish movement of the squares or Occupy wall street previously, was troubled by the old constituent itch...As long as one debates words, as long as revolution is formulated in the language of rights and the law, the ways of neutralizing it are well known and marked out." (76-77) However much the constitutional referendums in Chile, Tunisia, or Sudan might be portrayed as votes "against the political system itself," in them, the constituent tendency continues to reign.

If one can begin to see the destituent character of insurrections even as they are routed by constituting forces, it is not due to a breakdown of terms but by a step in the use of the concepts. By demarcating constituent tendencies, the notion of destitution jump-starts the process of thinking at

THESIS 1: The retrospective projection of an intact political identity to explain our present obfuscates the truths of our time.

We have recently been told that in light of the ongoing crisis of political representation, the persistent identitarian thrust of contemporary upheaval is "rational." What rationality is this? In "Onward, Barbarians," *Endnotes* situates our present in the aftermath of the demise of the workers' movements, a line familiar to some strands of contemporary revolutionary thought. The argument proceeds as follows. In the era of the workers' movements, the economy determined the political. The antagonistic structure of capital manifested as a social antagonism between proletarians and the bourgeoisie. The economic determination of the political thus enabled rebellious energy to take shape as a movement waged by the working class. Today, the argument goes, socio-economic dynamics continue to determine the political field, but principally as forces of dissolution rather than construction. Thus, in lieu of class composition we find the decomposition of class, in lieu of the socio-economic basis of democratic representation we find an absent basis of democratic representation, and in lieu of workers' movements we find "non-movements." On this reading, the socio-economic and political fields of today thus appear as the negative images of what they were sixty years ago.

We are told that contemporary struggles are "identitarian" because of their past, a past that is lost today. What does this mean for partisans? If we translate the argument into the terms of lived experience, the picture we get is a melancholic one. Today's insurgents are processing the loss of a once-intact and legitimate working class identity. We are nostalgic for a once-functioning and legitimate system of classed political representation that our world can no longer offer, we are told. But are the death of the workers' movements and a coincident collapse of effective political representation truly the animating problems of our era? No. The frontliners of last summer are far too young and hardly sufficiently "educated" to experience nostalgia for an absent working-class identity. If we find ourselves worried by the lack of viable careers, it is much more due to our inabili-

To describe what takes place in upheaval apart from constituent tendencies, the term "destitution" has appeared. In its significance for contemporary revolutionary thought, the concept has developed in light of a historical and political context defined by the collapse of the workers' movement and the crises of representation, as well as a refutation of every programmatism. The distinction between constitution and destitution is not merely descriptive, but pragmatic: it aims to answer the question of what is to be fostered and what is not.

To be sure, a "destituent strategy" is not at all revolutionary—provided, that is, the term "revolution" is reserved for those upheavals that install a new power in the stead of the one overthrown. "If to constituent power there correspond revolutions, revolts, and new constitutions, namely, a violence that puts into place and constitutes a new law, for destituent potential it is necessary to think entirely different strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics," Agamben wrote in 2014. (*Use of Bodies* 266) In 2017, the Invisible Committee developed the distinction as follows:

> "[T]he notion of *destitution*...is necessary to intervene in revolutionary logic, in order to establish a division *within* the idea of insurrection. For there are constituent insurrections, those that end like all the revolutions up to now have ended: by turning back into their opposite, those that have been made 'in the name of'—in the name of whom or what? The people, the working class, or God, it matters little. And there are destituent insurrections, such as May '68, the Italian creeping May, and so many insurrectionary communes. "(Now 76)

Constituent insurrections are those that assume, one way or another, a form compatible with the state, either the one in force or one still to come. Destituent insurrections—of which we have seen very few—point elsewhere altogether

THESIS 6: Processes of destitution differentiate themselves from, and in so doing undermine, constituent forces in action.

ty to pay rent and our debts than because we long to link arms with our absent fellow workers. Nor has any human condition proved itself stable enough to conclude—alongside, we might note, Francis Fukuyama's own recent reading of the identitarian turn in American politics—that an objective and ahistorical longing for belonging has suddenly found itself without any positive form. The demise of the workers' movements and the crisis of political representation are more akin to pre-conditions than live phenomena of our time, scores settled long before we came on the scene. Hence, an explanation of both the persistent identitarianism and demands for state recognition must begin somewhere other than in the decomposition of the workers' movements, whose aftermath began over a century ago. It could begin, perhaps, in the forms of power enabled by claims to identitarian commonality and what makes such formations desirable, and not just rational, in our present. But explaining the origins of persistent identitarian conflicts is not precisely my task.

Instead, here, I pursue what is obscured by such romantic portrayals of the present. I call Endnotes' argument romantic—romantic, that is, positing a kernel of truth in an imagined past, a kernel to be rediscovered and restored anew. Is the dialectical view not opposed to romanticism? I insist on the term, because what romanticism and crude dialectics have in common is the structure of presupposition, negation, and the subsequent positing of a new, positive, and unified universal.

THESIS 2: So long as one clings to the perspective of the spectacle—the regime of visibility that dominates in commodity society, the whitened regime of visualization—our present is destined to appear in the negative, that is, as lack, absence, and negation. As a consequence, the future of revolutionary activity will be framed as a need for a new universal or a new positive vision.

ferently, fascism and democracy are linked on the same line of contiguity, indubitably established by the events of the twentieth century. The classical social movement and civil war are the extreme forms that upheaval assumes when constituent tendencies predominate.

conception of bourgeois culture. Not every movement is identitarian, but every identitarian movement is constituent. Identitarian movements posit a partial people marginalized by or excluded from the popular dimension of the state. Their trajectory is thus doubly constituent insofar as it aims at the constitution of the excluded population *and* the reconstitution of the popular totality. The distinction between identitarian and populist social movements is less apparent from the perspective of the state, but important from the perspective of partisans, as each presents different opportunities for exiting the constituent schema. Both, however, involve the constitution of a people, both end up at the politicians' table, and both are ultimately constituent. Moreover, a combination of identitarian and populist tendencies can, as the past five years have demonstrated, give rise to social movements colloquially understood as fascist.

When a party of opposition takes on a form that is too discrete and too powerful for the state to respond, when the popular dimension of the state fractures beyond the possibility of reconstitution, and when the state no longer holds its monopoly on legitimacy and violence, upheaval that might otherwise have been a social movement can assume the constituent form of civil war. Civil war, as a limit-form of upheaval, remains "social" insofar as society itself is at stake. A particular line of battle comes to define the entire conflict. Partisans become locked in a mutually constitutive antagonism. An attachment to place–real or imagined–facilitates the closure of ranks. Militarized conflict comes to stand in for all conflict, as when "guns became the *ersatz* for strategy." The conflict is no longer generative, but shrinks to concern only what is already present in battle. Civil war is defined by its use of conflict as the predominant mechanism for constituting a people—and in this sense, it is ultimately a constituent process.

The classical social movement, populism, fascism, and civil war: while significant differences demarcate these political phenomena, the motor of each is constituent. Put dif-

When a past political configuration is accorded the weight of positivity, it is only logical that the present will appear in the negative. If our present appears as a collection of absences — the decomposition of class, the absent basis of democratic representation, the non-movement of movements today — this is because it has been forced to answer to a presupposed past, an intact system of economic determination and political representation. When capital, the state, and the politics amenable to them are accorded the weight, the positivity, and the continuity of the real, it is merely by logical extension that contemporary movements appear in the negative, as nothing more than "feeble alliances" and "generalized disorder." Certain theorists even affirm this analytic outright ("It is the consciousness of capital as our unity-in-separation that allows us to posit from within existing conditions—even if only as a *photographic negative*—humanity's capacity for communism." (52-53 fn. 32, emphasis ours)). Capital is attributed the positivity of "unity," even if a modified one, against which upheaval appears solely in a negative mode.

Positivity lies either in the past or on the side of capital, or both; the present is destined to appear in the negative. The next theoretical step is equally determined. What is needed will assume the doubly inverted shape of what has been lost. For this reason, futural proposals for revolutionary action that arise from frameworks such as these appear as positivities. For instance: "The non-movements point to a need for a universalism that goes beyond the ruins of the workers' movements." (12) We ought to "envisage means by which the non-movements might eventually seize control of capitalist stagnation/deindustrialization," and even consider "the prepar[ation] of an under-production plan," we are told. (24, 26) Again, what is available elsewhere, in the past or on the side of capital, is found missing in the present and dictates the shape of what ought to come (though not what *will*). When one is intent upon framing upheaval in the negative, what is called for will always be a new and currently

absent positivity, a novel and presently absent commons, a new and unthought universal. But this is all to say that what they find missing is the unity of the proletariat, the universal, a revolutionary agential subject, and that they tell us it is toward this we ought to organize.

If we are left with a conception of revolution as a never-ending cycle of violence, if we fail to develop an alternative ambition, we cannot understand revolutionary movements as anything other than failures, and we risk our ambitions taking the shape of what they set out to undermine.

Statist forces always present themselves as fully composed conjunctions of a people, a territory, and a law to govern them all. But there is no "people," no "society," no "nation," no "body politic," no "constituency" until they are produced as such—always by way of a violent demarcation between the included and the excluded. There are no "interests," "desires," no "will of the people" until they are hammered out—always by flattening real desires to the lowest common denominator. And there is no sanctification of that will into the form of law until the moment the law is applied—always by arbitrary force. Abbé Sieyès' distinction between constituting and constituted power, Carl Schmitt's *Constitutional Theory,* Walter Benjamin's distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence, Deleuze and Guattari's "*Urstaat,*" Agamben's "paradox of sovereignty," and the concept of constitution we mobilize here are all attempts—though with quite different motivations—to render visible the process by which states come about while concealing the productive operations necessary for their realization. Agamben's unique contribution was to gather this lineage and to assert, *contra* Negri, that the forms, activities, and potential proper to constituted power cannot be isolated from it. Constituents, constituent potential, and constitutions themselves are secondary effects of a more fundamental constituent process. "Constitution" thus names the processes by which energies, desires, gestures, and life are channeled and modulated into forms amenable to the state. At stake in the concept is the ability to depart from the landscape of the state.

If the "classical social movement" is to be defined, following Carl Schmitt, as "the mediation between unorganized people and the state," this is a definition of the social movement as a process of constitution. A potential taxonomy of the limit-forms of contemporary upheaval unfolds from here. Not every social movement is populist, but every populism is a social movement. Populist movements occur when a constituent people rebels against the prevailing

THESIS 5: The process of constitution is the process at work in every state—and in every so-called social movement and every identitarianism, as well as every populism, fascism, and civil war.

THESIS 3: Contrary to every spectacular perspective, the relation between revolutionary elements and their would-be representatives is that of a persistent and asymmetrical conflict.

While contemporary upheaval does not itself demand reference to the early twentieth-century workers' movements, it is possible to keep them in view without producing romantic views of the present. A variety of sources offer alternative accounts of the movements' demise; I take up Tiqqun's reading of the Italian autonomist period. It is in this time that the notion of the "decomposition of class"—the "decomposition" that ostensibly characterizes our present—emerged. On Tiqqun's reading, what many nostalgically call "the workers' movement" is not, in fact, the revolutionary elements of the time, but rather their capitalist-statist corollary. "The workers' movement has throughout its existence coincided with the *progressive* elements of capitalism," Tiqqun writes. "From February 1848 to the Commune and the autogestionary utopias of the 1970s, it has only ever demanded, for its most radical elements, the right of the working-class to *manage Capital for itself*." (*This is Not a Program*, 30-31) Upon the recognition of the distinction between proletariat and the working-class, the equation of revolutionary elements with the working class is an error.

> The revolutionary element is the proletariat, the rabble. [...] Every time that it has attempted to define itself as a class, the proletariat has lost itself, taken the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, for a model. As a non-class [...] *the proletariat is that which experiences itself as a form-of-life*. It is communist or nothing. In every age the form in which the proletariat appears is redefined according to the overall configuration of hostilities. The most regrettable confusion in this regard concerns the "working class." (ibid.)

The significance of this period is thus the historical and conceptual dislocation of the proletariat—that is, the revolutionary elements—from its traditional confusion with the working class. The confusion of revolutionary elements

and not just a handful of the more confused participants. A brawl or near fist fight between macho tough guys can stop a march in the middle of the street. Instead of a proliferation of actions so extensive that it takes time to determine where one's crew will start the day, actions are announced days in advance and sponsored by an attached list of organizations. The same people consistently appear to make speeches, with the effect not only of creating a sentiment or a direction for the crowd, but of slowly becoming recognizable figureheads—indicated, these days, when they start dropping Instagram handles for something other than suggestions as to what should be played on the sound truck. Eventually come the meetings. Not of crews debriefing or making plans or seeking to coordinate across multiple elements that have only just met. All these have their place in ungovernable confusion and can even be key means of expanding it. On the contrary, the process of constitution draws out meetings of organizers and activists. "This is a movement, not a moment," they have said over their megaphones the day before. At the meetings, more than one attendee will invoke a mysterious and never-present "people"—people who want something, people who might be "alienated" by this or that blockade or anything other than a peaceful protest, people who should be "brought on board" because the speakers are divesting themselves entirely of their capacity to act on their own behalf, and would prefer that everyone else there follow suit. After far too much talk, the break-out groups will form and everyone will rest in peace in their given roles. Little bureaucrats. Thus, a layer of managers begins to form. If riots, looting, and street battles are still underway, they will call actions at a distance from these more unruly events, leading crowds to what they call "strategic" targets, which are always the empty thrones of power, the governors' mansion, the courthouses, the federal buildings. Soon enough, they will be at the politicians' table, where they wanted to be all along.

This is one image of a constituent process at work in the twenty-first century USA.

One cannot escape from one's first riot unscathed and one equally cannot experience an ungovernable situation without learning its defamiliarizing cues. Ungovernability carries with it the distinct sense that things are developing far too quickly for any party to achieve a totalizing grasp on the situation. This is as true in any particular riot as it is for the broader situation at hand. Calls for action proliferate from innumerable and unknown camps; crowds gather by intuition rather than at publicized events; one hears of unfathomable attacks after they occur. While one crowd drags rubble into an already-burning building, it is entirely possible that another is pitching tear gas canisters at police across flaming barricades a block or ten away. Meanwhile, bands of looters dance in and out of demonstrations, while others may be laying waste to a shopping district on the other side of the city. Inexplicable sights pop up and then fade back into the landscape: someone on a megaphone and someone else on horseback, crews of builders eyeing how a certain piece of plywood could fit together with that piece of ten-foot-tall fencing, circles of friends sharing a blunt, someone else carrying a toddler on his shoulders make the ephemeral scene. Sprinters and scuffles, flashbangs and fireworks, long and low jeers, an inane oogle trill. Things are not entirely joyous: now and then people shout out in pain or fall to the ground weeping; others leave because they have been compromised or have found themselves unprepared. And the situation is not entirely amenable to revolutionary currents: desires conflict, struggles over strategy ensue, and counter-revolutionary tendencies abound. But an uprising, an insurrection, an ungovernable situation is marked by the feeling not just that anything is possible, but that one can act in whatever way one wills without the slightest hesitation. May 26 through June 1, 2020, USA, for instance.

When possibilities such as these are on the table, the process of constitution cannot set in through a single act of repression or containment, but requires an accumulation of gestures and hesitations. Someone yelling "if you're not black..." catches the ears of a noticeable portion of a crowd,

with a molar socio-economic formation is and was their demise. In their most recent text, Endnotes casts rosy eyes on the past. There is no way that people living in that past saw themselves living in the kinds of unities Endnotes invokes here. How could we understand Jim Crow, Reconstruction, or the world wars if the conflicts of the time were indeed organized around a strong working class identity? The question answers itself.

Revolutionary elements are defined solely by their vocation. They are allergic to representation, democratic or otherwise, and allergic to the state. There is therefore an asymmetrical conflict within revolutionary upheaval.

The asymmetry of revolutionary conflict is familiar in America, the liberal democracy and exporter of identitarian politics *par excellence*. Here, the asymmetrical nature of revolutionary upheaval is visible in the compulsory translation of rebellious energies into the form of social movements—that is, a form of contestation amenable to dialogue with the state. From revolutionary energies, gestures, practices and ideas, counter-insurrectional forces aim to extract a discrete constituency whose grievances may be legibly articulated to the state on the basis of an imagined social contract. Hence, in 2011, we watched an ensemble of articles in Adbusters, heads of media committees, demands committees, and general assemblies *produce* "the 99%" that "wanted corporations out of politics" from the occupations, blockades, and love affairs that erupted across the country. In 2014, we watched Alicia Garza and Fox News, black clergy members, activists, and the national franchise named "Black Lives Matter" *produce* "Black Lives that Mattered" from the riots, looting, occupations, and acts of communization in places like Ferguson, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Charlotte. In 2016-2017, we watched the ensemble of David Archimbault, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the legal entity that is the "Standing Rock Sioux Tribe," the lawsuits seeking to block pipeline construction, and the US Army Corps of Engineers *produce* an "indigenous people" seeking "recognition of their

rights to autonomy and the land" from the encampments, shared meals, destruction of construction equipment, the stampede of buffalo, and the pitched battles with police at Standing Rock. And last summer, we watched an uprising sputter out into a sloganistic desire to defund the police and yet another electoral charade. This time, however, the managerial process has been far less complete.

Again: there is an asymmetric conflict within revolutionary upheaval. When it is spoken of univocally, whether as "movements" or "non-movements," this asymmetry—the conflict within conflict—is obscured.

THESIS 4: Contemporary upheaval is the site of a conflictual encounter between destituent gestures and constituent forces.