

Alienation, Marvelous Pursuits and the New Nomadic Sciences

2001

As I sit at this corporate-owned cafe, there are three cell phone conversations going on at once — the buzz of stressful leisure is in the air; life is so complex these days but at the same time its just too easy. Convenience is killing adventure even for those who can't afford it; convenience invades the environments that it touches and infects them with sterility. The panhandler in front of the shopping mall gains nothing from the appliances and fashions sold within yet she has to suffer just the same from the stifling, lifeless environment created by convenience that is for others.

How did the challenge which is such a fundamental part of living life get erased to such an extent in the most affluent pockets of the globe? The convenience and instantaneity of technology have removed the spark of many an adventurous passion; they took the distance out of space and the place out of time. But that's not the end of the story. Challenge dies when the will is decimated: split into 10 pieces, shattered only to be swept up and used by others. Individual power is destroyed when one is prevented from acting or thinking. Hyper-specialization creates a society in which no one person has power over their actions. One can either act on others' commands or command the actions of others; it is becoming increasingly difficult to simply act. The splitting of our wills is fundamentally tied to the split between the physical and the intellectual, which stems from the division between physical and intellectual labor.

Gothic journeymen traveled from place to place building cathedrals. In that time there were no architects who planned construction on paper, physically distant from the construction site. Journeymen on the other hand, both planned and built cathedrals. The state did not appreciate the journeymen's associations' tendency

to strike, nor their ability to move as they pleased when work conditions were unfavorable. “The state’s response was to take over the management of the construction sites, merging all the divisions of labor together in the supreme distinction between the intellectual and the manual, the theoretical and the practical, fashioned after the difference between ‘governors’ and ‘governed’. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Nomadology*, 29–30) By separating intellectual and physical labor the state took power away from both types of workers. The manual laborers could then only build what others had planned and the planners — who in economic and political terms were the more powerful of the two groups — no longer had the capacity to build anything at all.

Hobbies are forms of alienated leisure, compartmentalized parts of one’s life, past-times whose purpose is to fill our time with countable accomplishments and enjoyments. At my piano lesson which I have to pay for, between 4 and 5 o’clock on Monday I will review lesson four. They are additions to our lives not multiplications or proliferations. While the hobby is alienated leisure, a past-time that is born from a shattering of the will and the divisions of labor and time within capitalist societies, the marvelous pursuit is an attempt to find paths out of alienation, an attempt to put the pieces back together again by refusing to conceive of human action as divisible into the physical and the mental. It is also an attempt to feel the rush of a life of challenge in which one can both make decisions and act. The marvelous pursuit is born from the desire to create playful complexity in a desert of simplistic convenience. A hobby is a form of consumption, the marvelous pursuit on the other hand, is a rejection of commodified convenience, it can’t be bought because it has no price. The person who reads Aramaic poetry on the sidewalk, the cramped city dweller who has an intricate knowledge of ferns, the person who can play a sonata with a blade of grass, these people interact with the things around them and the spaces they pass through in unexpected ways and make these places and moments their own. A sidewalk could be a place to pass by one one’s way from home to work or it could become a place to read Aramaic poetry to passers by. A marvelous pursuit refuses socially ascribed use. People learn such socially useless things as the names of fern and the grammar of dead languages because they are bored with the mind-dumbing options dished out to them on TV. Marvelous pursuits are a means to resist alienation from one’s environment because they are a temporary means to make that environment one’s own, by ascribing one’s own, often bizarre, value for things and spaces.

The marvelous pursuit often creates complexity but a complexity which is opposed to that of the technician. The ‘master’ of a marvelous pursuit can never be an engineer because the marvelous is by nature useless to society (and therefore to capital). The value in marvelous pursuits lies in their self-creation which evades both use-value and exchange value. These pursuits may or may not have revolu-

tionary potential, but it is very difficult for capitalism to recuperate them precisely because they are so useless. A marvelous pursuit could be a nomadic science — a traveling or a crossing — or it could get you nowhere: it is an attempt that might fail, a move away from alienation which may lead you in a circle back to the same spot, to sit on the pile of glass shards and wait for the next possible way out.

Another response to living in a society that's become just too convenient is DIY. Having grown up in late capitalist societies where things are bought not made, the youth of the richer countries often rebel by learning to do it themselves. Some buy land and move to the country to grow food, others learn to restore an abandoned building and pirate electricity and so on. This is a healthy response to growing up in useless culture, where people reach adulthood without knowing how to build, make or grow much of anything. Learning to make things we use ourselves instead of buying them is a fundamental and necessary part of creating a non-capitalist stateless society. Of course this cannot destroy capitalism, which is expansive and cancerous and must be attacked, but is a way to take parts of our lives back from capital in a direct way.

At times the DIY spirit is infused with a sense of practicality that is very utilitarian. In this country, it sometimes has a tinge of the "good ol' American can do." In this case I mean a utilitarianism that is born from a capitalist culture in which material goods are worshipped. That which is useful is that which produces something tangible, and the greater the quantity the better. Use is often determined by one's conception of survival, that which is most necessary for survival is most useful, but of course one's conception of survival will always be cultural. Counter-cultural types are not without mainstream cultural baggage, and in spite of a virulent rejection of materialism on one level they will think they need things to survive that a hunter gatherer simply couldn't find uses for. So even one's conception of survival is cultural, and in our culture survival is drenched with materialism. In societies that are highly capitalist the common conception of use-value will be completely tied up with exchange value; money is often a fundamental part of people's conception of an object's use. The most extreme manifestations of such a utilitarian mentality within the DIY subcultures are punk DIY businesses. The utilitarianism of the capitalist grid makes us tools. It is based on a practicality which has been directed away from one's situation to a complex set of systems; not to meeting an individual or group's needs but to meeting the need of the grid of the state-capital relation as a whole. That is why this type of practicality is so quantitative, it is shaped by capital's game of money's numbers.

The privileging of the physical over the mental is just as absurd as privileging the mental over the physical, since the two are impossible to separate within human experience. I would guess that the tendency to separate the two has become much more common since the separation between manual and intellectual labor

has become so all pervasive. The privileging of a concrete material outcome is a kind of utilitarianism that can serve capitalism's production centers well and the privileging of the intellectual can serve the class divisions that have accompanied the division between manual and intellectual labor.

There is much talk these days in the media about the marvels of artificial intelligence, computers are constantly referred to as if they function in a similar way to the human mind and the mind is referred to as if it functions like a computer: mechanically and virtually. It is possible that some forms of anti-intellectualism are reactions to the increasing displacement of action into the virtual, into the placelessness of cyberspace. Could this be the result of a desire to feel the soil beneath one's feet, to exist more fully as a physical, sensual being, to be part of a space time that isn't a series of freeze-frame instants like that of e-mail (7:37 EST Dear Julio,...)? Sometimes I have noticed people conflate the mental and the virtual, they impose all of the alienating qualities of the virtual onto the mental: the mental is separate from action and the physical, mental space is as placeless as cyberspace. For some the experience of acute social alienation makes it desirable to lose one's ability to distinguish between oneself and one's surroundings; some look for a mystical solution to their alienation. Some want to lose consciousness of the separation between the soil and their feet. But how does one feel the soil beneath one's feet without consciousness? But of course there are a myriad of ways in which humans can relate to their environment that lie between approaching it with removed mechanical calculation on the one extreme or attempting to achieve mystical union with it on the other. If one were indeed able to achieve a mystical state would this take away social alienation? Such attempts to overcome alienation ignore the very social relations that caused one to be alienated in the first place.

The development of the technological means to reproduce and transmit words, sounds and images has corresponded with a growing social alienation. That is, the development of technological means to increase communication between people that are far away has corresponded to a growing distance between those that are nearby. From this growing alienation grew the desire to overcome it. Milan Kundera has written about a phenomenon called graphomania: the desire to see one's writing in print, the desire to gain recognition and fame from one's writings. He views this as being directly related to the alienation between people who are physically near to each other. Lacking connection with those nearby we crave recognition from those far away. In the islands of the Massim region of Papua New Guinea people who are separated by water become known through trade and the gifting of decorated shells, every kula shell is unique and everyone knows who made it. The type of fame that a society creates is directly related to its communication technology, in the islands of where kula shells circulate each shell stays unique because people do not mechanically reproduce them. Hence people become known by a

smaller number of other people than those that are famous in our society but the quality of the knowledge that is spread about famous people is quite different.

The degree of alienation experienced by those who lived in the time of the advent of print capitalism was not as acute as the alienation between people in today's massified societies. In turn we have much more elaborate means for those that are very distant to communicate with words, sounds and images. The nature of fame has changed along with the level of social alienation and the technological means of communication, a Hollywood movie star's name and image is known by many more millions of people than the most famous early European novelists were in their time. Nowadays it is quite easy to become known, to spread one's name around the internet for example while communicating very little. Similar to this type of "fame" is that of success. Success is as colorless as money, it doesn't matter what makes one successful just like it doesn't matter what makes one rich. Success is the most impersonal kind of fame; it is the general equivalent of fame. Thus, success is no longer an adjective, it has become an abstract noun. "He is successful." As unique connections with specific reachable, touchable people dissolve, the need for general and wider recognition grows. The extreme result of this is the desire for success in the abstract, where there is no particular desire to be successful at only one thing, to be a successful banker is interchangeable with being a successful novelist. Soon children will begin to tell their parents: "When I grow up I want to be successful." The quest for fame is bound to be a frustrated quest because it is fueled by a desire for connections with those nearby which paradoxically results in a search for connections with those distant, the latter can never result in the former; like mystical oneness it can not truly satisfy a desire to overcome social alienation.

Western navigation depends on a global system of coordinates (latitude and longitude, now instantaneously measured by GPS) whereas Polynesian navigation depends on local knowledge that varies (the patterns of waves currents and winds, the types and habits of sea birds), adequations instead of universal principles applied to particulars. In *Nomadic Science* "if there are still equations, they are adequations, inequations, differential equations irreducible to the algebraic form and inseparable from a sensible intuition of variation. They seize or determine singularities in the matter instead of constituting a general form." (Deleuze and Guattari, *Nomadology*, 32) The practicality of adequations is not a practice of imitation or the mere imposition of codes, plotting points on the grid. Whereas modern science involves the splitting between observer and observed for the sake of experimentation (the word science comes from the Indo-European word skei which meant to cut or separate), and a thus a split between the physical object of study and the scientist's removed deductions, nomadic science involves an intimacy between the nomad and her surroundings. To equate is to impose conceptual equality between

a particular and an absent abstraction. The practicality of equations the impositions the external decisions through equalizing systems of thought, grids invented in other places and times, perhaps on other continents.

Many new kinds of nomadic sciences have been created, even in those societies where modern science is most advanced. Nomadic science can be a means to move away from an alienated existence, to move away from the options dished out by capital and create other ways to live. The skills necessary to make an abandoned building inhabitable, learning how and where to dumpster dive, how to live and travel without money, the skills of sabotage, all of these pursuits could become nomadic sciences, lines of flight out of our alienated existence. Insurrection cannot use the equations of modern science but must instead use the adequations of nomadic science. This is because social problems are unsolvable; there are no formulas that will eliminate them. We must instead feel the patterns of the waves, for amidst the unpredictability of the storm there are still discernible patterns that could guide us to the other side.

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