

crimethinc. corps diplomatique
E PLURIBUS LIBERATUM: LIBERATING MULTITUDE

(cast to the wind :: may you blow it widely)

Sisters, brothers, comrades:

Our history is **tragic** and our future opaque. We ride a storm of oppression into accelerating change, and we long to curve our path towards hope, towards the joy and justice, the world we know is possible. So we struggle, we organize and agitate, we protest and advocate, and yet the corrosive might of the world globalized into a new apartheid engorges, swallowing our victories and outflanking our defenses. How can we resist such state violence? How can we empower in the midst of such TV-drugged apathy? Despair surrounds us, conscious and unconscious. It is the root of fear and ignorance, of liberal nihilism and platitudes in the face of self-destruction, cynical sneers and cruel hedonism.

Yet I write an invitation to hope, not a paean to despair. There is another way to see the world, and our struggle within it. **The world system**, for all its size and power and endless invasion, is **brittle**. It is based on deceptive equations of profit, not only of production and consumption, but of impossible promises and hypocritical values. We can't be strong or beautiful (or real) like a beer commercial; capitalism doesn't promote life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The War on Terrorism is a response to the growing danger of delegitimization feared by Empire's new world order; it is their desperate gamble, that a world police state can squash global resistance despite the backlash.

It may work; it may not. I no longer have a sense of the inevitable, and in the face of despair that openness spells hope and the lustrous tang of possibility. Who knows what strange catastrophes and subtle shifts lie before us? **Many worlds are possible.**

Possible, but not certain. If we learn anything from the last terrifyingly optimistic century I hope it can be **humility**. Can we be sure that the best-laid plans will not go awry, the most hopeful society not fall into malignant oppression? Can we be certain which element or perspective or mode of organizing will ultimately achieve the downfall of capitalism, the overthrow of patriarchy, the end of domination? The world is a big, surprising place, and our history recalls defeat more than victory. Our radicalism and inspiration may end up being an escape valve, the source of systemic self-correction,

the mechanism of Empire's longevity. We have no cause for absolute faith in our prescriptions.

Still, we are not powerless. Indeed, in this globalizing world of unprecedented knowledge and skill, we have deep opportunity. I suggest that opportunity is to build a coherent, agile, and powerful **multitude** able to respond to changing circumstances dynamically and to grow quickly without awkwardness. I suggest that if such a multitude is rooted in direct action towards local liberation it can be fueled by the vast diversity of unsatisfied human desire, while avoiding betrayal by leaders, drift into irrelevance, and co-option into the status quo. I suggest that by focusing on growing strong, flexible, and democratic liaisons between particular communities of struggle, we will be able to articulate wildly dissimilar people into coherent, transformative movement without centralized power. And I suggest that if we succeed in infiltrating the tendrils of our multitude into contact with all pockets of liberatory desire, no matter how partial or "compromised," how liberal or reformist, the threat of the state's delegitimization will become our most potent defense against its repressive force.

This is **boldness**, and many activists and organizers desire boldness in deed rather than word. So do I. But action must contribute to an effective medium of change, or it is truly just letting off steam. Ideas can help us understand such a medium, and contextualize ourselves within it. But too often our words (bold or otherwise) have become purely abstract analyses of what is right and wrong about the whole world, contributing to arrogance or discouragement. If we can focus instead on the details of collective self-empowerment, and on healthy working relationships between disparate communities, we can learn how locally coordinated action within a democratic multitude can participate in a globally effective medium of change. We can be less stymied and more hopeful; our humility can fuel our courage.

After all, **the alternatives don't seem so promising**. Many of us believe that the only way to save the world is to convert the masses to our ideology or structure, and we are depressed or fall into schism beneath the weight of such a task. Others of us recognize the need for divergent groups to work together, and struggle again and again to coordinate uneasy coalitions under vague but controversial points of unity, sapping energy and inspiration for fragility and compromise. We pour time and spirit into dysfunctional groups hamstrung by the assumption that what we do is more important than who we become,

that correct thoughts are more powerful than wise relationships. Would it not be truly liberating if we could work together, effectively and healthfully, without worrying endlessly over a single universal structure and language of struggle?

We can. We have already, in bits and pieces throughout our lives. How better to understand the sudden **shard of liberation** so many of us experienced during the convergence on the WTO in Seattle, so recently, so long ago? It was neither shift in ideology nor novel organizing structure, neither unprecedented militance nor surge in consciousness that precipitated our experience. I suggest the streets of Seattle became the splinter of a possible world because we were a large but coherent pluralism, effective in diversity. *This is what democracy looks like* was more than a sardonic reference to rioting police or a statement about the role of civil disobedience; it was an expression of the soul-shivering power of liberation possible in even a transitory experience of real democracy. **Real democracy**; that is, an empowerment of the actual ability of people to act on the conditions of their existence. In a glorious swelter of hard organizing, capitalist hubris, and happy accident, our bodies, our voices, our souls achieved a polyglot collectivity able to influence the summit of imperial power.

And in that **polyglot collectivity** lies the mystery and the hope I wish us to learn. After all, the TV cliché of our chaotic, rampant cacophony is accurate: from the teach-ins to the flaming dumpsters, the flower children to the media whores. So many of us were there in our dissension and our egotism, our diverse tactics and exclusive rhetoric; and yet we experienced collectivity, solidarity in spirit and body, coherent participation in movement, a social space with momentum! A broad and often accidental convergence of factors contributed to our particular success. But rather than trying to generalize the details of Seattle, we can learn hope from how much effective and decentralized power we were able to achieve without painstaking preparation; in many ways, liberation became a chain reaction, catching up all of us who were there. It is that fire, that roaring energy in direct action towards desire that can fuel our organizing. We were lucky in Seattle; but we can learn to build our relationships into a conscious, intentional web of organized resistance without center, a democratic multitude, a new countervailing political force.

Countervailing political force. After all, whether reformists or revolutionaries, builders of party or smashers of state, our ideas and

our groups are finally useful only if they facilitate a movement, capable of threatening the legitimacy of the status quo and offering a taste of something different, of liberation. We must be able to measure our actions and our words against the ever-changing, specific contours of our struggles to achieve that sort of subjectivity, that sort of multitude. Correctness, purity, radicalism become less important than empathy and understanding, inspiration and momentum, the skills of teaching each other forms of solidarity that act directly towards liberation in our own terms. It is coherence rooted in our relationships (of which ideology is only a part) that can grow into a multitude capable of the permanent process of building the worlds we desire, person by person, community by community.

Such a process will be fundamentally local, dependent always on the specifics of a situation. Forms of organizing and action may be liberating in one situation and regressive in another; we will learn the differences through the practice of our struggle. However, as a vision to infuse action with direction I think we can imagine an effectively articulated democratic multitude as an **ecosystem of communities**, each overlapping and thickly interlinked in multiple directions. The communities are in general strong and lasting, but with shifting borders and populations; and this is the multitude's strength, providing the vital interchange of ideas, experiences, and relationships that hold it together. Some communities are ideological, organized around a shared abstract language describing the world and structuring members' participation: pagans, maoists, libertarians. Or they more closely resemble villages, somewhat arbitrary collections of people with relationships based on proximity or other accident: family, workplace, block. Indeed, what characterizes a community (from affinity group to international diaspora) is simply a density of relationships, the ability to coordinate action and discourse through the links it comprises. Individuals will typically belong to multiple communities, with different or even contradictory languages: sewing circles, spiritual disciplines, birth families, local neighborhoods, unions, action groups, musical genres, racial and gender and class identities. Indeed, the multilayered weaving of communities will allow people otherwise isolated from political action to learn from and contribute to the multitude: gardeners and babysitters and philosophers will join activists and organizers as revolutionaries. Overall, the strength and coherence of the multitude will grow as constituent communities are internally empowered to make decisions

and take actions, and externally linked to learn from others and collaborate effectively.

For this is the heart of the multitude, these links, **liaisons**, relationships. If they are backbiting and exclusive, poorly maintained, imbalanced and egotistical we will be fractious and stagnant. If instead we build strong, redundant relations supported by cultures of respect, flexibility, and trust; if our discourses are accessible and our communities linked by intentional ambassadors of understanding; if we each take responsibility for interpreting and integrating the diversity of our lives; then we may grow in democracy and liberating power.

The multitude exists already; it is all of us who struggle in our lives and in the world for liberation. Our politics and our relationships, our actions and our ideologies already structure our communities. But we are small and disconnected, poorly coordinated, limited in our ability to support and communicate local struggle. What I suggest is not a new project, but a new way of understanding what we already do, how it can be part of something bigger. This understanding of our participation in the multitude refocuses our attention on strengthening the relationships and attitudes that allow us to cohere, to grow, and to achieve the processes of liberation. As we are, we probably could not sustain empowerment if revolution landed in our lap. But as we build towards the vision of multitude I have sketched, I think we will learn the skills and structures that can allow us to grow quickly into truly democratic power, when the time is ripe. Even without this clear intention, we have built so much: from the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment to the new openness among international socialisms; from the Social Forums (and their critics) to tactical solidarity between middle-aged Pagans and the Black Bloc. Think what would have been possible if we had better developed relations among our multitude: more of the sudden but tentative experiences of Seattle could have grown into ongoing collaboration; the reformist successes against the WTO could have been the fire of inspiration rather than wind cut from our sails; we could have absorbed the outpouring of energy and confusion after September 11 into organization and action appropriate to particular needs, rather than suffocating ourselves with process and alienating all but the most committed. An effectively democratic pluralist multitude can draw on its variability and diversity to adapt to change and to undermine the system from all sides.

We will build this multitude by learning how relationship articulates individual desires to fuel local liberation and global solidarity in a coherence that changes the world. I suggest nine points of focus as examples of what we will need.

1. Healing

We are broken people, chewed and shat by the noxious dynamism of a world fueled by our misery. We must heal ourselves, rooting ourselves in relation with desire, each other, and the world we share. We must learn how solidarity and **love** can help us heal together, and how healthy, effective relationships can grow out of compassion.

2. Locality

Our circumstances and desires and brokenness will always be particular. If our multitude is to ride the wind of healing and the fire of desire we must learn how to reinforce local **wisdoms**. Our multitude will be strong and flexible if participation in struggle directly empowers communities towards joy, justice, and hope, whatever that means in their immediate environments. Local skills and experience in the processes of liberation can be shared in unfamiliar terms and across unexpected differences, if we learn respect and humility.

3. Holism

All aspects of our lives can become interwoven with the multitude, not only activism, organizing, and ideology. Building networks of healing, compassion, and empowerment can become part of everything we do; if we are rooted in liberation and democratically interconnected with others, we will be effective participants in struggle. Not only will this broaden our base of sympathy and minimize the fragmentation of our lives, but it will allow us to begin building the sorts of economies and polities we imagine, developing vital skills and examples and a practical support structure less dependent on the status quo. The multitude will become the framework for new sorts of **society**, an undiscovered country of honest freedom, a parallel universe of hope and truth.

4. Longevity

We need to learn how to develop long-term, ongoing relationships between durable communities of struggle, without forfeiting flexibility and openness. As affinity groups and collectives, communities and cooperatives, organizations and **social forums**, we must learn the balance between institutional stagnation and reinventing the wheel.

5. Communication

Our multitude will become a new way not only of experiencing power, but of perceiving the world. We must develop the skills and structures that will allow the broad, decentralized **dispersal** of ideas and perspectives without information overload. And we must learn how to appreciate and mobilize wisdom even when it is expressed in unfamiliar languages or unsatisfying terms.

6. Ideology

Ideology within the multitude then becomes a tool, for **interpreting** communities to themselves and to each other in ways that empower direct action while facilitating solidarity. We need to learn how to be translators between struggles, how to find the points of agreement and divergence that will allow us to connect as well as to adapt.

7. Decisiveness

We need to learn how to make truly democratic, decentralized, empowering decisions. If consensus is understood as a collection of tools allowing us to focus on the process of achieving decisiveness across difference, it may be a model for how we can learn to coordinate throughout the multitude. On the other hand, if consensus is a formal structure hobbling action and empowering egotism, it is emblematic of the challenges we face. Ultimately, we must recognize that our goal in decisiveness is not unity, but solidarity; not agreement, but collaboration; not correctness, but liberation. Decisions will be made only when necessary for the coordination of particular communities in struggle; and they will be measured by how they contribute to the liberatory growth of the multitude. If we disagree with a decision, our words or actions to withdraw from or oppose it must be based not on whether we are “right” or “wrong,” but what will be least damaging to our overall momentum. It will be difficult, but we will need to abandon control. No individual or group will understand the big picture, direct the revolution. Instead, we must learn to facilitate democratic discourses throughout the multitude, where as many perspectives as possible can be honestly spoken and respectfully heard; these will form the basis of the mutual understanding (and relationships of **trust**) upon which effective decisiveness will depend. Our momentum will not be directed from the center but will emerge out of the individual and community decisions we make through our web of relation, rooted in local liberation.

8. Defense

If these decentralized liaisons and modulating discourses succeed in allowing us to link our multitude with communities deeply enmeshed in the structures of domination, the half-mythical “mainstream” that legitimates power, we will establish our most effective defense against state violence. Global Northern power of force depends on the state’s ability to ostracize “troublemakers” as extreme, alien, terrorists. If the perception were to develop that the state was acting in self-preservation against the anger of its own citizenry, its **legitimacy** could collapse. Thus, the more connections we have and understanding we’ve developed in the heart of “normalcy,” the better our information flows despite the media behemoths, the less effective will be the cloak of silence around state terror. In such a situation, the state’s use of intimidation will become a potentially delegitimizing force through the nature of our networked multitude itself. In the end, this is our only defense.

9. Confidence

But even more, fraternizing within the enemy allows us to take the offensive. There is nothing that cannot be used to **infiltrate** the system with the destabilizing whiff of liberation. Business unions and bingo clubs, conservative churches and Hollywood blockbusters, PTA meetings and Stalinist fronts can become sites of solidarity and movement towards empowerment if they root deeper in desire and coordinate more effectively with others. Because the multitude comprises autonomous and “exclusive” local communities not controlled from outside, contact with difference and compromise does not detract from their internal workings. Instead, through the tight but non-binding “inclusive” liaisons between communities, difference becomes a source of adaptive strength and the propagation of our most powerful experiences of liberation into the very heart of Empire.

This is our power and our hope: that **liberation itself** can be the organizing force of a multitude that empowers its achievement. We place our trust not in ideas nor in structures, but in the relationships that build social networks to collectively achieve individual desires. We may fail; but how better in this present world can we hope to root our collective wisdom in adaptive diversity? We promise not victory, but struggle; the inevitable personal struggle for love and justice and wisdom, no longer alone but in community and solidarity with us all. So much is possible!

Courage. Humility. Joy. Love!

(signed) Verdant Darkness Rose, CrimethInc. Corps Diplomatique