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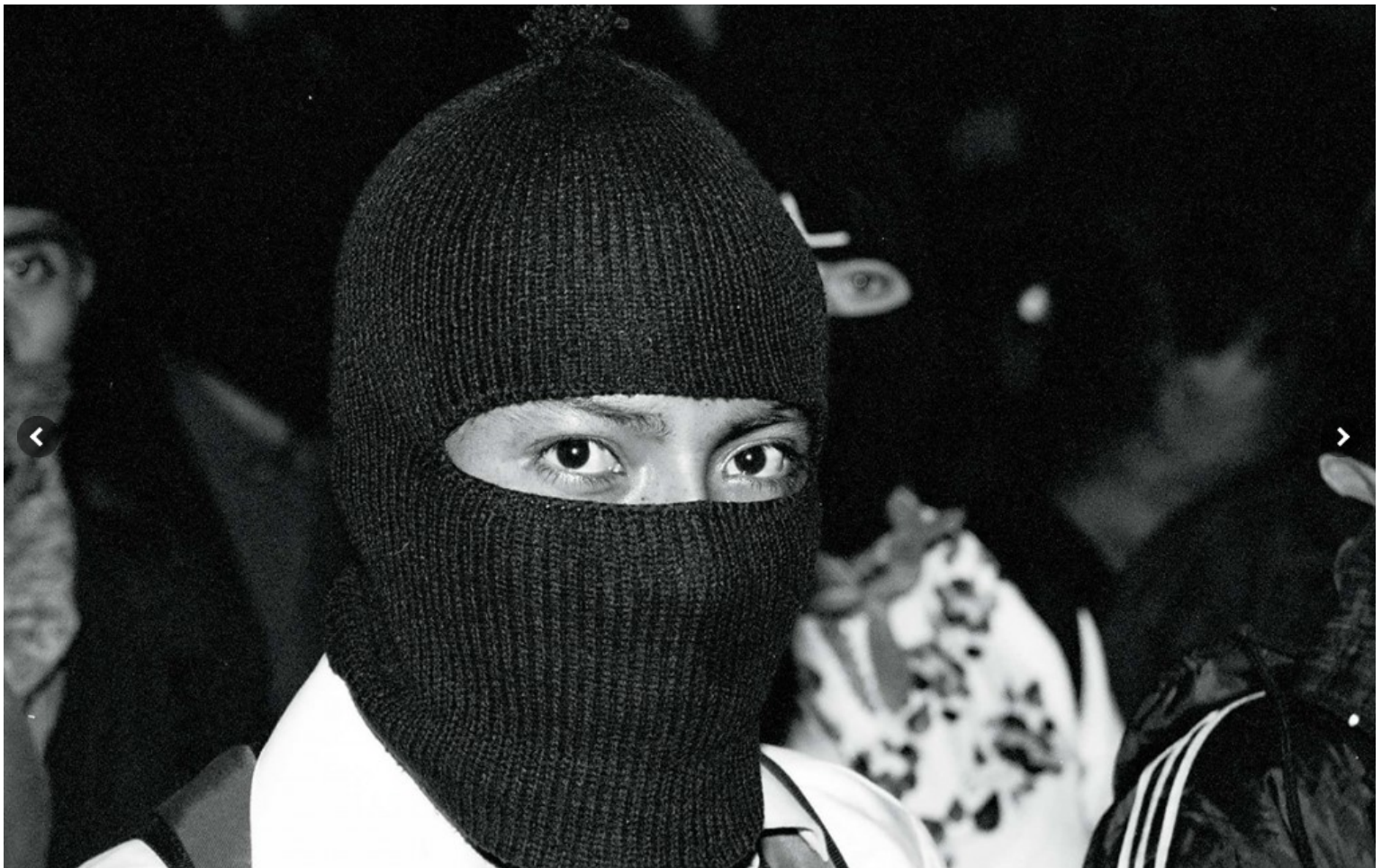


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political theory of the mask



otherproject-65 by seaghn higgins

by thomas nail

Larvatus prodeo [Masked, I advance]

—René Descartes

Radical political struggle today wears a mask. From motorcycle helmets worn by German Autonomists to Guy Fawkes masks worn by the Occupy Movement, it is possible to identify a practical and theoretical convergence of the mask with anti-representational political movements of the last twenty years. While it may be tempting to chalk this phenomenon up to chance or trend, this article offers a different account: the political use of masks as a strategic critique of the currently dominant form of political subjectivity based on identity. Political parties and states, no less than the capitalist market, require some form of identity *to represent*: a citizen, a voter, a consumer, etc. Even minorities are compelled to display identities to be represented. If they want to be counted by the state, they must show their faces. But if the political problem of our time is to become not simply the problem of *who* is

represented by parties, states, and capital, but the unraveling/undoing of the apparatus of *representation* itself, a new strategy is called for: the mask¹.

By wearing masks and costumes, global social movements reject the traditional presupposition that political minorities are seeking a party to represent them precisely by refusing to allow visible signs of participants' specific identities to be identified. The history of representation has so far been one of misrepresentation. In contrast to the opposition of different minority identities vying for representation, the use of masks disidentifies these movements and allows them to speak for themselves, in their own name. Instead of embracing the first person singular "I" (the self-identical subject), masks and costumes also allow these movements to create a new form of third person subjectivity: "we". Instead of being isolated by their identity, the mask allows for a new form of universalism, since the mask can be worn by anyone.

the global legacy of the political mask

The use of masks as a political technology against representation has a global history unique to the radical Left. This history begins with the use of masks in the 1970s and 80s by the German and Italian Autonomists, but was launched into global popularity by the Zapatistas². On January 1st, 1994—the day NAFTA went into effect—a group of indigenous peoples from Chiapas called the Zapatistas marched on San Cristobal de las Casas with their faces covered by black ski masks. They demanded their autonomy from the state and the return of their land from the capitalist ranchers who stole it. "In order for them to see us," Subcomandante Marcos says, "we covered our faces; so that they would call us by name, we gave up our names; we bet the present to have a future; and to live . . . we died"³. While Marcos has given several different reasons for the use of these masks over the years, from making sure no one tries to become the leader to portraying Mexico's covering up of its real Mexico, the collective practice of masking has also produced a very specific kind of revolutionary subjectivity immanent not to a consciousness who represents an "I" to itself, but to the political event of Zapatismo itself⁴. "Because," as Subcomandante Marcos says, "here in the EZLN the mistakes are conjugated in the first person singular and the achievements in the third person plural"⁶.

Subsequently, this practice has been taken up not only by Zapatista solidarity groups at almost every alter-globalization summit protest, but also expanded into different groups of people wearing similar masks or colors to create a "bloc" effect (the black bloc, pink bloc, white bloc, clown bloc, etc.)⁷. The Occupy movement continues this legacy⁸. But as a structural critique of party, state, and capitalist (mis)representation, and as an experiment in direct democracy, the Occupy movement also adds one new mask to the mix: the Guy Fawkes mask. In 1982–1989, Alan Moore, a British graphic artist and self-identified anarchist, wrote a graphic novel called *V for Vendetta* in which the main character "V" blows up Parliament and asks the people of London to wear Guy Fawkes masks for social change⁹. The image of thousands of masked protestors at the capital was something Moore borrowed from watching German Autonomists in their "black blocs" on the news in the late 80s. In 2006 the cartoon face of Guy Fawkes (inspired by *V for Vendetta*) was attached to a stick figure on the internet message board 4chan and given the name of "Epic Fail Guy." On February 10, 2008, the hacking group, calling itself "Anonymous," picketed Church of Scientology centers around the world while wearing Guy Fawkes masks and refusing to give their names. Finally, in 2011, the group Anonymous joined the OWS movement in New York's Zuccotti Park and helped organize social networking and technical communications. Anonymous brought the Fawkes masks with them and soon the masks appeared at Occupy demonstrations all over the world¹⁰.

If the current revolutionary sequence is an anti-representational one, it is also a masked one.

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1. As the Zapatistas say, "Anyone can be a Zapatista." [↪]

2. The Autonomists used motorcycle helmets and padded armor to protect themselves from police brutality during protests against squatter evictions, nuclear power, and restrictions on abortion—among other things. Practically, they not only made it difficult for police to isolate "leaders," but according to the police, the masks acted as "passive weaponry" against police violence. Theoretically, Autonomism rejected the legitimacy of state and capitalist representation in favor of anarchist and Marxist principles of direct democracy. Autonomists and their masks were not asking the state for representation, but calling for its abolition. [↪]

3. *Marcos, Ya Basta!*, 115. [↪]

4. "The main reason is that we have to be careful that nobody tries to be the main leader. The masks are meant to prevent this from happening." Marcos quoted in: Kenneth Maxwell and Neil Harvey, "Review of *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 March 1999, 6 <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/54737/kenneth-maxwell/the-chiapas-rebellion-the-struggle-for-land-and-democracy>> (accessed 10 February 2012). [↪]

5. "I will take off my ski mask when Mexican society takes off its own mask, the one it uses to cover up the real Mexico." Marcos quoted in interview by: Elaine Katzenberger, ed., *First World, Ha Ha Ha!: The Zapatista Challenge* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 70. [↪]

6. Gloria Muñoz Ramírez, *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement*, trans. Laura Carlsen and Alejandro Reyes Arias (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008), 307. [↪]

7. Some of the benefits of using these masks at summit protests are: (1) it conceals one's identity from police cameras; (2) it makes it harder for police to "single out" individual protestors to arrest; and (3) they create a visual feeling of solidarity and equality. [↪]

8. One can find protestors wearing Zapatistas-style ski masks, and occasionally organized into colored "blocs," for defensive purposes. [↪]

9. The use of masks was not part of the original Gunpowder Plot in 1605 to assassinate King James, to which the Guy Fawkes mask refers. [↪]

10. Overnight, the Guy Fawkes mask became the best selling mask on Amazon.com. Nick Carbone, (2011-08-29). "How Time Warner Profits from the 'Anonymous' Hackers". *Time*. Retrieved 2011-08-30 from: <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/08/29/how-time-warner-profits-from-the-anonymous-hackers/> [↪]

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