Strangers in an Alien World

Some thoughts on being an anarchist at the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century

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This is why being an anarchist in this world is a choice that must be made in each moment, free of moral or programmatic crutches. In a world opposed to free life created in its fullness, the only way to have my life is to live it as a stake that I play day after day.

Notes

to negotiate, acting for themselves. Anarchists are also generally among the exploited and dispossessed of this society and face the same immediate realities. So such situations provide a place for exploring complicity on a wider scale. Due to the nature of my anarchist aspirations, however, my participation in these social conflicts will express the same sort of tension as exists in my life. Like everyone else, I certainly want immediate relief from some of the more unpleasant aspects of my life, but I will never sacrifice my desire to make my life my own to these immediate circumstances. So I will bring this desire into every conflict as a willful tension toward autonomy and freedom. We want the way we go about these conflicts to reflect the way we want to live our lives. Thus I insist on using a methodology free of hierarchy and vanguardism. This creates a tension of striving to encourage tendencies toward self-organization and autonomous direct action that already exist in a particular conflict without falling into an evangelistic or leadership role that would undermine my desire for accomplices in a relationship of concrete equality. Because I am consciously at war with the social order, my participation in any broader social conflict will take the form of an intervention that hopes to expand the vision of that conflict, propelling it past the point of no return. But since I have no wish to be leader, teacher or evangelist – roles that interfere with our capacity to be individuals interacting with other individuals – this intervention will always be a tightrope-walk between living my own battle in my daily life and finding the ways to connect this battle with the battle of all those exploited and dispossessed people who are fighting against their condition.

I could go on examining all the areas in which this tension exists. But the point is that as a stranger in an alien world who has become conscious of that estrangement and has chosen to do battle against this world, each moment of my life as an anarchist is a tension, a straining toward something for which I have no words, and against the limits of the imposed reality.

Introduction

"...we are alone, with an entire world ranged against us."
-Andrea Dorea

I have been an anarchist for well over thirty years now. For me this has never been an identity to which to cling, a label to give me a sense of belonging. It has rather been an ongoing challenge to face my life in a particular way, constantly raising the question of what it means to reject every form of domination and exploitation in my life on a practical level. This is not a simple question with easy answers, but a problem that I have to wrestle with constantly, because I am facing a world here and now in which domination and exploitation define social relationships, in which most individuals are dispossessed of every possibility of determining their own existence, alienated from the creative energy through which such a project could be realized. As an anarchist, I have made a decision to reject and fight against this world. This makes me a deserter, an outsider, indeed, a stranger in an alien world. Obviously, this is not an easy choice. Several years ago I wrote: "I am not a peaceful man, a man content and willing to accept the will of the gods No, I am a man at war – with the world and with society, indeed, but also with myself and those I love the most." And I think that this is inevitably true for any anarchist who is sincere in her desire to live her refusal of the impositions of the ruling order. To overcome the isolation of this refusal it is necessary to seek accomplices with whom to steal back the creative energy with which we can build our lives together on our own terms and with whom to use that energy to destroy the alien world that the ruling order imposes on us. I wrestle constantly with the question of how to go about living in this way and carrying on this project with joy. The thoughts that follow stem from this questioning.

If I refer mainly to anarchists in speaking of the projects I pursue, it is because I am an anarchist and choose to carry out

my projects in a certain way because of this. At the same time, I am quite aware that complicity cannot be limited to anarchists. There are those who hate the habitual, unthinking daily activities, relationships and roles that make up this society and that by their nearly universal unconscious acceptance are imposed on all of us, but who do not express this through revolutionary or anarchist ideas. Nonetheless, they act against this society in their lives, and they are also potential accomplices. In fact, only by being open to such relationships can we anarchists break out of the ghettos in which we so easily lose ourselves. So I am addressing these thoughts mainly to anarchists, but also to anyone who despises the enslaving impositions of this society.

There are words that I will use in this writing that I do not trust. I know they are problematic and open to misunderstanding. Thus, I will sometimes use the word "we." There are circumstances in which it is the best shorthand metaphor to express what I am trying to say. As far as I am able, I will avoid the generic "we" in favor of the third person, but where this creates a clumsy and uncomfortable reading and I am referring to human beings in general, I will use this mistrusted word. In addition, it is important to recognize that society, the state, the economy, religion, etc., are not things in themselves, capable of acting. The are rather social relationships, activities that individuals carry out, generally in a habitual and unthinking manner. Throughout this series, I will often use the shorthand form of saying "society does this," "the state does that," etc., but I would like the reader to keep in mind that this is just a shorthand, that in reality, individuals are doing these things by carrying out the prescribed, habitual roles and activities that create and maintain the institutional structures of this society. Finally these thoughts are explorations, not final conclusions. As such, I consider them a tool for myself and others to use in developing and expanding our projects of stealing back our lives and destroying the social order that has stolen them from us.

situations that this society imposes on us to our own ends of taking back our lives and destroying this society.

I have mentioned that in this society survival stands in opposition to a full and passionate life. And yet it is obvious that if one dies of hunger or exposure, he will have no such life. So here is another area of tension. To speak of squatting, theft or similar activities as the solution here is to miss the point. I think that everyone reading this is capable of figuring out different ways to survive. The question is: how do I overcome the domination of survival over my life? How do I turn the means by which I get what I need to survive into mere tools for creating my life in an expansive and passionate manner? How can I do this together with others, my comrades and accomplices, striving to grasp their lives as well? And again, there are no final answers. Unless we have an idea of what we want to do with our lives, unless "we have a good reason for getting up in the morning," these questions are meaningless. We will simply get dragged along by the demands of survival, and "alternatives" like squatting, stealing or scamming will just be other forms of work. A reversal of perspective is needed so that we begin creating our lives as an ongoing project. This is where the avoidance of work gives way to the destruction of work as a social relationship, because whatever we do for money or survival (even jobs) will become a mere tool, a temporary means, in the ongoing project of creating our lives in revolt against this social order.

I have spoken of finding accomplices in my battles against this society. They don't all need to be anarchists. The desire for "something absolutely other" does not belong exclusively to those with this label. Nor is a conscious awareness of this desire necessary for an individual or a social conflict to manifest it in action. Most such conflicts are provoked by specific situations. Those involved are responding to something specific that made them angry. But often, they begin to act on their own without mediation from representative organizations, refusing

I am not willing to wait to begin my experiments in taking back my life until these conditions – which are now global – have been destroyed. But these experiments perpetually run up against social reality. I have no choice but to attack it.

But what does this mean practically? How do I create my life as an attack against the social world that steals it away? These questions cannot be answered once and for all. All ultimate answers would amount to a set of rules, a set of predetermined conditions to control my life. My answers to such questions must be my own and must themselves be called into question day after day. This is what keeps my life in play, what makes it worth living.

If the anarchist tension is the impulse to take back my life as I run up against the daily realities of this society, then I need to develop an idea of my life as a total, ongoing creation, not as disconnected fragments. It is not possible to carry on this creative process in isolation, because I live in relationship with others. But most of these relationships are imposed; they are social role connecting with social role like the gears of a machine, but they make us feel more like billiard balls banging against each other and bouncing away as quickly as possible due to our disgust. The situationists suggested that we need to learn to subvert these roles, to turn them against the society that imposes them, and I think this is a useful subversive project. But more importantly, in order to take my life back, I need to cultivate relationships of affinity and complicity with others, conscious relationships that we develop as ways of creating our lives together. I am not talking about forming collectivities, in which a social entity once again appropriates the lives of the individuals who make it up, but rather about figuring out the ways to interweave lives, desires, struggles, capacities and resources so that each individual's life is enhanced and becomes more fully her own. Within such a context, where we are creating our lives together against this world, the situationist practice mentioned above can become a tool for subverting

Chapter 1: Living in an Alien World

"Ours is a 'finished' world in which non-fulfillment has created a general powerlessness and evacuated all moral responsibility. Man has foresworn control over the world, and as a result we are assailed by one catastrophe after another, each more 'inevitable' than the last."

-Andrea Dorea

What does it mean to be living in an alien world? After all, this is not just the condition of anarchists and revolutionaries, the conscious enemies of this world. It is the normal condition of life within this society. Alienation defines all social relationships in a world of work and money, politics and economy, where wealth and power are concentrated in a few hands. Under such circumstances, there is no direct relationship between an individual's thoughts, her desires, his activities and their outcome. "Life" is something that happens to her, not something she creates. It is an alien imposition upon the nothing that he has become. If she still desires greatly with a creative energy that demands to be expressed, this condition is intolerable. But to fight it he needs some understanding of how it functions.

Survival vs. Life

The greatest evidence that alienation is the central basis of social relationships in this world is the fact that the requirements for survival are not merely separated from the desire for

interest in lamenting this. The very best that capital, the state and all the institutions of this civilization could offer would not please me any more. I am a stranger and an enemy in this world, not a reformer. My interest in looking at these realities is to understand the world I am facing right now so that I can figure out how to create my life for myself against this reality, finding the tools to use and the accomplices with whom to act against a social world that has stolen your life and mine.

Life as Tension

If all the exploited, the dispossessed, the uprooted are strangers in this alien world, then it is not this estrangement as such that distinguishes me as an anarchist. Nor is it the awareness of this condition. It is rather the fact that I recognize in this estrangement a monumental theft – the theft of my life (and of all lives) by the social order – and that I therefore choose to be the irreconcilable enemy of this order, battling to take my life back here and now, in association with others fighting for the same thing whenever possible.

The economy and the state have extended their reach everywhere,[4] so there is certainly no place to which I can escape to build my life. My desire to have my life as my own and my hostility toward the social order perpetually confront this imposed reality. I create my life for myself, but in conditions not of my choosing. At the same time, I am out to destroy these conditions, and so my life exists as a perpetual tension towards that which this society absolutely opposes. Since I am not a christian (or a leftist), willing to sacrifice my life for a higher good,

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[4] This does not mean that the control of the state and capital is absolute. In fact, this globally extended reach comes about at the expense of stretching control to its limits, making it quite tenuous everywhere. This is because the extension is made possible mainly through the use of complex and fragile technological networks (including the social technology of bureaucracy) that are inevitably full of holes.

the state as demons in order to isolate them from the rest of the exploited. Thus, in some places, anarchists are under intense repression, and everywhere, conscious rebels are targeted. In addition, surveillance technologies are spreading throughout the urban landscape creating a decentralized panopticon effect – the appearance that we are under constant surveillance, meant to make us police ourselves.

But these technologies are fragile, sometimes non-functional and always dependent on human beings to process the information they gather. This reflects another aspect of the need to spread control across the whole social field. To accomplish this, the state has to depend on a fragile, thinly spread technological network, a vast web with many holes and many weaknesses. This is why it has to depend on convincing people to police themselves.

To convince people to do this, the state uses its greatest weapon: fear. The ruling order uses the mass media to parade a series of threats before everyone's eyes. From disaster to terrorism, from crime to the latest epidemic, from the threat of unemployment and homelessness to an alleged genetic disposition to cancer or schizophrenia, the media proclaims that everyone is under constant attack and that only the state and its paid experts stand between us all and the direst catastrophes. This is how the rulers of this world convince almost everyone to accept policing and indeed to police themselves. As the authorities build an open-air jail around us all, they succeed all too well in training most people to thank their jailers, or worse yet, to be their own jailers. And yet a careful look at these threats shows that those which are not mere inventions to justify specific technological or political developments are in fact caused by the social order of the state and capital itself, by the world this order constructs. And this is becoming increasingly hard to hide.

This is a very incomplete and brief sketch of the hard times in which we are currently living. As an anarchist, I have no

a full and passionate life, but actually stand in opposition to it. The institutionalized and habitual activities and relationships that comprise the society of the market and the state create a reality in which we are forced to sacrifice the greater part of our existence in order to make money to meet our basic needs, rather than consuming our lives in self-enjoyment and creative exploration. To put it another way, this world blackmails us into reproducing it, into sacrificing our selves to its continued existence and expansion.

This has really hit home for me as I have begun to encounter greater and greater difficulty accomplishing what I want in my life and have watched increasing numbers of friends fall into dire financial straits in recent times. There are specific circumstances that have sharpened the pressure of the social blackmail of survival, economic realities, changes in the conditions of production and in class relationships that have made things more difficult everywhere. The US economy is in particularly bad shape right now, and as always those on the bottom pay the most. And there is nothing about being a revolutionary or an anarchist that makes one immune to these difficulties.

Sadly, for the most part, despite the critiques we anarchists may have as declared enemies of this society, we also tend to look for our immediate solutions in fragmented and atomized means. Even though we may recognize that, in terms of our dreams and desires, an Obama or a Nader is no better than a Bush, we don't apply the same logic to the options this society offers us for surviving. To some extent, this is inevitable so long as this society exists. There is nothing vitally passionate and invigorating about starving. Jobs, dole, school grants, scams, theft, dumpster diving – are all merely ways of surviving within this society and nothing more. The fact is that survival within this society is always fragmented and atomized, and this is why it is essential to strive to make our joy in life and our projects of revolt against this society take precedence over survival, so that we can turn the fragmented activities through

which we survive into mere tools for our projects and our lives, using them against the society that imposes them.

This is an extremely difficult project. It involves seeing beyond where we are, beyond the limitations of our present existence. And it involves learning how to recognize accomplices when we encounter them, learning how to weave together our efforts to get beyond the limitations of this society and our revolts against the impositions of survival. Such efforts exist wherever people have not been pushed to the limits of desperation, wherever even a little bit of pleasure can enter into people's lives. This is why so many of us have experienced those moments of living beyond the imposed limits of this society. In his introduction to Dancing in the Streets, Franklin Rosemont describes such an experience in North Beach in San Francisco during the Beat era. He relates the experience of people who decided to give their lives, their creativity and their enjoyment priority over survival and so found ways to take care of the latter without hindering the former. In his words: "Almost everyone was poor, but no one went hungry, and newcomers had no trouble finding a place to stay. In North Beach, 1960, what mattered most was poetry, freedom, creativity and having a good time." It is a utopian dream confronting the miserable realities of this existence, and thus creating a utopian practice in the present without falling into escapism. At the same time, I recognize that those were different, easier, more prosperous times. Where prosperity still seems to exist in the US and western Europe, it is thoroughly dependent on credit, and for those who cannot or will not play that game, the illusion of prosperity is disappearing. Those who do continue to play it remain in perpetual debt that enslaves them more and more deeply to the merry-go-round of work-and-pay, and as the credit system falls apart at the seams, it is hard to imagine that this illusion will hold up for anyone with a sliver of intelligence for much longer. But the alien world retains its vampiristic grip on everybody's lives, and only in unrelenting revolt against it is it possible to

This expansion across the globe has gone hand-in-hand with an economic and technological restructuring which has allowed capital to undermine the old safeguards for workers and the poor in the west. As welfare is cut back, secure jobs are harder and harder to find. More and more people find themselves in temporary work or crap jobs where it is assumed that they will quit or be fired after a short stint. Homelessness is on the rise. Incomes can't keep up with rising rents and utility bills. Many can't afford medical insurance. Illegal activity and the underground economy are necessary to more and more people's survival.

In short, as capital has come to dominate the world, it has been pushing more and more people to the margins of society, turning exploitation and dispossession into the threat of exclusion. But in doing so, it is creating a situation where more and more people will feel they have nothing to lose in venting their rage against the ruling order.

It is in this light that we can understand the increasing permeation of social control and the methods of policing and the prison into every aspect of daily life. The state is aware that the uprooting necessary to the expansion of capital is now also beginning to decivilize those it uproots, creating a growing number of malcontents with no demands and in fact with nothing at all to say to those in power. And so it is trying to get the machinery in place to keep this seemingly irrational unrest sporadic and isolated, as unintelligible to itself as it is to the state. On the direct level of the streets, this means the militarization of policing. This is a two-way development in which urban police forces get military training in urban maneuvers, while military forces are used more and more in international and internal policing operations. The state has also been focusing more intense repression against those it perceives as potential threats. Media stories attempt to paint such enemies of

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so I prefer to call it global climate change.

As I mentioned above, capitalism began its expansion by uprooting huge numbers of people from the lives they had developed for themselves. Yet until recent times, the majority of the world's people have managed to maintain their existence as peasants, gardeners, herders and foragers with only occasional direct contact with the reality of capitalism. In the western nations where capitalism forged ahead, a growing portion of the uprooted became wage laborers, and class struggle began to manifest within the industrial sectors. Side by side with bloody repression, the rulers granted concessions to workers usually through the trade union apparatus. By the 1960s, there were safeguards for workers and welfare systems for the poor that seemed to at least guarantee survival in most western countries. But at the same time capitalism had truly come to dominate the globe, and the effects of this global domination were beginning to manifest.

The most obvious effect of capital's expansion across the globe is the continuing vicious uprooting of people from the lives they knew. At this point more than half of the world's population lives in cities. Because there are not nearly enough places for all of these people in the labor market, many find themselves in ghettos and shantytowns eking out an existence in crime or in the underground economy. In addition, ethnic, nationalist and religious conflicts, environmental disasters, epidemics or mere poverty are driving growing numbers of people to take to the road or the open sea in hope of finding something better. These often undocumented immigrants are easily exploited as a cheap labor source, while living in constant fear of arrest and deportation. Those who manage to continue to live in small traditional communities where capital has not yet fully penetrated nonetheless feel its effects in the form of diminishing space, invading pollutants, airplanes passing over, transport passing through, individuals coming in to convert them to the ways of the dominant world.

temporarily break that hold and grasp those moments of real life.

Hard Times

Human beings have been living in an alien world since the economy and the state first came to dominate life, but the present generation is living in particularly hard times. Assurances of just a few decades ago have crumbled on all levels and the "confidence" that those who rule this world express takes on a more and more strident tone, as their failures combine with the horrific consequences of their successes to expose the precarious nature of the world that has been created for everyone. Indeed, it is our daily activity (work, consumption, the reproduction of social reality in the roles and predetermined relationships everyone plays out every day) that creates this world. And yet it is created against us, placing our well-being and increasingly our very existence in jeopardy. Precariousness on all levels has come to define human existence as we live in a world of disaster that is a product and requirement of capitalist society and its industrial apparatus.

From the time it began to develop, capitalism has been a catastrophe for all but the rulers and managers of society. It can only survive by expanding, and its expansion has required the continual uprooting of people from the lands and relationships that provided their existence. This has been necessary in order for capitalists to gain access to raw materials and to force people into a situation where they would be dependent on selling the time of their lives in exchange for a wage in order to survive. But the expansion of capital also required the development of an industrial system of production which started a process of environmental devastation.

Although disasters have been part of the reality of capitalism from the beginning, over the past few decades there has been a

notable increase in the number and intensity of disasters. This shouldn't be surprising. The environmental effects of the industrial system have been accumulating, and that system has expanded across the globe. Technological systems have become increasingly complex and fragile with the consequence that they are more prone to malfunction and breakdown. All this has occurred in a situation where the systems are increasingly interconnected and use materials whose potential effects we don't know. Thus, these breakdowns can be truly disastrous.

Industrial disasters like Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Tokaimura (Japan)[1] and Baiă Mare (Romania)[2] stand out due to the extent of the damage and the blatant technological cause. But similar disasters on a much smaller scale are part of the normal functioning of the industrial system. In Baiă Mare, for example, there had been several chemical spills in the year before this disaster, another smaller one in the same month and a steady parade of them in the years since. Similarly, chemical spills into the Mississippi River were slowly killing off more and more of the Gulf coastal waters along the southern United States coast long before the British Petroleum's oil spill of 2010. Perhaps the worst industrial disasters are these gradual ones with effects that only become clear after years of damage.

But so-called "natural" disasters have also become more frequent and devastating. In fact, we can't honestly speak of merely natural disasters anymore. Every disaster is social. On the one hand, the capitalist need for expansion promotes "cost-efficient" methods of production and construction that create a shoddiness which is bound to drastically increase the devastation caused by various disasters. Consider for example that dur-

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[1] In 1999, radioactive material was spilled at the power station here causing major environmental damage for a radius of several miles around it.

[2] A major chemical spill happened here in January 2000 that devastated three hundred miles of river life in the Lapus, Somes, Tisza and Danube rivers.

ing the earthquakes in Turkey in 1999, it was mostly the newer structures that collapsed. The old ones, built before capitalism took over construction in the area, withstood the disaster. On the other hand, the technological projects of the state and capital almost certainly play a role in the intensity and frequency of "natural" disasters. If the precise role of underground nuclear weapons testing in the increasing intensity and frequency of earthquakes is still open to question, the role of industrial pollution in the global climate change[3] that has certainly intensified hurricanes, flooding, blizzards and other weather disasters in recent years is pretty obvious. We live in a society that breeds disaster.

But disaster is not merely an unpleasant side effect of this social order. It requires such catastrophes. Now that the social order of capitalism has spread across the globe, continual disaster is necessary to keep production expanding. This is so not only because of the need to rebuild damaged areas, but also because these situations provide excuses for new technological developments allegedly intended to curb the harmful effects of disasters, but really intended to expand profits. In addition, the threat of disaster plays a necessary part in justifying the role of experts and their leadership. By portraying disasters as mostly distant and isolated events, the media prevents us from making connections and achieving an understanding of the social function of disaster, giving it the appearance of an unavoidable fate. This maintains the threat as a source of an underlying atmosphere of fear that serves the rulers of this world. But disasters are becoming more and more frequent and intense, and the industrial system imposed by capital can only make it worse. The experts and their technological fixes are becoming less and less convincing as solutions, as each new technological fix brings its own train of disasters with it.

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[3] A.k.a., "global warming." Although the overall trend is toward higher average temperatures, its real effects as experienced are much more chaotic,