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Return Fire
Alienation
Spring 2014

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Alienation

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Alienation – the result of individuals and, through them, societies 'becoming alien' (i.e distant, disengaged, even uncomprehending) to the results of their own activity, the environment in which that activity occurs, from the people who share that environment and activity, and from themselves. Alienation is marked in those of us living out systems of social relationships which thus redirect our energy from living on our own terms in a manner we ourselves can choose and assert, and into **simply reproducing and reinforcing that social system in order to attain the means for survival.** Individuals with the means (intellectual, ecological, social) to create lives they freely desire are difficult to base top-down authoritarian systems upon without the draining use of constant force. Alienation makes it possible to relatively smoothly maintain the centralisation of wealth, knowledge and power, separated from us yet raised by ourselves and many like us.

A well-used example of alienation was deployed to describe private property and the economic exploitation of capitalism, by which the worker is separated from what they produce: their 'power to' do whatever it might be is sold as labour power, transforming it into an owner's 'power over' them and thereby alienat-

ing human beings from their capacity to create. However it would be a mistake to simply stop there, as Marxists mostly do for instance. (In the 20th century what became known as 'the Fordist compromise' began to allow producers a limited amount of access to the commodities they produce; without however changing the course of alienation, now even more marked in the 'post-industrial' consumer classes.)

We believe that the problem runs much deeper and older than wage relations, in both the 'external' world of habitual interactions and their ramifications and in the psyche. While alienation can be and is implemented through many institutions (religion, for one) with a far longer history, a more holistic example of how alienation begins to sink its deeper roots would be the dispiriting result on untold numbers of land-based cultures from assimilation into conquering empires, and the industrial revolution that forced a mechanical division between individuals and their livelihoods, their tools, their communities, their lands; the separation between production and knowledge itself. Let's take a step back to a more fundamental appraisal of what it might mean to be a potentially-free being on a living planet.

What do you know about the trees outside the window? What keeps them healthy? What about the other animals that live close to you; do you recognise their calls or tracks? What they do, what they prefer? What do you know about the lives of human animals that go on over the other side of the wall next-door, or the masses you pass on the street? What do they know about you? How does that make you feel?

What do you really know about where the food you eat comes from? Or about what has to happen for our homes to be lit, heated, or built? **How many of your survival necessities or subsistence skills are truly in your own hands or those of your relations?**

What proportion of your conversations still enjoy the depth of face to face interaction? How much of your daily environment can you navigate on foot, walking, climbing, swimming, being helped

we see fit. The segregation from a multitude of lifeforms displaced by the city not just unfamiliarises us with our planet, but makes it much easier to participate in the industrial structure devouring everything.

Ignore these facts we may, they continue to come back to haunt us in the unarticulated precarity of our helpless dependence, the interpersonal violence, the deadly sadness. Self-medication doesn't cut it. Reality TV can't mask it. The chatter of the crowd won't drown it out. We are under mental and physical occupation by the capitalist-industrial system, leaving the firm but false impression of there being no outside, no choice, no escape. Is this really what we could call living?

to a deathly regime, and a condition that must be struggled against to overturn the whole social order – which we are demanded to adapt ourselves to fit. To adapt ourselves to ever-more limited and virtually superfluous roles, at any time liable to be replaced like a faulty cog. Beneath the surface of modern life, we live in what can only be described as a state of captivity, and the neurotic way we internalise this reality to cope with it seeps out and permeates our every interaction. **The loss of perspective that the overwhelming totality of the current system engenders, casting a shadow over all past ways of life, makes it easier to be fooled when we're told that it is us who are maladjusted, malfunctioning, and when the system's guardians tell us they have just the cure for the mysterious undermining of life.**

Yet in spite of generations of 'naturalisation', psychological immiseration tells us we are not at home in the world of social media, council estates, gated communities, artificial parks, billboards, office blocks, traffic jams, cash machines, asylums, factory farms, call centres and other prisons, stuck in a flaccid cycle of work, nuclear families and programmed entertainment. **This is the environment our pre-determined interactions, which we all go through every day, has created; yet it is created against us and our own self-determination.** Our health (inseparable from that of our land-base), solidarity, spontaneity, and indeed in the era of vast climate changes even our continued existence itself is jeopardised by our own alienated activity. The blackmail of the market keeps our habits and relationships, more often than not, not just delaying but actually antagonistic to the fullness of autonomous creativity. **Mass social organisation is the separate power that stands apart from us as individuals, regulating and imposing on us, as the truly human-scale in life is dwarfed by an unending cycle of representations, bureaucracy, requirements, regurgitating *what is*; and what cannot fail to oppress us.** The conditions of life forced upon us by the economy, the State and technological society have become powers that rule over and direct us, not tools to use as

by a companion, or how much of it is it necessary to depend on regulated means of transportation through? How much of your immediate surrounding area are you physically, socially or legally barred from exploring? Why?

How much of your daily activity is to suit your own needs? Aside from within the symbolic order of the wage economy, that is. **How much of it do you even really see or understand the repercussions of?** Would we live in this manner if we could directly see and touch the impacts that are hidden from most, in ghettos, toxic dumps, slaughter-houses, hospitals, cemeteries, refugee camps, battlefields and felled rainforest in distant lands, youth jails, oceanic garbage-gyres? Or have we become so distanced from other lives by the allotment of everything into categories of utility, so justifying their and our exploitation, that we cannot empathise with parallel lives that become mere resources for our own, as rulers living off us cannot empathise with ours?

Does the concept of diversity have much relation to your life beyond the array of brands at the supermarket, or inter-relatedness have a meaning beyond message boards? We are tricked and trick ourselves into believing that the damming of a river or disappearance of wildlife doesn't really affect us, burying ourselves in air-conditioned coffins as a society to separate ourselves from the world we were born in.

Do you even remember how to enact and express your joy as you may have in your early years? What actually gives you deep satisfaction; or fails to, even though it may be what advertising and marketing, your parents, school, politicians or your peers tell you should do? How in touch are you with your own desires, multi-sensuousness, thoughts and feelings? Might they be directed by social constructions of gender roles, 'human nature', class positions, urban desensitisation...? Might any tendencies which don't fit those constructions be smothered daily, in this world we endure? **Do you ever feel like something is missing?**

What about your own body; are your familiar with its cycles and drives, or are they an abstraction in a textbook or something that simply comes upon us from the blue? Is health just something obscure that a technical industry exists for and which we're objects to? Isn't the direction of our culture one directly away from the immediacy of human sensations, evidenced by inflating reliance on machine-readings of our 'vital statistics' and symptom-numbing drugs, shifting value from group play or physical activity in general into the spectacle of online games and, at best, exercising isolated with the iPod, or the generational proportion of Japanese society with a disinterest or even phobia of partner sex?

Do you find that you float from one hobby, job, friendship group or city to another, but never seem to be able to feel at home in yourself? **Have you ever felt, like a comrade wrote, that the only revolutionary thing about your life is its relentless circularity?** What systematically seems to push people into these directions, and aren't reflected in all histories and cultures, which suffer less of the loss of personality, loss of place, loss of purpose? What does it mean to be brought up and inherit not an intimate wealth of folklore to help us navigate a living landscape with reverence, but to be left grasping for a handle on an impersonal life that always gets away from us; as it did our immediate predecessors for multiple generations in the West, with little understanding or influence, our ancestral capabilities, skills and memories expropriated or sterilised? What does it tell us about the trajectory of this system when depression is a main cause of death in the 'developed' world?

It's this 'developed' world that we imagine most of our readers will be accustomed to: with the alienations of wage-labour, claustrophobic built-up areas, an endless routine repeated day after day to attain the means to go on surviving in the way we're used to, navigating the artefacts, mass media representations and bureaucracies of this civilisation, however irrelevant to our own thoughts and wishes. A while ago, Michele Vignodelli characterised the deeply meaningful interactions with a living Earth,

as the cornerstone of existence, as having been replaced by *“overstimulation by artificial, coarse, mechanical inputs, through fashions, revivals, disco music, roaring toys, cult actors, events... a whole flamboyant, uproarious and desperately hollow world. A rising wave of fleeting inputs, a multitude of fake interests and fake needs where our emotional energies are swept away, drowning us in nothingness[...] This sumptuous parade seems to consist substantially in the stream of toxic, hidden grudges that flows beneath the surface of politeness, in the corridors of industrial hives; it consists in the snarling defence of one's own niche, to protect 'freedoms' and 'rights' that are sanctioned by law, in a deep loneliness which is increasingly hidden in mass rituals, in a universal inauthenticity of relationships and experiences.”*

We're awash with communication technologies, and yet more often living alone, with fewer off-screen friends and little real-world social solidarity. In replacement we are given the imagined community of the market, the nation, or the virtual. What was once lived directly, becomes mere representation.

Alienation results in sensations including (but not limited to) powerlessness, shame, despair, delusions, hostility, social withdrawal, feeling constantly threatened or self-destructive, which are all pandemic within industrial civilisation. Its outward manifestations are on the rise everywhere that industry and 'development' have become the social norm, not just in the capitalist 'Old World' but now China, India, Africa. Alienation is needed for how our bodies are currently regulated in ways both great and small by being enmeshed within norms and expectations that *“determine what kinds of lives are deemed livable or useful and by shutting down the space of possibility and imaginative transformation where peoples' lives begin to exceed and escape [the system's] use for them”* (Susan Stryker). It forms a society of individuals largely isolated and dissociated from each other and themselves, despite the crowded cities, depressed, apathetic or filled with violent and directionless anger; and we identify it in how the dominant social mode pushes us further into this estrangement. It's the anguish of the living subjected