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Meta Present

Until now, imprisoned in our own sense of time, the meta-present offers us the first glance from the perspective of the time-scale of the Entire Human Species, whose conflicting Internal Hive Dynamics have created the world as we know it.

BPerkeley Inc.?

By Iain A. Boal

As a lead in to Mute's climate change special issue, Iain Boal reports on BP's recent biofuel deal with University of California, Berkeley. In the name of a planetary emergency, the oil behemoth has both managed to greenwash biotech research and further entrench campus capitalism

In June 2006 British Petroleum announced a plan to spend half a billion dollars to fund research into genetically modified elephant grass and other transgenic plants now being considered as candidates for rotting and fermenting into alcohol for non-fossil car fuel. Like the other oil majors, BP is outsourcing its R&D to universities who are lining up for Big Energy contract work.

Berkeley Students

Three months later BP formally invited Cambridge, Imperial College London, MIT, Stanford, and UC Berkeley to bid competitively for a ten-year contract to host an Energy Biosciences Institute, where biofuels and enhanced oil extraction techniques are to be developed, patented and made market ready.

This February the UC Chancellor, the Director of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (where the US nuclear arsenal is designed), and the Governor of California stood on a stage emblazoned with BP's new sun/flower logo to announce Berkeley's successful bid to host fifty company scientists and engineers who will be 'embedded within the campus research environment'. The Energy Biosciences Institute, according to the terms of the provisional deal, is slated to straddle the fence-line between the military (Lawrence Berkeley National Lab) and civilian campus, looking out over the Golden Gate. Up to 30 percent of BP's \$500-million grant may be spent inside BP's proprietary labs. Any faculty member or student who wishes to enter BP's labs would have to obtain 'controlled card-key access.'

Jennifer Washburn, author of *University Inc.*, accurately notes that the deal :

would...allow BP to operate its own private, commercial labs on the campuses, where research would be confidential and proprietary. The plan also dispenses with numerous traditional safeguards designed to protect the university's independence. It grants BP unusual control over the institute's research agenda, makes no mention of peer review, downplays commercial conflicts of interest and contains provisions on publication that would violate UC's written policies...[T]he plan gives BP exceptionally broad commercial rights to co-own and license the institute's academic inventions. In short, for \$500 million, the plan would allow BP, a company valued at \$250 billion, to turn an academic research institute into its own profit-making subsidiary.

One of the first casualties of the deal is already clear – the English language. The authors of this proposal have already begun a laundering operation, even before the deal is signed. Genetically modified organisms and biotechnology are nowhere to be seen. The brief era of 'biotech' is over, it seems; a new age of 'synthetic biology' is dawning. Oddly, we find ourselves back in a world of electricians, chemists and masons. Instead of living GMOs we are dealing with 'DNA circuits'; instead

of genes we find 'biobricks'. Plants no longer decompose; in this brave new science they undergo 'depolymerization'. These linguistic constructs are an attempt to obscure the fact that the core of the BP project for growing fuel instead of food remains the global proliferation of new, reproducing, lifeforms that contain genes transfected from distant species, with very poorly understood results.

It is not by accident that the parties to the BP-Berkeley deal borrow their rhetorical strategies from their counterparts in the military and nuclear fields. The UC scientists and administrators begin the proposal by invoking, in the most effusive terms, the Manhattan Project. In fact, the whole initiative is to be modeled on the Manhattan Project's 'team science' model. But that project is properly remembered for its secret, reckless decision-making. With its very first experiment, Arthur Compton, the head of the Chicago scientists involved, risked building a secret reactor in the middle of the city. Compton explained: "We did not see how a true nuclear explosion, such as that of an atomic bomb, could possibly occur"; still, as Richard Rhodes the historian of the Manhattan Project put it, he was risking 'a small Chernobyl in the midst of a crowded city.'

Here, then, are some questions: What is modern science that its shining hour was the Manhattan Project, a secret project to build a weapon of mass murder? What is modern science that it flourishes in secrecy? What is it that the biofuel boosters at UC Berkeley like so much about Lawrence and the atomic bomb project?

Trinity Test

Image: The first-ever nuclear detonation, at the Trinity test of July 16, 1945 under the auspices of The Manhattan Project

Well, here's one possible explanation: science – that is to say, 'actually existing' science – is capital's way of knowing the world. It's no accident that ballistics and the development of weapons of mass murder are at the heart of modern physics. Now the cult of the atom is mirrored and even matched by the cult of the gene. The stakes are high, they tell us – global warming and oil depletion loom. And certainly this is all rather plausible, even if promoted by known market manipulators such as BP. But it is worth asking: what does it mean, when the language of crisis is on so many lips? Suddenly, everyone is on board with biofuels as the answer to global warming – scientists, environmentalists, pundits, celebrities, politicians of all stripes – the Gores and Bransons and Blairs, and now the Bushes, with their ethanol deal with Brazil.

Global emergency, like communism and terrorism, is a very useful bogeyman that brooks no dissent. It facilitates backroom deals, and in the BP case (an agreement put together, in the revealing phrase of the UC vice chancellor for research, 'at warp speed'), it obscures the risks that university administrators and scientists are prepared to take not only with the local environment of Strawberry Canyon in Berkeley, but with the ecosystems of the planet and the lives of small farmers everywhere who face further dispossession for the purpose of developing a biofuel monoculture.

Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

Image: Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

Not that you would suspect any of this by listening to the President of the University of California when the deal was announced. 'A great day for Mother Earth', intoned Robert Dynes. Certainly it was music to the ears of BP executives (working for one of the world's brownest firms) for whom a deal with Berkeley represents good greenwashing value. As it does for the nuclear weaponeers from the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab, who will be partners in the project. The cost of this exercise for BP is actually rather modest. BP's net profit last year, in 2006, was \$22 billion - roughly \$600 per second. So the annual commitment to the program represents 0.0005% of annual profits – which can be measured in a few hours. However, BP's biofuel interests are part of a picture of very large investment

by oil companies in other fuels and the energy field overall (e.g. Shell investing in solar in China); this is why all the oil majors have these sorts of university relations around the globe (Stanford with Exxon etc); this is part of a much larger wave of such 'partnerships', mostly with private, that is publicly unaccountable, institutions.

BP's track record does not augur well for this partnership or for free and open inquiry. Here are the words of Greg Palast of *BBC Newsnight*:

BP, which owns 46% of the Alaska pipeline and is supposed to manage the system, had a habit of hunting down and destroying the careers of those who warn of pipeline problems. In one case, BP's CEO of Alaskan operations hired a former CIA expert to break into the home of a whistleblower, Chuck Hamel, who had complained of conditions at the pipe's tanker facility. BP tapped his phone calls with a US congressman and ran a surveillance and smear campaign against him. When caught, a US federal judge said BP's acts were 'reminiscent of Nazi Germany'.

Indeed, on what grounds could one expect anything else from a marriage between self-described legatees of the Manhattan Project and a global oil corporation? In other words, it's business as usual. On a straightforward institutional analysis, how could a major oil company behave very differently than the way it currently is doing? For starters, it would be a dereliction of their sworn obligation to stockholders. By the same token, should we be surprised that a governor with 8 Hummers is committing 40 million dollars of public funds to keep his vehicles running... on alcohol?

Khalifornia

The 'governator' is riding a wave of public anxiety, as the residents of California contemplate the drying up of the Columbia river and coastal inundation scenarios. They listened to a news item last week suggesting that Perth in Western Australia may be the first major modern city to be simply abandoned for lack of water. There are dangers, however, in the discourse of global warming and the widespread predictions of imminent global catastrophe, which issue not just from religious salesmen of apocalypse, but from pundits and scientists and environmentalists everywhere – the Gores and Bransons and Blairs, and now the Bushes. Thus Al Gore: 'What we are facing is a planetary emergency. So some things you would never consider otherwise, it makes sense to consider.' He is far from alone. In Britain and Germany nuclear electricity is on the agenda again. Horst Teltschik, former security adviser to Chancellor Kohl recently said: 'It is a tragedy of every democracy that everyone can publicly represent their opinion ... In a dictatorship, this type of thing wouldn't happen.'

Governator Money

The matter is complicated. On the one hand, 'peak oil' has a plausible ring to it, but it is a mystification. We are not going to be out of oil in our lifetimes. (Sheikh Yamani, when he was head of OPEC, liked to say, 'The stone age did not end for lack of stone'.) The history of oil has never been one of scarcity, except locally or through the monopolistic actions of cartels. Rather it is a story of glut; the problem for the oil executives has always been how to create scarcity – Enron learned much from BP about gaming the market. The timing of last summer's sudden inspection and fix of a decade-long problem has a suspicious smell. A precipitous shutdown in mid-summer, in the middle of Middle East war(s), is guaranteed to raise prices and reap large profits for BP. The price of crude jumped \$2.22 a barrel on the shutdown news to over \$76. How lucky for BP, which sells four million barrels of oil a day. Had BP completed its inspection and repairs a couple years back – say, after a tenth warning – the oil market would have hardly noticed.

But \$2 a barrel is just the beginning of BP's shut-down bonus. The Alaskan oil was destined for the California market which now faces a supply crisis at the very height of the summer travel season. The big winner is ARCO petroleum, the largest retailer in the Golden State. ARCO is a 100%-owned subsidiary of... British Petroleum.

Enron Corporation was infamous for deliberately timing repairs to maximize profit. Would BP also manipulate the market in such a crude manner? Some US prosecutors think they did so in the US propane market. The Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) charged the company with approving an Enron-style scheme to crank up the price of propane sold in poor rural communities in the US. Lord Browne, the CEO of BP who was recently forced to resign, apologized for that scam, for the Alaska spill, for the summer shutdown, and for the deaths in 2005 of 15 workers at the company's refinery operation at Texas City, Texas.

Alaska Oil Spill

Image: Site of the BP Alaska oil spill

A second note of caution, which also has to do with the politics of emergency. We live in a system that positively produces crisis and emergency and disaster. It is a system that even thrives on disaster. Naomi Klein calls it 'disaster capitalism'; she notes it was very visible in New Orleans and now again in Iraq. Companies like Halliburton are the beneficiaries of the chaos. A profoundly undemocratic politics of emergency flows rather plausibly from the current climate of fear; it is on view every week in the US on Fox TV's 24. As the result of a kind of 'Jack Bauer effect' we are invited to believe that there is no time for deliberation, only for extreme measures... now.

We are further asked to believe that the same people who brought you the problem will bring you the solution. Just as the industries that bring you a breast cancer epidemic are claiming to deliver the cure. What they won't bring you, we may be sure, is prevention. There's no profit in it. Just as obviously, British Petroleum will not be financing a critique of automobilism, nor will it foster a new critical urbanism, that links mobility, livelihood, habitation and space. The proposal that UC was 'honored to submit' – and which it has delivered to BP cap in hand – is deeply complicit with the status quo, namely the neoliberal policies that now, through the WTO and IMF and US Treasury, dominate the global system and were hatched in the 70s thinktanks funded by big oil and big armaments. We can directly connect the world they have ushered in to the unfolding disasters in New Orleans and Mesopotamia – the gimcrack levees, the destruction by the oil companies of the buttressing wetlands, the intensity of hurricanes, the gutting of public health infrastructure, the privatization of war and emergency relief. And leading us again to the politics of emergency, even though the crises have been long in the making.

For example, the choking of funds to public education and research has a lot to do with this deal. And we can trace it directly to Proposition 13 in 1978 and the policies of Ronald Reagan starving the University of California. The current proposal will do nothing to strike at the roots. Biomass-derived alcohol may fuel a few more hummers and 'Ford Tough' trucks. Mostly it will fuel a lot more despair and insecurity, more degradation of communal lands; for sure it means a race to the bottom for the world's farmers who are heading in staggering numbers to the cities, where there is no work waiting for them. The two faces of global neoliberalism, fully supported, funded, endorsed by big oil and soon by UC Berkeley, are the obscene sumptuary playgrounds of Dubai and the complementary slumworld of Cairo and Delhi.

We have already noted how the very language in which to discuss our plight has been hijacked. What economists and in particular the drafters of this UC-BP proposal call the 'market' is really the 'anti-market'. The capitalist 'market' is about monopoly and crushing competition, and it always has

been. Knowledge-making, however, which is the business of the university, depends on an economy of the gift, of collegiality and cooperation. This necessary sociality BP is going to exploit and to profit from. It will of course be massively compromised by the paraphernalia of security, passwords, 'need to know' and secrecy. In the proposal there is talk about 'flow' between 'open' and 'proprietary' areas of the Biofuels Institute, but it's basically a lie. We know the direction of flow they really care about – from open to proprietary; coming in your direction expect a niagara of green hype from the BP marketers.

Their 'market' bears the same relationship to the glory of a local brocante, agora, or *mercado* as Velveeta cheese does to Jose Bove's Roquefort. And the same goes for the bioscientific 'disruptive technologies' (the term used by the drafters of the UC-BP proposal) in relation to a biology adequate to the times. I am speaking of a critical, liberatory science rooted in an ethic of care and equity, in restorative justice and rightful reparation to the communities and natural systems worldwide which have been devastated in the deadly pursuit of private enrichment. A science, finally, that will be at home in a world no longer dominated by private tyrannies, one that partakes of an open, ample life in common.

Iain Boal <retort AT sonic.net> is a social historian of science and technics, associated with Retort. He is author of the forthcoming book *The Long Theft: Episodes in the History of Enclosure*

Speculating on Student Debt

ByThe Committee for Radical Diplomacy

Student Debts Image1

Images: by Esiri Erheriene-Essi <morrison55_AT_fsmail.net.

Far from being a right, British higher education in the age of top-up fees is a commodity with a hefty price tag attached. For most students, write the Committee for Radical Diplomacy, it offers a basic schooling in debt and recasts learning as a down-payment on a dubious future

I wake up at ten to a call from the bank, concerned that while in Berlin I withdrew cash without letting them know I would be out of the country. A text message follows stating: 'Next time, let us know so that we can protect your interests.'

Beyond late, I get on my bicycle and pedal frantically to class. I have not had time to do the reading as I spent last night working and was too wired to read the Grundisse when I got home. (I repeat to myself, 'next time I will read, I will force myself to read. I have no business doing a PhD if I do not force myself to read.')

In class I nearly fall asleep several times. It's hot and they are clearing out asbestos from the hallway, but I try to put up my hand a few times to keep the conversation going. It's hard as the other students are tired too. So is the professor, who tells us she is in the process of ticking a thousand boxes on her AHRC grant application to get a sabbatical.

I hear about four conferences happening in the next week. I can go to none of them. I'm working. One is called 'Knowledge for Wealth Creation'. I roll my eyes.

Coffee with colleagues. Of course none of us mentions the 'f' word (finances). We talk about communes, island fantasies, this week's private views that none of us can attend and departmental gossip.

Downstairs my students drift in, looking absent minded. I wonder what motivates them, and nearly fall asleep several times. So do they. I wonder if it's because of parties or because of work, or the asbestos.

Back on the bike.

Stop at the mobile phone place to see if credit check went through for new account. I am informed that I have been declined due to bad rating. No one can tell me who decides how one gets 'bad rating' or based on what criteria. But every time you check it gets worse, they say.

In a panic I think to myself, I can't even get a mobile phone. What will I do with my life? What will I do with my life? What will I do with my life?

Off to an interview for a summer internship gig. This one's for pay, so I should probably dress up. No time.

At the interview they ask, 'what do you want to do with your life?' I give them my packaged answer (enter current ambition for appropriate job here).

Upset by yet another occasion in which I sit in the face of judgment wearing bad shoes, I stop by a café in Mile End for moral support and to say goodbye to friends – more like acquaintances – who are moving to a city with cheaper rent. That's a lie. I'm really there because they've told me a guy I've been wanting to meet who knows about a scholarship might stop by. I wait. We talk about making a television program about our lives. Who would buy it? We talk about going out on the razz – ecstasy, a rave – which we've never done in all our years as grad students. The guy never shows up.

The age is off its hinges
– Derrida

We begin with this short vignette of everyday student life to point out what we already know. We are Generation X, Generation Debt, Generation Fucked. Depends who you ask.

The story of privatising European education can be told as a tale that dates back to 1995, when the WTO brought into effect the progressive liberalisation of trades and services under GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services). Through this process education has been designated a vertical sector of the economy, which means that state subsidies for educational institutions may now be considered a hindrance to trade and thus may have to be abolished (or made accessible to foreign providers).

It is most recently under the banner of the Bologna Process that many universities have begun to champion privatisation with renewed gusto. This document, drawn up in 1999 by 29 European countries, set out to standardise higher education across the EU, and liberally deployed the language of 'inclusion' and 'mobility'. But, truth be told, the document itself did not make privatisation mandatory.

In all countries where education has been privatised, there has been an escalation from a gradually intensified demand that individual students contribute to the cost of their schooling, to lifting caps on these costs, to state managed student grants, and finally to the liberalisation of loans. As is often the case, it is the US that is leading the way with the UK following at its heels. (For nightmarish tales from the other side of the ocean see: <http://www.generationdebt.org>).

Gordon Brown has recently announced that, for the second time in the matrimonial tangle of top up fees and student loans, he intends to sell off the £16 million worth of student loan debt to the private sector. The State is as usual underwriting business by selling off public assets at below market value for short term budgetary gains. The money earned from the sell off will, we are told, be put back into education. The State is also effectively doing the debt collecting for the private sector since the loan repayment will be automatically taken off former students' salaries along with their National Insurance contributions by the government.

In 1999, the last time the government sold off loan repayments, future revenue streams from student loans, administered through a non-departmental government company (Student Loans Company), they sold to Honours TD – a conglomerate of Deutsche Bank and the National Building Society. We are told by Bill Rammell, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, that the government received '£1 billion for the sale of student loans with a face value of £1.03 billion.' They have subsequently paid the banks subsidies of between £30,000 and £110,000 per year.[1]

For private companies, says the Financial Times, the purchase of student repayment is attractive, seen as a low risk investment (i.e. a sure thing) that can be used to secure portfolios such as pension schemes.

For those of you who have not had the pleasure of acquiring a student loan in Britain – since 2003 UK students have been eligible, after a complex qualification procedure, to go into debt with the government in order to pay their tuition fees. This version of the Student Loans Programme was introduced at the same time that universities were authorised to raise top-up fees to an upper limit of £3,000. This directly contravened New Labour's campaign promise, made only two years earlier, not to introduce the top-up fees they had 'legislated against'.

The average debt load upon graduation is currently rated at £12,500, distributed between government student loans, bank overdrafts and parental support. Gordon Brown's elaborate laundering of student debt is in reality a rather basic slight of hand: 'short term gain at the cost of future earnings'. Like the concept of education itself, the debt becomes a promise of the future in the present. Sold. In this cheap magician's trick, education mutates from a right (secured through taxation) to a privilege (one you must pay for).

'Unreal' Living: Blasé Economics

As we are inducted into the ranks of student debtors, a percentage of our future earnings already sold to the highest bidder, we ask the question, why are the conditions of debt so hard to register? Perhaps it is because we just don't get it. And maybe we don't get it because, in the words of 1980s valley girls, debt is 'totally unreal'.

Debt is something that you don't smell, you don't touch and you don't feel. Your student loans go directly from the government to the university account. It is a bit like smoking: pleasure now and pain later – well, perhaps.

In a Parliamentary speech made by Phil Willis on the state of financial education, he reported on what he considers to be alarming rates of public ignorance on the subject. At a moment in which \$1.3 trillion had been incurred in consumer debt (a figure above the entire GDP for Britain), 79 percent of people did not know what APR stands for, 20 percent did not understand the concept of inflation and a hilarious 50 percent did not know what '50 percent' means.[2]

This intangibility is a structural dimension of the contemporary global financial system – a system that was actually born with us, the same generation that experienced student debt for the first time. It was 1971 when the USA first ‘temporarily’ suspended the convertibility of the dollar into gold. Until that point convertibility guaranteed the value of the dollar as global reserve currency. Today, we are left with a reserve currency backed not by gold but by (American) debt. How do we pay debts if we no longer have ‘real’ money, i.e. connected to goods? According to Luca Fantacci, we simply don’t.[3] Where international commerce grew from \$2000 billion worth of transactions in 1986 to \$7000 billion in 2003, international financial markets in the same period jumped from \$40,000 billion dollars to \$800,000 billion. This means there is currently an approximate ratio of 1:100 between exchanges of concrete goods and services and exchanges of, well, money. Money is traded against other money in a spiraling, self-referential game that confounds wealth with its autistic signifier. This alchemist’s trick, however, has real consequences as it acts as a mechanism for the (re)distribution of wealth, moving value produced by those at the bottom of the financial pyramid into the hands of those at the top.

So, education is becoming a privilege. But it would be simplistic to respond by advocating state education. Our entry into the system of global finance via student debt simply confirms what Ivan Illich has always said about the function of organised schooling (as opposed to education), that it is our induction into wage relations, its hidden curriculum a rehearsal of roles in the productive chain. As Michael Aglietta has argued in his *Theory of Capitalist Regulation*, debt rests on this division of labour. While in training, we are learning to be in debt, and that being in debt means participating in the current composition of work.

For those able to attend university, the mode of production begins to mirror the speculative operations of global finance. Like theorist Paolo Virno’s service sector virtuosi, student/workers endlessly perform their self-publicity, legions of Nathan Barley-esque ‘self-facilitating media nodes’ betting that frantic networking now will pay off in the future. In this exhausting dance of likeability, only the moderately dissociated (and heavily trust-funded) can survive. And in the differential admission game played by universities, the hot product offered to the student/consumer is precisely the possibility of access to this or that hyped network: the dangling carrot of the internship scheme.

Student Debts Image3

Who Do You Want to Be Today? On Debt’s Affect

Where debt for education is an incredibly effective technology of governance, in the Foucauldian sense, the affective condition of experiencing education as a privilege rather than a right can be framed in a Nietzschean way: the debtor is in a perpetual state of guilt, and the creditor is authorised to enjoy the cruelty of the punishment.

Debt produces us in a strange temporality. It strings us along. Being in debt gives us a sense of linear time, that we are making an investment in our future, that our future will compensate us proportionately.

The tense of education has taken a grammatical leap – from the utterances of the present continuous (I am studying, I am paying off my debt), to the future perfect (I will have prepared myself for full time employment. I will have paid my debt by the time I am 40). The future now.

Students, particularly those entering into the illusory promised land of the creative industries, currently experience this temporal mash up first hand. Their education does not entitle them to a future of full time waged employment. Rather the organisational make up of student life – a combination of paid employment in the service sector, unpaid or highly flexible work in the creative sector, bank

overdrafts, government loans and ongoing educational initiatives – is likely to extend well beyond the years of formal education. Graduation marks only the additional burden of debt repayment.

This creates a class of cheap and uninterested labourers that do not have identitarian or affective investments in their paid positions and won't therefore try to unionise or complain. This condition, which has often been the historical experience of the working classes, is now extended to the middle classes. Among their ranks can be heard a splitting in such vernacular assertions of the relationship between free labour and waged employment as: 'my real work' and 'the work I do for money'.

Organising in the Red? (Because You're Worth It)

As education becomes organised around increasing levels of complexity, and working life around ever more parceled-out units of time, filled with simpler and more repetitive tasks, we are left wondering what exactly is the privilege that we purchase with student debt? Is it the opportunity to stay out of the boredom and cruelty of the working life for a bit longer?

If we were to imagine organising from the guilt, despair and panic of being in the red, perhaps we may have to start from scratch, by reformulating our desires regarding education and our expectations regarding our working and not working lives.

As Ivan Illich proposed in *The Right To Useful Unemployment*, we should seek to attain a different kind of subsistence:

The inverse of professionally certified lack, need, and poverty is modern subsistence ... the style of life that prevails in a post-industrial economy in which people have succeeded in reducing their market dependence, and have done so by protecting – by political means – a social infrastructure in which techniques and tools are used primarily to generate use-values that are unmeasured and unmeasurable by professional need-makers.[4]

Let's take it from there.

Student Debts Image2

FOOTNOTES

[1] Taken from a 'Written Answer' in response to Alan Simpson MP's question on 3 May, 2007. Available from <http://www.theyworkforyou.com>.

[2] APR means Annual Percentage Rate, an expression of the effective interest rate that will be paid on a loan, taking into account one-time fees and standardising the way the rate is expressed, i.e. the total cost of credit to the consumer, expressed as an annual percentage of the amount of credit granted.

[3] See Luca Fantacci, *Moneta: Storia di Una Istituzione Mancata*, Marsilio, 2005.

[4] Ivan Illich, *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, Marion Boyars, London, 1978

Valeria Graziano and Janna Graham <radicaldiplomacy AT kein.org> are founding members of the Committee for Radical Diplomacy. Last autumn, together with Susan Kelly, they undertook a lay research project in cities across Europe, dispatching the question 'what can we learn from free labour?' from the back of a camper van. They are currently working with a group of students and cultural

workers to develop a secret society for interns and other free labourers in London's cultural sector.
Both are Ph.D. candidates and teachers at Goldsmith's University