

# The philosophy of Anonymous

## Ontological politics without identity

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You cannot arrest an idea.

The last tweet of Topiary, before his arrest

Ranging from WikiLeaks to the global struggle against treaties such as ACTA, over the last few years the Web has become a centre of political struggle *in and of itself* rather than a mere adjunct of other struggles. At the same time, a new social force has emerged from the Internet: Anonymous. It is unclear at this moment even what Anonymous *is*, much less where it is going. Is Anonymous the vanguard defending the Internet, the Internet not only *in-itself* but *for-itself*, whose denial-of-service attacks are ‘Internet street protests’, as Richard Stallman put it?<sup>1</sup> Is Anonymous the incarnation of the long-awaited altruistic invisible army of hackers needed by various social movements, as promised by science-fiction writers for the last decade? Or is Anonymous a phenomenon more similar to a mass panic, a sort of collective behaviour that falls outside of organized politics, an ‘Internet Hate Machine’ that embodies the libidinal subconscious of the lost children of the Web? All of these theories are attempts to grasp something that is both radically new and the return of a certain long-repressed collective force whose existence pre-dates the Enlightenment ideology of the individual. Anonymous, it will be argued here, is an ontological shift on the terrain of identity at the very moment that identity has become the highest form of selection and exploitation in cognitive capitalism, the first glimpse of a form of life without identity on the Internet. Heidegger was wrong: the coming of the gods *after* cybernetics is possible: they do not forgive and they do not forget.

Anonymous stretches simultaneously traditional theories of political organization and our ontology of personal identity. It is precisely this interlinked nexus that gives Anonymous, and future Internet phenomena,

their power. Anonymous does not constitute a dubious mystical collective being; nor should techno-gnosticism be substituted for the very real battles for control over the all-too-material infrastructure of global capitalism, of which the Internet is the first and foremost example. However, one cannot deny that Anonymous is a global political collective force whose international impact has been as wide, if not wider, than any other recent movements. Anonymous distinguishes itself from previous political phenomena by its ability to coordinate mass direct actions that are global in scope within minutes purely using the Internet and without any pre-existing organizational structure: a phenomenon of real-time politics still not grasped by current institutions whose foundations were constructed before the advent of the Internet.

The secret to this scalability and participation lies on the plane of ontology. The political power of Anonymous cannot be separated from its strange world of memes, a unit of self-replicating culture originally theorized by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins.<sup>2</sup> On the Internet, strange phenomena such as putting cats inside baked bread – or using simple tools to take down a website in revenge for the repression of WikiLeaks – can spread across the world within minutes. The rise in participation in Anonymous can be directly linked to the ongoing collapse of personal identity, a phenomenon most clearly expressed by unemployed ‘digital native’ youth and those marginalized by established social forms. Anonymous is not just another political movement; it represents the first expression of an ontology that follows from the collapse of the hitherto existing form of the individual subject. Its peculiar, even weird, politics is a product of the new nascent Internet-driven ontology that comes *after* this very collapse. What else could explain the mind-boggling popularity of Nyan Cat or the Lulz Boat?

## Internet as surveillance machine

Massive web platforms such as Apple, Google and Facebook are monopolies increasingly reminiscent of the golden age of capitalism, in which the new form of commodity is personal identity: every interaction with the Internet is recorded for marketing purposes, ideally with a full name and billing address. Much of the Italian 'autonomist' school of thought correctly surmised the shift after the global crisis of capitalism in 1973 as one to a new kind of cognitive capitalism, where the power of language and subjectivity would be knit together by cybernetics as the reinvigorated heart of capital.<sup>3</sup> Autonomist theorists like Antonio Negri celebrated this shift as a prelude to a possible neocommunist utopia, since by their very nature 'immaterial' forces such as language and subjectivity were a kind of affective 'commons' within capital.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, far from being dispersed or rendered irrelevant by information, the power of domination now simply moves within information. Multinational corporations have determined how to extract monetary value from the Internet primarily by exploiting the social life and free labour of its users. Is it not ironic that the once idealistically lauded open-source software, thought to be a tool of freedom, now runs massive centralized server farms that provide the foundation for the most sophisticated regime of surveillance ever imagined? This behavioural tracking can be self-imposed: with Facebook, users freely surrender their very most personal of data to marketers in return for ease of communication with their friends. Yet Facebook is only the most visible point of a phenomenon much larger in scale that encompasses nearly every click on the Web. This totalizing regime of identification is usually accomplished via the innocently named 'cookies': tiny data structures that can be automatically put inside a web browser when it visits a website without someone's consent or knowledge. Using cookies, web browsers communicate directly back to their originating site – and these cookies stay with the browser even after one has left the site and turned off the computer. For example, when Britain's National Health Service enabled Facebook's infamous 'Like' Button, the cookies could send back information about whether or not people were browsing treatments for cancer.<sup>5</sup>

On one level, this all appears harmless. After all, the users of these services often freely opt in, and many people find advertisements useful sources of new information. More worrisome, one should remember that identity is valuable not only for marketing but for social control. The very same techniques are being employed for the most blatant forms of repression,

transforming the Web into a massive surveillance machine of proportions unimaginable to the secret police of earlier eras. Currently, various repressive governments are using technologies, ranging from low-level deep-packet inspection of Internet traffic to higher-level monitoring of social networking, to find, track and even kill agents for social change, with the most prominent examples in the mass media being Syria and Iran.<sup>6</sup> Yet even those who live in countries that supposedly support liberal democratic 'freedom of expression' on the Internet should not sleep easily, as Internet surveillance is increasingly common practice for almost every government, as demonstrated by the controversy around Britain's new Communications Capabilities Development Programme.<sup>7</sup> Those even in countries that supposedly support liberal democratic 'freedom of expression' on the Internet should not sleep easily.

## Decomposition of the networked individual

The reaction from radical theory to the transformation of the Internet into a system of social control has been for the most part depression and retreat from the previous visions of the Internet as a liberatory force. In *After the Future*, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi put forward the proposition that the Internet has caused a collapse of subjectivity (the once great subjectivity of the 'worker' or even newer brands such as the 'precarious') on such a scale that it makes any future revolution impossible, although currently his opinion appears to have shifted due to the events of 2011.<sup>8</sup> Lacking any revolutionary agent, others such as Galloway and Thacker hold out for the possibility of Net Art or hackers to create an 'exploit' to break the fast-growing networks of domination.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most devastating critique of the cybernetic utopia comes from Tiqqun, a radical French collective associated with the now-infamous *Coming Insurrection*, which in their second eponymous journal stated:

cybernetics is not, as we are supposed to believe, a separate sphere of the production of information and communication, a virtual space superimposed on the real world. No, it is, rather, an autonomous world of apparatuses so blended with the capitalist project that it has become a political project ... it proposes to conceive biological, physical, and social behaviors as something integrally programmed and re-programmable ... [so that] cybernetics is war against all that lives and all that is lasting.<sup>10</sup>

Is it possible that the Internet, as the latest stage of cybernetics, is the supreme and perhaps even final

act of counter-revolution, the destruction of all potentialities for another world? With web-surfing records being fed into increasingly sophisticated algorithms to predict behaviour, it seems difficult to argue with such gloomy prospects for any project for social change when the Internet serves as an almost inescapable panopticon.

It seems a certain apex has been reached: the perfect prisoner is the one who voluntarily subjects him- or herself to constant surveillance. With Facebook, our most intimate personal details, our friends, our geolocation and the like are all willingly surrendered in return for the gift of managing our social communication easily through the Internet. The purpose of the creation of personal profiles, photo albums, and 'likes' is ultimately the creation of the quantified self in a digital medium. This quantified self is simultaneously spectacular and biopolitical: the presentation of our real life as a series of digitized images and a disciplining of the body in the service of the 'free' digital services that now mediate social life. This new kind of discipline can be witnessed in the near compulsive use of mobile phones, updating of status profiles, tweeting, and the like that now seems to be an integrated component of social life. Yet does one not detect the faint refrain of hysteria behind this constant creation of digital identity: 'The more I want to be Me, the more I feel an emptiness.'<sup>11</sup>

The production of the 'me' through the digital medium contains within it signs of the coming collapse of the (neo)liberal individual. The much-lauded networked individualism, the individual super-powered like some digital *Übermensch* with the power of Facebook and Twitter that is celebrated both by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and by popular interpretations of Tahrir Square, seems to be reaching a point of exhaustion. As is even being asked by the popular press, this constant self-manufacture of identity goes hand in hand with an increased anomie of postmodern life.<sup>12</sup> It becomes increasingly clear what the networked individual actually stands for: the move towards total publicity on the Web hastens a sort of hypertrophy of individuality, where your every movement becomes part of a constant marketing machine that purports to stabilize and market your identity, while in reality constraining social life and leading to its alienation, exploitation and domination. Yet history, even during the information age, is dialectical; and digital identity also opens the space for its own negation. Of course, the operative question is what comes *after* the consumerist networked individual begins to collapse in on itself, in part provoked by the crisis of capitalism in

2008. Far from the end of subjectivity, what arises is a new form of collective subjectivity without individual identity, as wildly proclaimed by what Tiquun called the Bloom, so that 'just as the individual resulted in the decomposition of the community, so the Bloom results in the decomposition of the individual, or more precisely, of the fiction of the individual.'<sup>13</sup> Yet what was not foreseen by Tiquun was that this new incarnation of non-identity would happen over the Internet as the new social force known as Anonymous.

## Internet cities

As the Internet provides contemporary digital biopolitics with an increasingly efficient space for demanding that everyone establish their own digital identity, the space for a total inversion was also opened: the possibility of *being anonymous* in the strange world of the Internet, where one can 'check one's body' at the door. The murky origins of Anonymous come at least in part from the sharing of manga, a certain substream of Japanese graphic art often considered pornographic in nature. Manga is incredibly popular beyond Japan, likely due to its hybridity between machinic demons and unrestrained human sexuality that strangely resonates with the increasingly global alienation from individuality. As the most cutting-edge manga was shared via the image-sharing Japanese website 2chan.org (Futaba Channel), a fair number of non-Japanese speakers became frustrated with attempting to navigate a website that only existed in Japanese. A teenager living with his parents, known originally only by his nickname *moot*, later revealed to be Christopher Poole, decided single-handedly to translate the website into English, without any knowledge of Japanese, purportedly using only automatic Google translation. This required him to copy the software and set up his own Web server, which he dubbed '4chan.org'. 4chan copied one crucial feature from 2chan, namely the ability to post pictures and comments anonymously. In Japan there is a strict moral separation between one's personal identity, in particular one's real name, and one's Internet activity on boards such as 2chan, so following popular Japanese convention 2chan allowed users to post anonymously. Copying 2chan, Poole originally enabled – and later sometimes even forced! – the functionality of posting as an 'anonymous' user, thus accidentally setting the stage for the rise of Anonymous.

Given that 4chan did not require one to log in with an identity but instead allowed people to log in anonymously, 4chan quickly became a virtual haven for what could be termed a certain libidinal collective

unconscious of the Internet, an Internet message board inhabited primarily – but far from exclusively – by young people who share strange messages and images that would put the Marquis de Sade to shame. Divided into various categories ranging from manga to cooking, by far the most popular category became ‘miscellaneous’, which was hosted as the message-board ‘/b/’.<sup>14</sup> As they do not keep logs of user activity, it is hard to say how many people actually use 4chan, although it has been estimated that 4chan has 5,700,000 users, making it larger than many cities. The theme is to produce an image to ‘that cannot be unseen’, with ‘mash-ups’ of images that can be considered offensive being posted to the image-board, often with humorous subtitles. Threads of commentary on these images tend to last about five minutes. Given the fact that the vast majority of postings (over 90 per cent) are anonymous, a very distinct set of digital gestures quickly developed on 4chan.<sup>15</sup> When one first interacts with the online vortex of 4chan, one is called ‘newfagg’, a ‘n00b’ (although it should be noted the use of the word ‘fagg’ is omnipresent on 4chan and has very little to do with homosexuality, as well-known 4chan users are called ‘oldfaggs’). After a certain amount of time, one loses one’s individuality and enters the ‘hivemind’ of ‘/b/’, self-described as:

Bam to behold, a public bulletin board, built of both brilliance and barbarity by bastards with boners. This bastion, no mere bulwark of boredom, is a brutal barrage of blistering bullshit, barely benevolent... but behind the bigotry and boobs, beyond the bitter broadcasts of bragging buffoons: here be the body politic. A brotherhood of blasphemy, blessed with more balls than brains, battling the bland, the bogus, the benign. Bedlam? Bring it on. But I babble... better to be brief.<sup>16</sup>

To describe the phenomenon of 4chan, one generally posts an image, and then comments come flooding in, using a dialect based on the perversion of popular culture. This new Thieves’ Cant is purposely obscured from outsiders (parents in particular, one imagines) although it is documented by its own Wikipedia, the controversial Encyclopedia Dramatica.<sup>17</sup> These comments can range from a dozen within a minute to hundreds within an hour, a virtual parlour dialogue that usually resembles some humorous and perverse version of a salon. As new images are added literally every minute, the entire conversation quickly becomes an addictive postmodern pastiche of videos, images, links and text that stretches anyone’s cognitive limits. A primary motif of 4chan is the concept of *lulz*, a corruption of the Internet abbreviation LOL for ‘laughing

out loud’. Indeed, 4chan became known as the ‘Internet Meme Machine’, producing humorous viral content that often became embedded in popular cultures, ranging from pictures of cats trying to eat cheeseburgers (‘Can I Haz Cheeseburger?’) to ‘rick-rolling’, the sending of a link to some supposed interesting content that just redirects the unexpected user to a kitschy 1980s’ music video of Rick Astley.

One should not underestimate the importance of these memes: the infamous Nyan Cat meme, a video-game cat flying through space set to a repetitive if catchy autotune song consisting entirely of the phrase ‘nyan’, has over 70 million views on YouTube, making it *more* popular than Obama’s State of the Union speech or professionally released music videos by pop stars such as Kanye West. The scale of the Internet is something not yet fully grasped by philosophy: websites like 4chan are the cities of the Internet. Simply compare the populations: 4Chan is likely as large as New York City, the World of Warcraft as Scandinavia, and Facebook is as big as the entire United States – cyber-heterotopias whose potential has recently been theorized by, among others, Finn Brunton.<sup>18</sup> There is some new force yet currently only dimly grasped by philosophy now being massively mobilized by the Internet, and it seems as if it is soon to spread out of cyberspace and into popular culture – and politics.

Laughter is thought of as purely ephemeral, but the *lulz* began incarnating itself outside of the Web in an organized fashion. What is most fascinating about 4chan is that after its first few years of existence, the comments began being used to coordinate various kinds of actions, not merely to replicate memes that gave the collective hivemind of 4chan their *lulz*. An early well-known example of coordinated action was the promotion of Christopher Poole to person of the year in *Time* magazine’s online poll in 2008. However, much darker was the 2010 case of Jessi Slaughter, an 11-year-old girl who was accused of having a relationship with the singer of a pop band, and in response she posted a video: ‘If you can’t stop hating, you know what? I’ll pop a glock in your mouth and make a brain slushy.’<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, this video was posted to 4chan, which then proceeded ‘for the *lulz*’ to re-post her name and address and encouraged her to commit suicide. Having his daughter reduced to tears by a faceless mob on the Internet, the father posted his own video threatening to call the ‘cyberpolice’, which only provoked even more attacks – a story that became so well known that it was picked up by Fox News, which dubbed 4chan the ‘Internet Hate Machine’.<sup>20</sup> Yet, there were also acts of unexpected kindness, such as the case

of a picture posted to 4chan of an ad by an elderly man for ‘People Wanted for Birthday Party’.<sup>21</sup> Striking some sort of collective heartstring, 4chan uncovered the elderly man’s name, address and phone number and began ‘Operation Birthday Boy’, placing hundreds of phone calls and birthday cards wishing the elderly man well, with orders of cake and strippers made over the Internet. Thus the curious ambiguous ethical nature of 4chan in particular and being-anonymous in general is revealed in its entirety, as both senseless acts of kindness and depravity – all symptomatic of the breakdown of the ontological order of individual identity that creates the preconditions for a new kind of *Stimmung*.

## Stimmung

We claim that Anonymous is a *Stimmung*. *Stimmung* is a powerful yet often misunderstood concept associated with Heidegger, who wrote: ‘what we indicate ontologically by our state of mind is ontically the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our mood [*Stimmung*], our Being attuned.’<sup>22</sup> The translation of *Stimmung* as ‘mood’ leaves some of the nuances of the term unsaid. The examples given by Heidegger, which seem pertinent to Anonymous, are those of boredom, anxiety, and – most of all – laughter. Even without the Internet, laughter is started by some content or event, and then spreads throughout those present. Now imagine what happens when the ability of laughter to spread is removed from the latencies of our pre-Internet everyday temporality and spatiality, and instead spreads through the Internet using near real-time communications. As documented extensively by anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, lulz is the key to understanding Anonymous.<sup>23</sup> The initial awakening of Anonymous was the collective laughter of the Internet – the lulz – that arose from a simplistic Internet image board, the anonymous and at times sleazy virtual city of 4chan.

Yet the *Stimmung* is not merely some sort of irrational collective group mood that stands in simplistic contrast to an individual state of mind. This would fail to explain how the sharing of humorous and perverse pictures led to Anonymous, a collective political force capable of fighting against institutions and even governments. It would also misinterpret the consequences of Heidegger’s destruction of the epistemological subject. Originally referring to the tuning of a music instrument, the *Stimmung* denotes ‘our Being attuned’, not the mood of an individual subject.<sup>24</sup> Etymologically, *Stimmung* is a variant of the German word *die Stimme*, and *die Stimme* is not

the mood, but the *voice*. Following this conceptual trajectory, a *Stimmung* is not a particular individual voice but the voice of a world, where a world is that which is attached to language-games, gestures, emotion and action: what Wittgenstein termed a form of life. While Wittgenstein tended conservatively to restrict his language-games to natural languages and Heidegger restricted his analysis to mundane everyday worlds, there is no reason a *Dasein* or form of life cannot form in new kinds of technological worlds as proposed by Stiegler, for example.<sup>25</sup> In fact, as should have been clear in Heidegger, any world also includes technology by definition – the ‘*technological form-of-life*’ in Scott Lash’s phrase.<sup>26</sup>

Anonymous is the *Stimmung*, the voice, of the Internet; not only a set of individual voices, but a collection of bodies that becomes organized and articulates a common voice. These voices are not Dawkinsesque memetic replicators that simply copy each other, using the individual brain as a host, or static and even ethnic archetypes in a proto-fascist Jungian collective unconscious. A *Stimmung* is always a collective affair in the terms of our present-day ontology of individuality and collectivity: it is an aspect of a particular *Dasein* as their ‘being-in-the-world’ and so is also present in collective gathering of beings that share a world. In this regard, the *Stimmung* of Anonymous is naturally associated with ideas such as ‘collective intelligence’ and ‘hivemind’ that are in turn often associated with Anonymous by its participants. To use the words of Jake Davis, who is claimed to be Topiary, in his final missive on Anonymous: ‘You need to know that the ownership of cyberspace will always remain with the hivemind. The internet does not belong to your beloved authorities, militaries, or multi-millionaire company owners.’<sup>27</sup>

A fascinating geographical study of how a *Stimmung* gave birth to religions and particular ontologies can be found in Edward Casey’s *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, a work that has strange similarities with the trajectory of Anonymous.<sup>28</sup> Casey notes that in all early mythologies the gods were incarnations that spoke directly to people as voices, and these voices were attached to particular places such as holy sites. (Anthropologists such as Jaynes have noticed this same phenomenon, although they have blamed it on the lack of cortical development in early humans.<sup>29</sup>) For example, Egyptian mythology had its first ‘gods’ were literally the land and sea that separated from the mist, while in the more recent Greek mythology the gods were attached to distinct kinds of places, such as Mount Olympus. To consider Anonymous in this

theoretical framework, one merely needs to consider that the Internet is a new particular world, albeit a strange one of code and lulz far outside of traditional readings of Heidegger.

At the very moment when a particular ontology of individual identity is entering into crisis, is it a surprise that one faces the re-emergence of the *Stimmung*; a *Stimmung* that, rather than re-forming new individual subjects, is expressed ontologically by new and momentary collective resonances? Yet Tiqqun never realized that the Internet could amplify these resonances and send them pulsing through the world outside of the Net with unheard of speed.

## The rise of Anonymous

The first manifestation of the politicization of Anonymous was surprising. This slumbering online force was awoken into its first radical political action by the Church of Scientology attempting to stop its lulz via the censorship of a viral video of Tom Cruise.<sup>30</sup> Since almost the dawn of the Internet, there have been numerous leaks of Church of Scientology documents onto the Internet, which have at every turn been met by massive legal actions to have the material removed. While never entirely successful in their pursuit of censorship, the Church of Scientology pursues these cases with extraordinary vigilance, and has never been successfully directly confronted; until 4chan found a particular video of Tom Cruise professing his belief in some of the more absurd aspects of Scientology hilarious. When the Church of Scientology began to demand take-downs of this video in 2008, 4chan decided to organize its first truly coordinated campaign of online protest mixed with street protests under the banner of ‘Project Chanology’. A video communiqué was sent to the Church of Scientology by ‘Anonymous’, the first public message that had Anonymous self-recognize itself as a social force:

Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind – for the laughs – we shall expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form.<sup>31</sup>

In describing themselves, Anonymous stated their now famous slogan ‘Knowledge is free. We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.’ The Church soon found its website taken down by a denial-of-service attack, even more of its secret documents revealed, and street protests at almost all of their churches. As these new memes of Anonymous versus the Church of Scientology started

circulating throughout 4chan, a new image was posted with the subtitle ‘What would Anonymous look like?’ and it featured the final scene of the movie *V for Vendetta* (a scene missing from the original comic), where masks of Guy Fawkes were simultaneously put on by a large crowd. The Church of Scientology soon found its website taken down by a denial-of-service attack and even more of its secret documents revealed, but the defining moment of Anonymous was the street protests at almost all of their churches, where many of the participants of Anonymous met first face-to-face (or mask-to-mask!) with Guy Fawkes masks – and the *Stimmung* of 4chan transformed into a new particular *Stimmung*, the *Stimmung* of Anonymous.

This was only the beginning. After its first explicitly political campaign against the Church of Scientology, Anonymous decided to take on defending file-sharing in Operation Payback in September 2010 – its first major operation that featured direct action regardless of legal consequences. As copyright enforcement groups were committing denial-of-service attacks, usually indirectly by hiring private companies, on file-sharing websites such as the Pirate Bay, Anonymous decided to turn its metaphorical guns around and commit denial-of-service attacks on the sites of groups such as Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), law firms, and government agencies that supported copyright enforcement. Then, in December 2010, the US government’s attempted repression of WikiLeaks led to the rapid politicization of Anonymous, which proceeded in ‘Operation Avenge Assange’ in 2010 to take out the websites of Visa, Amazon and PayPal when they proceeded to stop processing donations for WikiLeaks. This campaign was followed quickly by operations that went beyond protests against content take-downs, but in explicit solidarity with revolutionary movements in Tunisia and the Egyptian Revolution, where Anonymous defaced government websites in solidarity with the Arab Spring. Anonymous also grew its own propaganda arm, created on IRC in the #propaganda channel and primarily distributed through the Twitter accounts like AnonOps and YourAnonymousNews. Anonymous also publicly went beyond its previous simple tactics to more skilled hacking, although hacking had long been secretly employed in many operations. One of the more infamous incidents was the leaking of the emails of the security company HBGary after its CEO Aaron Burr threatened to ‘dox’ Anonymous itself, a hacking that revealed not only their (mostly incorrect) list of people involved with Anonymous but also various proposals of the United States to continue their prosecution of WikiLeaks. For the lulz, smaller break-out

groups such as LulzSec began hacking a large number of websites in order to reveal that the digital emperor had no clothes in terms of cyber-security (an effort termed 'Antisec' for 'anti-security'), hacking websites from Britain's Serious Organized Crime Agency to NATO. Furthermore, Anonymous clearly became no longer only an English-speaking phenomenon, with the Spanish-language Anonymous sending protesters into the street in solidarity with the M15 protests in Spain in the spring of 2011 and a Mexican Anonymous branch unsuccessfully confronting gangs of narcotics like the Zetas.

In the fall of 2011, with #occupy it was no accident that protesters wearing *V for Vendetta* masks were omnipresent. As a personal participant in the first #Occupy meeting in New York, it was clear that it was not David Graeber who started #occupy, but the ability of Anonymous to help content that might otherwise be ignored by the mass media go viral, such as the video of protesters being beaten up at the Brooklyn Bridge, that eventually forced major newspapers such as the *New York Times* to cover the growing protests in Zucotti Square. Furthermore, it appears Anonymous was heavily influential in making the Occupy movement global, as witnessed by their 'Occupy the Planet' video communique in which they explicitly state their goal of beyond New York City:

Next month marks a momentous moment in our history, everyone everywhere will occupy their squares ... it's now bigger than you and me, it's about us, a collective 99 per cent that will no longer stand for the corruption, greed and inequality that is rampant within our governing bodies ... spread this message like the plague.<sup>32</sup>

As Anonymous had a network of participants spread throughout the world, not only in major metropolises but also in smaller cities and suburbs, they could very effectively spread the meme of #occupy throughout the United States and other countries. A round of intense international repression hit in 2012 with the FBI and UK police arresting many people, ranging in ages from 42 to 16 (including the case of Topiary, a 20-year-old who seemed to direct much of LulzSec and Anonymous's public presence in 2010–11 from a house in the Shetland Islands), and although activity slowed temporarily, it has not ceased. In 2012, Anonymous began noticing legislative efforts to enforce intellectual property and Internet surveillance such as SOPA/PIPA in the United States and the ratification of the international treaty ACTA in the EC, and began engaging in massive street protests and targeted action against these initiatives in concert with a wide variety of non-profits

and minor political parties, such as the Pirate Party. SOPA/PPIA and ACTA were both defeated, with the crowning moment for Anonymous perhaps being best incarnated by members of the Polish parliament putting on Guy Fawkes masks as they refused to ratify ACTA.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, even prominent economists such as Yochai Benkler have stated that Anonymous is a new form of political expression and should not be considered a threat to US national security.<sup>34</sup>

Looking back on its development, Anonymous is a collection of bodies that became organized, whose *Stimmung* takes concrete form as images and gestures. During its first incarnation in the 'Message to the Church of Scientology', Anonymous was only represented as a computerized voice overlaid across bleak grey clouds in a video sent to the Church of Scientology. Following Casey's analysis of the formation of worlds and how these lead to increasingly concrete visual forms, during the course of its development, Anonymous later appeared in a more concretely visual form when it took to the streets in the mask of Guy Fawkes from *V for Vendetta*.<sup>35</sup> This should be expected, as a *Stimmung* always in the final instance takes the form not only of a voice, but of a body. Yet the gathering-of-beings that reveals a *Stimmung* is not *the image of a single body*, but *a multitude of concrete human bodies*.

## Organization

The method of organization and composition of Anonymous differs profoundly from previous social movements, as it organizes almost entirely over the Internet and is composed of a truly global cross-section of society, consisting primarily of the unemployed and youth. Although it has some structural affinity with anarchism, Anonymous tends mostly to self-identify as a global movement against corruption and repression, primarily interested in the accountability and transparency of institutions, as well as in support of a somewhat fuzzy notion of popular democracy, with only the vaguest of connections with any historical revolutionary Left. In its earliest incarnation, the vast majority of its participants did not really consider themselves even to be doing politics, but simply expressing themselves, having lulz, or trying to perform the right ethical act. However, as Anonymous became involved in activities such as defending WikiLeaks and offering support to revolutionaries in the Arab Spring, more of Anonymous considered themselves as participating in explicitly politically engaged direct action.

Of particular importance is the fact that the extremely decentralized nature of Anonymous means

anyone can join and participate in any way they choose. As there is no such thing as a ‘member’ of Anonymous, only those sufficiently affected by its *Stimmung* to participate in its actions, and any group, however temporary, can self-appoint themselves as part of Anonymous; often leading to confusion over who is even behind certain actions and massive debates over whether certain actions are suitable or express the lulz. As such, Anonymous is the classic example of a decentralized network, and as many of the participants rarely if ever meet outside the Internet, the ability of Anonymous both to increase its numbers and to survive the arrests of participants is higher than most other organizations. However, there are a number of common factors that deserve commentary. Although the original meme came from 4chan.org, it has since moved to Internet Relay Chat, an old Internet technology for group chat that allows servers to be easily and independently hosted anywhere – a technology Anonymous has used to quickly move servers outside of particular legal jurisdictions. Anyone from a person at an Internet café in Tangiers to an FBI agent in Washington DC can simply join. These chat channels have hundreds of people on them chatting in the strange cant of 4chan, with various channels existing for different languages such as French and Spanish.

In these chat channels, ideas for actions and news are spread, as is various informal gossip. Instead of a simple anonymous non-identity, various pseudonyms (often of a humorous nature) are often self-identified in order to distinguish the people in the chat room, although many people use multiple chat channels with both multiple pseudonyms and anonymous identities. Very basic security precautions are used in order not only to be anonymous in name only, but to prevent governments or other repressive forces from tracking down their presence in the IRC channel to a particular physical computer, with VPNs being popular. In particular, the methods used by Anonymous are easy to use, as they taking advantage of the open sourcing of tools such as the Low Orbit Ion Cannon to let almost anyone with a computer participate in the kinds of denial-of-service attacks needed to bring down sites like Visa and PayPal, although security flaws in some early versions of this software are precisely what led the FBI to arrest some of Anonymous for participating in these attacks. These kinds of attacks are not hacks, but are similar to techniques of ‘electronic civil disobedience’ (a term popularized by the Critical Art Ensemble)<sup>36</sup> where by virtue of sending too many requests simultaneously to a website, the website

overloads and goes off the Internet. The thing about Anonymous is that it escapes the grasp of power by opacity. The myriad IRC channels, 4chan and others, are essentially zones of opaque offensivity, as ‘opaque to power as gypsy camp’ according to the Invisible Committee,<sup>37</sup> although the actual opacity depends on a myriad purely technical factors such as whether or not IP addresses are logged or not. Thus, one cannot help but notice the affinity of Anonymous with the politics of the Invisible Committee, with the Blooms of 4chan becoming the Imaginary Party of Anonymous – as the French press put it, a ‘Tarnac numérique’.<sup>38</sup>

If the arrests of the people that are claimed to be ‘members’ of Anonymous<sup>39</sup> are a good sample, the demographics of Anonymous are those of what Marx would term the ‘surplus population’ produced by the economic crisis: mostly rather young, unemployed, computer-literate, global, stretching across racial boundaries and often from low-income backgrounds. While the stereotype of Anonymous, particularly on 4chan, was of sexist 16-year-old boys, what has been revealed is that 4chan and Anonymous are as global as any Internationale and include many women and transgender people. ‘No’, one of the ex-operators of Anonymous’s chat channel, was claimed by the FBI to be Mercedes Haefer, a 20-year-old journalism student. One of the most famous hackers of Anonymous and Lulzsec, Kayla, claimed to be a 16-year old girl but was instead a 25-year old unemployed ex-army veteran from South Yorkshire – and one of the core arrests of Lulzsec, Tflow, was a 16-year old in London who was one of the more talented hackers in the group. The group is also multiracial. For example, the infamous hacker Sabu, who was involved in both Anonymous and Lulzsec, was a 29-year-old unemployed New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent who began working for the FBI when his children were threatened.

Less well known arrests testify to the internationalism of Anonymous, including arrests in the Dominican Republic, Spain, Turkey, Chile and Romania. In Eastern Europe the protests against ACTA that were sparked in part by Anonymous were the largest street demonstrations since the fall of the Soviet Bloc governments. One can only suspect that a far larger section of the population enjoys the freedom of expression that Anonymous provides: those who are marginalized for reasons of class, age, gender, as well as those who simply live in a remote places where no other form of political expression is easily available, all find a vital new form of politics in participating in the actions of Anonymous. The issues of censorship and anonymity may be the kernel of a



distinctive political spirit of the Internet that resonates far more widely than those involved in traditional politics, including those of the radical strain, may expect. In the seedy bars of the 4chan – Interzone of the Internet – it is perhaps surprising that ‘the space appropriate to the future crowd, the space that will beckon them, interpellate them, accommodate them’, in the words of Kristen Ross, is not ‘the bleak landscapes of Rimbaud’s later poetry ... the tactile, haptic landscapes of desert, sea, and poles, more sonar than visual’ but the visual and linguistic spaces of message boards, viral videos and group chat on the Internet.<sup>40</sup> To take the words of Jake Davis (Topiary) in his final message on Anonymous at face value: the ontology of the ‘hivemind’ is not a mere epiphenomenon; it constitutes Anonymous.

### The future of Anonymous

The philosophy of Anonymous offers insight into a long-standing political question that has gone unanswered with often tragic consequences for social movements: what does a new form of collective politics look like that wishes to go beyond the identity of the individual subject in late capitalism? The ontological power of the lulz, the inhuman laughter of the Internet, is our first clue, and it should not be underestimated as a beacon of hope; those who bear the brunt of the crisis can even find laughter in the face of the current catastrophe. What has been discovered by the largely unemployed and marginalized participants in Anonymous gives flesh to the currently deserted world of politics and post-political theory, whose potential was only glimpsed during the alter-globalization movement. From the comfort of their laptop, anyone can be respected for their actions rather than their identity. Further, in places like Tunisia and Egypt, unemployed youth can cause the revolutionary overthrow of dictators, and a 16-year-old with a laptop can show their power to be paper tigers in the realm of cyberspace. Anonymous demonstrates, albeit almost without any self-consciousness, nothing more than the forgotten memory of social movements. Ordinary people can take issues into their own hands and create a new world history, rediscovering over the Internet a certain ‘invisible international’ imagined by Serge.<sup>41</sup>

Anonymous is almost too simple a dialectical tale, a glimpse of what comes after the collapse of the networked individual, the negation of that excessive individuality of Facebook which inscribes digital identity at the cost of constant surveillance. The truth is that the Internet is simultaneously a machine of surveillance and a space for the free play of identity,

and both aspects need to be affirmed and overcome in order to move the world out of crisis. It is still very possible that the fascinating story of Anonymous will be stopped by excessive prison sentences (often more than ten years in the USA) and that the taking down of websites may itself be a form of censorship. Those concerned with their fate should stand in solidarity with the arrested via the #FreeAnons Anonymous Solidarity Network.<sup>42</sup> Yet it is impossible to arrest an idea, and Joshua Corman’s theorizing of how a more transparent and accountable Anonymous could serve as the foundation for solving large-scale social problems provides a number of tantalizing hints as to the way forward.<sup>43</sup> After all, Anonymous merely reacts to current events, like the repression of WikiLeaks or the Libyan Revolution; so, as Gabriella Coleman has put it, ‘The most important lesson of Anonymous: The Internet will judge corporations and people.’<sup>44</sup> Could not the real potential of Anonymous be that at some barely imagined point in the future, the world of the Internet – the Anonymous-to-come – could formulate a positive collective vision and put it into play via massively scalable Web-collective organization, so commencing the long-awaited political-ontological transformation of our current social totality, long thought impossible?

In the final analysis, Anonymous is a testament to the infinite power of the refusal of predicates, the *whatever-singularity* of Agamben’s *Coming Community* brought into being in the most surprising and bizarre of worlds, the Internet. While the Anonymous-as-it-is is itself already trapped, captured and defeated as it becomes labelled and controlled by the very predicates it inscribes upon itself (the Guy Fawkes mask, for example) or has inscribed upon it (by the hysterical attacks on it by the mass media), the philosophy of Anonymous provides a hint of what may be entailed by a more general analysis of the ontological forces released by the Web, a task still barely begun. As capitalism destroys the ontological ground of the individual subject via digital identity and mass unemployment, these new collective forces will, amplified by the Internet-like Anonymous, become increasingly powerful. There is a storm of singularities on the horizon. The philosophical task is thus also urgent. As the Internet transforms from a free space for the play of identity into a massive surveillance machine, the war over anonymity and censorship takes centre stage in the twenty-first century. It is the first round of an ontological conflict between the forms-of-life of the Internet and the pre-Internet institutions that are unravelling around us.

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