A Nihilist Understanding of Social War

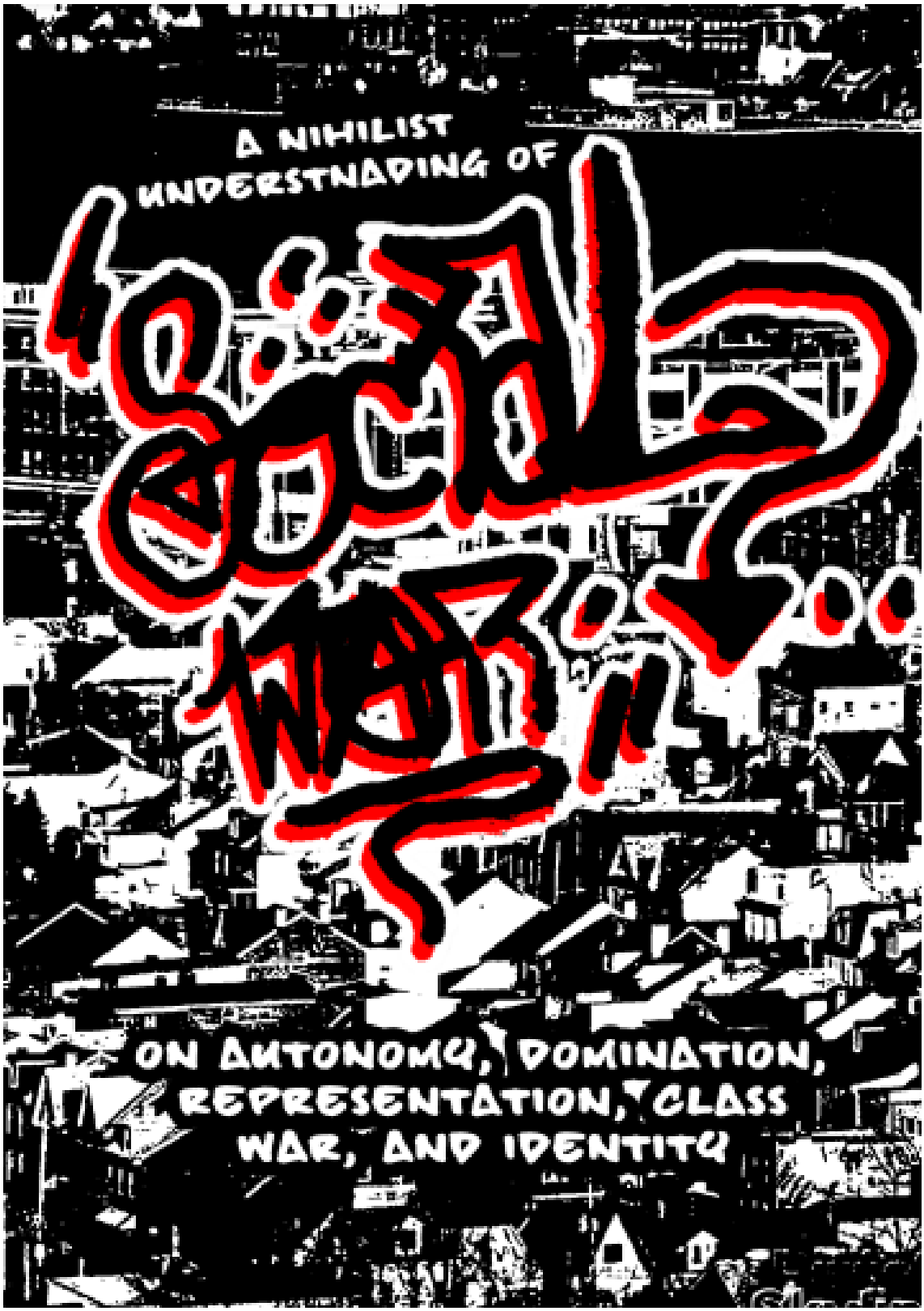
On Autonomy, Domination, Representation, Class War, and Identity

DESTROY

March 10th, 2023

Contents

Introduction 4
Rupturing the Realm of Representation 4
Identity and Class War 5
On Domination and Its Technologies 7
Techniques of Autonomy 8
Conclusion 10
References 11


A NIHILIST
UNDERSTNADING OF
ON AUTONOMY, DOMINATION,
REPRESENTATION, CLASS
WAR, AND IDENTITY

Introduction

"Politics is the continuation of war by other means." (Foucault) This war can best be understood as the social war, or the war by the state and other institutions to maintain social control, as well as the resistance to this control.

Social war is all around us. It is present in the cop cars that patrol our streets, in our schools, in the design of our cities and suburbs, and in the boundaries of what it means to be a man or a woman. To wage social war is to either exercise social control or destroy it, to govern or to be uncontrollable, or to forfeit your agency to a representative or to take direct action. Social war is all around us, we cannot choose whether we are subjected to it, but whether we choose to fight back.

In this piece, I will explore a few concepts from a nihilist understanding of social war, the realm of representation, identity and class war, domination, and autonomy. Each concept will be introduced and informed by incidents from my own life. My goal is to ground our understanding of social war in a concrete terrain of struggle as social war expresses itself in day-to-day conflict, and thus should not be divorced from reality.

Rupturing the Realm of Representation

At my elementary school, from kindergarten to third grade, we could sit with whomever we wanted to at lunch, no matter what class they were in. But in fourth grade, a new principal imposed a new rule that we could only sit with our own class of around 20 kids during lunch, preventing us from eating with our friends in other classes except for on "buddy mingle Fridays." Our grade wasn't having it. A friend of mine, Maddie, wrote a demand that we be allowed to sit with whomever we wanted to, no matter the day. We circulated the demand, garnering signatures from nearly every kid in the fourth grade, and presented the demand to the new principal, who addressed it at lunch the next day. She said she was proud of our effort and drive, but ultimately the administration decided that this is what was best for us, and she would not advocate changing it. This was the day I realized that mere demands or petitions are pointless.

In our attempt to seize back our freedoms of the lunchroom, we had fallen into the trap of representation. Instead of directly refusing to comply with these new rules, calling into question the very nature of the administration's rule over us, we further cemented our powerlessness over our own lives. Our petition was a forfeit of our agency to the principal, who we implicitly defined as a suitable and legitimate actor to make these decisions. If only we would have rejected the principal's rule and the administration's power over us, we would have been saved from the disappointment of our failed petition. We could have all just chosen to sit with whomever we wanted, making every day "buddy mingle Friday". If teachers tried to stop us, we could lash out, flipping tables, throwing food, kicking doors, and refusing to go back to class.

In fact, this is what children did in the UK just the other week when posed with a new rule that restricted the use of toilets during class time. After attempts at protesting the administration failed to achieve their demands, they ran wild through the halls, setting off fire alarms, pushing teachers, and even setting a tree ablaze. The school administration responded in kind, calling in riot police to quell the demonstrations and searching students prior to class.

This is a prime example of social war. The students are subject to control by their school administration, which locks the bathroom doors and confines students to the classroom. The students exercise their autonomy by refusing this control, making a total mess of the institution that entraps them, not only ignoring the rules but striking back against their material manifestations. By rioting, they do not make an appeal to the administration, as we did with our petition or as others do in voting. Refusing to follow the rules is an immediate assertion of one's own power to direct their life. Transforming one's self into a more autonomous, brave, and courageous individual. Identities like "student" begin to break down here. Where "student" implies passivity in learning and, at most, a limited agency in the academic realm, the rioting child can no longer be called a student. They are regaining their agency, they are becoming more human.

It is difficult to say whether these young rioters value their actions for what is immediately expressed in them or if they see themselves as activists involved in escalation from earlier, more tame protests. Their actions could indeed act as pressure to force the administration to cede to their demands. However, this framing is ultimately representational, relying on those in power to decide for us how our world works.

If we frame our struggle as an attempt to change the minds of our oppressors, we will eventually become disillusioned and tired when we cannot secure our demands or when repression increases. And in the event that we do actually secure our demands, the system of control will go back to normal, albeit a slightly different normal. If the children's rioting successfully pressured their administration to reverse the new toilet rules, the children would simply go back to class. Resuming their role as students trapped within the confines of a compulsory education system.

Best for the students to disregard any hope in their school system. Schools, as they exist today, function to smother creative and unique individuals into productive and obedient automatons. The student is taught how to center their lives around an institution, follow orders from superiors, and the appropriate norms and values of capitalist society. No amount of reform will ever reverse this function. Schools will always be a tool for domination and thus a weapon of control in the social war.

It may be impossible to ever truly abolish all schools. The capacity for the state and other systems of domination to exact force is immense, and the control these systems have over the vast majority of people's values, drives, and actions makes large-scale insurrection rare. However, to wage social war against domination is not to envision and actualize some ideal future. That is the job of the priests, both religious and political. The future must be recognized for what it is, a god obeyed at the expense of one's immediate desires (Flower Bomb). Therefore, a moment of rupture should be lived in the moment. Experienced as an exciting, empowering, fun, and transformative departure from a monotonous and submissive everyday existence. And during it, school is effectively abolished. This is the goal of those waging social war against domination. Whoever said anything about winning? Overcoming is everything (It's Still Today Here).

Identity and Class War

There is a town about a 20-minute drive away from my house where protests are held outside of the courthouse a few times a month. I've been a few times, people stand around with signs proclaiming their support or opposition to whatever policy is being contested that week. Local activists, community members, and politicians will speak through a microphone in front of the

crowd, proclaiming that action will happen and that we must vote blue in the coming election. People cheer, take part in a few chants, and then shuffle out, all about in the span of an hour or two.

I found these protests boring and meaningless. They functioned like rituals, always happening at roughly the same time and days of the week, always on the same lawn in front of an empty courthouse. I only showed up to distribute anarchist zines and stickers to the bored protesters in hopes of pushing them in a more radical direction. While I appreciated the opportunity to distribute my propaganda, I was deeply frustrated with the handful of leftist organizations who put on these protests. They sapped youthful energy away from direct forms of action and made kids reliant on hierarchical forms of organizing. It was all just another form of social control but under the banner of liberation. I would soon learn that it wasn't just these few local leftist organizations that were like this, but the entire Left, even the supposedly radical fringes.

These protesters, along with most of the Left, are preoccupied with the concept of class war, which pits the proletariat (those who work to survive) against the bourgeois (those who subsist off of profits) for control over the means of production (factories, farms, workplaces, etc.). This framing reduces individuals to a class identity that supposedly determines their self-interest. Class war treats humans as purely economic actors, concerned with getting the most value out of their labor and improving their working conditions. The resolution of class war is the communal ownership over the means of production, a seizing of capital and the nation-state in order to impose the interests of the "worker". This ideology reconstitutes some social institutions, but preserves them, state, schools, prisons, and work. A system of self-managed misery replaces the capitalist one, complete with all the same forms of domination.

In the class war, identity is a central concept from which the proletariat is meant to rally around and show solidarity through. Leftists will proudly identify themselves as "workers" and attempt to organize other "workers". However, most people don't think of themselves as "workers". They see work as something they have to do to survive, not as something that gives their life meaning and value. And with the heightened precariousness and impermanence of jobs today, this is increasingly true.

By accepting the identities given to us by those asserting social control, we reinforce that social control.Those in power pigeonhole us into identities to control our everyday social scripts as well our life trajectory. Workers go to work and produce under the direction of a manager. Students go to school and passively learn under the supervision of a teacher. Women reproduce future workers, perform unpaid domestic labor, and act as sexual objects for men. Men reproduce the patriarchy and act as mini-dictators of their nuclear families. Each identity limits the scope of possible actions an individual can take as those asserting social control make individuals base their personal worth on how well they perform their identity. To bring about radical change, these identities must be discarded. The only identities worth preserving are those that social control considers deviant (criminal, queer, autistic, insane), as the embodiment of these identities combats social order.

The Left uses these identities to build mass – more bodies at the protest, more signatures on the petition, and more members in the organization. They believe that given enough mass, they can finally combat the capitalist superstructure and take control over the means of production. This drive towards quantitative growth eclipses all other values and drives of the leftist organization, sacrificing effective and provocative strategies over concerns over "optics". Members are told to disregard their passions and engage in repetitive and monotonous work in order to secure

some ideal socialist future. This makes the leftist organization no different from religion, which also preaches against indulgences in favor of repetitive prayer and worship to achieve some membership in a non-existent utopia.

This is where the organization of class war and social war differ greatly. Those engaged in class war form herds, where conformity and mass are the functions of the group. Members of herds are encouraged (or even required) to follow the group's norms, internalize its values, and perform its patterns of action. In return, members are rewarded with the warm comfort of acceptance and an illusion of some future. Herds tend towards domination of their members and those in the out-group.

Those engaged in social war form packs, where an increase in each member's power is prioritized. Packs come together because of a shared interest in supporting each other's individual and collective projects as well as feelings of love and trust. Packs empower individuals to act for themselves with the added benefit of support from others. No group is purely a pack or a herd, but some mix of the two. However, by framing our insurgency in the social war rather than the class war, we will tend to make packs rather than herds.

On Domination and Its Technologies

Last semester at the University of Pittsburgh a student was raped in the stairwell of our most iconic building, the Cathedral of Learning. A crime report was emailed to every student and faculty member detailing the incident along with a short description of the perpetrator. Shortly thereafter, a change.org petition went up and was spread on social media, calling for more cameras and police to be stationed across the university in order to combat sexual assault. The petition also called for a stand-in protest outside the Cathedral the next day. The petition garnered more than six thousand signatures and the protest was attended by about one hundred students.

Not every student agreed with this petition. Many pointed out how police do not make them feel safer, and that they do not trust them to deal with cases involving sexual assault. Others pointed out how the installation of surveillance cameras is just mere security theater, as even with these tools police rarely catch the perpetrators of sexual assault, and the reality of sexual assault is that it often happens far from the watch of cameras, at house parties, and at bars. However, the university gladly took this opportunity to increase police presence and install dozens of new cameras. This is an example of the university using concern over public safety to increase its technologies of domination, as the state often does.

But what is domination? Domination is an asymmetrical and fixed power relation, where individuals are repeatedly assigned to the same roles. Every social relation is a power relation to some extent. But it is only domination if there is a power imbalance that cannot simply be shifted or reversed, unlike the often dynamic nature of relationships of love or comradery. Domination sets the world a certain way according to the will of certain people. Domination can happen at a very small scale between two people, and it can also be systemized through the use of institutions with police forces and judiciary systems. These are systems of domination, which create entire cultures with norms, values, and desires that uphold them, along with technologies of domination that maintain and expand domination.

Surveillance is just one of these technologies. Wherever it is deployed, the possibility of being watched, and therefore judged and apprehended, is introduced. Never mind that this technology

can never be omnipresent or fully weaponized against resistance. Still, surveillance presents a deterrent effect to those desiring to act outside of the rules of the dominant social order. Thus, those in power reduce the scope of possible actions. In fact, much of social war is altering the scope of possible action. Installing cameras, putting up barbed wire fences, policing, and schooling are all limits put on the range of actions individuals can reasonably take, either through direct material consequences, physical or social obstacles, or the manipulation of an individual's desires and values. To blind a surveillance camera, cut a hole through a fence, deflate the tires of a police cruiser, or disrupt class is to expand the scope of possible action. Individuals are no longer burdened by technologies of domination to some extent and can pursue desires that lie outside of dominant norms and laws.

The prospect of abolishing, subverting, or disrupting these technologies of domination is frightening for many. The systems of domination have convinced the populace that it is in their best interest to be subjected to these technologies. Police are here to protect from crime. The military protects us from foreign invaders. Surveillance monitors those who break the law. Schools teach us the necessary knowledge for life. Consumer capitalism provides us with all the joys of life. Regardless of whether or not a technology of domination benefits an individual (and they usually only benefit a certain subset of the populace), it will always strengthen domination itself and, in turn, make those subject to it less powerful and more reliant on these systems.

The students who supported the petition to increase cameras and policing at the University of Pittsburgh strengthened the idea that we should rely on technologies of domination to keep us safe when really their function is to control. It is true that sexual assault is a serious problem and a rape culture exists on campus. But to put hope in the university to solve this problem is to put hope in the same patriarchal system that makes men feel like they can abuse women. Instead of putting hope in a system of domination to reduce its oppression, we ought to put hope in ourselves to create space and time where we can escape this oppression and attack its roots.

Students across many campuses have taken it upon themselves to open up DIY venues in their basements and living rooms. In my experience, these spaces almost always exhibit an anti-misogynistic ethos where oppressive behaviors are called-out and dealt with accordingly. These venues are a space where people can escape the effects of certain types of domination, thus they can be considered a tool in the social war against domination. However, it is not enough to create spaces where we can experiment with non-hierarchical social relations, we must also attack the old oppressive ones, as one can never fully escape them. Some have already begun by vandalizing frat houses where rape occurs regularly and by physically attacking persistent abusers. These attacks have been mostly isolated incidents, but in each case they have increased the power of those on the attack, making them a force against domination in the social war.

Techniques of Autonomy

It was the beginning of the pandemic, I was more than halfway through my sophomore year of high school and school was asynchronous. Each day we were given about an hour of busy work to do on our computer, then we were pretty much free for the rest of the day. During this time, my friend and I did what we always did, go to the margins of the suburbs to the few remaining patches of land in our town that have not been cleared, paved, and mowed, the wooded areas, the creeks, and the overgrown fields. These places were even more important to us now. Without

them, we would have been stuck at home with our parents, who were working from home. This meant being under near-constant adult supervision all day! We sought to escape, not only from our parent's supervision but also from the monotony of our housing developments, where every inch of the environment has been designed, regulated, and maintained. An environment almost completely shaped by forces far above us.

Every day we hung out between a few different spots reachable by bike. One of these spots was a patch of woods just a short bike ride from our houses. It was a convenient spot to get away from home and to be in a bit of nature. But we were not content with just visiting the park and walking around in it like the township intended. We wanted our own private space in the woods, somewhere we could get out of the sun, sit down, and have a bit of privacy. So, we set to work on building the "shack".

It was a modest vision. Just a little room about the size of a storage closet. We cleared out the brush in a brambly part of the woods a bit off the trail and began constructing walls. We used fallen tree limbs and scavenged tree fencing and posts – left in the park months ago from some tree-planting project – to build the walls and the roof. We thatched the structure with straw-like grass that grew along the trails, built a stone floor, and finished the structure off with a twine-hinged door. Two logs were placed inside as seats, and in a matter of two or three weeks, the shack was finished. We visited it often, brought friends there, and used it as a display room for our stolen construction signs and yard signs. It was a space completely of our own creation. The shack reflected our initiatives, desires, and capacities. There, we could live and shape our social relations without the influence of parents, teachers, cops, neighbors, and our manufactured neighborhoods.

We had taken space considered to be the township's property and had made it our own. We took what was meant to be experienced in a limited and passive way, much like a commodity, and asserted our own will over it. This is an opening of space outside of the structures of domination. Instead of us occupying the spaces which were under the dominion of some adult figure and influenced by the dullness that often characterizes domination, we were able to occupy a space where we decided the possible scope of our actions and the constitution of our surroundings. We had established a space where we could exercise more agency and avoid the conformism and passivity of suburban life. The shack was a resistance to the forces of domination and a technique for increasing our autonomy, thus we were engaged in social war.

Autonomy is on the opposing side of domination in the social war. Domination can never be total, there will always be resistance and crevices where it is not as strongly felt. Wherever individuals can act towards their own desires without the constraints of domination, either as an obstacle or as ideology, there is autonomy. To wage social war against domination is to exercise autonomy. And just like domination, there are a variety of tools to increase and spread autonomy. We will call these the techniques of autonomy.

Just as a technology of domination attempts to set the world a certain way and narrows the scope of possible action, a technique of autonomy allows or seduces others into making the world as they see fit, opening up the scope of possible action. Some techniques of autonomy include (but are certainly not limited to) the reclamation and seizing of space, attack and sabotage aimed at the technologies of domination and the individuals behind them, expropriation, the establishment of infoshops, community defense, legal support, and vandalism. All of these techniques allow their practitioners to regain lost agency and act as forms of propaganda.

A type of vandalism is the practice of wheat pasting, or affixing posters to surfaces using a wheat-based glue. This practice is very effective in getting a message out or announcing some type of event. It is faster than taping up posters and generally stays up longer too. It increases the agency of the wheat paster by increasing the number of people they can communicate with, thus giving them more power over their social environment. The posters also potentially damage the surface that they are affixed to as they can be difficult to remove and distract from advertisements, attacking structures of domination both physically and ideologically.

A technique of autonomy does not only affect its practitioner and the structures of domination, it also affects those who come into contact with it. The wheatpaste posters are in themselves a demonstration of the possibility of acting for yourself, each poster an invitation to the passerby, "you can do this too!" However, it is important to note that this technique can just as easily be used for domination if its messaging supports conformity and submission to an institution or ideology.

The shack also functioned as an invitation for autonomy. Friends who visited were inspired to help with its construction and to build later shacks. Younger kids who found the shack left notes, snacks, and stolen signs of their own. It was a space – albeit a small one – for creative self-determination, and it spread to everyone who visited. But now the shack is gone. Replaced by a single orange cone, only the stone floor remaining. The trees obscuring the shack from view lost their leaves in the wintertime, making the shack visible from the trail. I can only assume the parks and recreation department came by and threw away the whole structure, probably at the request of a "good citizen".

The destruction or subsumption of reclaimed or autonomous space is nothing new. In fact, it is the very process by which a state gains territory, known as accumulation by dispossession or primitive accumulation. This process highlights the need for a combination of techniques of autonomy. One can not only reclaim space, one must also defend it and attack the structures of domination that wish to destroy or subsume it. Likewise, one cannot only attack domination, one must also create and tap into support structures to retreat to and heal from. Remember, there is no full escape from domination, it must always be actively combated.

When these techniques of autonomy are combined meaningfully, given direction by one's desires, and subject to continuous reflection and critique, they become projects. A projectual approach transforms our misfortunes into challenges, obstacles to be overcome through conscious planning and action. It is a way to become an active force in your life rather than passively accepting the conditions imposed by domination. However, a project must always be led by passion, lest it become yet another repetitive chore like work. A project should weave your life into others who share your passions, and transform your life as you develop it. A projectual life is one at the frontlines of social war, striking at domination with passion, joy, and effective resistance.

Conclusion

Social war is the conflict between the structures of domination and the forces of autonomy. It is both the state's repression and our resistance, and the structuring of our lives and the disintegration of that structure. To engage in social warfare is to increase your individual and collective power immediately, bypassing representation in favor of direct action. Social war transcends class war and the Left, encouraging us to organize in packs rather than herds. It is a constant

battle for what constitutes the scope of possible actions, each side armed with either the technologies of domination or the techniques of autonomy.

Most of all, engaging in the social war against domination and for autonomy is a transformative and empowering life experience. It is a realization that we no longer have to be passive subjects in our own lives. We can actively choose our desires and pursue them to their fullest extent, attacking the structures of domination that stand in their way. To wage social war is to be unapologetically yourself – to live now and to live free.

References

Anonymous. "At Daggers Drawn With The Existent, its Defenders and its False Critics." Translated by Jean Weir, Elephant Editions, 2001.

"The BASTARD Chronicles - social war." Ardent Press, 2014.

Curious George Brigade. "Anarchy in the Age of Dinosaurs." Combustion Books, 2012.

Flower Bomb. "No Hope, No Future: Let the Adventures Begin!" Warzone Distro, 2019

"Insurgencies - A Journal on Insurgent Strategy." The Institute for the Study of Insurgent Warfare, 2014.

It's Still Today Here. Directed by Anonymous, accessed on Anarchy.Tube, 2022.

Shahin. "Nietzche and Anarchy." Elephant Editions, 2016.

Wolfi Landstreicher. "Against the Logic of Submission." 2005.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



DESTROY
A Nihilist Understanding of Social War
On Autonomy, Domination, Representation, Class War, and Identity
March 10th, 2023

Retrieved on March 30th, 2023 from https://upittanarchy.org/zine-files/socialwar.pdf

theanarchistlibrary.org