Since the development of “cultural activism” as a dominant tendency in the activism of the contemporary global justice movement, there has been a massive proliferation of theories which attempt to engage with and understand it as a practice. Accompanying this has been an equal proliferation of neologisms: activist-art (Raunig), art-activism (Felshin), crimethinc (Anon., Days of War), cultural activism (Trapese Collective), culture-jamming (Dery), dark matter (Sholette), the eros-effect (Katsiaficas), ethical spectacle (Duncombe), interventionism (Sholette and Thompson), Kommunikationsguerilla (Guerilla Communications) or Spaßguerilla (Guerilla Prank) (Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A. Gruppe), poetic terrorism (Bey), tactical frivolity (Evans), the temporary autonomous zone (Bey), transversal activism (Raunig). 2

However, this multiplication of critical terms is, in many ways, a sign of the very elusiveness of “cultural activism” as a concept. Many (but by no means all) of these approaches are indebted to critical traditions which, having developed out of different historical circumstances, remain at odds with many of the assumptions which underlie the practices of cultural activism. This article will attempt to examine some of these theoretical assumptions by seeking to uncover the meaning of one of cultural activism’s central theoretical turning points—the notion of irony. The notion of irony appears as central in almost every account of any particular act of cultural activism, whatever its level of theoretical sophistication.

In explaining their engagement with culture and politics, cultural activist groups often place themselves in relation to the revolutionary avant-garde from Dada and Surrealism to the Situationists and beyond. Indeed, this emphasis on creating distance through displacement, dissonance, fracture, détournement, the combination of heterogeneous elements etc. draws on a central current extending from the
revolutionary Dadaist and Surrealist avant-garde to the present. Such ideas are also indebted to the fact that this avant-garde develops its own theoretical engagement with this approach and its revolutionary potential in the theory of revolution-as-festival, taken up and reworked by various groups and thinkers throughout the twentieth century, which contemporary activist groups often also take as a central point of influence. In both critical writing on such activism and in the perspectives of activists themselves, the notions of irony and festival have often been interpreted simply in terms of joy and laughter, of a riotous table-turning and ridiculing of authority. In academic discourse, the English-language reception of the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin, which has not only emphasized his notion of carnival, but also often employed it in an unexamined and even tokenistic fashion, is perhaps much to blame here. However, within the activist milieu, out of which groups such as Reclaim the Streets emerged, we might also look to the influential, but often rather simplistic formulations of Post-Left Anarchy, in the writing of Hakim Bey and Bob Black, which privileged laughter, laziness, and the spontaneous revolt of desire in terms which were often excessively simple.

Such perspectives are often limited in terms of practical, tactical action and engagement, and fall back into an enthusiastic, celebratory assertion of the power of laughter, or a call for new inspiring myths, radical faith, or revolutionary romanticism. However, if we look again at the notion of irony which is central to these critical perspectives, we can make out the emergence of a number of other more difficult, but less utopian, dynamics and possibilities for cultural activism. Most of the attempts to define cultural activism cited above emphasize reversal and irony as fundamental to its workings as a means of transcendence. However, the very notion of a revolutionary, transcendent “table-turning” has its own rather illustrious philosophical lineage.

**The World Turned Upside Down**

Friedrich Engels famously claimed that Marx set Hegel’s upside-down system upon its feet. This occurs most clearly in Marx’s debt to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, in which Marx draws out the dialectic between the working class and capital by which the working class discovers its own separate creative power. A detailed account of the various twists and turns of Hegel’s logic exceeds the bounds of this article, but a short summary is possible. The dialectical notion of self-overcoming has its origins in the famous chapter of Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Lordship and Bondage.” He argues, broadly, that the subject finds that “self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only so is it, in fact, self-consciousness” (110). He must therefore seek a mutually self-affirming relation with another subject. But having found it, this equilibrium is only temporary. These subjects’ wills to recognition are mutually exclusive and throw them into a struggle against each other. This struggle