04 2016

From cooperation to black operation

A Conversation with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten on The Undercommons

Stefano Harney / Fred Moten

Transversal Texts*: Of course, the concepts you have invented, unsettled, shifted, dislocated in* The Undercommons *are not meant to create a system in any traditional sense. But there is nevertheless a certain affinity, appositionality, proximity of concepts such as study, planning, policy, queer debt, logisticality, general antagonism, unsettling, the shipped, and so on. Instead of a system, would it be helpful to think rather of a socio-geology of these concepts, and to ask* where *they are, especially when they are connected? Where is the surround? Around the forts, in the Panthers' planning, and where else? Could it be that it is everywhere, even in surrounded rectors' offices and command bridges and prison towers? Where (and when) is the hold? Is it the one of the slave ships of the Black Atlantic, and/or is it everywhere something is being held by governance and policy?*
Stefano Harney / Fred Moten: These concepts emerge from a terrain of struggle. That terrain was unsettled long before we fled to it. And that struggle was planned long before we got there, long before we got to the kitchen table, long before we got to stand around the stove, or we were invited sit on the steps, or to jump up in the fete. Black women thought and fought this struggle and led us into the land we continuously unoccupy with our hospitality. The black radical tradition is where these concepts came from, and very specifically black radical women then and now. And this is so because black women have been for so long theorizing and planning what we have called the undercommons as the place where you can no longer just be yourself and never were. Their planning is our queer debt, our black debt, our trans debt, which is of course not ours.

The hold is different. It is the specificity in the general deployment of the black radical tradition, and although different accounts of blackness may change the specificity of the hold, they cannot change the hold's specificity. As such it cannot operate like the other concepts in the book, but must be constantly withdrawn if the general antagonism of our history in the present is not to be mere agonism. At the same time, and this is a difficult kind of philosophical thing, that specificity, which is irreducible, is also irreducible in, say, the modern world system, because the hold of the ship is the condition of possibility of that system. Every place held by governance and policy bears the weight/trace of that specificity even if it can't be said to be that specificity.

Along that socio-geological line, where is the undercommons, where is the under in undercommons, is it the mole, the underground, the water vein, is it under and beyond like the Latin sub? Is it implicitly antagonizing or problematizing or subverting the concept of the common(s)? As form of knowledge it (is it they or it?) seems to be quite different from what has been discussed as common(s), not general, but in proximity to the general antagonism, knowledge emerging in governance, but not in the dichotomy of victims and subjects, not on governance's radar, but governance is always in search of it, though it emerges before governance. As form of subjectivation, as survival, as poetry, as affection, as connecting, not relating, potential of resistance, not critique, abstract line, not in line, it is everywhere. Is it everywhere?
When we are asked about the undercommons this way we sometimes say that we are more interested in the undercommons of the concept than in the concept of the undercommons. This is to say that it is not only

important for the undercommons to remain an improper term, an inappropriate term, an unfinished term, but it is also important for the term to join a disallowed terminology in general, to resist the terms of debate or the terms of service, to refuse the terms of a contract or the terms of a settlement. It's just like with credit and debt. There are terms of credit but not terms of debt, not bad debt anyway, not the kind we try to get into. When we study our debts, the term never ends.

But it may be that the undercommons is less a set of common capacities or an imagined common space - as the term common(s) often denotes – and therefore less about collective living than about collected being, or better still, being that is both collected and stranded together, both stolen and given away, not enough but already good and plenty; or maybe collective living in uncollected, disheveled, dispersed being. Maybe the question concerning "where" belies or deflects or obscures a radical non-locality, a general displacement, the field of the feel, a social disruption of ontology, or at least of already existing modern ontology's commitment to a certain classical notion of space/time.

11 years after the text on the university and the undercommons was published in Social Text*, most of it still sounds to come from today's factories of knowledge. Still, what are your thoughts on the current state of the university, and new recipes for its desertion? Especially as you remain inside, working and struggling in this field…*

Here we could risk a bit of philology on this piece. Our work started in friendship and always already in the study of friendship. The university came to block our ability to study, which is to say cultivate friendship generally. At first we wrote several critical texts, not included in the book, in the mode of those who expect something from institutions, even if that expectation is about their transformation. But even as we were writing the 'University and the Undercommons' essay, we came to see something clearer. And it was this: the modern university is nothing other than a ministry of information during wartime. It spews out information in support of a killing machine in a war that Europeans and Americans have tried to globalize for five centuries. This war is called, variously, the public, the economy, or just 'man.' It is a war on the human, and other living things, and the earth, primarily prosecuted in the name of the human, the improvement of the human, the usufruct of man and nature.

Now, firstly, a ministry of information in wartime pumps out information in the form of lies, of misinformation. This is largely the function of the social sciences today. But secondly, a ministry of information in wartime also pumps out propaganda for 'its own side.' This is, of course, the function of the humanities. The sciences for their part may be employed in either of these functions, or folded directly and silently into the killing machine itself. Now what you do with a ministry of information during wartime is that you try to sabotage that information. And we have a word for the sabotage of information, and that word is study. But this is to say that study, insofar as it comes first, is what the ministry of information has always been trying to regulate—simultaneously to accumulate and destroy. So you try to study, where to study, to be collected and stranded in study, in friendship, not, in the first place, to try to sabotage information; rather we might say study sabotages information precisely because that it is not its aim. Study is not a critique of information. In fact, study is aimless, shiftless. Study is a drifting hobo camp of sharecroppers with untimely dreams of cooperative farms, dreams that never settle, as, for instance, Christopher Taylor reads CLR James's writings on sharecroppers. The university - the ministry of information – can be sabotaged, but it cannot be transformed. Study is not transformational. It is deformational, subformational, formless formation.

Could you tell us about the process of producing these texts? Academic cooperation in research and writing seems to have become a must, but your practice is a specific and very different case, not the least because of the overlapping poetic and theoretical styles and languages, up to the point where it is no longer possible to distinguish borders. Is your cooperation purely affirmative or are there ways to cope with disagreement, negation, particular antagonisms? What

about the very specific disciplinary specificities, for example, when it comes to technical terms from economics or black aesthetics? Is there a practice of discussing dark sentences, if there are any? How do you work together with respect to conceptual inventions, and the sound and rhythm of the texts, when music and poetry are not only content, but obviously also a formal aspect?

What if we thought of cooperation as the breakdown of being together? What if cooperation is an emergency measure taken to curb the emergence of the individual capable of cooperation? Cooperation would then be the self-defense of friendship, its violent moment. Cooperation might then indeed include an affirmative or dissensual communication. This violent singling out in communication, this cooperation, may sometimes be necessary (just) as self-defense as theorised by revolutionaries. But it is just as surely a deviation, distraction, and subtraction from being together. Poetry is where dissensus and affirmation blur. In defense of undercommon difference we wanted to make a difference engine, a generative machine, that would also be a mechanism of and for attunement, in the tradition of making what you say sound like something. We have been interested in the transition from cooperation to black operation. Over and beyond more of the same, which is cool, what might a dark sentence generate if a gathering forms around it? We were definitely thinking about that!

Hapticality, love, the interiority of sentiment. This seems to be a different tone than that of and about panthers, criminality, bad debt, black debt, surround that plays with the monstrosity of resistance, be it micro or mouselike. Have you become philosophers of the feel meanwhile, and what does that mean for a(n affirmative?) theory that dismisses critique as an operation within the state apparatus? What about possibly being (mis)interpreted as hippies, romanticists, or even idealists?

Of course you can feel all kinds of things. But also all kinds of things can feel. Hapticality might be a way of trying to say the history of feeling has been dominated by what we can feel, but a counter-history has been necessarily concerned with what things feel. Given how brutal is the condition of this counter-history, as Hortense Spillers narrates it so chillingly in her account of what she called, long before us, empathy, it is unlikely we could ever forget what it feels like.

But it may also be the case that everything we do is critique, if critique means suspicion of what is given to us in this war, and on the other hand critique may be nothing we do if critique means system building. Or in other words maybe there is nothing for a resistance to become. Take the phrase you mention, interiority of sentiment, this is something we love, and by loving it we are making a critique since we are told sentiment has no interiority. It is not that the critique is not there. The thing is, we just don't care about the critique. Meanwhile, all the while, the Panthers were in love.

In May 2015, the activist Ada Colau became mayor of Barcelona, Barcelona en Comú won the elections, as a critical as well as affective assemblage coming out of the molecular practice of neighborhood assemblies, platforms against evictions and micropolitical efforts deriving from decades of struggles against precarization, gentrification, and the effects of the subprime crisis. What about using your concept of prophetic organization for these practices of reterritorialization in Spain?

You can understand that we would resist the idea of having our (attitudes towards) concepts applied and tested, as if this were the only form of use for them. It would be more interesting to learn of an experiment with or through a concept, where the concept and experiment come into the world together, not one chasing the other and trying to settle it. I think you would agree with us that this would be a good use of the concept communism, for instance, or human being, as Sylvia Wynter noted. Of course, from the black radical tradition, or from indigenous militancy, or Third World feminism, indeed any number of such struggles and

bodies of theory, what we await still is some sign - not of solidarity now that Europeans face en mass homelessness and precarity – but a sign that Europe might enjoy a teachable moment, an openness to ways of thinking and feeling that are focused on (re)creating life from the ruins of homelessness and precarity and, ultimately, Europeanness. There is no such sign yet. In the meantime, we offer our solidarity.