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Wages of Fear in the Crisis City

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Fear is one of the defining political emotions of capitalist modernity, and amidst the proliferating social antagonisms that mark the neoliberal present, filmmakers, sociologists, activists, philosophers, and pundits see fear everywhere. If fear has become a way of life, the contemporary mediatized city is seen by many to be one of its most prominent and productive social laboratories. Today's fears are often attributed to three intertwined processes. First, the growing weaponization of cities carried out in the name of security. Second, the growing insecurity of everyday life brought about by global economic crisis. And, third, the ways in which fear circulates in and exacerbates people's fears in our increasingly precarious everyday life. Yet, while there is a growing body of scholarship that sees fear to be such a politically significant emotion, the way it is studied often both naturalizes and exteriorizes fear from politics. As a result, fear's more complex and antagonistic status as both a social relation and an arena of political action is submerged. In this talk, I raise the productive role of social struggle and propose a different approach to thinking about, and acting in, the city of fear. I propose a framework for thinking about our much-discussed "culture of fear" politically through an analysis of struggles for the reconstruction of the social commons amidst a process of accelerated enclosure. By taking social struggles as our starting point, the city of fear becomes recognizable as a platform for social action, a place for the elaboration of a theory and practice of emancipatory politics, a staging ground for the re-appropriation of the city.