

Small victories

Portland author Kevin Van Meter looks at the revolutionary heart behind everyday resistance

BY STEPHEN QUIRKE
STAFF WRITER

HBO is currently catching criticism for rolling out a new show called "Confederate" – an alternative history where slavery never ended because the Confederacy won the Civil War. Widespread criticism may very well end the show before it begins; last December A&E was forced to cancel a show called "Generation KKK" – a series that promised in-depth profiles of Klan families – after it was revealed that the crew had made cash payments to Klansmen.

To put the creative work at HBO into perspective, it helps to remember that there are ways in which the Confederates already won the Civil War – starting with the permitted rise of the KKK and the terrorism that instituted Jim Crow. According to historian James Loewen, the history that's been taught to Americans in school is largely the one promoted by the United Daughters of the Confederacy – one that goes out of its way to hide widespread resistance to slavery and undermines continued efforts at liberation.

Another possible reason Americans don't think about this resistance is that we typically don't talk about social change unless we see it happening on a grand-scale. Rebellion and revolution catch everyone's attention – the small acts that made them possible typically do not.

It's only in recent years that these small acts have begun to get their due. In 1985, James C. Scott coined the phrase "everyday resistance" in his book "Weapons of the Weak – Everyday Acts of Peasant Resistance." One method of resistance uncovered by Scott was the simple act of running away – a tactic used repeatedly by slaves in the Americas.

Now, local activist and scholar Kevin Van Meter has made an original contribution to this study in "Guerrillas of Desire: Notes on Everyday Resistance and Organizing to Make a Revolution Possible," published by AK Press and the Institute for Anarchist Studies.

Part history and part theory, "Guerrillas of Desire" brings together moments as diverse as the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, to wildcat factory strikes in Michigan, to peasant rebellions in Europe to the feminist revolt against housework. All of these struggles, says Van Meter, are joined by their efforts to resist imposed work, and in doing so, they fight to create more time for all the things the world actually needs – including the ability to thoughtfully care for each other.

On August 10, Van Meter will be speaking at 7:30 p.m. at Powell's Books, 3723 SE Hawthorne Blvd.

We sat down with Van Meter to discuss his



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thoughts on everyday resistance and why he's convinced that progressive organizers should pay more attention to it.

Stephen Quirke: Your book describes capitalism as a structure that imposes work and shows the various ways work can be refused in different contexts. Why is it important to think about capitalism and resistance to it in this specific way?

Kevin Van Meter: In "Guerrillas of Desire" I argue that the central operating mechanism in a capitalist society is the imposition of work, both in its waged form, as we usually think of it, but also in its unwaged form as unwaged housework – that is, reproducing workers ability to work – and social reproduction – meaning, the work of reproducing the

larger society. We will spend more time working in our lives than doing any other activity besides sleeping, and if you combine the time working and the time recovering from working, there is nothing else that we will spend more time doing between birth and death.

As it turns out, what most people do all day is pretty terrible, or unnecessary, or not fulfilling, or not conducive to creating a just and equitable society. When looking at the last 500 years of capitalism – of chattel slavery, those employed in the agricultural sector, and those working in fields, factories, workshops as well as bedrooms, kitchens, classrooms, and now offices and the larger service economy – I've found a ceaseless, unending refusal of work. If we live in a society that honors work, that sees work and our working lives as definite factors in our self-

understanding and self-worth, then why are so many people refusing the imposition of work in small ways – stealing office supplies, taking longer breaks, feigning illness, slacking off, finding quicker ways to accomplish work tasks as to make the work easier or more enjoyable? I think this is an important question to answer.

S.Q.: How does this relate to the title, "Guerrillas of Desire"?

K.V.M.: Human beings desire all sorts of things, from human touch and companionship, to contributing to society and being productive with friends and neighbors to seeing themselves as part of something larger than themselves and their immediate family. I see these desires as a striving for more than the contemporary society can provide. Because we live in a class-based capitalist society, how many people are forced to work at crummy jobs that shouldn't exist rather than contribute their passions and real talents to the world? How many people are too busy working at crummy jobs to contribute to the larger political, social, civil, and cultural society? I believe – no, I am convinced – that the desires that emerge from human beings speak to a world beyond this one.

S.Q.: Why do you encourage readers to think about small and discrete acts, as opposed to self-conscious rebellion?

K.V.M.: I ask readers to think about small and discreet acts rather than larger social movements or rebellions since these are common, everyday – and taking place all the time. Actually, everyday acts of resistance outnumber self-conscious rebellious acts a thousand or possibly a million fold. Self-conscious rebellious acts and uprisings are exceedingly rare, especially in a society so rife with domination and control. The question I always ask is not why are people rebelling, but why are people not rebelling more. And when we start to look at everyday life, we begin to see how all sorts of people, in all kinds of jobs, in all areas of life are rebelling and trying to create a world of their own making.

S.Q.: You argue that "a generalized revolt against work already exists." How is this occurring?

K.V.M.: We live in a society where everyone must work. If you don't work to obtain a wage you starve, and you aren't granted clothing or shelter. And, of course, we know from research conducted that many unhoused people are in fact working but just don't make enough money to afford rent. So in a society that forces most of its members to work at jobs that aren't fulfilling, that aren't democratic, that don't speak to their needs and talents and abilities and their possibility to grow, or when they are fulfilling we don't have much control over them and the work process, we shouldn't be surprised that there are those of us who refuse this "regime of work." And looking at both the historical record and contemporary society, we find that it is the norm – more common than not – that there is a generalized revolt against the imposition of work at a particular job and to the idea that in order to live, to survive, we must work at jobs that are neither fulfilling for the individual nor beneficial for the larger society.

S.Q.: You suggest that organizers on the Left need to practice "reading the struggles" and circulating them. What does that look like in practice?

K.V.M.: While I believe that Left organizers



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can contribute to the creation of a better world, I think that we fool ourselves into thinking we are the catalyst or main progenitor of this new world. When we inquire into the actually existing needs and desires of working and poor peoples and discover the struggles taking place around survival and creating a life worth living, then we are grounded in how people are rather than what we want them to be. We need to listen to and record these struggles. Then by circulating them through stories, cultural products, political essays and presentations, we can begin to amplify and intervene in a new society, a new social order that is more just and fair than the one we now inhabit, as it emerges.

S.Q.: You really focus on the idea of self-liberation in your book. In the section on American slavery you emphasize that slaves in America were always in the process of liberating themselves, and this led to other people supporting them in various ways.

K.V.M.: Yes – and the historical research on this not only undermined the dominant narrative about Africans in the United States, historically and present, but it also undermined the narrative that there needed to be some party or leadership or union structure. Slaves, peasants and workers historically have really liberated themselves. The great failure of the contemporary union movement is the assumption that you're waiting for union leadership or a union organizer for people to resist on the job. People are not waiting for revolutionary consciousness. They're not waiting for the Left. People understand their situations and people are organized, just in order to survive in this terrible society that we live in. And we should honor them. And, arguably, that is the largest wellspring of any other form of resistance.

Nat Turner talks about this in his confessions – that what led him to rebellion was running away, and stealing, breaking tools, all these other acts. And he didn't need any scholar or union bureaucrat to tell him to do that. He developed those leadership skills out of those processes of self-reflection, self-activity, and self-liberation.

S.Q.: You also write that the slave revolts led to the struggle for the 8-hour work-day. Can you explain this in more detail? Did waged workers learn about slave resistance and think "we can do that too?"

K.V.M.: I think we can certainly point to that in a couple of places. But I also don't want to separate these into separate categories of workers. We want to see people as more dynamic. There's a circulation of struggle that's constantly taking place. And we don't want to separate the slave as a figure and the worker as the figure, because very often it's the same figure. Their strongest form of resistance was running away. But that figure could then be re-enslaved. That figure could then become a semi-waged worker. We want to see the complexity of the dynamics and not focus on just these categorical identities.

S.Q.: You argue that the run-up to the American civil war was in many ways a revolutionary

situation. What are the implications of this? Why don't we talk about the war this way?

K.V.M.: First and foremost, I think it is important to emphasize again that the slaves freed themselves. The mass exodus of slaves from the plantations into marooned communities, and north via the underground railroad forced the federal government to respond with the fugitive slave act. Innumerable thefts and the illicit economy, in which both blacks and whites participated, forced local governments and vigilantes to raid grog shops and publicly punish pilferers and their accomplices. The palpable fear felt by the white slaveholding class, not just economically but for their very lives, was the direct result of slave rebellions – nearly 250 actual or attempted rebellions took place during American slavery. And this fear pushed the South toward war. As with ever major economic and political crisis in the US since, compromise was reached – chattel slaves were provided limited freedom as wage slaves under Jim Crow, blacks were "granted" civil rights. Both were compromises to prevent the emergence of a strong black community and a directly democratic society based in racial equality. In this way, I and other scholars would argue that the black freedom struggle that began under slavery was then, and is now, revolutionary. And we don't talk about the Civil War in this way because our telling of the story in the present has actual, real political implications today.

S.Q.: You talk about organizing "all the way down." Is this a way of saying that people are already resisting, and we need to find out how that's happening, and identify with it – do that kind of imaginative work?

K.V.M.: That's exactly what I'm trying to say. I want to redefine the role of the organizer as someone who's circulating struggles, who's not the central figure. Because what's most important is the existing struggles that are taking place. The underlying assumption of left radical organizing is that people are uneducated, unagitated, unorganized. I think I've shown over the last 500 years of struggle against capitalism that that assumption is empirically wrong.

S.Q.: Do you think the abandonment of reconstruction hurt the workers movement?

K.V.M.: If you can take a good sector out of the working class and immiserate them, then it decreases the overall class' ability to fight back. That's been the struggle against white racism for so long – until everyone is free none of us is free. That is materially and actually correct.

The argument I want to make is that capital and the state respond to our overt and everyday forms of struggle. They're responding to us; we're the primary figure. They need to capture our work. They need to make sure that we're constantly reproducing these gender and racial hierarchies. And as long as the system functions it will continue to impose these things upon us.