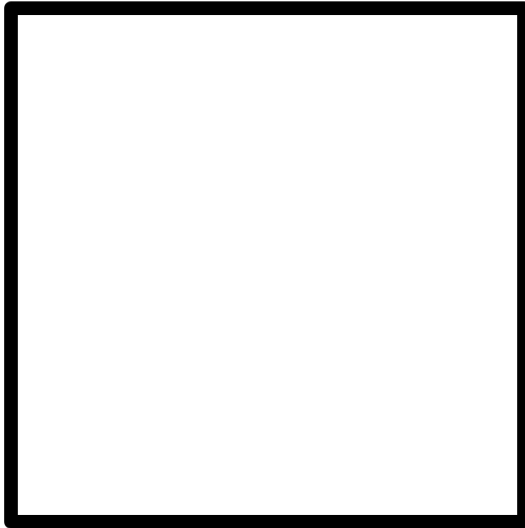


+Pure

Negativity+



+An extract from the Baeden Universe+

The following text is an extract from the first volume of the Journal Baeden (Baeden 1 a Journal of Queer Nihilism) on the topic of what they and other Queer Nihilists/Queer Insurgent theorists have termed interchangeably pure negativity/negation, absolute negativity/negation, radical negativity/negation, and in some cases (e.g. Hostis Volume 1) absolute hostility. We created this mini zine as we feel that the content is useful for a more in-depth understanding of a term used in many writings from queer insurgent/nihilist trajectories and is one of the more in-depth explorations of said concept.

A full version of this volume and others from the Baeden universe can be found at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/baedan-baedan>

## The Anti-Social Turn.

No Future, Edelman's magnum opus of queer negativity, offers a series of crucial lessons for baedlings; that is, for those of us whose queerness means the refusal of society and not any negotiation with or within it. In our reading and use—or abuse—of Edelman's singular work, we have no choice but to take him to task for his academic form, his position within institutionalized queer theory, and the separation between his theory and practice. His project fails in that it locates queer negativity within various cultural productions—literature, film—and yet never works to unveil this negation in the context of lived revolt or of active struggle against the society he purports to oppose.

In exploring No Future, we insist on expropriating it from the ivory tower of theory and using it as a tool for our life projects. Against the safe interpretations offered by the academy and its theorists, we embark on an elaboration of queer negativity that means nothing less than the destruction of the civilized world.

Judith/Jack Halberstam, another popular queer theorist, reads the significance of Edelman's text in regard to what they term the anti-social project, but also experiences it as lacking:

Edelman's polemic opens the door to a ferocious articulation of negativity (“fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop”) but, ultimately, he does not fuck the law, big or little L, he succumbs to the law of grammar, the law of logic, the law of abstraction, the law of apolitical formalism, the law of Genres...

Elsewhere, Halberstam more explicitly frames their particular interest as follows: “I want to engage critically with Edelman’s project here in order to argue for a more explicitly political framing of the anti-social project.”

Halberstam’s aim is like ours, in a way. Edelman’s ferocious negativity remains caught within the web of formal knowledge and domination that is the academy. Trapped within these laws—logic, abstraction, formalism—Edelman’s theory, as it stands, can only serve to be a somewhat more naughty articulation of the law of the social order itself. And yet Halberstam’s alternative project fails in the same way. We don’t desire a more explicitly political framing of the anti-social project, when the logic of politics itself can only really offer us more abstraction, more formalism, more of the same. For us, queer theory is only important to the extent that we make it a tool or a weapon for our projects. But in this we cannot look to politics, which is the science of organizing and representing society. Instead we have to exceed Edelman’s project, discarding his apolitics in favor of an explosive anti-politics.

If Edelman opened a door, as Halberstam argues, for an anti-social queer project, then let’s cross through the threshold and let’s set the whole house on fire while we’re at it. What follows is a close reading and overthrowing of *No Future*. These are the vital elements of the theory without the baggage of the academy, the crucial points of the text sharpened into weapons for anti-social projects.



-Fig I: Obligatory photo of a Car on Fire-

# Pure Negativity

Edelman's project, insofar as we can imagine it as a starting point, is intriguing because for him queerness is fundamentally negative. Whether in the form of gay assimilation, identity politics, or 'radical queer' subculture, any contemporary engagement with queerness must reckon with decades of capitalist integration into society and its state. These varying forms are joined together through positive queer identity as a shared content. If we read Edelman with a great sense of catharsis, it is because his conception of negative queerness allows us to discard all the identitarian baggage which accompanies queerness.

This move against a positive queer projects is a crucial one; it illustrates one truth about capital. Capital is predicated on accumulating value—any value—for its own self-reproduction. Capital is in a constant process of revolt against itself. Subjects which were once marginalized or annihilated by the civilized order are absorbed into its circuitry, positions that could mark an outside are moved inward. There is no positive queerness that isn't already a site of society's reproduction. The positivist institutions of queerness—its dance parties, community projects, activist groups, social networks, fashion, literature, art, festivals—form the material structure of civilization. Whatever antagonism or difference these forms possess is thoroughly re-made in capital's image; all value extracted, all danger neutralized. To our horror, queerness becomes the avant-garde of marketplaces and the dynamic lifeblood of the advanced postmodern economy.

This analysis of positivism is not particular to queerness. One can as easily point to any number of anarchist projects and expose the ways in which they reproduce the very alienation they aim to overcome. Cooperative business, radical commodities, independent media, social spaces, Food Not Bombs: when positive anarchist projects aren't doing social work to stave off collapse or upheaval, they are developing the innovations (self-management, decentralized production, crowd-sourcing, social networking) that will help to extend capital's reign into the next century.

The departure from these forms is the elaboration of queerness in the negative. In this linking of queerness and negativity, we join Edelman, who defines queerness thus:

[Q]ueerness, irreducibly linked to the “aberrant or atypical,” to what chafes against “normalization,” finds its value not in a good susceptible to generalization, but only in the stubborn particularity that voids every notion of a general good. The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself.

Put another way, we are not interested in a social project of queerness, in queer contributions to society, in carving out our own ghettos within the material and symbolic structures of capitalist life. Rather, our engagement with queer theory must be attuned to locating the moments which reveal the potential undoing of society, its structures and its relations. For Edelman, a theory of queer negativity begins from an exploration of the fantastic position of queers within society’s collective imaginary. His methodology is to navigate the discourses and nightmares of right-wing heteronormativity. Citing one fundamentalist pundit after another, he fleshes out the terror with which the anti-queer establishment imagines the threat of queerness. A thread persists through history into the present which imagines queers as the destroyers of social cohesion, the ‘gravediggers of society,’ the repudiation of the values of hard work and family, the persistent wave which erodes the bedrock of the monetary and libidinal economies, thieves, tricksters, hustlers, sinners, murderers, deviants, and perverts. Queers are not just damned, they are the proof of society’s fundamental damnation as well. Sodomites, after all, are named for their symbolic position as the sexual symbol of civilization’s decadence and imminent annihilation.

Analyzing an example of this fantasy, Edelman writes:

We might do well to consider this less as an instance of hyperbolic rant and more as a reminder of the disorientation that queer sexualities should entail: “acceptance or indifference to the homosexual movement will result in society’s destruction by allowing civil order to be redefined and by plummeting ourselves, our children and grandchildren into an age of godlessness. Indeed, the very foundation of Western Civilization is at stake.” Before the self-righteous bromides of liberal pluralism spill from our lips, before we supply once more the assurance that ours is another kind of love but a love like his nonetheless, before we piously invoke the litany of our glorious contributions to the civilizations of east and west alike, dare we pause for a moment to acknowledge that he might be right—or, more important, that he ought to be right: that queerness should and must destroy such notions of “civil order” through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity?

Edelman’s desire for a queerness that would hear itself called a threat to the social order and takes this as a challenge rather than an insult is paralleled by the text “Criminal Intimacy,” authored by ‘a gang of criminal queers’ and published in the anarchist journal Total Destroy in 2009:

The machinery of control has rendered our very existence illegal. We’ve endured the criminalization and crucifixion of our bodies, our sex, our unruly genders. Raids, witch-hunts, burnings at the stake. We’ve occupied the space of deviants, of whores, of perverts, and abominations. This culture has rendered us criminal, and of course, in turn, we’ve committed our lives to crime. In the criminalization of our pleasures, we’ve found the pleasure to be had in crime! In being outlawed for who we are, we’ve discovered that we are indeed fucking outlaws! Many blame queers for the decline of this society—we take pride in this. Some believe that we intend to shred-to-bits this civilization and it’s moral fabric—they couldn’t be more accurate. We’re often described as depraved, decadent and revolting—but oh, they ain’t seen nothing yet.



This position of ownership of the negative means a liberatory conspiracy between the enemies of society. It allows us to escape the traps that lie in any attempt at affirming a positive counter-narrative. One cannot deny the destructive and anti-social potential of queerness without also affirming the social order. One cannot argue against the anti-queer paranoia which imagines us to be enemies of God and state and family without implicitly conceding the legitimacy of each. The hope for progressive notions of tolerance or combative activism to undo this fantasy is an expression of the desire for assimilation into society. Even ‘radical’ or ‘anti-assimilationist’ queer positions attempt to deny this negativity and to create space for queer representation in the State or queer belonging within capitalism.

We’ll follow Edelman as he elaborates on this idea:

Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, the ascription of negativity to the queer, we might... do better to consider accepting and even embracing it. Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order—such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer—but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane. And the trump card of affirmation? Always the question: If not this, what? Always the demand to translate the insistence, the pulsive force, or negativity into some determinate stance or “position” whose determination would thus negate it: always the imperative to immure it in some stable and positive form... I do not intend to propose some “good” that will thereby be assured. To the contrary, I mean to insist that nothing, and certainly not what we call “good,” can ever have any assurance at all in the order of the Symbolic... [W]e might rather, figuratively cast our vote for “none of the above,” for the primacy of a constant “no” in response to the law of the symbolic, which would echo that law’s foundational act, its self-constituting negation.

Again, a simple shift can apply this argument to the discursive and imaginary constructions of anarchists. Many anarchists find themselves compulsively responding to negative characterizations of our intentions and dispositions. In the face of an array of flattering accusations—we are criminal, nihilistic, violent, sowers of disorder—the proponents of a positive anarchism instinctively respond by insisting that we are motivated by the highest ideals (democracy, consensus, equality, justice), seek to create a better society, are non-violent, and believe anarchism to be the greatest order of all. Over and over again anarchists and other revolutionaries offer their allegiance to society by denying the reality or possibility of their enmity with the social order.

Leftist notions of reform, progress, tolerance, and social justice always come up against the harsh reality that any progressive development can only mean a more sophisticated system of misery and exploitation; that tolerance means nothing; that justice is an impossibility. Activists, progressive and revolutionary alike, will always respond to our critique of the social order with a demand that we articulate some sort of alternative. Let us say once and for all that we have none to offer. Faced with the system's seamless integration of all positive projects into itself, we can't afford to affirm or posit any more alternatives for it to consume. Rather we must realize that our task is infinite, not because we have so much to build but because we have an entire world to destroy. Our daily life is so saturated and structured by capital that it is impossible to imagine a life worth living, except one of revolt.

We understand destruction to be necessary, and we desire it in abundance. We have nothing to gain through shame or lack of confidence in these desires. There cannot be freedom in the shadow of prisons, there cannot be human community in the context of commodities, there cannot be self-determination under the reign of a state.

This world—the police and armies that defend it, the institutions that constitute it, the architecture that gives it shape, the subjectivities that populate it, the apparatuses that administer its function, the schools that inscribe its ideology, the activism that frantically responds to its crises, the arteries of its circulation and flows, the commodities that define life within it, the communication networks that proliferate it, the information technology that surveils and records it—must be annihilated in every instance, all at once. To shy away from this task, to assure our enemies of our good intentions, is the most crass dishonesty. Anarchy, as with queerness, is most powerful in its negative form. Positive conceptions of these, when they are not simply a quiet acquiescence in the face of a sophisticated and evolving totality of domination, are hopelessly trapped in combat with the details of this totality on its own terms.

In *No Future*, Edelman appropriates and privileges a particular psychoanalytic concept: the death drive. In elaborating the relationship of “queer theory and the death drive” (the subtitle of *No Future*), he deploys the concept in order to name a force that isn’t specifically tied to queer identity. He argues that the death drive is a constant eruption of disorder from within the symbolic order itself. It is an unnameable and inarticulate tendency for any society to produce the contradictions and forces which can tear that society apart.

To avoid getting trapped in Lacanian ideology, we should quickly depart from a purely psychoanalytic framework for understanding this drive. Marxism, to imagine it another way, assures us that a fundamental crisis within the capitalist mode of production guarantees that it will produce its own negation from within itself. Messianic traditions, likewise, hold fast to a faith that the messiah must emerge in the course of daily life to overthrow the horror of history. The most romantic elaborations of anarchism describe the inevitability that individuals will revolt against the banality and alienation of modern life. Cybernetic government operates on the understanding that the illusions of social peace contain a complex and unpredictable series of

risks, catastrophes, contagions, events and upheavals to be managed. Each of these contains a kernel of truth, if perhaps in spite of their ideologies. The death drive names that permanent and irreducible element which has and will always produce revolt. Species being, queerness, chaos, willful revolt, the commune, rupture, the Idea, the wild, oppositional defiance disorder—we can give innumerable names to what escapes our ability to describe it. Each of these attempts to term the erratic negation intrinsic to society. Each comes close to theorizing the universal tendency that any civilization will produce its own undoing.

Explosions of urban rioting, the prevalence of methods of piracy and expropriation, the hatred of work, gender dysphoria, the inexplicable rise in violent attacks against police officers, self-immolation, non-reproductive sexual practices, irrational sabotage, nihilistic hacker culture, lawless encampments which exist simply for themselves—the death drive is evidenced in each moment that exceeds the social order and begins to rip at its fabric.

The symbolic deployment of queerness by the social order is always an attempt to identify the negativity of the death drive, to lock this chaotic potential up in the confines of this or that subjectivity. Foucault's work is foundational to queer theory in part because of his argument that power must create and then classify antagonistic subjectivities so as to then annihilate any subversive potential within a social body. Homosexuals, gangsters, criminals, immigrants, welfare mothers, transsexuals, women, youth, terrorists, the black bloc, communists, extremists: power is always constructing and defining these antagonistic subjects which must be managed. When the smoke clears after a riot, the state and media apparatuses universally begin to locate such events within the logic of identity, freezing the fluidity of revolt into a handful of subject positions to be imprisoned, or, more sinisterly, organized. Progressivism, with its drive toward inclusion and assimilation, stakes its hope on the social viability of these subjects, on their ability to participate in the daily reproduction of society.

In doing so, the ideology of progress functions to trap subversive potential within a particular subject, and then to solicit that subject's self-repudiation of the danger which they've been constructed to represent. This move for social peace fails to eliminate the drive, because despite a whole range of determinisms, there is no subject which can solely and perfectly contain the potential for revolt. The simultaneous attempt at justice must also fail, because the integration of each successive subject position into normative relations necessitates the construction of the next Other to be disciplined or destroyed.

Rather than a progressive project which aims to steadily eradicate an emergent chaos over time, our project, located at the threshold of Edelman's work, bases itself upon the persistent negativity of the death drive. We choose not to establish a place for queers, thereby shifting the structural position of queerness to some other population. We identify with the negativity of the drive, and thereby perform a disidentification away from any identity to be represented or which can beg for rights.

Following Edelman further:

To figure the undoing of civil society, the death drive of the dominant order, is neither to be nor to become that drive; such a being is not the point. Rather, acceding to that figural position means recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in denial of that drive. As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such—on disturbing, and therefore on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one. And so, when I argue, as I aim to do here, that the burden of queerness is to be located less in the assertion of an oppositional political identity than in opposition to politics as the governing fantasy of realizing identities, I am proposing no platform or position from which queer sexuality or any queer subject might finally and truly become itself, as if it could somehow manage thereby

to achieve an essential queerness.

I am suggesting instead that the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself.

This negative queerness severs us from any simple understanding of ourselves. More so, it severs us from any formulaic or easily-represented notions of what we need, what we desire, or what is to be done. Our queerness does not imagine a coherent self, and thus cannot agitate for any selves to find their place within civilization. The only queerness that queer sexuality could ever hope to achieve would exist in a total refusal of attempts at the symbolic integration of our sexuality into governing and market structures. This refusal of representation forecloses on any hope that we ever have in identity politics or positive identity projects. We decline the progressive faith in the ability for our bodies to be figured into the symbolic order. We decline the liberal assurance that everything will turn out right, if we just have faith.

No, instead we mean to “unleash negativity against the coherence of any self-image, subjecting us to a moral law that evacuates the subject so as to locate it through and in that very act of evacuation, permitting the realization, thereby, of a freedom beyond the boundaries of any image or representation, a freedom that ultimately resides in nothing more than the capacity to advance into emptiness.”

A non-identitarian, unrepresentable, unintelligible queer revolt will be purely negative, or it won't be at all. In the same way, an insurrectionary anarchy must embrace the death drive against all the positivisms afforded by the world it opposes. If we hope to interrupt the ceaseless forward motion of capital and its state, we cannot rely on failed methods. Identity politics, platforms, formal organizations, subcultures, activist campaigns (each being either queer or anarchist) will always arrive at the dead ends of identity and representation.

We must flee from these positivities, these models, to instead experiment with the undying negativity of the death drive. Edelman again:

The death drive's immortality, then refers to a persistent negation that offers assurance of nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of the future. Instead, it insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order's truth and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance... [Queerness] affirms a constant, eruptive jouissance that responds to the inarticulable real, to the impossibility of sexual rapport or of ever being able to signify the relation between the sexes. [Queerness] then, like the death drive, engages, by refusing, the normative stasis, the immobility, of sexuation... breaks down the mortifying structures that give us ourselves as selves and does so with all the force of the Real that such forms must fail to signify... the death drive both evades and undoes representation... the gravediggers of society [are] those who care nothing for the future.

We'll return soon to the concepts of futurity and of jouissance, but to conclude this point, we'll assert that an insurrectionary process can only be an explosion of negativity against everything that dominates and exploits us, but also against everything that produces us as we are.

This world— the police and armies that defend it, the institutions that constitute it, the architecture that gives it shape, the subjectivities that populate it, the apparatuses that administer its function, the schools that inscribe its ideology, the activism that frantically responds to its crises, the arteries of its circulation and flows, the commodities that define life within it, the communication networks that proliferate it, the information technology that surveils and records it— must be annihilated in every instance, all at once.'

