

## **What will we resort to when capitalism is over?**

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“. . . indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To

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grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary. [Refuse of History].”

- Walter Benjamin. Convolute N2, 6 of *The Arcades Project*

1.

What *should* "Las Vegas" be like?

2.

At a cheap buffet off of the strip and north of downtown, a busy sixty-something waitress stopped to ask why such young people were even there. I told her about the conference we were here for and she said, “Well you must know a whole lot about this crazy planet we are all living on.”

She implored us to fix the world’s problems, and also to tell all the people at the conference to come and spend their money at the buffet.

3.

This was the first time I remember entering a convention center and feeling comforted by its familiar vacuousness. Quiet, calm, uncanny. Excessive expansive emptiness. A welcome respite from the casinos on the strip. You could walk minutes without being subjected to a single spectacle.

4.

From my tour guide:

“There was a bomb threat at the Bellagio last night. But they didn’t even get the millionaires out of bed, because it wasn’t a very good bomb threat.”

5.

Circus Circus (where most of us stayed) was built 30 years before the Bellagio, in 1968. One can’t help but feel as though it was designed as a dungeon. It is dark, with low ceilings and long winding corridors meant to disorient. These are meant to trap visitors who are presumed always to be trying to flee the casino and escape to the light of day. Its space is reflective of industrial capital and extractive industries - dark and heavy material productions, mining in particular. Circus Circus is a space designed to extract bets from those who’ve been captured.

The Bellagio was built in 1998. The space produced in the Bellagio is airy with huge ceilings, a pantheon of lights and large open walkways that are clearly distinguishable – there is no getting lost there. The Bellagio reflects a neoliberal, financialized imaginary. Moreover, unlike Circus Circus, the Bellagio was devoid of children in the gambling areas. Gamblers, as with laborers, should never be so encumbered. The Bellagio is a space designed for self-disciplined bodies – those that have already internalized a gambling subjectivity; those who are already Las Vegas before coming to Las Vegas.

6.

The early casinos were built with millions from Teamster money. Lately, Vegas has been one of the fastest-unionizing towns. Hot shops in the post-industrial era; hotels, restaurants, and casinos can't just set up shop elsewhere when labor exerts its collective strength. If the syndicalist vision saw unions as the new world being constructed in the shell of the old, as proof that society could be run without the bosses, has this prefigurative vision of a new social order lost some of its meaning in the era of service unions? Will there be card dealers, sex workers and bed makers under decentralized socialism?

7.

I had the flu and the locals told me to go to the hospital that was 'closer'. Of course I mapped it and chose the hospital that was actually closer. But really they were trying to tell me not to go to the one where I ended up, where the majority of emergency room patients are meth addicts. I got 'fast-tracked' through; I felt bad making it sound like I had pain at all, and the E.R. nurse said it was the first time in weeks he had not been lied to. The doctor looked in my ears, prescribed any antibiotic I wanted, and I left.

8.

A good friend of mine lives in Vegas. She picked me up at the airport. The drive out to her house was about nine miles. 4,000 square foot houses in fancy, new subdivisions are squeezed onto their lots with little more than a stifling breezeway between them. "When we moved here our house was right next to the desert," she said. "Now, the city extends out another mile or two."

9.

I hadn't been to downtown Vegas for years. I think my mom would say, "They really fixed that place up."

10.

The city is spectacularly not about preservation or re-investment. The imploding of 'historic' casinos is a regular New Year's Eve firework display.

11.

One night we sat at a large round table at a large second floor Italian chain restaurant looking out over the Encore and the Wynn. We were chatting with our waiter and he told us that his wife worked at the Wynn. Upon the opening of the Encore, she and all of the other servers and dealers were told that they would no longer be full-time employees; that they would no longer have benefits. Steve Wynn shared the news himself, gesturing towards the door saying, "That's where you can go if you don't like it." We spent some time at the Wynn. Some of us even stayed there. It was, after all, the hot spot on the strip. For now.

12.

There were men and women on the street peddling flesh. They wore shirts that said things like, "Have a Girl Delivered, anywhere, in ten minutes or less." They lined the strip,

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clicking the cards in their hand to catch the attention of passersby. Initially appalled, I was then struck by the efficiency of their advertised service. Ten minutes or less, anywhere? In Brooklyn we have car services that promise the same. I wondered if the girls purchased are considered to be as interchangeable and forgettable as the cars that work the New York City streets.

13.

We'd been camping for two days in the wilds of Zion National Park. We saw few people those two days, and fewer signs still of human presence. We packed ziplock bags so that we could seal our used toilette paper in them and carry it out with us when we left. We were not messing with the pristine nature of this desert world. We pitched tents at a smooth sandy site on a dry creek bed and set about making dinner. We were hungry, and it was a feast: pasta with a sauce of sun dried tomatoes, wild mushrooms, zucchini and tinned sardines, topped with cheese. We had one tiny camp stove and our cooking pots were too small, we had to filter our cooking water by hand and clean our pots by the light of one headlamp in the pitch black, but that was some fine food. After eating, we laid out in our sleeping bags and stared up at the stars.

Next day we hiked out. We had been regaled with tales of endless Vegas buffets. But the funny is that you can't actually find food there. You can purchase a meal, served to you, but not the raw elements of food that you might recombine or cook in order to produce your own delicious and nutritious meal. Nor is it easy to find an implement – such as a stove – to assist in this task. To eat is to be served, there is no other option.

We attempted to use our camp stove in our hotel room, but our window wouldn't open, and without ventilation, we deemed this unwise. At Walgreen's we found a hot pot for ten dollars. We boiled water to make oatmeal and tea every morning with this hot pot. We did our cooking in the bathroom, surrounded by damp towels and the detritus of four people's toiletries.

One night, desperate for a hot dinner that we made ourselves, we bought two packs of Pad Thai and a plastic container of pre-cut vegetables (again at Walgreen's, the closest thing to a grocery we could find). Crouched over the bathroom sink, we boiled the Pad Thai noodles in the hot pot, sprinkled the little packet of bright orange spices over the noodles, and mixed in the vegetables that we'd boiled in the pasta water. We settled onto our respective beds and tried to watch cable TV while eating our meal. It was a disgusting mush. I ate it out of stubborn pride. Later I cleaned the greasy pot with the hotel hand soap in the bathroom sink, little fragments of vegetable escaping down the drain. The remaining pre-cut vegetables sat in their plastic case all week next to the hair dryer and rotted.

14.

Food desert

15.

A sparkly sweet chorus kept repeating on endless loop in that plaza with the giant metal sail over it. “The whole city is all hooks. Only hooks,” one of us observed. Many of the hooks were revolting, but many were also appealing: strangers in the shuttle from the airport striking up an easy conversation; the Wynn glinting smoothly at dusk, cold and warm at once; strolling with a drink in the open air; Treasure Island fireballs and dancing Bellagio fountains; feeling people's attention concentrate on me when my slot machine paid off. Are the hooks catching onto something at our human core, or snagging some wretched capitalist excrescence that has built up in our psyches over years? Maybe capitalism is like the Hoover dam, blocking the flow of human life, concentrating our energy and work, diverting us in our leisure up into strange backwaters like the canyon fingers of Lake Mead.

16.

I felt a vibe at the conference like we were there to critique Vegas as if it were a world apart from our ‘good’ lives.

17.

Paris, Venice and Caesar's, but no Mumbai, Tenochtitlan, Cleopatra's. There is the Luxor, for now, but I guess they are getting rid of the Egyptian theme. My tour guide explained: “Kid's don't care about history. All they care about is getting drunk and having fun.”

18.

On a visit to Hoover Dam, I was struck not only by the magnitude of the labor embedded in the concrete, but also by the art deco details, the utopian freezes, and the terrazzo floors. One artist made a terrace of angels dedicated to the spirit of progress. He viewed the dam as “a monument to collective genius exerting itself in community efforts around a common need or ideal.”

There is a memorial to the 96 men who lost their lives in the building of the damn. “THEY DIED TO MAKE THE DESSERT BLOOM,” it says in bold, stylized letters. I wonder if The Strip is what they had in mind.

Even if it was never true, I am haunted by all these reminders of the vastly different social imagination of value that might have possessed the space produced with the dam.

19.

At the edges of the city, after mile after mile of walled subdivisions, strip malls, and gated communities, there at the far corner of the last intersection in the city sun-bleached wood beams glimmer. Skeletons of a future's death, unable to rot in the high desert's climate of eternal preservation.

20.

Maybe, after the revolution, there would still be a Vegas, of kind. Maybe we would still build monuments to fun and entertainment.

But what would they look like?

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21. (Blackjack!)

It's not that we have no collective projects, but that we so reliably fail to recognize them as such. After the conference, one of our peers commented that much of the work she presented was made of ideas and suggestions that had come from conversations and readings with others: "I felt almost like I was lying in performing the paper as 'mine'." Meanwhile we all paid our registration and membership fees. A few people went camping and brought their own food, but most of us were dependent on precarious and largely invisible labor to meet our basic needs. So much visibly invisible work all around us; if we cited it all, who or what would be left of *authority*?

Is this the living history of our "collective genius"?