

post-literacy

Seaweed

I lugged my collection of books from town to town, across a continent, from place to place, for 40 years. It has always felt like if I didn't have them, I didn't have the knowledge or insights they contained: "Medicinal plants of the PNW", "Against His-story, against Leviathan", "TAZ", "Foods of the indigenous peoples of British Columbia", "How to make wild mead and wine", "Living My Life", "The Castle", "Les chants de Maldoror"... But I recently moved to a new place. I brought my collection of books and when it came time to unload and store them, I began to refer to them as 'boxes of words'. "Damn it, another 50 lbs of words! I can hardly lift this thing!" Quantifying their content in this way was a liberating moment. I had finally put them in their place.

Books are not literally knowledge or wisdom or insights — they are paper and ink and glue, the congealed labor and alienation of workers, commodities in the marketplace. And they are heavy! I have boxes and boxes and shelves and shelves of words. And once again I get the sense that I'm merely an object of history, a cliché, a passive being who has internalized enlightenment and civilized values and aspirations. Like the bourgeois who wants to live in their own castle, I'm the philosopher with his own library!

The emergence of literacy and its role in society is a large and complex topic, one deserving of much debate and conversation. But it's important to me that the reader of my essays is aware of my discomfort with, and ultimately rejection of, literate-centricity. It seems implied by the writing and publishing of my thinking that I must view literacy as a neutral, if not necessary or important, tool in the spreading of ideas. But this is not the case. In fact, I believe that a better world, an anarchic one, would have difficulty making a place for it. It would have to be an imposition, a misplaced, ill-fitting carry-over from the old world into the new.

Literacy presupposes many relationships between humans and between humans and their environment.

Is orthography more important than say community songs and dances? In an ecologically sane, imaginative, horizontal world, are there going to be school buildings in which we are forced to sit quietly as children, being taught how to write and spell, or will we be at the river learning how to fish, or in the field learning how to gather medicinal herbs and edible plants? Will we be laboring at a printing press, with its machinery and oils and noise, or honing our oratorical skills at gatherings? Will we be in the machine shop making parts for the press or reciting poetry from memory to our lover in a meadow?

To my mind, books are like cars or computers or electric guitars. We make use of them today, within the context of this particular social order, but I assume that we have no intention of maintaining the cultural values and social relationships necessary for their survival in a post capitalist world without centralized political power enforcing a homogeneous culture on a population. If anarchy is renewal, is a liberatory explosion of the imagination, a rejection of coercion, of monolithic lifeways, then I fail to see how literacy would survive in such a de-commodified, horizontal, de-massified existence.

I admit that I have greatly benefitted from books, from poetry and radical theory to how-to and fiction books. I've been enriched by their possession. But I've also enjoyed my toaster, electric piano, disposable lighters and automobile and sincerely hope and doubt that any of these would survive the dismantling of the global grid of authoritarian institutions and a rediscovery of our kinship with nature.

Historically elite classes kept a great deal of knowledge to themselves, keeping the peasantry ignorant of important facts, which made literacy and books sort of levelling tools, a way to even the playing field. Clearly, in that context, we seem better off with them. But are we really? Aren't there other ways to impart important knowledge? If all the municipal buildings and the banks were burned to the ground, if there was no longer records of ownership or debt as everything was freely shared, what sort of information would still be necessary to record and store?

So I am encouraging us to look more closely at literacy, the social order and relationships that created it and the way it forms our thinking, reinforces unhealthy habits, and reproduces oppressive and uniform social orders. I am also speculating that truly free people deep-rooted in habitats would probably not pursue literacy. Without elites that have an interest in keeping certain knowledge for themselves, facts and philosophy would be shared and debated equally through daily activities, not contained in books.

Books are not just one feature of a beautiful web of learning. They are more like the hub of a mechanical wheel, with a set of hard spokes emanating from it. Each spoke represents a static, simple fragment of what might have been a holistic and complex culture. One spoke points to the alienation and coercion inherent in schooling as an institution, another to the ossification of language as the organic is forced to bend to the inorganic, another to alienated labor making the machinery and paper and ink and glue, and yet another points to a society of experts and the division of labor, etc. It seems so obvious that, given the choice, only some people might choose to maintain literacy and books, but many others, likely most, would not and it would be difficult to argue that the literate culture would be superior to the illiterate. In fact the literate one would plainly need a social order very similar to the one we are trying to dismantle!

There is a big difference between language/oratorical skills and the ability to communicate using script. If we were to live in organically self-organized communities that are entrenched in habitats, would we have an interest or the time to teach script and copy texts? Wouldn't we be busy mending fishing nets, making medicines, repairing our structures, preserving food and other daily necessities of survival? Isn't it likely that as authentic communities form and separate from the massified cultures of capitalism, localized dialects would emerge? Does it make any sense for local dialects and languages spoken by small numbers of people to have their own script? To what purpose?

Without authoritarian institutions, private property records, large homogeneous territories controlled from above, there would be an explosion of new languages blossoming over the planet as centralized control, colonialism, compulsory education and mass media disappear. We know

that there was once an enormous diversity of languages, and that they were erased by economics, political imperatives, outsider interests, subjugation, invasion... If this is the case, ridding ourselves of these forces would lead to a re-emergence of this diversity. And in that scenario, why would small villages, isolated regions, roaming clans of nomads, experimental unions of egoists, autonomous tribes, etc ever want to take the time to build a script that reflects their language, perhaps only spoken by a few hundred or thousand people?

It seems plainly ridiculous to assume that literacy will endure everywhere or even anywhere where anarchic social relations prevail. I doubt that the interest, ability and energy will exist to ensure its universal continuance. A few texts in some places might be copied and reproduced in some fashion, but we shouldn't project a literate world into a decentralized, non-industrial, de-massified and ecological existence. It seems much more likely that the average inhabitant of any given area will be expected and encouraged to nurture highly developed memory and oratorical skills rather than literate abilities. Of course there are social and pro-industrial anarchists committed to maintaining urban civilization, and, in the beginning at least, they would recognize literacy as an essential cog in that machine and therefore try to maintain it, but it would likely be a difficult proposition if coercion were truly absent, and overtime the effort would fail.

In the meantime I want to encourage face to face conversations and debates, public speaking, memorization of texts and other forms of direct, non-literate communication not only among eco-radicals, but among all who truly want demassified societies, anarchic relationships and orientations, authentic upheaval, etc. Even reading to each other is probably better than reading alone. Instead of handing someone a zine or an essay, why not try to memorize it, make it your own in some way, then share it with your friends/comrades/neighbours?

Memorization, public speaking talents and the ability to take the stories and ideas of others and make them our own can be powerful tools and skills in our struggle to dismantle the psychological and propagandistic institutions that dominate our lives, to help open our minds and hearts to what is truly important and re-discover new ways of learning about and sharing them.

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