The task of the revolutionary is not simply to fulfill existing desires, but to expand our collective sense of the possible, so our desires and the realities they drive us to create can shift in turn. If we want to end oppression, not merely manage its details in a non-coercive manner, a discourse of consent is not enough. We need a new framework to open pathways out of consensus reality.

We aspire to invite others into practices that will prove contagious: ideas that self-replicate, models that can be applied in a variety of circumstances, attitudes that prove infectious. We succeed when others emerge from the spaces we create feeling more powerful. We win when the ruptures of possibility we open prove impossible to close.
For further reading on related subjects, check out:

THE DIVORCE OF THOUGHT FROM DEED: SOCIAL CONFLICT, WHITE SUPREMACY, AND FREE SPEECH AT UNC CHAPEL HILL by the NC Piece Corps
THE ILLEGITIMACY OF VIOLENCE, THE VIOLENCE OF LEGITIMACY by Crimethinc
GOD ONLY KNOWS WHAT DEVILS WE ARE by the Institute for Experimental Freedom
A PLEA FOR CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN by Henry David Thoreau
desires to arise or flow into new hosts. Critics who frame their objections in consent discourse may not be fundamentally opposed to the tactics in question after all; they may simply not feel that they had the chance to become protagonists in their own stories of rebellion.

**INTO THE UNKNOWN**

What are anarchists good for? We don’t see ourselves as “the” revolutionary subject, nor its vanguard or representative. But that doesn’t mean we’re irrelevant to the struggles and upheavals around us. We up the ante and rep the anti; we call bluffs and take dares; we discover lines of flight out of consensus reality. We become lightning rods that crackle with flows of charged desire. We become transvestites of the unknown, in its pleasures and its risks.

We dive headlong into the terrifying fires of transformation, allowing strange passions to seize us. It’s not that these desires are “ours”; rather, we are theirs. We discover lines of flight out of consensus reality. We take risks to induce others to share them with us; we take care of each other so we can be dangerous together.

Ultimately, the politics of seduction don’t rely on rational argumentation to influence people. We dive headlong into the terrifying fires of transformation, allowing strange passions to seize us. It's not that these desires are "ours"; rather, we are theirs. We become lightning rods that crackle with flows of charged desire.

Let’s not forget the importance of seducing ourselves with our actions. It’s frighteningly easy for activism to ossify into dreary, repetitive routines. Actions that don’t emerge out of our own desires are unlikely to seduce us or anyone else. Sure, some kids will be radicalized by the Food Not Bombs run by four burnt-out punks who resent every Sunday they spend in the kitchen. But we forge our deepest relationships of struggle in collectively experiencing the new, the exciting, the terrifying. It’s not only beautiful but strategic to live lives that push to the outermost edges of what’s possible.

The stakes are high. From consent discourse, we retain the prioritization of caring for others and paying attention to their needs. We must never disregard the well-being of those we invite into zones of transformation; yet neither can we play it safe and allow consensus reality to dictate our range of possible dreams and actions. We cannot promise safety, but we can share in the danger of the unknown, in its pleasures and its risks.

**BREAKING WITH CONSENSUS REALITY**

*from the politics of consent to the seduction of revolution*

Those of us who wish to create a freer world face a fundamental contradiction. On one hand, we don’t want to impose our will on others, which runs counter to our values. On the other hand, many of the strategies and tactics that can help us respond to oppression and injustice are unpalatable to the majority of our fellow citizens. The impoverishment of millions and the destruction of our ecosystems demand that we act decisively. What standards will enable us to challenge these systems of misery without resorting to the authoritarian means we condemn?

Some of us have developed a practice of prioritizing consent as a provisional answer to this dilemma. This discourse comes to us through educators who promote mutually respectful sexuality in the midst of a rape culture. Applying this discourse within our intimate relationships and beyond, we seek to respect others’ autonomy by not subjecting them to actions that violate their consent—that is, by staying within the boundaries of others’ desires as they determine and articulate them. We reject coercion of any form, whether physical, verbal, economic, or otherwise, and assert our self-determination to participate in or abstain from whatever we choose.

Yet outside of the sexual realm, consent discourse doesn’t always offer a sufficient framework with which to evaluate direct action tactics and strategy. Knowing whether an action is consensual may not suffice to indicate whether it is effective or worthwhile. Aware that most people oppose some of our tactics, we don’t plan our actions on the basis of consent, yet we don’t aspire to become a vanguard, either. Furthermore, since we can only desire on the basis of what we know, we’re unlikely to achieve liberation from simply fulfilling the desires we have now without changing the conditions that produced them. So how else might we conceive of our political project, if not through the lens of consent?

A close examination of our activities reveals that in setting out to transform our society, we appear to be operating according to a logic of seduction. Are we prepared to accept the implications of this reframing? Let’s begin by examining the politics of consent and their limitations.

**IS CONSENT ENOUGH?**

At first glance, the notion of basing our political practice on a theory of consent makes intuitive sense. What’s our critique of the state? It’s a body that wields power over us even to the point of life and death, and yet no one ever asked us if we wanted to be governed. Elections don’t even begin to offer us the meaningful alternatives true consent would require. It’s been said before: our desires will never fit in their ballot boxes. We promote the principle of voluntary association—the freedom to form what-ever groups and collectives we want without being compelled to participate in any. We never had the chance to say no to capitalism, to government, to police, to all the systems of hierarchy that impose...
their rule—so clearly those can't be consensual in any meaningful way. As we do away with the coercive systems that dominate our lives, we can reconstruct new social relations based on consent: a world in which no one controls anyone else, in which we can determine our own destinies.

It makes sense… doesn't it? Certainly, this discourse of consent offers a compelling way to imagine the world we want to live in. But how does it serve as a strategy for dislodging this one? It's difficult to envision a political practice that stringently respects the consent of all people while simultaneously destroying the fabric of our hierarchical society. If we insist on the unity of means and ends, we have to dismantle coercive institutions and social relations. While non-coercive processes can build a non-coercive society. Abandoning this vision could undermine the very basis of our politics. Yet if we don't succeed in uprooting capitalism and the state, the bases of economic and political coercion, we'll never arrive at a society in which a consent-based framework could actually be tenable.

How can we resolve these dilemmas? Let's look more closely at what we mean by consent, and how it operates in our society and in our movements.

CONSENSUS REALITY, NONVIOLENCE, LIBERAL CONSENT

Power and consent are critically intertwined. Power imbalances make it difficult or impossible to give consent freely. Can a much older person have consentual sex with a very young person? Can someone who is subjected to another's economic control freely consent to that person's desire? For consent to be meaningful, it must be possible to say no, any time and for any reason, on one's own terms. When the state monopolizes the use of force and the economy, consent is constrained by far more than traffic laws and zoning regulations; social norms, gender roles, and innumerable other systems shape how we act, and each way we're constrained provides new terrain for transformation.

The key lies in challenging what's taken for granted in a way that opens up the possibility to act differently, and to imagine how the world would be different if those rules and borders were no longer fixed.

Consensus reality constitutes the ruling class's coordinated attempt to uphold their dominance and our exploitation as efficiently as possible. Capitalism secures its efficiency; it is the system that currently provides the largest number of people with incentive to participate in their own exploitation. It offers us a series of options that are presented as a lack of agency over our lives. The trump card of capitalist democracy is the idea that everyone's consent is respected in a marketplace of ideas within which desires can be freely expressed and influenced. We can argue that this marketplace isn't truly free—corporations control the mass media, some views get more airtime than others, thus the consent is not fully informed—but this doesn't get at the heart of things. Obviously, equal access to means of influence on a level playing field is impossible in capitalist society. But it is the systems of power, not just speech, that determine the framework within which we experience reality. All political systems—whether anarchist, fascist, or democratic—produce particular patterns of social relations. The advent of these systems does not; it cannot transcend the framework in which it occurs.1 Free speech discourse offers each of us our own box of colored chalk to decorate the cement blocks around our feet, and calls us into equality; whether we can waste away doesn't even enter into the picture. Our experience of what we are and aren't able to do determines our sense of what is possible far more than our ideas and discourses. To shift the boundaries of our imagination and desires, we have to find ways to make new experiences possible beyond the bounds of consensus reality.

Take, for example, the debates about violence and nonviolence in every organizing coalition and Occupy movement. What is violence? At first glance, the term seems to have no more
c- live. Sometimes it can be as simple as doing things in the street without permits, or using a park or building for an entirely new purpose. Disobedience is crucial to transformation; nothing opens up a sense of possibility like literally breaking the rules. But our behavior is constrained by far more than traffic laws and zoning regulations; social norms, gender roles, and innumerable other systems shape how we act, and each way we're constrained provides new terrain for transformation. The key lies in challenging what's taken for granted in a way that opens up the possibility to act differently, and to imagine how the world would be different if those rules and borders were no longer fixed.

Consensus reality ensures that rebellion isn't restricted to activists, scenesters, or any other particular group. Only when revolt spreads so widely that it can no longer be quarantined to a specific demographic will anarchy more permanently be in the hearts and minds of revolutionaries. Only when revolutions emerge from the spaces we create feeling more powerful. We win when the ruptures of possibility we open prove impossible to close.

WHEN SEDUCTION FAILS

Unfortunately, our actions don't always achieve these goals. Sometimes we try to cast spells of transformation and they fail.

Our efforts can go awry when they position the organizing cabal as the protagonists rather than the invitees we hope to seduce into participation. In these cases, our actions don't spread, but remain the province of a distinct group. For practitioners of transformation, the one whose agency counts—in contrast to rational discourse nor imposition by force. Here we maintain the spirit of consent discourse, asserting our respect for the wishes of others and opposition to coercion. We aspire to a world based on voluntary association, in which participation is based on our own free choice rather than force or manipulation, and thus we aim to prefigure that world through our methods of creative resistance.

Consensus reality treats the freedom as an illusion. It can take many forms: leaving the doors open in the occupied building, modeling mutual aid at public Really Really Free Markets, offering black bandanas and cans of paint as the march leaves the show. Of course, we can't literally invite others to participate in every action beforehand, either because they have to be organized clandestinely or because we honestly don't know what will happen. But we can shape our actions to maximize the agency of potential participants.

Seduction casts the invitee as the protagonist, the one whose agency counts—in contrast to consent discourse, which merely seeks permission. The whole point is for people to discover new desires, to want to do something they didn't want before; they have to be in the driver's seat for that to be possible. In this sense, we are using seduction to mean the opposite of its traditional negative connotation of trying to get something from people against their will or at their expense.

Seduction can fail. The inviting of the invitee fails to meet the desires of participants or bystanders. The failure of an unpleasant action doesn't stem from the fact that it failed to meet the desires of participants or bystanders. Rather, the action failed to enable subversive
There's another framework that seems to be implied by our current practice, whether or not we acknowledge it. This framework is seduction.

What is seduction? It's a rather unsavory concept, bringing to mind manipulative attempts to induce others to let themselves be used for one's own ends. In a sexual context, it can imply either a romantic, charismatic persuasive use of charm to propose a sexual encounter, or a way to trick someone into succumbing to one's advances. The connotations are discomfiting, but the salient factor is the implication that the seducer creates a desire, rather than simply unearthing it. It is this sense that we find most interesting in considering the problems of desire and consensus reality on the political level.

When we seduce, we present someone who ostensibly doesn't want something with a new situation in which they may want it after all. Whereas consent focuses on obtaining the go-ahead for an external action—‘Is this OK?’—seduction focuses internally, on desire: ‘Could you want this?’ Our practices of seduction don't aim to induce others to do things they don't want to do, but to induce others to want to do them, in the most meaningful sense: to want to take on all the risks and pleasures they entail.

Again, we don't believe that we can persuade everyone to consent to our dreams of revolution; not only is the deck stacked against us, but the dealer, the table, and the whole house. We don't buy into the idea that our goals are what everybody ‘really’ wants, nor do we assume that everyone would adopt our views if only they had access to all the right information. We don't claim to represent any one beyond ourselves, nor to stand in for any silent majority; in that sense, ours is not a democratic project. Nor do we, despairing of those things, decide that to be true to our principles we must give up on transforming society altogether and retreat into isolation among the few comrades with whom we can establish meaningful self-determined consensus. We don't think it's hopeless to resist in the face of the state and incorporated into our consensus reality.

ORDER

What is called violence is any violation of norms about legitimate use of force, norms dictated by the state and incorporated into our consensus reality. The debate about violence is really a coded discourse in which nonviolence stands in for consent; when we attempt to make space for autonomy and diversity of tactics, our opponents perceive us as disregarding consent simply for opposing the terms of consensus reality.

Let's observe how an anxious liberal from our local Occupy movement, dismayed by an illegal building occupation undertaken by autonomous occupiers, strives to distance the Occupy group from the occupation. He says to a reporter: “Our movement is nonviolent, it is peaceful, and it does not break the law.” The building occupation involved no physical violence, nor damage to property, nor anything that could be construed as violent even within his own definition, whereas the eviction by rifle-wielding thugs was violent enough to shock people across the political spectrum. How can we make sense of this seeming contradiction?

It seems that the meaningful sense of violence here is a rupture of consensus reality. This liberal wishes to communicate that the building occupation felt like a violation of his consent. Why? Because it was related to a current in which he felt invested, yet he had not been invited to participate in decision-making, and it involved actions that he personally disdained. Of course, we undertook the occupation autonomously precisely for that reason: we knew we could never achieve consensus in the public general assemblies to do something that so dramatically challenged consensus reality. Whether or not the occupation hurt anyone was beside the point: its “violence” had less to do with its literal effects than its challenge to consensus reality. To him, such a challenge constituted a violation of collective consent.

Let's call this liberal consent: the notion that we must adhere tactically to the most conservative path forward, one that doesn't assume desire to be fixed, that doesn't rely on liberal consent. We neither wish to impose our will on others by force, nor to disregard their desires. Instead, we want to perform a kind of magic, an alchemical operation. We want to induce desires, not simply fulfill them.

Our greatest strength is not the coherence and reason of our ideology, but the passionate actions we undertake and the ungovernable lives we lead. Let's not try to convert people to anarchism; let's set out, with mischievous glee, to infect everyone around us with the anarchy that flows in our veins. Let's produce situations in which anarch is possible, even likely—even desirable—to those who might not feel any inclination towards it today.

Of course, this is a violation of liberal consent: the right to be left alone to one's desires as they have been produced amidst the domination of state and capital. But is it really better to abandon our friends and neighbors to the mediocrity of consensus reality? Is it more responsible for us to deny and suppress the subversive desires that flow through us, policing ourselves so as to save the authorities the trouble? Or can we instead open up space for those desires to transform us, and in turn drive us to transform the world?

TRANSFORMATION, INVITATION, CONTAGION

How does seduction work? We hypothesize that seduction unfolds via three processes: transformation, invitation, and contagion. We transform circumstances, creating space for new possibilities and thus new desires to flourish; we invite others to participate in these new situations, to experiment with different modes of action and desire; and we infect others with curiosity, an insatiable desire for freedom, and the means to experiment towards it.

We strive for transformation because if we desire on the basis of what we know, we can only induce new desires that exceed the confines of our current reality by shifting the conditions in which we herence than the Supreme Court definition of obscenity. I don't define it, but I know it when I see it. This makes it an especially dangerous tool when wielded by liberals to control group norms. But recalling that violence springs from the same root as violation helps us get at the meaning behind how the word is used. What is called violence is any violation of norms about legitimate use of force, norms dictated by the state and incorporated into our consensus reality. The debate about violence is really a coded discourse in which nonviolence stands in for consent; when we attempt to make space for autonomy and diversity of tactics, our opponents perceive us as disregarding consent simply for opposing the terms of consensus reality.

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LET'S CALL THIS LIBERAL CONSENT: THE NOTION THAT WE MUST ADHERE TACTICALLY TO THE MOST CONSERVATIVE
Our ideal is not a world without conflict, but a world in which the violence is woven so seamlessly into the very fabric of state legitimacy that the state is fundamentally the very condition of every “nonviolent” movement and revolution they struggle and insurrection against the state, the gains they accept the boundaries of legitimacy decreed by consensus reality and partisans against it.

In short, the liberal notion of consent is a barrier to revolution. By definition, breaking consensus reality cannot be consensual. We have to move beyond political consent discourse to imagine liberating strategies for transforming reality.

Can We Rescue the Political Discourse of Consent?

So liberal consent is a tool for defending consensus reality, useless to our project of liberation. But that doesn’t necessarily mean we have to give up on the discourse of consent itself. Are there ways to respond to these objections within a consent-based framework? Let’s explore some of the possible responses to liberal consent rhetoric.

Decision-making should be weighted to prioritize the most affected. According to this principle, the greater the impact a decision will have on a person, the more leverage he or she should have in the decision-making process. For instance, the opinions of a poor neighborhood’s long-term residents should count for more than those of developers or wealthier newcomers when determining whether to build new condominiums.

Bearing this in mind, how consensual an action is depends not on whether every citizen, equal under the law, would check yes or no about it on a ballot, rather, individuals’ feelings are weighted proportionally according to how the consequences will impact them. This reframing sidesteps some of the problems of negotiating political consent across power differentials. However, it preserves the notion that our interests coincide enough to be forged into a consensus.

But this realization is terrifying, but it opens up new ways of understanding the revolutionary project in relation to the consensus reality arrayed against us.

The nature of desire is complex and centrifugal, in contrast to the simplifying and centripetal nature of interests. The traditional approach of the left is for organizers to assist constituencies in winning victories that build power, which will presumably be deployed towards increasingly radical ends.

The goals of these victories are generally framed in terms of the interests of the constituency, not their desires. This is a clever trick, as interests appear to be an objective rather than subjective matter.

It is easier for an outsider managerial class to get away with defining and representing them. Interests can be framed as unitary, coherent, and integrative, whereas desires are multiply, inchoate, contradictory. Identity groups share interests; friends and lovers share desires. Interests are composed of calcified blocks of desire standardized to make sense within consensus reality.

Not only is desire far more complex and unstable than our discourses allow, it’s also shaped by the conditions of our misery and exploitation. Even amid contradictions and chaos, the range of what is possible to desire rarely escapes the confines of consensus reality. Who really imagines that in a free world, we’d dream of ergonomic chairs for our cubicles, more TV channels and brands of detergent, longer chains and softer cages? This is not to demean the struggles of those who fight for better conditions amid contradictions and chaos, it is to remain suspicious of a project framed in such transparent manipulative terms.

What sets us apart is that we strive to create a world in which every person can realize her unique desires from some internal vault, nor a pseudo-Buddhist project of extinguishing desire on an individual level while the world burns. What sets us apart is that we strive to create a world in which everyone can imagine the transformations that can open pathways out of consensus reality.

Wait, there’s nothing liberating about attempting to induce desires in others. That’s the function of the advertising industry, the lever of demand that has driven capitalism over the past century. Democracy purports to be a marketplace of ideas where we can have a society where we can talk about what we want and then decide; different configurations of desire are constantly at war. Ad firms don’t just create specific desires, they enforce a mode of desiring that can be routed through the consumer economy.

Propaganda, subliminal messaging, induced addiction, outright violence: these comprise a brutal arsenal aimed at us every moment of the day. Around the globe, the military clears the path for neoliberal pillaging, while NGOs get into the business of inducing people to want to be successful at generating content that can be exchanged on the global market. Ought we not be suspicious of a project framed in such transparent manipulative terms?

As grim as it looks, this vista reveals that if we are not partisans of certain modes of desiring, we will remain objects rather than subjects within these desiring wars. We cannot retreat into essentialist notions of unearthing our “true” desires from some internal vault, nor a pseudo-Buddhist project of extinguishing desire on an individual level while the world burns. What sets us apart is that we strive to create a world in which every person can realize her unique desires from some internal vault, nor a pseudo-Buddhist project of extinguishing desire on an individual level while the world burns.

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Not everyone emerges from the womb with her politics fully formed—most of us had some sort of experience that opened us to a sense of possibility we hadn’t previously been able to imagine. At age 18, during the height of the anti-Vietnam protests, I heard a vague rumor that I should show up at a concert. I did, and lo and behold, when it ended a group of maniacs appeared with drums and banners, and before I knew it I’d joined 200 others marching in the street, permits be damned. We were unstoppable. The blood boiled in my veins and I howled ecstatically until I lost my voice. Things were never the same again.

Now, I’d participated in polite permitted marches before. If you’d asked me if I desired to go on a feisty unpermitted midnight march, I probably would have thought it sounded cool. But I didn’t actively desire it beforehand; if I’d been forthrightly invited, I might have declined out of anxiousness or indifference. The desire was generated by the context, the mystery, and the experience itself. I suspect that the key was that it was unexpected and illicit: It took me beyond myself, opening some door of desire that couldn’t be shut. Had someone asked me in advance whether I would consent to participate, that might have declined out of anxiousness or indifference. The desire was generated by the context, the mystery, and the experience itself. Trust me, I’m as uncomfortable with the implications of this as you are. But we need to look honestly at the transformative experiences that opened the door for us into radical politics and think about how we can construct and open those types of doors for others. If we’re not going to be a vanguard and we’re not going to convince everyone to join us through mere rational discourse, this might be what we’ve got to work with.

In concluding that the consent framework can’t accommodate our political needs, we’re not endorsing the violation of consent, nor throwing consent out as a priority. Rather, the consent framework has not been sufficient to transcend the self-defeating dichotomy between respecting consent to such an extent that we can’t overthrow capitalism or dismiss the chotomy between either respecting consent to such an extent that we can’t overthrow capitalism or dismissing the need for self-defense. This dichotomy is one that we need to transcend. The desire, with humans as the medium. Individuals don’t desire things; whole societies produce and circulate desires, even if those desires remain submerged in most people. The fundamental unit of our analysis is not the individual human being, but the desire, with humans as the medium.

How can we conceive of desire and self-hood as they relate to consent and political action? The existing consent discourse presupposes static notions of self and desire. It presumes that desire is monolithic, composed of a single thrust rather than multiple pulls in different directions. When we have multiple desires, the desire that garners the plurality in our internal electoral process is assumed to be the only one that counts. Consent discourse presumes that what we want is knowable and can be articulated within the framework of our shared reality.

In reality, the desires we experience are not fixed or unitary. They shift constantly based on our experiences and contexts. The desire isopaque, contradictory, and divergent, surprising us with their diversity, frustrating us with their mutability. They resist our attempts to confine or domesticate them. They simply can’t fit into a two-dimensional binary model of consent, wherein we either want something or we

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which conflicts don’t produce hierarchies and oppression. 

ful for preventing actions or challenging their validity after the fact than for initiating them. The impacts of our actions ripple out far beyond our ability to trace them or the range of lives they will touch. We cannot even hope to be aware of every person who would be impacted by a decision, much less solicit meaningful input from each of them to confirm or deny consensus. In practical terms, expanding the participation in decision-making to everyone affected would either require resorting to majority-rule democracy—not a consent-based framework—or accepting the impossibility of ever making decisions.

We have to confront the reality that broad consensus on many issues simply doesn’t exist. We might be able to agree about what to cook for dinner, but on the real questions about how to organize society and distribute resources, no consensus is possible today. In a class society stratified by white supremacy and patriarchy, our interests are fundamentally in conflict. Certainly we share many interests in common, and we can imagine worlds in which people weren’t pitted against one another in contests for status and survival. But we will not be able to desert this world by consensus.

We’re acting in self-defense. As this reasoning goes, the operation of oppressive institutions constitutes an attack on us, and we don’t need the consent of our attackers to organize ourselves. This form of action is always on a literal, direct, individual level, as in that specific Starbucks window makes my individual life increasingly precarious and impossible. In a hopelessly complex global economy that masks the root causes of these attacks, it creates a false choice. If we want to launch a defensive counterattack will seem either symbolic or misdirected. Still, in this sense, direct action can be framed as defending ourselves against violations of our consent by state and capital. But the rhetoric of direct action as self-defense doesn’t offer us much guidance for how to move forward. In this model, state and capital are the protagonists, and the various formulations of we that we self-defend the mere objects of their actions.

We make such supporters into a sort of prosthesis for our activities, implicitly writing off those who don’t. We make such supporters into a sort of prosthesis for our activities, implicitly writing off those who don’t. For instance, the workers favored by IWW organizers, the West Virginia locals courted by opponents of mountaintop removal, or the extras in hip hop videos that insurrectionists hope will join them in the streets.

This is not only tokenizing, but dangerous, as it can lead us to overestimate popular support for our actions. Yet it is supported by a variety of rationalizations. Just because we don’t see public support doesn’t mean it isn’t there; the people who are most marginalized—who, we assume, are most likely to support our unpopular actions—are the least free to express that support publicly; and so on. There is some truth in these arguments. But when we gamble on this imagined solidarity as an effort to outweigh by proxy the consent of the unrepresented—now represented by our presumed affinity with them—we’re just deluding ourselves.

Decision-making must be broadened to include all the people impacted. Often, many of those who will be impacted by supposedly consensual decisions do not have appropriate leverage on them. For instance, the university’s board of governors can decide by consensus to raise tuition, but what kind of consensus is that without the participation of the students who’ll be paying it? If decisions included all stakeholders and elites couldn’t impose them by force, wouldn’t there be hope for a politics of consent? Unfortunately, this framework is more useful for preventing actions or challenging their validity after the fact than for initiating them. The impacts of our actions ripple out far beyond our ability to trace them or the range of lives they will touch. We cannot even hope to be aware of every person who would be impacted by a decision, much less solicit meaningful input from each of them to confirm or deny consensus. In practical terms, expanding the participation in decision-making to everyone affected would either require resorting to majority-rule democracy—not a consent-based framework—or accepting the impossibility of ever making decisions.

We have to confront the reality that broad consensus on many issues simply doesn’t exist. We might be able to agree about what to cook for dinner, but on the real questions about how to organize society and distribute resources, no consensus is possible today. In a class society stratified by white supremacy and patriarchy, our interests are fundamentally in conflict. Certainly we share many interests in common, and we can imagine worlds in which people weren’t pitted against one another in contests for status and survival. But we will not be able to desert this world by consensus.

We’re acting in self-defense. As this reasoning goes, the operation of oppressive institutions constitutes an attack on us, and we don’t need the consent of our attackers to organize ourselves. This form of action is always on a literal, direct, individual level, as in that specific Starbucks window makes my individual life increasingly precarious and impossible. In a hopelessly complex global economy that masks the root causes of these attacks, it creates a false choice. If we want to launch a defensive counterattack will seem either symbolic or misdirected. Still, in this sense, direct action can be framed as defending ourselves against violations of our consent by state and capital. But the rhetoric of direct action as self-defense doesn’t offer us much guidance for how to move forward. In this model, state and capital are the protagonists, and the various formulations of we that we self-defend the mere objects of their actions. We can only react, not strategize new initiatives. Furthermore, the framework of self-defense is based in
One of the implications of this analysis is that we must unflinchingly recognize conflict as a reality. The vision we’re putting forward aims not just to create a world in which all is consensual. We strive to prioritize each other’s consent as much as possible, while recognizing that sometimes we really are in conflict, and we have to acknowledge conflicts rather than sweeping them under the rug of an imposed consensus. Our ideal is not a world without conflict, but a world in which conflicts don’t produce hierarchies and oppression. We envision associations that can come together and break apart according to our desires; unlike the state, these would require no imposed consensus.

Consent has to be informed. In all consent-based ethical systems, medical, sexual, and otherwise, authentic consent requires full knowledge of the implications of a decision. On the political level, this criticism goes, if we all had access to complete information, we would make decisions differently. This is the basic hypothesis of liberalism: the best of all possible worlds will result when people have access to all relevant information and the means to discuss it openly in order to make rational decisions. The fatal flaw in this reasoning is that it fails to take power dynamics into account. When access to money and property determines our ability to act, under the rule of a state that reserves the sole right to employ violence, knowledge is not in fact power. Furthermore, it seems to demand a politics of total transparency, which would either preclude illegal activity or consign us all to the certainty of prison. An informed consent framework neither enables us to imagine how to achieve a consensus for revolution nor suffices to determine how much information to share with whom about the actions we take to fight for it.

Also, what does this imply in the realm of sexuality? Remember, our goal in acknowledging the limitations of consent discourse is not to discard it entirely but to determine where it can take us and where else we need to go. Consent provides us with crucial tools for treating each other with care in sexual interactions. At the same time, we can challenge simplistic notions of desire: some of our most deeply erotic moments occur not when we finally achieve a desire previously fixed within us, but when we experience unexpected and unprecedented forms of pleasure. Perhaps insights from our discourse of political seduction can offer perspective on our sexuality, but we maintain our allegiance to consent discourse in sex. Our critique of political consent discourse isn’t abstract, but based on its tactical shortcomings, the limitations of what it allows us to do and imagine. By contrast, sexual consent discourse has proven its utility in our daily lives, inducing us to examine our desires and transform how we relate to each other erotically.