Hakim Bey

Articles on Hakim Bey from Ceasefire Magazine

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An Introduction

Hakim Bey is a quasi-fictional anarchist theorist best known for his concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). He has also formulated a type of post-left anarchist theory known as immediatism. Bey is widely regarded as a pseudonym for the writer and comparative religion specialist Peter Lamborn Wilson. The works of Bey and Wilson can be found and read for free at a number of websites. Stemming from anarchism, New Age spirituality and the 60s counterculture, Bey’s work provides one of the most astute recent theories of alienation and capitalism to be found anywhere today. However his work is also extremely controversial, for reasons that will be discussed in detail in the last parts of the series.

Who is Hakim Bey?

On one level, the relationship between Bey and Wilson is clear: they are the same person. But on another level, it is unclear. Bey may simply be a pseudonym, or an alter ego. For example, Simon Sellars argues that Hakim Bey is not just a pseudonym, but a fictional character. He cites as evidence the fictionalised biography of Bey provided in TAZ. Similarly, Greer suggests that Bey was originally a deliberate fiction. The identity of Wilson, Bey, and the Association for Ontological Anarchy was a closely guarded secret. When Bey appeared in a video about TAZ, he is presented in a blurred form, using psychedelic colours and patterns. In this series, I shall assume for sake of simplicity that Bey and Wilson are the same person, although there are noticeable differences in style.

The invented name ‘Hakim Bey’ has two probable sources. Hakim was a Fatimid caliph admired by Wilson for his heterodoxy. Bey is a common title given in the Moorish Science movement to which Wilson is loosely affiliated. Given Wilson’s hostility to the Internet, connotations of ‘hacking’ are probably unintentional. Bey’s work is described by Simon Sellars as ‘a potent brew of mysticism, historical narratives, autonomous Marxist politics and French critical theory’. He explicitly sees himself as continuing the struggle waged by Situationism and Italian autonomia. However, he rejects the class-struggle orientation central to these traditions. Instead, he theorises revolution in terms of the achievement of altered states of consciousness, in struggle against the dominant ‘Spectacular’, ‘consensus’ or ‘media trance’ worldview.

In Knight’s biography, Wilson is portrayed as a former hippy and drug-user who converted to Sufi Islam during a period of exile in Iran. He started out as a so-called ‘white Negro’ jazz fan and marijuana smoker. He was later involved with the Moorish Orthodox Church, a mainly-white splinter from the black-led Moorish Science Temple. He was also involved with the LSD-fuelled religious activities of Timothy Leary. When Leary’s activities were criminalised, and with a climate of repression and the Vietnam draft hanging over his head, Wilson fled the country. He claims that he intended permanent exile. He journeyed in Bengal, Assam, Balochistan, northwest Pakistan, and Afghanistan. He eventually settled in Iran, referred to the Iranian Sufis by an Indian Sufi master. After studying with a number of masters, he became affiliated with the
Maryamiyya. This was a Sufi order founded by western scholars connected to the Iranian monarchy. Wilson was editor of the sect’s journal *Sophia Perennis* during the 1970s. The price for this affiliation was turning a blind eye to the abuses of the last years of the Shah’s rule. (Bey later associated himself with Ali Shariati, a rebel against the Shah). At this time, Wilson also saw Islam as providing a penetrating critique of modernity. Knight suggests that photos from this period show a ‘happy’ Wilson, contrasting with the ‘tired’ man of today. Bey himself tells us that he converted to orthodox Sufism in 1971. This cost him ‘seven lean years’, but also taught him a lot. He is no longer a practising Muslim, but admires Sufism for its emphasis on immediacy.

In 1979, he was forced to flee Iran due to the rise of Khomeini, and ended up back in America. Most of his better-known writings appeared after this date. The Broadsheets of Ontological Anarchism, appeared in various zines and as decorated fliers on coloured paper in the 1980s. (Zines are homemade, anarchic counterculture magazines). These were written by Bey/Wilson, but attributed to the possibly fictitious Association for Ontological Anarchy. They were compiled, with other pieces, into the book TAZ in 1991. Bey/Wilson has written around a dozen other books and a greater number of short pieces which have developed and modified his theory. None of these works are as well-known as *TAZ*, but many offer important contributions to understanding alienation, liberation, capitalism and autonomy.

**The Imaginal World**

The central innovation of Bey/Wilson’s approach to anarchism and transformative politics is his focus on the domain of images and spirituality. Bey/Wilson suggests that a *Mundus Imaginalis* (world or images or imagination) exists. In this world, there are ‘imaginal personae’ or archetypes. This idea of an imaginal world comes from the work of comparative religion scholar Henry Corbin. ‘Imaginal’ means that something exists in the world of images and archetypes – it does not mean ‘imaginary’. For Bey (and Corbin), we can have relations with this realm. In his discussion of archetypes, he suggests there are three realms – the level of oneness of being, the imaginal level, and the material level. Myths are not authored, but fished from the imaginal realm. As in Jungian theory, Bey maintains that archetypes express structural universals of the human condition. For this reason, ‘lost’ religious and indigenous traditions can often be reconstructed by interpreting them through archetypes. Such texts are not fictional, so much as polemics for imaginal initiation, which manifest a process of such initiation. Imaginal links are actual – both material and spiritual – and not simply symbols or metaphors. Bey’s own writing (and the Bey persona) are in this style, a type of mythopoesis or deliberate invention of a mythical system, which channels imaginative energies through images. In one piece, Bey/Wilson advances the slogan ‘all power to the imagination’, which he argues it still emerging as a paradigm despite setbacks since the 1960s.

Stylistically, Bey’s writings tend to be poetic and elusive, though easily comprehensible to someone who has experienced the kind of intense altered consciousness they summon. Even his longer works are composed of fragments. They are suggestive and inspirational, but not particularly difficult to read. This style is based on an ontological orientation to the imaginal realm. Discussing mystical poetry in *Scandal*, Bey/Wilson argues that insight starts with a moment of pure intuition of the unity of being. This happens at the level of the heart or spirit. It quickly begins to form into archetypal images, which the poet then arranges into organised form. This
process both crystallises and memorises the intuition, integrating it into the self, and transmits it to others. The poet seeks to draw the listener towards the altered state of consciousness the poet wishes to invoke. He admits seeking to be entertaining as well as instructive. He also writes that he has little interest in dialogue, and none in disciples – seeking instead ‘co-conspirators’. His style is as important as his content in conveying his ideas. He offers readers a playful, poetic style of politics in which nothing is fixed in place and everything is open to re-use. Indeed, he seems to offer his work to readers in this way – as a collection of items from which readers can borrow or steal at will. His writing style sometimes imitates William S. Burroughs’ cut-up technique. Hence, something goes missing when I summarise his ideas in prosaic form – unlike some theorists, there is no substitute for reading the original.

As readers will have noticed, my own preferred writing style is direct and literal. I sometimes criticise academic writers for unnecessarily complex, poetic presentation which interferes with communication. In Bey’s case, however, his style complements the substance of his work. In Scandal, writing as Wilson, he suggests that representational language is too easy, and says too little of importance. It activates one area of consciousness to the exclusion of others – intellect rather than intuition. Only poetry and story can speak to consciousness as a whole. Art is the language of rebirth or transformation. It is associated with open-mindedness. On the other hand, prose writing is associated with closed systems of thought. Once an idea or image acquires representational or prose forms, it tends to fixate on categories. It creates polemics, dualisms and definitions. It stops expanding perceptions. Dogmatic systems are composed of ideas, not images. If Bey/Wilson is right, then the difficulty with some poststructuralists is not their use of poetic style as such. It’s the fact that the style is image-light, and seeks to frustrate readers rather than open their minds.

Despite his preference for a poetic style, Bey/Wilson has also written a number of more empirical works in a more direct style, usually under the name Wilson. These are usually histories of particular past examples of autonomous zones. These works are closer to academic style than most of Bey’s works, but still rely heavily on imaginative reconstruction. They often deal with areas of history where evidence is limited. Bey’s work deviates from usual norms of historical scholarship by using imagination and interpretation to fill in the gaps. Bey’s renderings of past autonomous zones are perhaps best read as affective interpretations. They attempt to reconstruct the zone’s lifeworld from similar autonomous affects today. Similarly, his translations of historical texts are often approximate, and include anachronistic contemporary elements.

Bey’s analysis of the social world follows from his emphasis on the imaginal realm. Each group or individual lives under certain signs by which they are known, which connect the Imaginary and Real realms. Bey sees modern power as rooted in ancient forms of magic and spirituality. Money, television, writing and so on are forms of magic because they involve action at a distance. The Spectacle, or the capitalist system, is a kind of trance-state produced by forms of mediatised magic or representation. Bey often explores the ancient or esoteric meanings underpinning current institutions. For instance, in his book Abecedarium, Bey explains the symbolism behind each letter of the alphabet. He also provides explorations around these imputed meanings. On a similar note, Bey does not wish to dispense with origins. He views origins as mythological or imaginal, rather than real. He encourages his readers to stack up or combine different origins or conceptual elements from different sources.

Bey’s strategic focus on struggle on the imaginal level has led to accusations of ‘lifestyle anarchism’. Usually, such accusations are anathemas thrown by opponents. However, there are
exceptions. For instance, Leonard Williams sees Bey’s work as exemplary of a shift in anarchism from a focus on the state to a political culture of alternative living and aesthetic practice. This practice claims to be a triumph of life over dogma. He suggests that Bey’s theory avoids political and educational purpose. Instead it draws on artistic expressivism, emphasising themes of art, imagination, immediacy and experience. Bey’s approach to all belief-systems, including anarchism, is to seek to channel their vital energy – their ‘life-forces, daring, intransigence, anger, heedlessness’ – while discarding their spooks, or fixed categories. This leads to an approach in which he loots or appropriates from different theories and traditions, without endorsing their foundational assumptions. Bey terms this ‘cultural bricolage’, or as ‘thieving’, or ‘hunting and gathering’, in an informational world. He takes, for instance, passion from revolutionary socialism, grace and ease from anarchism, self-overcoming or higher awareness from mysticism.

A non-standard type of self or subject is at the heart of this process. In order to perform acts of bricolage, there must be some kind of selecting self. But this is not necessarily an ego associated with a spook. The self is the Stirnerian Unique One, irreducible to categories. In Bey’s work, the Unique One is associated with the higher Self of mystical and spiritual traditions. Yet Bey also suggests that the Unique One paradoxically requires the Other, as a witness or key to holism. In his approach, the ideal is that the process of bricolage is driven by desire. Bey’s work is deliberately inspirational. He seeks to cause hearers or readers to reach for happiness, to purge barriers to freedom, and to open themselves to difference.

**Bey and Postanarchism**

There are some who treat Bey as the first postanarchist. This is largely due to his article ‘Post-Anarchism Anarchy’, which arguably pioneered the term. (The title is probably a play on ‘post-left anarchy’, and suggests the rejection of anarchism as an ideology – although Bey elsewhere identifies with the term ‘ontological anarchism’). Bey shares with postanarchism a simultaneous valuing of and distance from historical and leftist forms of anarchism. He also shares with the tradition an interest in poststructuralism (he clearly uses ideas drawn from Deleuze and Baudrillard).

This said, I would suggest there are important differences between a post-left anarchist position such as Bey’s and the forms of postanarchism developed by academics. Postanarchists such as Saul Newman and Simon Critchley generally maintain that there is no overarching social system. They embrace a strong constructivist ontology in which there is ‘no outside’ of dominant categories. As a result, they orient politically to a practice of small transgressions rather than systemic ruptures. They are influenced by Laclau, Foucault and Derrida, and see power as partial and diffuse. They value reformist, non-separatist strategies. These strategies operate on the inside of a system considered to have no outside. Revolution and exodus are dismissed with a hundred labels (moralist, purist, abstract, dualistic, irrelevant to the people...) The point of post-anarchist practice is not to overthrow the system, but to subvert the self, or the authority of the text. There is thus a negative, fatalistic quality to the poetics of post-anarchism.

Bey’s work, in contrast, is unapologetically opposed to a dominant system conceived largely as an external force which an actor can seek to resist or escape. Its orientation is insurrectional even when its tactics are not. A perspectival or everyday ‘outside’ is always available in the form of altered consciousness. Derridean and postcolonial approaches also arguably value a kind
of shamanic altered consciousness. They arguably seek to attain it through the failure and dismantling of the self. They seek awareness of interdependence and holism, the self/ego as a mere appearance, and the ethical call of the whole of existence. Both Bey’s and the Derridean approach are broadly pantheist, but with different affective and political consequences. Bey, like Stirner, Deleuze and Nietzsche, derives a politics of affirmation, desire, power, creativity, and ecstasy. The continuity of true Self and divinity leads to antinomianism and affirmation of life whatever form it takes. This leads to affects of euphoria, intensity and rebellion. On the other hand, Derrida and postanarchism tend to produce affects of humility and lack. They situate divinity mainly in the Other rather than the Self.

Bey’s work influenced autonomous social movements, particularly in Europe and America, in the 1990s. The idea of TAZ has inspired groups such as ravers, computer hackers, squatters and countercultural activists. Events like Reclaim the Streets and Carnivals against Capital, as well as the rise of social centres and small-scale, informal political groups, are partly inspired by the idea of the TAZ. According to Bey/Wilson’s unofficial biographer, Michael Muhammad Knight, TAZ inspired the early ‘Trips to the Zone’ which evolved into the Burning Man festival. There is reportedly at least one intentional community based on Bey’s theories. There is also an event video based on the TAZ idea. The video, like Bey’s work, uses humour, image manipulation and appeals to altered consciousness. It seeks to ‘deconstruct, synthesise and reconstruct’.

Note to readers:

Hakim Bey/Peter Lamborn Wilson is a controversial figure due to his apparent support for child sexual abuse. While there is some disagreement over what exactly he believes, it is clear that at the very least, he has provided apologia for child sexual abuse. I believe he takes this position seriously, and is not just engaged in playful provocation as some supporters claim. In my view, his position is inconsistent with his wider positions on sexual consent and abuse, and on children’s liberation. I believe Wilson/Bey is wrong on this question. However, most of the theorists covered in this column take at least one position which is oppressive or problematic (Aristotle supported slavery, Bakunin was anti-Semitic, Aquinas was homophobic, Althusser killed his wife…). If I required purity on all issues of oppression from all the theorists I write on, and effectively ‘no-platformed’ any theorist who might be complicit in one or more oppressions, I would have to exclude the overwhelming majority of historical thinkers. I have therefore generally refrained from omitting thinkers from the series based on single oppressive position, if I feel their theory is otherwise useful. I also believe that the inner structure of a theorist’s thought – the “problematic” or “theoretical machine” which drives the generation of ideas – is separable from the historical personage who formulates the thought. I believe the rest of Bey’s theory can be used, without entailing endorsement of sexual abuse. Bey’s position, and the problems with it, will be examined in detail in part 15, where I also explain in more detail my disagreements with some of Bey’s critics and defenders, and my rejection of a ‘no-platform’ position towards his work.
“Chaos never died”: Hakim Bey’s Ontology

“Chaos never died”. This is one of the best-known slogans from Hakim Bey’s seminal work, TAZ. In the second of a sixteen-part series, Andrew Robinson reconstructs the ontology of Bey’s “ontological anarchism”. He examines what it means to take chaos as ontologically primary, and how a sense of meaning or order can emerge from chaos.

Chaos Never Died

Bey’s ontology is based on the primacy of chaos. The concept of chaos should not be seen as a synonym for disorder, or an attention-grabbing rephrasing of anarchism. Chaos is not simply the absence of laws or the state. It is an ontological condition characterised by constant flux and flow, the absence of normative or other criteria of order, and a state of being akin to intoxication. Chaos, Bey tells us, is ‘continuous creation’. He also repeatedly states that ‘Chaos never died’. Chaos has survived the supposed foundation of order. It is a basic ontological reality we should embrace and celebrate.

There are thus no essential or natural laws to provide us with meaning. Nature, says Bey, has no laws, only habits. Meaning creation is, then, a matter of personal construction based on desire. The only order possible is the order one produces and imagines through ‘existential freedom’. All other orders are illusions. Life and the body are permeable, ad hoc, impure, and full of holes. Yet nevertheless, existential autonomy and self-actualisation must be accomplished in this field. In any case, Bey prefers a world of ‘indeterminacy, of rich ambiguity, of complex impurities’ to purist utopias. Chaos is therefore desirable as well as ontologically basic, or necessary. Bey sometimes portrays his theory in terms of a decision to say yes to life itself. In another work, Bey describes himself as a ‘bad prophet’ who bets on unlikely anomalies and chaos.

Chaos is something prior to thought and social construction. Bey conceives Chaos as a creative potential underlying all reality. It means that living things can generate their own spontaneous orders. It also undercuts the legitimacy of all hegemonic and hierarchical systems. Bey suggests that something comes into thought which consciousness attempts to structure. The structure appears to be the foundational level, but it isn’t. This analysis rules out representation, but not thought as such. Indeed, thought and images are both important. Letters or hieroglyphs are both thoughts and images. Bey celebrates a type of in-betweenness which deals with both thought and images.

Chaos is primary over order. In fact, order is an illusion. We are always in chaos, but sometimes we fall for the lie that order exists. This lie leads to alienation. The world is real, but consciousness is also real since it has real effects. In one passage, Bey suggests that the self cannot produce things, nor be produced. Everything simply is what it is, spontaneously. In ‘The Information War’, Bey argues that information is chaos, knowledge is spontaneous ordering from chaos, and freedom is surfing the wave of that spontaneity. He counterposes this view to the gnostic dualism.
of those who use information (or spirit) to deny the body. Instead he seeks a 'great complex confusion' of body and spirit.

Access to chaos comes through altered consciousness, but chaos is also always present in everyday life, beneath the surface. Chaos, or imagination, is the basis of a field which is outside the ordinary. However, it is also the field from which the ordinary is composed. It can enter into ordinary life. Interpretation, for example, occurs in this field. It is similar to the field of becoming in Deleuzian theory, of time or the virtual for Deleuze and Bergson, and the unconscious in Jung. The numinous is 'banal'; it can be found everywhere. Bey refers to himself as a radical monist, in distinction from the gnostic or Manichean dualisms of the right-wing. Although he does not say so directly, he seems to treat oppressive systems as distorted forms of the field of chaos, turned aside by 'dark magic' or negative forms of trance. The zone of altered consciousness is also the zone of hybridity, the zone where the boundaries provided by interpretive categories break down.

Psychological liberation consists in actualising, or bringing into being, spaces where freedom actually exists. This is not something unimaginably other. Bey suggests that many of us have attended parties which have become a brief 'republic of gratified desires'. The qualitative force of even such a brief moment is sometimes greater than the power of the state. It provides meaning, and attracts desire and intensity. Similar claims are made elsewhere in post-left anarchy. For instance, Feral Faun suggests that we all knew this kind of intensity in childhood.

**Chaos as the Basis for Meaning and Order**

In the field of chaos, things are held together by desire or attraction. Action is possible at this underlying, chaotic or quantum level. Magic is 'action at a distance'. Chaos also produces a kind of order, through Eros (love) or the self-ordering activity of a Stirnerian ego. Bey adopts Fourier's view, which he also attributes to Sufi poets, that love or attraction is the driving force of the universe. The Big Bang is 'beautiful and loves beauty', although dirt is also the mirror of beauty. For instance, flowers grow from dirt.

The possibility of 'action at a distance' is the main belief of the Hermetic approach with which Bey identifies. This approach was supposedly banished from science in its mechanistic phase, but keeps coming back – in gravity as 'attraction', in quantum physics, strange attractors, the power of media, and so on (and rather differently, in Fourier's work).

Hermeticists believed that the 'moral power' of an image could be conveyed across distance, by some kind of energy beam, especially if boosted by other sensory inputs. Bey believes that artists continue to do this, even when they deny it. Advertising, for example, conveys a particular affective or 'moral' frame. Hermeticism thus has a dual aspect. In its positive form, it is liberatory and politically radical. However, it also provides the basis for advertising, PR and so on.

The only viable government is that of attraction or love among chaotic forces. Only desire creates values. Values arise from the turbulent, chaotic process of forming relations. Such values are based on abundance, not scarcity, and are the opposite of the dominant morality. Bey describes 'peak experiences' as value-formative on an individual level. They transform everyday life and allow values to be changed or 'revalued'. Creative powers arise from desire and imagination, and allow people to create values. Catastrophe has negative connotations today, but it originally meant a sudden change, and such a change is sometimes desirable.
Bey talks a lot about magic, spirituality, Hermeticism, esotericism, and so on. This is not ‘mystification’ in the usual sense, nor a literal belief in the kinds of magic seen in fiction. Rather, it involves reflections on the symbolic and imaginary nature of many taken-for-granted practices and objects. Something is ‘magical’ or ‘spiritual’ in a positive sense if it leads to an altered state of consciousness.

Things can also be ‘magical’ or ‘spiritual’ in enacting invisible forms of long-range communication or control. ‘Magic’ or ‘spirit’ in this sense is something immanent, something most of us have experienced already – as an intense emotional experience, romantic or sexual attraction, a psychedelic trip, a meditative state, a powerful dream, an empowering protest or direct action, a random moment where everything feels right. It does not involve reference to a transcendent field outside experience, although it is certainly taken to be outside ordinary, ‘consensus’ experience.

Bey writes as if the entities experienced in altered consciousness, or the archetypes found in dreams and stories, are real. But this is part of the process of mythically initiating the reader. The ultimate ontological status of these entities (whether they are merely imagined, or have some real existence) is not particularly important. (In a sense, if everything is chaos, oneness, or becoming, then nothing of a categorisable type is real in any case). What matters is the role of these figures, and belief in them, in producing altered consciousness and intensity.

**Chaos, Religion, and Science**

Bey’s idea of chaos has a number of resonances. It is similar to the idea of chaos in chaos theory, but qualitative, rather than mathematical. It has similarities with a particular style of reading quantum-level realities. It is also similar to Deleuze’s claim that becoming or difference-production is ontologically basic, and Spinoza’s univocity of being.

Bey periodically refers to Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism, Kabbalah, quantum physics, and other bodies of thought as similar to his own, although his relationship to them is often syncretic. To the extent that one understands the Tao as an undifferentiated force of becoming, it is similar to Bey’s chaos. To the extent that one understands God as immanently coextensive with being, then God is another name for chaos.

In ‘Quantum Mechanics and Chaos Theory’, Bey argues that scientific worldviews both influence and are influenced by wider social discourses. Ptolemaic theory echoed monarchy and religion, Newtonian/Cartesian theories echoed capitalism and nationalism. Quantum theory and relativity similarly co-constitute a current social reality. However, theory continues to lag behind quantum mechanics, as scientists struggle to explain phenomena which clearly “work” scientifically. Quantum theory seems to validate Eastern and New Age worldviews, which might provide an organising myth or poetics for quantum science.

Bey summarises a series of different possible readings, some of which recover some form of realism, others of which do not. He insists that the universe must be a single reality, and suggests that the underlying chaotic nature of reality produces effects such as quantum uncertainty. This possibility could shatter ‘consensus reality’ and its claims to truth.

This could have various social effects. For example, an economy mirroring quantum theory would have to abolish work, because work is similar to classical physics in structure. The re-
sult might either be a Zerowork utopia, or a form of enslavement worse than work (probably cybernetic, and following Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of machinic enslavement).

Taoism and Buddhism are recurring points of reference. According to Wilson/Bey in *Escape from the Nineteenth Century*, Taoism is a Clastrian machine for warding off hierarchy, which offers direct experience in a manner similar to shamanism. Historically, it undermined Chinese Imperial mediation. In another piece, Bey calls for a ‘new theory of Taoist dialectics’. In Taoism, Wilson argues in *Shower of Stars*, chaos is not a figure of evil, but full of potential. It is the source of creation. The only difference between ontological anarchism and Taoism is on the question of action versus quietism.

Bey also embraces the Zen Buddhist idea of Beginner’s Mind. In another piece, Bey compares the Buddhist concept of satori with the Situationist Revolution of Everyday Life, and the Surrealist and Dadaist concept of the eruption of the marvellous. All involve perceiving the ordinary in extraordinary ways. While Situationism neglects the spiritual aspect, Buddhism neglects the political.

Bey also likens his position to Sufism. In the Sufi tradition, a ‘single vision’ of holistic divine reality is contrasted with the ‘double vision’ of alienated consciousness. Wilson relates this to the one-eyed monsters associated with the Soma-function and with magic mushrooms, taking it to be a form of altered consciousness.

Bey’s readings are sometimes rather selective. Many of the traditions he discusses counterpose spiritual awakening to bodily pleasure. They also emphasise the channelling, constraint, or balancing of desire, not simply its release. However, Bey nonetheless traces interesting parallels among traditions of disalienation.

The idea of chaos is also similar to the primordial force which is slain by the founder of civilisation in a number of statist epics (such as the Epic of Gilgamesh). Bey further likens his view of chaos to hunter-gatherer worldviews, arguing that we need to recover shamanism against priesthood, bards against lords and so on. His approach is modelled on a language which does not yet distinguish ritual from art, religion from harmonious social life, work from play, art-objects from useful objects, and so on. In one passage, Bey depicts a war between two sets of forces. Chaos, Mother Gaia and the Titans are on the side of aimless wandering, hunter-gatherers and freedom. Zeus and the Olympians are on the side of order.

If humans are different from animals, it is because of consciousness or self-consciousness, not awareness. Animals are also aware, in a spiritual sense. However, only humans have technology – which can either be a means or can dominate us. Symbolic systems are related to consciousness. Humans are thus split between an ‘animal’ level of intimacy and unified consciousness, and a distinctly human level of alienated consciousness.

Religion stems from this tragic separation of mind and body. This, in turn, leads to a huge range of practices of ‘knowing’, ranging from psychedelic drugs to computers. But since early civilisations, religion has sought to escape the body, becoming increasingly gnostic and body-hating. Bey seeks to re-valorise the ‘animal’ level of immediate awareness.

Bey’s position on altered consciousness puts him in disagreement with many anarchists. He rejects the ‘two-dimensional scientism’ of classical anarchism. The idea of being, consciousness, or bliss contained in mystical conceptions is not for Bey a Stirnerian spook – an abstract figure to which people subordinate themselves. It is a term for a type of intense awareness or ‘valuative consciousness’ resulting from immanence, which is to say, the rejection of spooks. Techniques for higher consciousness can be appropriated by anarchists.
Bey sees science as a ‘way of thinking’ without special ontological status. He therefore opposes the common assumption that only one type of consciousness, the scientific, has validity. One kind of consciousness – universalising, Enlightenment, linear, rational, mechanical – has dominated for too long. For Bey, experiences in altered states of consciousness have as much reality as any other kind of experience. Also, if something has effects, then it might as well be real.

Bey describes his approach as a ‘rationalism of the marvellous’ – neither science nor religion. This rationalism accepts that some things cannot be explained. However, in *Scandal*, he also suggests that there is ‘something mad’ about any metaphysical experience of the oneness of being, which is chaotic and primordial. Altered consciousness is both rational (as something there are good reasons to believe in) and extra-rational (as an experience). In *Sacred Drift*, Bey argues that spiritual realisation is ‘good for quite a lot’, worth tasting and striving for. But it is not the end point of human development. Rather, it is a means to something deeper.

Joseph Christian Greer has explored the origins of Bey’s thought in the zine movement, and the new religious movements of Chaos Magick and Discordianism. He argues that Bey’s ontology is largely derived from these movements. He also contends that Bey’s thought is formed in debate with alternative (especially nihilistic) positions in particular zines. TAZ, he notes, is a compilation of already-published articles, which had appeared in zines such as *Kaos* and *Mondo 2000*.

The zine scene of the 1980s was rhizomatic and transgressive, often covering taboo topics. Chaos Magick and other esoteric zines overlapped constantly with those focusing on punk music, alternative sexuality, cyberculture, and radical politics. Many of Bey’s pieces appeared in the Chaos Magick zine *Kaos*, which operated a policy of printing everything submitted to it.

Chaos Magick is a playful religious tradition which nevertheless focuses on a central belief: that magical forces can be used to manipulate reality. It maintains, like Bey, that one can achieve ‘gnosis’ through ritual and psychedelic practices. Gnosis gives access to the forces structuring reality. Such access is normally blocked by the mass media, or other ‘psychic propaganda’.

The controversies between Bey and other contributors were focused on Bey’s insistence that the death-drive, or ‘thanatos’, belongs exclusively to the Spectacle. Bey reads chaos as a creative force, and the role of the Chaos magician as encompassing others’ desires. This brought him into conflict with nihilistic and individualistic contributors.

In ‘The Ontological Status of Conspiracy Theory’, Bey argues that conspiracy theory is right-wing only because it emphasises individual rather than group action as the source of social problems. Similarly, vanguardists believe the state is a conspiracy, and conspire to seize it. Alternatively, one can maintain that elites are ‘simply carried by the flow of history’. The state does not have power, so much as it usurps individuals’ power.

However, social forces do not simply determine individuals. Rather, there is also a feedback mechanism in which people modify the forces which produce them. He calls for an existentialist valuing of acting *as if* actions can be effective, to avoid a poverty of becoming. We have to act as if we act freely, whether we really do or not. Bey also suggests that history is chaotic, and abrupt denials of all conspiracy theories reveal an irrational faith in the superficial social world.

**Chaos and Technology**

For Bey, techniques and technologies are associated with ‘action at a distance’. Technology is a kind of magic. This position renders Bey both sceptical of modern technology, and hostile
to the wide-ranging anti-technology positions of some eco-anarchists. For Wilson, writing in *Ec(o)logues*, only a type of technology which ‘enhances freedom and pleasure for all humans more-or-less equally’ can provide a basis for the flourishing of creativity and individuality.

Neolithic technology fits this definition. However, some modern technologies – such as bicycles and balloons – are basically of the Neolithic type, even though they were invented much later. Similarly, renewable energy, handlooms and the like are the right kinds of technology.

In a piece titled ‘Domestication’, Wilson argues for Fourier’s idea of ‘horticulture’ as a system which combines aspects of agriculture and gathering. A transition to horticulture seems more viable than the anarcho-primitivist idea of a transition to hunting and gathering. Furthermore, Bey suggests that domestication was initially not control, but an effect of love (caring for a young animal). However, in another paper, Bey argues that agriculture is the only truly new technology, and amounts to ‘cutting the earth’. It instantly seems a bad deal to non-agricultural peoples, and leads to authoritarianism.

In ‘Back to 1911’, Bey suggests that refusing technologies past a certain point can allow the recovery of imagination and ‘human life’. For example, amateur communal music is preferable to recorded music, and letters to telephones. Like many of Bey’s experimental proposals, this is a way of creating altered everyday experiences.

Bey has an ambiguous relationship to eco-anarchism. He opposes the rejection of technology of authors such as Zerzan. But he also calls for a psychological return of ‘paleolithic’ or ‘primitive’ techniques such as shamanism. He frames this as a return in a psychoanalytic sense – a return of the repressed. The paleolithic continues to exist at an unconscious level. Bey also supports Luddite tactics against technologies used for oppression today, whatever their future potential.

But chaos implies a right to appropriate the high-tech as well as the paleolithic. Bey does not seek to reduce the level of technology, but instead to recover lost psychological or spiritual techniques. He also suggests there is a kind of future which is at once paleolithic and sci-fi, and also immediately present to those who can feel it. This future involves new technologies of the Imagination, and a new science beyond quantum science and chaos theory.

In ‘Primitives and Extropians’, Bey responds to the appeal of his theory both to deep ecological and anarcho-primitivist approaches, and to Internet-focused and science-fiction movements, which have radically different attitudes to technology. He accuses anarcho-primitivists of a puritan impulse which uses the ‘primitive’ as a metaphysical principle (an essence, trunk, or spook).

On the other side, pro-technology ‘Extropians’ lack a critique of modern technology. They are also too purist, whereas the field of desire is ‘messy’. Zerzan criticised Bey on the back of this article for failing to understand the oppressive effects of technology. In Seduction of the Cyber Zombies, Bey suggests that there is some point at which technology flips from serving to dominating humans, and we need to keep it serving humans.

Bey calls on people to think about technology and society without absolute categories. Instead, a ‘bricolage’ or ad-hoc approach should be used. ‘Appropriate’ technology should be selected based on maximum pleasure and low cost. Bey suggests that the basic principle after the system is destroyed would be freedom from coercion of individuals or groups by others. The ‘revolutionary desire’ of freely acting people would then arrive at the appropriate level of technology.

In terms of levels of technology, Bey suggests that it ultimately comes down to desire. Do people who want computers or spaceships really want them enough to make the components themselves? If so, they will happen, if not, they are impossible, since people will reject alienated work.
While primitivists are sure that such a situation would preclude all technology, Bey is less certain. Both sides will be reconciled to it because it is based on pleasure and surplus, not scarcity, and the process of creation and conviviality would be more immediate and human-scale.

In TAZ, Bey opposes the idea of a return to the Paleolithic or any other period. Instead, he writes of a return of the Paleolithic through shamanic practices and zero-work, a return analogous to the Freudian return of the repressed. This position is implicitly directed against anarcho-primitivism. Similarly, he rejects the primitivist position of trying to reverse the rise of agriculture.

Later, however, in Riverpeople, Bey/Wilson has come round to the view that people were 'meant to live' like indigenous hunter-gatherers or gardeners. This is the high stage of human development – not today's 'Civilisation'. Hunter-gatherers may know hunger, but not scarcity. He calls for a return to gathering, hunting, or swidden (slash-and-burn) cultivation, and the renunciation of literacy.

In Shower of Stars, Bey argues that hunter-gatherers have a way of thought based on the generosity of the material bodily principle, similar to peasant carnivals. He also argues that wilderness can be recovered. Even if it has disappeared today, it can be restored or summoned back. We need to forget (but not forgive) the system, and become radically other to it, remembering our 'prophetic selves' and bodies.

In Ec(o)logues, Wilson includes a 'Neo-Pastoralist Manifesto' which suggests inculcating superstitious fear of nature as a way to ensure it wins the 'war on nature' against humans. It is important that any return to nature take the form of 'coherent actions for re-enchantment', not passive tourism.
Hakim Bey: Chaos, altered consciousness, and peak experiences

Ontological anarchist Hakim Bey argues that chaos is ontologically primary. Meaning can only be produced subjectively, through self-valorisation. In this third essay of the series, I explore the role of peak experience and altered consciousness in ontological anarchism. I examine how immediacy can provide a basis for resistance to alienation, explore Bey’s ethical theories, and look at whether social life is still possible if outer order is rejected.

The orientation to chaos leads to a political theory of altered consciousness. In order to be felt as really meaningful and existing, something needs to interact with the body and with imagination. It needs to exist in the ‘imaginal’ realm – the realm of images, unconscious archetypes, and imagination. Bey seeks an intensification of everyday life – a situation in which marvellous, ecstatic, intense, passionate forces enter into life. The passions are not pale shadows of higher realities, as in Platonism, but are themselves supernatural realities. Everyday life can be raised or sublimated to ‘a degree of intensity approaching full presence, full embodiment – and yet still indistinct... an erotic dream of a utopian landscape’. A TAZ is a case of life ‘spending itself in living’, rather than simply surviving. It can entail risking the abyss. This position involves a particular kind of affective politics. Bey clearly sees boredom or lack of meaning as the major problem in contemporary life.

Bey also proposes a particular path to creating meaning. Chaos means that anything ones does must be ‘founded on nothing’. No solid groundings are possible. Yet still, we need projects, because we are not ourselves ‘nothing’. The project which remains is an uprising against everything that posits an essential nature of things. Anarchism is faced with a philosophical problem deriving from the contradiction between meaninglessness and ethics. It seeks a ‘right way to live’ in an ‘absurd universe’. In ‘The Palimpsest’, Bey distinguishes between theory – which drifts nomadically – and ideology, which is rigid, and creates cities and moral laws. Ideology re-orders the world from outside, whereas theory refuses to let go of desire and thus creates organic movements. Theory is like a palimpsest, in which different texts are written over one another. The idea of theory as a palimpsest comes from Derrida. However, Bey is looking for ‘bursts of light’, moments of intensity, rather than Derridean ironies. He is seeking values, or the creative capacity to create values out of desires. Bey’s style of theory aims to be a ludic (play-based) approach. It is not moral relativism in the usual sense. A viewpoint is given value by a kind of subjective teleology – the individual’s search for purposes, goals, and objects of desire. The epistemology (way of learning and knowing) associated with this theory will involve juxtaposing distinct elements, rather than developing them consistently.

Awareness of chaos is intensified by altered states of consciousness and intense experiences, including those arising from psychedelic drugs, shamanism, meditation, and aestheticised living. Such practices are ways of sucking everything present into the Other World, the spiritual or chaotic world. They are attempts to reconnect with ‘original intimacy’, prior to cognition. With-
out such 'higher states of consciousness', anarchism dries up in resentment and misery. Hence the need for an anarchism both mystical and practical. Bey lists a wide range of possible sources of such intense, unmediated perception, including inspiration, danger, architecture, drink and sexuality. One passage refers to Iranian poetry set to music and chanted or sung, producing an affect known as *hal* – somewhere between hyperawareness and an aesthetic mood. Another passage refers to the techniques of heretics and mystics, seeking inner liberation. Some such techniques get trapped in religion, whereas others become revolutionary. Bey uses the term ‘magic’ or ‘sorcery’ for practices which cultivate altered awareness and disrupt the false selves that result from ordinary perception. A sorcerer recognises the reality of consciousness. This leads to a state of intoxication. Sorcery is a set of means to sustain this state of being, and expand it to other people.

Such practices produce a particular relationship to the universe. True mysticism creates what Bey calls a ‘self at peace’, a ‘self with power’. Awareness of the ‘immanent oneness of being’ is at the root of various anarchistic heresies such as the Ranters and Assassins. Another passage (from the *Black Fez Manifesto*) refers to the ‘potential of an idleness money can’t buy, the thrill of zilch, the zen of ZeroWork’. This idleness, ‘natural to childhood, must be strenuously defended’. Bey effectively calls for us to avoid being broken-in by capitalism, to remain in or return to a childhood orientation to play and immediacy. A shaman of bard uses a combination of words, music and archetypes to create altered consciousness. Everyone is an artist, but not necessarily all of the same type. Some might specialise in the ‘grand integrative powers of creativity’ or telling the ‘central stories’ of the group. Such integration by bards is posited as an alternative to integration by laws.

Many fields of life are already inflected with altered consciousness. Hermetic powers have been appropriated by dominant institutions. The means to prevent such capture is to insist that each adept control the powers, rather than be manipulated through them. Bey periodically refers to Bakhtin’s ‘material bodily principle’, or the valuing of the body in carnival, as typical of intensity. He counterposes the celebration of the body to gnostic body-hatred, which he believes is prevalent in the Spectacle. In a poem, Wilson suggests that animals already practice zerowork economics.

Bey suggests that language does not have to be representational. The structure of language may turn out to be chaotic, or complex and dynamic. Grammar might be a strange attractor, rather than a structuring law. Language is a bridge (of translation or metaphor) and not a structure of resemblance. Language should be ‘angelic’ – similar to the figure of the angel as messenger or intermediary. It should carry magic between self and other. Instead it is infected with a virus of sameness and alienation. This virus is the source of the master-signifier in language.

In many ways, Bey’s work can be understood as a theory of alienation. Alienation (whether social, psychological or ecological) separates us from awareness of, and life in, ontological chaos. For instance, belief in order leads to normativities of good and evil, body-shame, and so on. The family is criticised for encouraging miserliness with love. Christianity, even in its liberationist variants, is condemned. The point is to seize back presence from the absence created by abstraction. Life belongs neither to past nor future, but to the present. Idealised pasts and futures are rejected as barriers to presence. Time can become authentic and chaotic by being released from planned grids.

Bey criticises negative ontology, in which he apparently includes much of poststructuralism, for flattening reality onto a single, level plain. This process makes altered consciousness and es-
cape from capitalism difficult. Everything becomes equally meaningless. Negative consciousness is a predictable effect of the present system. But for Bey it is a kind of ‘spook-sickness’ caused by alienation. It serves the status quo, because it keeps people afraid, and reliant on leaders for salvation. This makes attacks on leaders seem stupid. It creates a binary between pointless action and sensible passivity. This argument is similar to my own work on theories of constitutive lack.

Chaos is misappropriated when used as a scientific basis for death, as nihilism, or for scams. Chaos is everywhere, and so is unsaleable. At one point, Bey argues that both New Age spirituality and religious fundamentalisms derive their power from the spiritual emptiness of modern life. However, they divert the rejection of emptiness into new abstractions – commodification in the New Age, morality in fundamentalism. Escaping spiritual emptiness instead requires escaping abstractions.

Bey specifically rejects the view of chaos as lack, entropy, or nihilism. Instead, he argues that chaos is Tao, or continual creation. It is a field of potential energy rather than exhaustion, of everything rather than nothing. Bey speaks of moments when he’s overcome the feeling of powerlessness and futility. He writes that these are the only times he breaks through into a state of consciousness which feels like health. In other words, action is necessary to disalienate, even if it has no outer effect. Existence is a meaningless abyss. Yet this is not cause for pessimism. Rather, it leads to an open world in which we can create or bestow meaning through action, play, and will.

Bey seeks to make an offer of disalienation, which, once felt, breaks the functioning of capitalism. Even a few moments of joy may be worth considerable sacrifice. Awareness of the holism of being, or ‘metanoia’, can go beyond categorised thinking into smooth, nomadic, or chaotic thinking and perception. Bey denies that he is pointing to a secret which he is refusing to share. Rather, the material bodily principle is secret because it is forgotten. The body is degraded both by the world of images and by bodily narcissism.

Immediacy, or presence, is a central concept for Bey. Immediacy is valued as a counterpoint to representation and simulation – which are definitive of the dominant system. Immediacy can also be expressed in or through representation, by means of chaotic processes which disrupt order. The spirituality of pleasure, as Bey terms it, exists only in a presence which disappears if it is represented. In Bey’s reading of religious imperatives, such imperatives are not outer impositions but a kind of inner choice – to live fully, or to risk dying without having lived. The point seems to be to experience chaos as play, rather than trauma. ‘The universe’, Bey states at one point, ‘wants to play’. One loses one’s humanity or divinity if one refuses to play. People sometimes refuse to play due to alienated motives ranging from dull anguish to greed to contemplation. The ‘magic’ practices of Bey’s politics are ways of experiencing chaos in a suitably joyful way. In Scandal, Wilson argues that one can handle pain, suffering and negative emotions by ritualising them, turning them into reversible symbols. Cultures also symbolise and channel the potentially destructive power of Eros. Bey insists that this approach does not deny that there are ugly, frightening things in the world. However, many of these can be overcome. They can only be overcome if people build an aesthetic from overcoming rather than fear. If one reads history through ‘both hemispheres’ – meaning both affectively and logically – then one realises the world constantly undergoes death and rebirth.

If life is chaos, then Bey’s response is what he sometimes terms ‘aimless wandering’ or nomadism, and compares to the Situationist drive and Sufi ‘journeying’. Nomadism, along with the Uprising, provides a model for everyday life. In Sacred Drift, Wilson invokes the figure of
the 'rootless cosmopolitan', a Stalinist slander against Jews, as a general modern strategy. People wander or drift today because nothing fixes them in place or commands fixed loyalties. This process of movement is also a kind of psychological nomadism which moves among different bodies of theory. There is an ambiguity in that, since being is oneness, journeys start and end in the same place.

For Bey, life is to be lived through peak experiences, and conviviality. The peak experience becomes the goal of aimless wandering, much like a shrine is the goal of a pilgrimage. Bey’s concept of peak experience is modified from Maslow’s. Against the false unity of a flattened, commodified world, Bey argues for disloyalty to the dominant culture and nomadic movement among different alternatives.

In a poem in the *Black Fez Manifesto*, Bey cites Ibn Khaldun’s view that nomads who awake at night to see the stars are like animals reassured the universe is still there. But he adds that city-dwellers who awake similarly while on a trip are sucked into ‘panic’ and ‘freefall’. The point here seems to be that the experience of chaos is negative only because of the habits and alienation of modern subjects. Embracing chaos is not a loss in itself, but seems as such from a certain point of view, because of a lack of familiarity with chaos. Modernity or the Enlightenment tries to blot out the stars with light pollution, to destroy the vitality of night. Night here symbolises a type of energy associated with smooth space and altered consciousness. In a related piece, Bey calls for a ‘Bureau of Endarkenment’ to encourage superstitions about technologies such as cars and electricity.

**Ethics and society**

Like other post-left and politics-of-desire writers, Bey rejects normativity and top-down morality. Instead, he argues for a type of immanent ethics based on one’s own desire and ethos. In a fragment on crime, Bey defines justice as action in line with spontaneous nature. He argues that it cannot be obtained by any law or dogma. The moment someone discovers and acts in line with a mode of being different from alienated reality, the state or ‘law’ tries to crush it. This means that we are all criminals. Instead of claiming martyrdom as victims of persecution, we should admit that our very nature is criminal.

Ontological freedom stems from ontological chaos. We are already sovereigns in our own skins, by virtue of the absence of order. Freedom is not, therefore, something we have to achieve through revolution or struggle. Freedom is realised in the experience of intensity, or emotion experienced to the point of being overwhelmed. Bey supports Fourier’s idea that unrepressed passions provide the only basis for social harmony. However, people also seek other sovereigns (i.e. other autonomous subjects) for relations. Reciprocity, or pleasure with others, is the non-predatory expansion of intensity. It is a kind of eros of the social. In one passage, Bey argues that 'each of us owns half the map', so finding intensity is often a cooperative activity. He suggests that the self/other or individual/group contradictions are false dichotomies created by the Spectacle. Self and other are complementary. The Ego and Society are absolutes which do not exist. Rather, people are drawn into complex relations in a field of chaos. Bey refers to Stirner’s union of self-owning ones, Nietzsche’s circle of free spirits, and Fourier’s passional series as inspirations for such relations. They involve processes of redoubling oneself as others also do so. The ‘gratuitous creativity’ of such a group would replace the specialised field of art.
In a sense, Bey is constructing a virtue ethics very different from the usual type, in which virtuous life consists in the pursuit of peak experiences and a type of living compatible with ontological chaos. Some readers see Bey’s politics as emphasising sincerity as a virtue. In such a worldview, enjoyment is almost a moral imperative. One has an obligation to experience joy, and not postpone it to the future or afterlife, so as to do justice to oneself. In *Sacred Drift*, Wilson argues that this is a prerequisite for doing justice to others. By combining various Sufi theories of disalienation, Bey suggests that we arrive at a position which valorises all kinds of sexualities, both as permitted bodily enjoyment and spiritual practice.

Bey, following Bob Black, favours the abolition of work. The subset of work-like tasks which remain necessary are to become a kind of play for those attracted to them. Bey thinks that relations among autonomous beings might find ways of working themselves out. He sometimes suggests that we are all ‘monarchs’ or ‘sovereigns’. Today we survive as pretenders, but we can still seize a little reality for ourselves. Monarchy is closer to anarchy than other forms of government, because it recognises individual sovereignty. Bey here plays on the Situationist idea of ‘masters without servants’, which is an egalitarian attempt to address hierarchical aspects of Nietzsche.

However, this does not mean that people should optimise their own enjoyment in predatory ways. The point is to realise intensity in altered consciousness, not to appropriate alienated experiences in a maximising way. In ‘The Anti-Caliph’, Wilson distances his position from ‘libertinism’, in the sense of doing what one likes regardless of others’ values or lives. The difference between an antinomian (Wilson/Bey’s position) and a libertine is that the former acts from a personal ethic. This ethic is considered higher than outer laws and social norms, and thus provides a basis for defying them. Such an ethic is more demanding than normativity or law, since it involves the expansion of the self to include others, rather than self- or other-denial.

‘A freedom or pleasure that rests on someone else’s slavery or misery cannot finally satisfy the self because it is a limitation or narrowing of the self, an admission of impotence, an offence against generosity and justice’.

Bey does not want to realise desires at the expense of others’ misery – not for moral reasons, but because it is self-defeating. Misery breeds misery, and desires to cause misery stem from psychological impoverishment. He is sympathetic to Fourier’s argument that desire is impossible unless all desires are possible. Everyone aspires to certain ‘good things’ which are available only among free spirits. This is particularly true in cases of love. The spiritual meaning of sexuality, for instance, precludes uncaring, violent and dominating types of sex. Bey thus advocates the destruction of all social relations which treat some as subordinate to or owned by others – including marriage and the family. One’s sexual code should be ‘both highly ethical and highly humane’, valuing both pleasure and conviviality. It should include a spiritual dimension, and not succumb to ‘joyless commodification’ or ‘vulgar materialism’. Such an ethic is distinct from normativity, and continuous with shamanism. For instance, Bey remarks that paganism invents virtues, but not laws.

‘Wrong’ in Bey’s code of ethics means counterproductive and self-immiserating. Causing misery to others is wrong because it is self-defeating (misery breeds misery). Those who immiserate others are in Bey’s experience psychologically poor, and themselves miserable. Bey associates de Sade with fascism – the satisfaction of desires of an elite through the creation of enemies and victims. Against these positions, Bey turns to Fourier’s view that desire is impossible unless all desires are possible. This seems to be partly a response to Bookchin’s critique. It is a similar
critique of simple egoism to that found, for instance, in Ancient Greek thought, which similarly argued for ethical positions without assuming a standpoint higher than the self.

Other passages also emphasise the relational aspect of chaos and becoming. For instance, Bey argues that speech is dialogical or ‘diadic’ in structure. It relies on a pairing of speaker and hearer, and this pairing can be reversed. In *Sacred Drift*, Wilson argues for reciprocity, sharing, mutual benefit, and harmony, instead of either quarrelling or submitting. In ‘Utopian Blues’, he claims that utopia is a unity, not a uniformity. It is based on something like Fourier’s idea of harmonisation – a combination of widely different people and desires, through each pursuing their own attractions. Utopian desire ‘never comes to an end, even – or especially – in utopia’.

The primary conflict of the current world is the conflict between the authority of the tyrant and the authority of the realised self. In *Ec(o)logues*, Wilson claims that social life is to be based on conviviality and creativity, rather than mediation. A key step towards a different way of being is to summon the will to experience other living beings as relatives or relations. The valuation of a different kind of world is crucial here. Many people are forced to live by means of conviviality or social networks due to poverty (for instance, collective squatting). They don’t necessarily value such practices. However, ontological anarchy values such a way of life as preferable to mass consumerism.

At times, the imperative to support chaos and promote freedom lead to ambivalent positions. For instance, Bey is ambivalent about abortion, supporting women’s freedom but desiring that the entropic force of family planning be negated by chaos. This position does not imply optimism about human nature. Bey opposes the view that humans are ‘basically good’. Instead, he argues against others holding power ‘precisely because we don’t trust the bastards’. In another passage in *Sacred Drift*, he argues that brilliance is not itself desirable. He observes that people can be brilliant for good things like love or humanity, but also for bad things like hatred and self-aggrandisement. In the latter case, there is a need for self-defence against brilliance. The best of human potentiality seems to come out in altered consciousness, whereas capitalism stimulates the worst.
Hakim Bey: Alienation and The State

Hakim Bey’s TAZ is a well-known manifesto of anti-capitalism, providing a model for alternative living. Yet Bey’s work has been criticised for neglecting the critique of capitalism. In the fourth and fifth parts of the series, I aim to show that Bey has an astute, unusual analysis of the structure of the dominant system. This fourth part explores the view of the dominant system as a ‘Spectacle’, the theory of alienation, and the history and contemporary forms of the state.

Bey’s work is thoroughly anti-capitalist. Critics sometimes miss this fact because of Bey’s unusual terminology. He rarely talks about ‘capitalism’. Nevertheless, his theory is clearly directed at a more-or-less unitary adversary, identifiable as capitalism or modern society. Bey seeks to challenge the whole system, rather than be distracted by any particular issue. He does not see power as localised, diffuse, or irrelevant. In this column and elsewhere, I’ve generally paraphrased Bey using the words ‘system’ and ‘Spectacle’. In fact, Bey tends not to talk about the system in such general terms. He assumes it in the background of his theory. When he names it at all, he uses terms like ‘consensus reality’, ‘scarcity’, and ‘images’. Sometimes, Bey uses the Hegelian term ‘Totality’ to refer to what he considers the false consensus expressed on behalf of society. He also sometimes uses the term Spectacle, derived from Situationism. Other times, Bey refers to the Planetary Work Machine (from P.M.’s Bolo’Bolo), or to Empire (from Hardt and Negri. While these terms don’t necessarily connote a dominant system for some readers, they are used in a way which clearly refers to a systemic structure. In a related discussion, Sellars suggests that Bey’s view of the system is basically Debord’s.

Bey’s theory of capitalism draws heavily on the Situationist idea of the Spectacle. This approach sees capitalism as a type of life mediated by images. Bey similarly sees the system as a regime in which images dominate life. If someone is within ‘consensus thought’, they accept the dominant beliefs of the current system. For example, they only recognise the existence of things that are represented, not those that are present. Representing something (within the Spectacle) makes it ‘semiotically richer but existentially impoverished’. This process gives something a more symbolic meaning, but a less emotional or lived meaning. A represented thing becomes a potential commodity. This, in turn, destroys the existential meaning of objects, especially those which produce altered consciousness. Take an example such as dance music. As part of a rave, it is hard to represent. At the same time, it generates intense energy, such as ecstatic experiences and collective bonding. Now suppose the same music is recorded, sold, and classified. It gains symbolic meaning. It becomes easier to name, categorise and compare with other things. But it loses some of its emotional meaning. It is no longer part of the context of intense practice.

The Spectacle is also a system of scarcity. Like many eco-anarchists, Bey contrasts the system of scarcity with an ethos of abundance in indigenous societies. Modern cultures, and agricultural indigenous cultures, often symbolise scarcity as a loss or fall. A familiar example is the story of the fall from Eden. For Wilson (in Ploughing the Clouds), this type of story symbolises the loss of original anarchy and autonomy. In the passage to modern life, intimacy with nature is replaced by separation from it. Abundance is replaced by scarcity. Gift economies are replaced
by commodity economies. ‘Polymorphous co-sensuality’ in sexual relations is lost to kinship and marriage structures.

If something went wrong in modern history – and Wilson/Bey is sure it did – then it must have happened in the imaginal realm. He thinks that humanity’s main historical mistake was to lose the experience of the imaginal realm. Modern humans have lost the experience of intimacy with the cosmos. Most of us can no longer attain altered consciousness. In *Shower of Stars*, he adds that every society produces an excess, which it needs to squander. There are different ways to do this. Wealth can be squandered in rituals of consumption, such as potlatch. It can be consumed by a large ‘idle’ population, such as monks. It can be consumed in carnivals. Or it can be managed through the artificial production of scarcity. Capitalism opts for the last of these options. This is not a good way to deal with excess. Seen from an altered state of consciousness, he adds in *Riverpeople*, authoritarianism and conventional morality come to seem like a disease.

Bey also endorses most of the standard objections to capitalism. The system is objectionable for a whole range of familiar reasons. Wealth is too concentrated. Financial capitalism separates money from production. The media enclose meaning in a limited sphere. Capitalism leads to securitisation, repression, and ecological destruction. The benefits of civilisation are only ever available to an elite of about 10%. The system, or Empire, brings with it murder, famine, war and greed, all of which are effects of the triumph of death over life.

Bey claims to be ‘personally at war’ with each of these facts because ‘they violate my desires and deny me my pleasures’. In other words, Bey is an anti-capitalist, but his grounds for anti-capitalism are largely Stirnerian. He objects to capitalism because it blocks self-actualisation and the personal production of meaning. He embraces the Marxist critique of alienation, but not Marxist collectivism. Capitalism is emptiness – what Bey in a poem terms a ‘lukewarm necromantic vacuum of dephlogisticated corpse breath’. It is figured archetypally as death, rather than life or joy. For instance, the dead were the first to get privatised space and to invest in futures.

Alienation

Much of Bey’s theory focused on the question of alienation – though he prefers the less ‘lofty’ term ‘loneliness’ – and he theorises the system in such terms. Capitalism involves both sameness and separation. In *Riverpeople*, he portrays capitalism as a form of monoculture. Property is a type of ‘spectral alienation’, as opposed to the ‘mutualism of usufruct’ (a Proudhonian term for temporary ownership based on use). The problem with modern society is ‘civilisation’, not culture or technology. In other words, Bey identifies the main social problem as a certain kind of social system, based on alienation. Civilisation reproduces itself through alienation, negation, and unfulfilment. It offers the appearance of fulfilment from which one always awakes unhappy. The Totality renders people isolated and powerless. It offers only illusory forms of self-expression. Alienation is a ‘demonic democracy’, everything equal but valueless. It is a ‘bad mood in which every day is the same’. In his ‘Esoteric Interpretation of the IWW Preamble’, Bey argues that alienation is psychological as well as economic. He argues for a political orientation to all of those affected by alienation, not only industrial workers.

Alienation functions partly through the disruption of horizontal social relations. In the essay ‘Immediatism versus Capitalism’, Bey argues that capitalism only supports or enables, or even allows, particular kinds of groups. It promotes groups based on production (such as work
colleagues), consumption (such as self-help groups) or reproduction (such as nuclear families). Capitalism is organised to prevent conviviality in Bey’s sense – or coming together for purposes of play, life, or mutual enhancement. Bey argues that pressures on people’s time and energy from work, consumption and reproduction are today a bigger force in oppressing people than things like police repression and unjust laws. The structure of social life, which really makes everyone miserable, goes unnoticed.

Conviviality is possible within small affinity-groups – in Bey’s terms, bees or tongs. However, capitalism subtly disrupts such groups. Affinity-groups come up against barriers such as the ‘busy’ lives of members, the need to earn money, or difficulties which seem like bad luck. Today capitalism has fragmented people to an extraordinary degree. Most people are caught in ‘involution’ (shrinkage, or production through their own inverse) with the media. Small groups are also isolated from each other. Neoliberal capitalism is based on isolating people to an increasing extent. Forms of ‘combination’, or life in common, have been destroyed or turned into simulations. Poverty, terror, mediation and alienation all contribute to this process of isolation. Hence, while Bey rejects collectivism, he also opposes standard types of individualism. The ego, as much as the group, can be a Stirnerian ‘spook’, or false essence. People can be subordinated and captured through their own appearance – for example, through self-branding.

Recuperation through representation is identified by Bey as the main problem facing dissent. The system captures and redirects everything simply by representing it, and changing its context. It can even pre-empt opposition through simulation. In earlier works such as TAZ, Bey argues that opposition is open to recuperation, as it gets converted into post-revolutionary normality. Each generation’s dream becomes the next generation’s parlour decor. People construct artificial outer images of themselves, known as personae. They succumb to a kind of generalised common sense or ‘consensus-perception’ which filters out much of what exists. The global crisis does not in fact result from scarcity, but from the ideology of scarcity. The world doesn’t run out of resources. Rather, it runs out of imagination, or creative energy. Today there is too little, too thinly spread.

Bey sometimes goes as far as to see power as mainly an image. In ‘The Information War’, he argues that the state is now a ‘disembodied patterning of information’ rather than a force in its own right. There is no ‘power’ today, but instead a complete and false totality which contains all discourse through commodification and mediation. Individuals always remain outside of this, but as something pathetic and meaningless. One cannot appear in the media with one’s true subjectivity, but only disappear in representation. The system’s power does not stem from a solid structure – a possibility precluded by Bey’s insistence on the primacy of chaos. In Immediatism, Bey repeats his view that any order, except that arising from existential freedom, is illusory. However, illusions can kill. Only desire creates values. Civilisation is based on the denial of desire. In other words, it is a kind of upside-down value which values its own denial. Knowledge has also been alienated today. It is replaced by a simulation – the same ‘data’, but in a dead form. It is alienating because it fails to interact with the body, or with imagination. The illusions created by finance capital have become consensus reality, but remain illusions. Bey seeks to recover the call of a submerged reality accessible only rarely – the reality of intensity.

The persistence of this system offers a kind of de-intensified, meaningless experience. We’re at the end of history, götterdämmerung, and yet it’s also ‘goddam dull’. In one poem in Black Fez Manifesto, he suggests that we hide in ‘squatted character armor’ which is not our own, like hermit crabs. In another poem (this time in Ec(o)logues), Wilson discusses his native New Jersey.
Modern agriculture is associated with death. It is opposed by ‘secret ludic economies’ connected with meadows, woods and wild spaces. Today, the system tries to force people into mediation. Today, unmediated pleasures are nearly always illegal. Even simple enjoyments like outdoor barbecues often violate bylaws. Pleasure becomes too stressful and people retreat into the world of television.

The media play a central role in Bey’s theory of capitalist power. In ‘Media Creed for the Fin de Siécle’, Wilson argues that the term ‘media’ should refer mainly to those media which claim objectivity. Subjective media tend to resist mediation. Books, for instance, have become an intimate or subjective medium because anyone can write one. The mass media constructs an image of false subjectivity by blurring the boundary between objective and subjective. It sells an illusion that each of us has expressed her/himself by buying a lifestyle or appearing within representation. The system still had ‘glitches’ in the 1960s because the media failed to convince. War appeared as Hell, not glorious; the counterculture appeared exciting, not evil. This led to cognitive dissonance, or a gap between experience and representation. When the system is able to produce experiences in line with its discourses, it eliminates virtually all cognitive dissonance. The 1960s movement saw and exploited the glitch, but fell into the trap of seeking to seize the media, and thus becoming images and commodities themselves. In any case, these tactics are no longer viable. However, in ‘Utopian Blues’, Bey argues that the ‘con’ of alienated civilisation is wearing thin to the point of transparency. Capitalism is threatened by a ‘mass arousal from the media-trance of inattention’.

The State and the Rise of Alienation

Bey discusses the state as a central aspect of alienation. In Bey’s historical theory, the rise of the dominant system is an effect of increasing alienation and mediation. In other words, lived, immediate, intense symbolism and imagery are gradually replaced by increasingly abstract, emotionally empty symbols. These symbols are in turn captured and monopolised by dominant institutions, which are effectively accumulations of such symbols. Law, writing, money, and computer coding are all examples of extremely abstract symbolism with only an attenuated relation to their original, imaginary basis. This contrasts with indigenous symbolism such as shamanism, origin narratives (‘myths’), symbolic exchange, and wampum. These all involve a close connection between imagery, social use, and emotional or existential significance. Bey seeks alternatives to capitalism, of a certain type. He seeks to recover more intense, less mediated types of imagery and symbolism.

Bey rejects the view that either capital or the state is a determinant, final instance of alienation. Oppressive, alienating institutions are not reducible to a single matrix. There are a number of different sources of alienation. Money (or Capital) and the State are distinct institutions, although they are sometimes allied. Authoritarian religion is a third, distinct force. The emergence of the state seems to have been a revolution when seen from the longue durée of historical time. But it is more gradual in human terms. The rise of the state is the rise of separation and hierarchy. The early State had to coexist with social forms – such as rights and customs – which resisted it. An absolute State or ‘free’ market was inconceivable, as it violated reciprocity. Only in modern times are there absolutist States or ‘free’ money. Although distinct from capital, the state always remains mired in production. In contrast, money can escape production as pure symbolisation.
The emergence of the state requires the emergence of statist images. The state has to ‘invent’ surplus and scarcity to disrupt indigenous bands, which are based on abundance. The rise of the state must have been a result of human actions (not for instance population growth or climate change), since the state is a social relation. Bey suggests the rise of the state must have involved a revolt by one or another group differentiated by role. Maybe chiefs, shamans, or warriors revolted, or of men revolted against women. The resultant structure is still with us. In some ways, we are still within the Roman Empire. The Roman form of the state, law, and property are still fundamental to modern power.

As we shall see later, Bey sees indigenous social forms as a type of social ‘machine’ which includes a gift economy, shamanism, and diffuse power as theorised by Clastres. The state had to defeat this social machine to take power. Why was it defeated? What ‘went wrong’? Wilson suggests in *E(c)logues* that excess production may have given the temple political power, and metal-smithing may have strengthened warriors. A new ideology of human sacrifice was created to replace the old religions. The state was based on an elite, which captured the social surplus. This elite then focused on war instead of food production. War already existed as an aspect of indigenous diffuse power. However, it changed with the rise of the state. The new, ‘classical’ (rather than indigenous) form of war was a means to capture wealth and slaves. Corresponding to this process, land was privatised. Originally, myths and institutions existed which warded off the state – for instance, shamanism. Something went wrong somewhere, and the founding myths are now those of alienation. The State is founded on symbolisation as mediation and alienation. It thus has a magical basis, in writing as ‘action at a distance’. It also rests on the monopolisation of violence. Violence originally belonged to everyone. It was monopolised by the state. The state might even have started off as a scapegoat, carrying off blood-guilt.

The state is also based on homogenisation. Planned statist cities are designed as gridworks, whereas grottos associated with mysticism are shapeless and meandering. Medieval cities are similar to grottos. In statist systems, a single worldview and value-system is locked in place. This is true of Christianity, and also of capitalism since the collapse of Stalinism. This single worldview reshapes language. Linguistic categories are a secondary structure used to interpret incoming chaotic flows. Modernity is unusual in insisting on only a single structure. Bey suggests that any map (or language) will fit any territory (or experience), given enough violence. Capitalism seeks to fit the whole world into a single conceptual language. This contrasts with the hermeticist and indigenous views of multiplicity, in which many worldviews contain part of the truth of a world based on difference. The hegemony of a single image of the world obstructs the circulation of images and undermines the expression of difference. Instead, the same discourse is endlessly recycled or reproduced.

However, the state has also changed in the neoliberal period. With the rise of the Spectacle, the function of law has changed. In Nietzsche’s day, law still appeared as the oppressor’s arsenal of tools, which is useful in providing something to struggle against. Today it is less an edged weapon than a ‘viral ooze’, operating through the Spectacle and ‘cop culture’ which become indistinguishable from real power. The law should still be used as ‘an edge to sharpen our lives’. However, law has mutated from a tool of oppressors to the self-image of the spectacle. Law simulates power, while offering and denying the utopia of justice. Anything which provides unmediated experience is a threat to the Spectacle and at risk of being banned.

In some pieces, Bey argues that the law is a useful stimulus for the subversive effects of dissent. Paradoxically, a liberal regime can disempower dissent by making it safe. In *Against Legalisation*,

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Bey argues that dissident media is impossible without censorship. American-style free speech absorbs or co-opts dissent as images, thus rendering it ineffectual. Today, reform is impossible, because partial victories are always absorbed as commodity relations. For example, Bey suggests that legalisation would absorb drugs as a ‘new means of control’. It could be used, for instance, to control drug research more effectively, as the underground would disappear. The 10% of the world economy which is ‘grey’ or quasi-criminal is a new frontier for capital to recuperate. This article shows clearly Bey’s emphasis on recuperation as a greater danger than repression.

The Contemporary State

Today, the state is undergoing a process of decline marked by its current death-spasms of apocalyptic violence. Hence there are periodic ‘spasms of control-by-terror’ directed at perceived enemies, such as hackers. ‘Robocop’, or the automation of war, is the last interface between power and its others. Bey portrays the state as simultaneously liquefying and petrifying – its outer rigidity marking its emptiness. Bey likens these spasms of repression to medieval public executions, intended to terrorise and paralyse rebels. This is simulated justice, or terror, as opposed to systematic repression. This pattern of repression makes publicity a bad tactic and clandestinity a good one.

Another aspect of the contemporary state is its use of ‘depletion’ as social control. The old liberal approach sought to assimilate marginal groups. Today’s approach instead relies on repression and isolation in zones of depletion. In this context, immigration is really a problem for global capitalism. Undergoing decay, capitalism practices social triage. It lets go of areas (and classes, races, etc) which fall below a certain level of participation in the Spectacle. This leads to no-go-zones where control is mostly simulated. Officially these zones remain state-controlled. They are not allowed political autonomy, and spasms of spectacular terror are sometimes unleashed against them. The Spectacle still tries to destroy any threat to its monopoly on spectacular authority. In theory, everyone is represented. In practice, however, most people are sacrificed. They cannot enter the deathly world of virtual reality or Cyber-Gnosis. There is thus a process of polarisation between included and excluded. Bey thinks this process will speed up, and even parts of America will be affected. Triage will occur even within the zones assigned to supposedly ‘safe’ subjects with rights. However, this creates possibilities through the occupation of zones of depletion, or NoGoZones.

Corresponding to its creation of zones of depletion, capital actually retreats on a spatial level. A philosophy of risk-management and protection is accompanied by a process of withdrawal into fortress-like spaces such as gated communities and malls. This corresponds to the disappearance of certain zones into virtual reality, and the consignment of others as zones of depletion. Most people are left behind in the resultant ‘social triage’, even if they remain media-entranced. There is also a clever control strategy in which the system threatens something very extreme, and when it falls short, people are relieved and find it tolerable. The surveillance state creates a danger of ‘information totality’ in which the map finally covers the whole territory. Such a regime would amount to unchallenged terror and the triumph of order and death. Our hopes in such a system are computer glitches and venal human controllers.

In an earlier paper, Bey argued that the right-wing need an enemy. In the absence of communism, they worry about the UN, or Arabs, or drugs. This is partly because they cannot theorise
the current regime of rule by virtual capital. Elsewhere, he argues that both right and left are
captured in identifying symptoms and enemies. These enemies actually stem from the political
subconscious, which is affected by neoliberalism and the resulting dissatisfaction. Some symp-
toms are noticed from the right, others from the left, but both are searching for a scapegoat for
the general malaise. This leads to a society which is waging war on itself. In Sacred Drift, Wilson
notes that the west has rediscovered ‘its ancient Other’. He cites Marx’s dictum that history re-
peats first as tragedy, then as farce. Today’s Islamophobia is a farcical re-enactment of medieval
conflicts.

One of the more unusual aspects of Bey’s theory of the state is his relative preference for
monarchical and single-leader states over mass culture and modern regimes. The only regimes
which exist at an archetypal level – in dreams, for example – are anarchy and monarchy. Both are
rooted in sovereignty and will. Monarchy is objectionable for cruelty and capriciousness. But it is
closer to anarchy than modern regime-types. Monarchs at least are human in their flaws. Today’s
rulers barely even exist aside from the Ideas, or spooks, they serve. Such people are functionaries,
not archetypes. Bey suggests that anarchism is actually a mutation of monarchy, in which each
person becomes sovereign in a creative sphere.
Hakim Bey: Capitalism, the State, and the Spectacle

In the previous essay, I examined Hakim Bey’s theories of alienation and the state. Completing the examination of Bey’s analysis of the dominant system, this fifth of sixteen columns examines Bey’s theory of capitalism. It shows how Bey situates capitalism as a trance-like manipulation of desire, and as a process of alienation from the body culminating in a flight to the ether. It also examines Bey’s critique of ‘cop culture’ and his comments on American global hegemony, and provides an analysis of Bey’s view of the dominant system.

Capital and Capitalism

Bey also analyses capital as a machine for the production of scarcity and the destruction of intensity. Capitalism seeks, not to satisfy desire, but to exacerbate longing through utopian traces. This idea – which Bey attributes to Benjamin – plays on the idea that commodities are advertised in terms of future promises. The commodity will provide enjoyment or validity or reality, or validate one’s experiences. Capital needs the promise of such future benefits to sell products. Yet it also needs to avoid actually delivering on these promises. If it delivered, then there would be no need to buy further products.

Hence, capitalism constantly reproduces scarcity to stimulate demand. This renders art threatening to capitalism. Art, or creativity, is based on the gesture of reciprocity, or presence. Everyone is an artist, in the sense of co-creation through lived experience, play, and meaning. But capitalism intervenes to mediate between people. It interrupts reciprocity and introduces scarcity and separation. Capitalism is vampiric. It relies on consuming others’ creativity. It liberates itself by enslaving desire. Much of what the system offers has no real use – it is ‘snake oil’ – but it works because it has a placebo effect.

Capitalism stems from the invention of scarcity as an existential condition. It is driven by a totalitarian logic of eternal growth. It claims eternity, and therefore ahistoricity. Capitalism cannot “really” escape production. But the ideology of globalised capitalism creates the appearance of escaping production. It appears to be pure, disembodied and ecstatic. The triumph of capital is connected to the triumph of the screen. The system represents itself as a state of oneness, and as invulnerable. But its weakness is shown in the feeling that it is ‘not reflected in lived experience’ – in experiences of alienation, emptiness and boredom.

Contemporary capitalism takes this process to new extremes. Today, the system is evolving towards rule by technocrats over a mass of homogenised but atomised consumers, linked only by ‘CommTech’ and mutual surveillance. The current situation is like the story, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice – in which a junior wizard uses magic in which he is untrained, causing disaster. Today this is happening with technology. The current phase of capitalism involves a kind of historical blockage. The world has basically remained in – or looped back to – the nineteenth
century. Authors as early as Fourier, in 1799, were already discussing today’s problems. However, the system conceals such history. Capitalism is building an ‘8-lane bypass over the Past’. Like the state, it operates at the level of images.

The current situation is not so much postmodernist as anti-modernist. Modern insights have been denied and jettisoned. For example, the Freudian discovery of the unconscious has been rejected. It is denied and spread-out across various forms of downmarket media. One might add that Marxian insights are similarly rejected in neo-classical economics, and that sociological knowledge has been displaced by policy discourse and individualised explanations. The dominant system is today defined by its denial or warding-off of certain directions of development of knowledge, leaving knowledge as a kind of Lysenkoite shell.

Money may have originally appeared as a type of religious, symbolic power. Coins might have been temple souvenirs deemed to have mana or numinous value, which could be exchanged for real wealth. Alternatively, it might have first appeared as debt. Either way, Bey suggests that its basic gesture is to separate wealth from its symbol and recombine them later, making the symbol tradeable. The rise of money is also part of the rise of cumulative mediation. Whereas commodity currencies (such as cattle or barley) still had personal uses, money is entirely impersonal – a floating signifier.

However, writing and money are not enough to explain the rise of alienation. Money existed for 4000 years before the state emerged. The material world tends to restore equality. It resists accumulation. In any case, the State provides ‘protection’, which is not a material resource. Bey believes that symbolic power is central here. The State can only gain an advantage over diffuse social institutions when it can present its power in symbolic terms.

Capital operates at the level of magic, or interpretation, the same level where Bey locates resistance. The capitalist type of imagination is negative, reducing everything to debt and sucking it into a black hole. Debt mutates into peonage (slavery) as jubilee (debt write-off) never comes. Abstractions are handed down from one generation to the next. Nothing is experienced directly; everything is mediated by money. Capital seeks a monopoly on interpretation. It constructs a space of supposed dialogue which in fact precludes any response, resonance or resistance.

This is similar to the idea of forced communication within dominant terms. Whereas in totalitarian systems, the regime censors by fiat, in capitalist systems the market censors through market failure. Today, capital seeks to detach images from experienced life entirely. In tourism, even the real world is experienced as an image. Tourists are seduced by the utopian trace of difference, but bear the virus of sameness into living spaces. Bey likens this process to the indigenous idea of soul loss.

**Capital Today**

In *Millennium*, Bey suggests that, in the recent past – up to the 1990s – it was still possible to see the Spectacle or the Planetary Work Machine as the enemy. It was then possible to resist through exodus. This was the analysis underpinning *TAZ* – creating nuclei of alternative forces and using resistance to defend them. Today, in contrast, capitalism does not need to concede space to such ‘third forces’. It has shed its ideological armouring and initiated a full onslaught. It now treats all opponents directly as enemies. This means we are left with a global neoliberalism and a superpower which doesn’t even obey its own rules.
Bey opposes the postmodern position that all binaries and categories have now dissolved. He argues that one category – the system – survives. Survival in this context depends on persistence – on determination to remain in history after its declared end. Bey suggests that capitalism is triumphalist because of the end of the Cold War. But he argues that it is only the winner by default – because viable alternatives have collapsed first. Today, money is turning into a phantom-like, imaginary entity outside the world. The energy of life remains outside the system.

In *Escape from the Nineteenth Century*, Bey/Wilson argues that the increasing abstraction of capital renders it increasingly unreal and ineffective. Over 90% of money has escaped into a kind of ‘CyberGnostic heaven or numisphere’. This sphere has no relationship to production or government. Bey is here alluding to the expansion of finance capital, which has grown out of proportion to productive capital. This is similar to the Marxist idea of fictitious capital.

However, Bey/Wilson believes it also has existential or spiritual significance. Cyber-gnosis realise the Enlightenment dream of a unified rational world-consciousness. It has expanded into a fragile membrane around the earth, a bubble filled with hot gases. It has become self-enclosed and self-referential. In another paper, Bey argues that money referring only to more money in an endless chain is the most abstract idea humanity has ever had.

In the poem *Creepy Sensation*, Bey speculates that we are being watched by future people who might redeem our lost sensations, envying our sensations which they lack, and our closeness to species extinct in the future. Similarly, in ‘Islam and the Internet’, Bey argues that the spirit/body split and the hierarchical organisation of religion reaches a culmination in cyberspace – the principle of mind separated from body.

The Internet was designed to resist physical destruction, such as nuclear war, by rapidly transcendentals, matter, transferring it between sites. It does not offer immanence, but a false transcendence based on the gnostic mind-body split. It is a kind of heaven. The conflict over the future of the Internet thus seems to be a ‘war in heaven’. (In *Riverpeople*, Wilson reverses this and suggests that money has virtualised itself into Hell). There is barely even a ruling-class, firstly because CEOs are replaceable functionaries, and secondly because only a few hundred people ‘control’ half the money. Actually, Bey believes that nobody is in control any more. The ruling class has lost control of virtual capital.

Capitalism today pretends to be the only possible world. For Bey, this entails a kind of closure of reality. This closure has created a sense of numbness and powerlessness. It also leads to ennui and anomie, as ways of covering-up an anger with no clear target. It is impossibly pessimistic to actually feel what is happening today, a ‘tragedy without catharsis’. The current world is marked by a new kind of psychological malaise.

Bey suggests that this malaise stems from a ‘cognitive collapse’. This collapse is focused on the single world of capitalist monoculture. It is the effect of a deep psychological capitulation to this world as the only alternative available. Echoing Baudrillard, Bey argues that the relationship of alienation, the ‘mirror of production’, has been replaced by a ‘vertigo of terror’.

This new phenomenon realises tendencies inherent in capitalism. Indeed, money has always been nothing but absence or debt. Most people are now in debt to de-realised finance capital, and excluded from the heaven reserved for the very few. Capital takes off into a timeless future, leaving the rest of us stuck, reliving the past. The stock market soars, but leaves zones of depletion everywhere. Such zones of depletion are both regions and groups of people. Such zones of depletion are not rescued by the system but punished.
Bey sees money as a religious phenomenon, striving to remove itself from the world of bodies to the world of spirit. Coins were initially seen as ‘liminal’ objects, existing at the intersection of the material and spiritual worlds. Whereas nomads move between spaces, money moves from time to time, obliterating space. It is based on what Bey calls the ‘sexuality of the dead’ – a type of inorganic reproduction through constant splitting.

It thus captures chaos of sorts, but a type of chaos stripped of life. It cannot deal with true complexity, reducing it to sameness. Today, the attempt to posit capitalism as the only existing world turns money into the one God. Capital increasingly needs no authority except money. It has placed itself beyond the human – beyond conservatism as much as beyond leftism.

Today (or at least in the 1990s), capital has gained primacy over the state. All states, even the US, are simply turned into mercenaries of capital. One might expect a showdown between capitalism and the State for absolute power. However, the State seems to have realised it was beaten. With money breaking free of the state, the state loses its power to claim to be providing ‘something for nothing’ – protection.

The post-Fordist state provides ‘nothing for nothing’ and its power is shattered. It has given up its protective role in every sphere from human rights to economics. It seems to believe it can give up its powers and functions and yet still survive as an ‘elected occupying army’. What remains are empty ceremony and the exercise of terror against the poor and different – for instance, the ‘war on crime’. However, Bey speculates that the state could be used as a kind of social ‘custom and right’ against capital.

Bey’s reaction to 9/11 in ‘Crisis of Meaning’ is based on the idea that meaning is already in crisis. This is not changed by ‘5000 murders’. Yet others thought something had changed. For instance, articles after 9/11 were arguing that advertising now seemed shameful. Wasn’t it already shameful, since death and tragedy happen every day?

Bey argues against the view that any trauma or tragedy is so great that art or poetry are no longer possible. They have already survived the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the Gulag, in spite of predictions to the contrary. Bey predicts – probably rightly – that 9/11 would quickly be sublimated into the collective unconscious, after an orgy of fear, hate, and destruction of freedoms.

In a later interview, Bey suggests that globalism has emerged stronger than ever, because it now has the enemy it had been looking for since the Soviet collapse. America is able to sustain globalism and hegemony together. People were hypnotised by the media for two or three weeks after 9/11. This produced a ‘neurotic, obsessive, trance-like consciousness’. I would suggest that this kind of hypnosis is commonly repeated when tragedies or atrocities occur. It has become an important mechanism of stabilisation.

**Spectacle as Trance**

Bey sees economic systems as producing, or being co-produced with, corresponding worldviews. Indigenous and agricultural systems have an organic consciousness. Civilisation emerges from ideologies, which rigidly order the world as if from outside. It makes abstract ideas concrete, rather than emerging naturally or organically.

As technology expands in modernity, a corresponding machinic consciousness emerges. The rigid psychological repression of the unconscious in Victorian thought is based on a
mind-machine model which reflects the production line. It leads to puritanism and imperialism. We are now undergoing a further paradigm shift focused on cybernetics, quantum physics, and dematerialisation. Today, the law seeks to suppress this shift (for instance, through the ‘War on Drugs’).

However, the system is also using the newly-recovered esoteric powers unleashed by this shift. For Bey, civilisation is a ‘trance-like state’ which produces a ‘bad consciousness’, somewhat like a bad drug trip. Hermetic powers have also been appropriated by science, the State, capitalism, and the media. For example, adverts use erotically charged symbolic imagery, intelligence services use cryptography, and money has a spiritual origin.

The power of such institutions can only be understood in terms of their recuperation or turning-aside of hermetic processes originally designed for liberation or immediacy. Such recuperation occurs by using the powers to control users, thus leaving them alienated rather than enchanted. Bey considers many forms of transformation to be alchemical. The system uses a lot of ‘evil alchemy’, a category which includes nuclear weapons, commodification, and acts such as 9/11. Both drug addiction and the war on drugs are ‘shamanism gone bad’.

Bey theorises capitalist ideology as a variety of the gnostic ideology of disembodiment. Information theory is now producing fantasies of disembodiment worthy of Puritans or gnostics. The ‘information economy’ is a new mask for body-hatred. It involves revulsion against the heaviness of material production, and the ongoing replacement of organic space with machinic space to organise consciousness.

Computers are a kind of prosthesis of consciousness. They make the religious mind-body split even more acute, by reifying consciousness in technology. Virtual life encourages a false transcendence, in which people believe consciousness will become immortal as pure information.

This ideology forgets that we can’t eat information. Capital seeks to transcend the body into pure spirit or information. In fact, the gnostic capital which escapes embodiment also relies on a huge exploited periphery of old-fashioned industry and agriculture, mostly in the global South. This process shows the falsity of commodities. The idea that images are wealth is a delusion caused by the Spectacle and believed by its supporters.

Bey argues that the ‘gnostic dualists are wrong’ – body and spirit cannot exist without each other. The rule of spirit has alienated us from the language of the body, which we scarcely even speak today. Modernity believes in rationality, unified consciousness, teleological history and so on. Public discourse pretends to be secular, and separate from religion. But in fact, religious phenomena keep resurfacing, for example in moral panics, conspiracy theories and so on. Such social phenomena channel similar energies to religion. Bey views the current system as in fact deeply religious, based on a gnostic separation of mind and body, and a particular answer to the religious problem of intensity.

Bey argues that the media’s extension across the social field also creates problems for power. The media has paradoxically approached a limit of ‘image-enclosure’ (by analogy with the Enclosures of land). This leads to a ‘crisis of the stasis of the image, and of the complete disappearance of communicativeness’.

In other words, because all images are captured by the media, images lose the ability to communicate. Everything the media says refers to itself, and lacks an external connection to an outside. This idea is derived from Baudrillard, and points to transformative strategies focused on horizontal communication and intimate media. Soviet communism failed because it failed to embrace the Spectacle. Capital adapted, and so will disintegrate instead of imploding.
In one essay, Bey suggests that the Evil Eye exists, in the sense of having apparent effects. It’s a complex way in which humans affect each other. Westerners are especially vulnerable to the Eye, because the western social ethic is rooted in envy, and because defences are not used. Capitalism and Russian-style communism are both rooted in envy, and require it as a survival trait.

The gaze thus becomes a gaze of hate, rather than love. It is expressed around us as the panopticon (surveillance, performance management and so on). It manifests as an experience of deprivation and misery, often focused on lack of some commodity. This experience is fuelled by the ways we are represented, as lacking commodities or rights. Against envy, Bey proposes not morality (‘another abstraction’) but over-abundant power.

As in his other occult pieces, the claim that the Evil Eye ‘exists’ is not so much an ontological claim as a metaphor for a particular affect or social force – in this case, envy and lack. This in turn is a variant of the recurring theme of alienation, which is counterposed to life-force.

**Critique of Representation**

Bey theorises representation as a hardened form of imagery. Capitalism, or the ‘cruel instrumentality of Reason’, has a flattening effect. It reduces consciousness to a 2-dimensional map. This map is viewed mechanically. Meaning is excluded, as it would disrupt mechanical order. This leads to a contemporary ‘plague of meaninglessness’ and a collapse of ethics. Marxism is similarly limited because it reproduces meaninglessness. The theory of meaning implied here is expressive or affective. Instrumental rationality destroys meaning because it is difficult to invest emotionally in it.

The type of image used in modern society reflects this tendency towards meaninglessness. Writing and computer coding are based on images. However, they are reified, solidified forms of images. Computer coding is based on a very simple, binary image-system. It never escapes images, but they are buried more deeply. In Abecedarium, Wilson argues that writing is a form of alienation, which brings with it the state. It enables communication and therefore action at a distance. This tends to destroy earlier, direct forms of community.

However, various so-called ‘pre-writing’ systems, such as wampum, manage to avoid alienation. They should be renamed (and not called writing or pre-writing) to avoid implications of evolution-as-progress. Such systems belong to complex, wealthy societies which refuse the emergence of capitalism and the state.

Symbolism through images arises in non-state societies. However, writing based on abstract letters is inherently statist. States seem to require writing, along with irrigation and metallurgy, to exist. Writing is a kind of magic, or ‘action-at-a-distance’, which entraps people for the state. Wilson argues that Native American wampum is neither money nor writing. Instead, it operates to ward off these technologies. Colonisers turned it into money by mass-producing and counterfeiting it, cornering the market.

In Abecedarium, Wilson recounts the evolution of the letters of the English alphabet from hieroglyphs with pictorial resemblance to the things they represent. He portrays this process as a kind of entrapment and alienation of imaginal meaning. Letters capture the spirit of the image so it can be manipulated or worshipped. Words maintain a magical (imaginal) connection to things, but this is hidden by letters.
Nevertheless, the power of images persists beneath letters. Most images are turned back-to-front or upside-down, to conceal their image-power. A, for example, is a bull or ox – but the image of its head is turned upside-down. Originally a proud bull, it is now domesticated. The underlying pictoral meaning of letters is taken to rebut the structuralist idea that writing is arbitrary.

“Cop Culture”

The police-state logics of the contemporary state also have an imaginal element. In a 1980s piece, Bey calls for a boycott of ‘cop culture’. He argues that police TV shows encourage identification with power – which he terms a ‘police-state-of-consciousness’. Viewers are encouraged to identify as powerless victims. This victim identity plays into the grievances of identity groups. It encourages us to see the police as the mediator between criminal and victim, and between each other. This stops us identifying as chaotic heroes. The power of the police is built on the viewer’s helplessness and lack of autonomous substance.

In police dramas, if we aren’t powerless victims, we are criminals. These shows also encourage people to act as amateur cops and ‘help’ the police. While real vigilantes are threatening to the police-state, media vigilantes support it. People are turned into extensions of the state’s surveillance machinery through shows like *Crimewatch*. This process turns people into a nation of toadies sucking up to an elite of bullies. It prepares us for a messianic moment of police-state control which is at once total control and leached of content – ‘meaningless violent spasms’ as the ‘last principle of governance’.

The signifiers involved in this phenomenon are contradictory. People ambiguously identify as victims or amateur cops, but also identify as criminals and want ‘crime’. The signifier of ‘crime’ has come to stand for unmediated desire. Hence, police shows enact a kind of inner conflict between superego and id, across an abandoned landscape of alienation.

The success of police shows is a result of popular acceptance of the Manichean worldview of the police. It plays to an inner personality in which passion is dammed and diverted against itself. Bey seeks the destruction of the archetypal image of the cop or the cop-in-the-head (not necessarily of individual cops). Destroying this inner repressive force releases tides of passionate energy – not the negative disorder feared by authoritarians.

American Global Hegemony

Bey also occasionally discusses global geopolitics. In 'The Information War', Bey distinguishes three kinds of conflict. Indigenous war is a ‘ritual brawl’, voluntary and non-hierarchical. Statist or classical war is compulsory and hierarchical. Hyperreal or ‘pure’ war – the kind discussed by Baudrillard – is based on images and psychological effects. Wilson portrays the founding of America as a successful conspiracy by a white male elite against Church and King.

The elite’s power is founded on enterprise, including slavery and swindling, and a political system designed to perpetuate their rule. The US has defined itself as the hegemon over an illusory ‘free market’, acting as both CEO and ‘security cop’ at a global level. Overt discrimination has largely been replaced by psychological racism, or hostility to other cultures. Imaginative participation in other cultures is a way to resist psychological racism.
America has tried to avoid the problem of diversity through its melting-pot approach. But in practice, American consensus culture was English colonial culture with amnesia and frontier bluster. Multiculturalism emerged as a response to the failure of assimilation. It is designed to save the American system of social control, by allowing a small degree of cultural self-identity and tokenistic inclusion.

Minority cultures are still valued only in relation to a ‘universal’ culture of the dominant group. They are also ‘appropriated’ in the sense of being commodified, and reduced to images or ‘Spectacle’. Liberal integration posits a false separation of cultures, which in fact are only tolerated or encouraged if they tacitly recognise the centrality of the consensus. Particularities and cultures are spokes in a wheel around a central hub, the dominant system. Genuine cultural autonomy and horizontal connections across cultures are forbidden.

The consensus thus sucks in energy in a death-like process. Since particularism is a source of resistance, the system offers a false form of it, devoid of insurrectionary desire. At the same time, it encourages hatred and conflict among groups, and responds to social problems with securitisation. The system provides false, packaged particularities articulated by the commodity system, whereas Bey proposes autonomous groups articulated through reciprocity and a gift economy.

Instead of multiculturalism, Bey calls for ‘radical tolerance’. This is a situation of creative chaos and multiple relations among relatively equal powers, without a centre. The system’s pluralism focuses on the specific object of desire – such as a particular food or dance – whereas the real issue is ‘to be yourself’ or to ‘be free’. The possibility of autonomous desire is more important than the object of desire. The system can offer the object (conditional on conformity), but not autonomy – and this renders partial victories and reforms problematic.

Today’s ‘pan-capitalism’ in theory permits any image, but in practice proves unable to generate anything but sameness. Images of relations other than exchange are implicitly prohibited. For example, a documentary about an indigenous group cannot convey the meaning of gift economy, although it might create ‘cognitive dissonances’ through things which remain unseen.

**Discussion**

Bey’s analysis of capitalism, the state, and the Spectacle is thought-provoking and insightful. It is written with an eye to strategic responses to particular configurations of power. Counter to certain critics, I wouldn’t interpret Bey as reducing the system to an imaginary construct, or a ‘discourse’ in a narrow sense. Rather, he is suggesting that the imaginal underpinning of the system provides the matrix for its real functioning.

The imaginal aspect of the system disrupts responses on a purely material level. It is necessary to fight at the imaginal as well as the material level to be effective. This is similar to Gramsci’s view that civil society insulates the state and capital from revolution. It by no means implies that the system’s violence, or its human consequences, aren’t ‘real’, or that the system will disappear simply from not believing in it.

However, I feel Bey often places too great an emphasis on recuperation relative to repression, as a threat to social movements. He seems, therefore, to overemphasise imaginal strategies over material control of spaces, resources and so on. Especially in the post-9/11 era, repression is a very real threat. It responds in a targeted way to the danger posed to it by autonomous zones.
The idea that the state can function as an ‘adversary’ against which to sharpen one’s claws seems naive in a control society, in which state-produced fear and anxiety have such a debilitating effect on dissent. In addition to its imaginal operation, capital and the state also rely on spatial dominance. It seems impossible to prevent this dominance without some kind of counter-power. I would analyse legalisation, and other border-conflicts with the state, as more than just recuperation – they are also means to push back the state, to create space for autonomy.
Hakim Bey: The Temporary Autonomous Zone

Counterculture guru Hakim Bey is best-known for his concept of TAZ – the Temporary Autonomous Zone. Previous columns have reconstructed Bey’s immanent ontology and his critiques of capitalism and the state. In this sixth of sixteen parts, Bey’s seminal idea – the TAZ – is finally examined. I also explore other types of autonomous zones found in Bey’s work, and his later theories of small-scale group formation.

The Temporary Autonomous Zone

Bey’s best-known concept is the Temporary Autonomous Zone, usually abbreviated TAZ. This concept originates in his works of the 1980s, and especially the 1991 compilation of the same name. When the pieces appearing in the book were first written, the figure of Bey was not yet associated with Wilson. Many pieces appeared as typewritten, sigil-covered leaflets on coloured paper, before being reprinted in a bewildering array of zines. Many were first collated as a book in 1985, and posted on the Internet – a process Bey claims he had ‘nothing to do with’.

Bey deliberately avoids defining the concept of TAZ, which he sees as self-explanatory when experienced in action. However, it is not a meaningless concept, but one with imaginal resonances. If someone has experienced a TAZ, they will be able to tell a TAZ from a non-TAZ. Once the phrase is lodged in someone’s mind, Bey predicts they will begin to see TAZs everywhere. Roughly speaking, a TAZ is a deliberately short-lived (or else precarious) spatial zone in which peak experiences and altered consciousness are realised, in a context of ‘autonomy’ or the absence of hierarchy. A TAZ is necessarily immediate and present, rather than an ideal which fuels sacrifice for the future.

The idea of TAZ is an attempt to exploit cracks in the power of the Spectacle. It is based on the limits of broad-brush representational practices. The possibility of TAZ is grounded in the gap between the map and the territory. A map, or other representation, is never a perfect representation of the territory. It always simplifies and leaves things out. This means that there are spaces where chaos can re-emerge. People can practice autonomy, without being represented.

Bey draws on the cyberpunk idea of ‘islands in the net’. He suggests that a collapse of centralised control will lead to a proliferation of experimental communities and zones. The map is closed, but the TAZ is open, expanding along molecular lines invisible on the map. A TAZ is open because it is not ‘ordered’. Even if it is planned, it is the spontaneous ‘happening’ which defines it. TAZ is festive, and fighting ‘for the right to party’ is not a parody when enjoyment is usually mediated. It is a kind of endlessly replicating, temporary revolution.

One finds spaces where TAZ’s can be formed by looking for spaces and times neglected or unnoticed by the state. Bey portrays TAZs as occupying gaps in time as well as space, like medieval
festivals. The conditions for TAZs are like ‘strange attractors’ in chaos theory, arising outside observable causality and seeming almost arbitrary. A TAZ is a place where revolution has actually happened, even if only for a short time, for a few people.

The experience of a TAZ is similar to a potlatch or a festival. It involves an experience of excess, intensity and abundance. A TAZ is a zone of peak experience and sensory intensity. Bey, following Baudrillard, argues that the system values simulation, not substance. This means that TAZs can invisibly occupy the zones of substance neglected by the system. The TAZ is thus a ‘tactic of disappearance’. It is thus rather different from the confrontation typical of revolutionary politics. However, disappearance cannot simply entail ‘never coming back’. It must be possible to conceive of everyday life in a liberated zone. A TAZ provides the peak experience of insurrection without the risk of martyrdom.

There is not a specific way to create a TAZ. Rather, TAZs have been and are being created in different ways. From a strategic standpoint, Bey is not expecting an imminent explosion of anarchist culture. However, he sees TAZs as a step in this direction, prefiguring an anarchist culture in microcosm. The world might change because of a TAZ, or it might not. The focus should not be on such effects. Rather, Bey suggests that we should ‘keep on the move, and live intensely’. TAZs are connected by open information networks. They are based on indiscriminate syncretism, not exclusion.

Some TAZs are persistent, interconnected, underground nodes. A well-formed TAZ is clandestine, invisible, not represented in the media or the Spectacle, and undefinable in the system’s terms. It is therefore able to avoid being recuperated or repressed by a system which cannot see it. However, Bey does not wish for TAZs to be temporary moments of excess which quickly burn-out. Rather, they are most effective as islands in the net.

We don’t know where the process of intensity will lead – for instance, whether it will be high-tech or anarcho-primitivist. However, we can trace the direction to move in – ‘successful raids on consensus reality’, increases in abundance and intensity. Bey argues that a TAZ is more than simply a bolt-hole within the system, sustained by parasitism on it. If TAZs expand past a certain point, they become an entire alternative world, similar to that portrayed in the anachist utopia bolo bolo. TAZ is also a learning process, a growth from tameness to ferality or wildness.

Aesthetics is important in realising an effective TAZ. Economically, a TAZ might be based on what Bey calls the ‘surplus of social overproduction’ or ‘pirate economics’. This involves extracting part of the surplus left over from consumerism and capitalism. Bey suggests that the question of land is a recurring problem for anarchy. The central question is how to separate space from control, so as to create liberated spaces.

The TAZ as a strategy is prefigured in Bey/Wilson’s historical examples. These were more-or-less permanent communities of resistance established in remote or secluded geographical regions. Historical examples of TAZs include most of the cases discussed by Bey – Maroon and ‘tri-racial isolate’ communities, revolutionary moments like the 1919 Munich Soviet and the 1871 Paris Commune, short-lived occupations like D’Annunzio’s Fiume, pirate utopias, Fourierist experiments, the Assassins of Alamut and so on.

However, modern technology makes such autonomous zones unlikely. We are now, for the first time, in a world without unmapped zones. Bey posits the TAZ as an alternative which already exists. It provides a possibility for action even when it seems hopeless. At least, one should seek to cultivate insight, love, freedom and justice within oneself and one’s few close friends, to the greatest degree possible in one’s context.
TAZ twelve years on

In a 2003 introduction to the book TAZ (which is a collection of several 80s pieces), Bey looks back on TAZ with nostalgia, describing it as a very ‘80s’ book, from a more erotic and romantic time. However, he also suggests that the TAZ seems the ‘last and only means of creating an Outside’ or space of resistance to the system. He denies that he invented the TAZ. Instead, he insists he merely gave a name to ways of maximising some conception of freedom that come naturally to those who resist.

In another later piece, Bey disavows the claim that TAZ abandons past and future to an eternal present, or replaces concrete politics. Rather, it is a way to maximise autonomy and pleasure for as many people as possible, as soon as possible. TAZs have existed, and will exist in the future. Furthermore, TAZ is not the end of the line, but simply the only manifestation of radical conviviality visible today.

Bey looks back on the book as surprisingly anti-pessimistic. He suggests that the ‘hippy/punk anarchism’ underpinning TAZ is one of an array of third alternatives (to capitalism and communism) which seem to have failed or disappeared after 1989. However, he argues that TAZ as peak experience or existential condition remains important to revitalise the social. He now sees the TAZ as the last way of creating an outside, at least in the core countries.

Bey particularly criticises the Internet, and his earlier writings on this, suggesting that it has now become a commercial/surveillance network, and emphasising the need to resist mediation. He also suggests that TAZs can be periodic (e.g. camps and holidays) or permanent (e.g. communes and enclaves). There are even ‘degrees’ of TAZness in phenomena such as hobby groups. At this point, he predicts a new movement against capitalism and the simulated or spurious world of spectacle. This movement will be spontaneous and experiential, Green, possibly technophobe, spiritual or shamanistic, ‘social’, and probably based in the Fourth World. It will vary between places, and will use guerilla tactics to liberate space and time, avoiding big confrontations.

TAZ and the Internet

The association of TAZ with the Internet and cyberculture has been one of the major lines of promotion of Bey’s work. For example, André Lemos termed Minitel, the French proto-Internet system, a TAZ because it is self-organising and rhizomatic. However, Bey was always hesitant about virtual applications of the TAZ idea. He argued that the counter-net, or network of dissident information, needs to be expanded. The zines and BBS’s of the 1990s are said to insufficiently provide goods and services for everyday life. In a new preface from 2003, Bey argues that the discussion of the Internet is the least contemporarily relevant part of TAZ. He criticises a counterculture which now mistakes ‘a few thousand "hits"’ for political action, and which neglects physical presence.

In ‘Islam and the Internet’, Bey argues that the major limit of virtual politics is that the Internet can be controlled from outside. It is diffuse in its internal power-structure, but this is undermined by its connections with the wider context. Therefore, resistance also has to happen outside the Internet. An entirely virtual resistance is only a spectacle of resistance. The body must also be present in effective resistance.
However, communications technologies can organise revolutions. Bey uses the example of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which relied heavily on cassette tapes. He nevertheless argues that technology cannot overcome the cultural or religious forces of power. We need to stop reifying technology, and realise that only imagination creates values.

There is an ambiguity in the Internet, because it is designed in a structure similar to indigenous warfare (i.e. diffuse power) to avoid destruction. It is ‘designed to be out of control’. However, this does not render it safe or free. Those who control the means of communication have power over those who communicate. The Internet is not really in heaven, because it can be controlled from outside. As a result, it is a false transcendence of the culture-nature dichotomy.

Since the Internet can be controlled from outside, resistance also has to occur outside. Also, the controllers of the Internet will be reluctant to allow it to spread to the global majority, because of the fear of terrorism. Technology is in many ways a religious problem. The binary of good and evil prevents a technology like the Internet from bringing salvation. Indeed, communication technologies tend to become forms of mediation and separation.

In a later work, ‘Seduction of the Cyber Zombies’, Bey argues that ‘other nets’ need to be set up alongside ‘the’ Net, otherwise it will simply become another alienating medium. These ‘other nets’ would include other patterns of communicativeness and conviviality. Indeed, the Internet today is so alienated as to be interesting mainly as a ‘romantic ruin’ – a site where old sites, coding languages and webpages are available to bricoleurs.

In ‘Media-Space! – Opening Speech’, Bey argues that the Internet raised social hopes because it was out of control. It is still technically out of control, but now socially under control. This is because the tiny free spaces are now dwarfed by massive multinationals. The struggle today over Internet censorship is largely between capital and the state. The Internet suits capital because it is similarly chaotic and decentralised. Technologies mirror the society and economy that generate them. The Internet should be used as a tool, not imagined to be a magical answer to political problems. The Internet is molecular, but molecularity can be used against us.

In ‘A Network of Castles’, Bey compares the Internet to Alamut. He suggests that the network aspect of horizontal politics is now easier. But the problem is in creating castles from which to network. It is no longer possible to create defensible positions, given modern military and surveillance technology. Instead, Bey suggests that unused sites may be occupied in periods of confusion and collapse, and will then be unassimilable but also irrelevant. There will be little reason for capital or the state to waste effort destroying them. (In other pieces, Bey speculates about survivalist hide-outs, underwater or underground facilities, or outer space, though he concludes that none of them seem feasible).

In an interview, Bey argues that the military made a mistake in inventing the Internet. The Internet is a machine of indigenous war (in Clastres’ sense of diffusion of power), not classical war. The Internet is decentralised, and therefore reproduces the structure of indigenous war. However, the military and corporations are seeking to control the Internet. The Internet can reproduce mind-body separation. If people don’t think about the body, desire, and pleasure, they are stuck in a mental game without real resistance to oppression. Real resistance is embodied resistance.

Bey predicts the fusion of television and the Internet into a single, final medium which encloses and censors/moderates all discourse. More recently, Bey is reported to want to smash the Internet with a hammer. According to Knight, Wilson can’t use a computer, and doesn’t understand that the Bey identity is no longer a secret. However, in his more pro-Internet period, Bey/Wilson was reportedly involved in the Ong’s Hat hoax.
**Temporary, Permanent, and Periodic Autonomous Zones**

Initially, TAZ is temporary for a particular strategic reason. In the book *TAZ*, temporariness is connected to the need for struggle against an adversary to produce intensity. ‘Successful’ revolutions risk collapsing into habit and boredom. The temporariness of TAZ is thus a way to prevent its encrustation into institutionalised socialism. Even then, Bey recognised that certain causes remain semi-permanent, if only because their adversaries are so awful.

This strategic perspective declines after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with neoliberalism claiming to be the only possible world. As a result, recurring and permanent TAZs become conceivable. In ‘Periodic Autonomous Zone’, Bey discusses festivals and carnival as varieties of recurring TAZ. They create a liminal (inbetween) zone between culture and nature. This sometimes reflects ecological and economic cycles. For instance, summertime gathering seems like play compared to spring/autumn farming. In this piece, Bey also argues for the re-emergence of camps, as sites for autonomous zones. Such ‘neo-camps’ will need to be disguised from the state, and provide a month or two of temporary freedom. This is better than no autonomous zones at all, giving a taste of autonomy.

In the paradoxically titled ‘Permanent TAZs’, Bey responds to the expansion of TAZs at the time of writing. People are dropping out, disappearing, or at least creating their own networks in urban folk-culture. For instance, much passion and creativity goes into hobby networks. Furthermore, swathes of the world are now empty of substantive power, besides media and a few police. In this context, some TAZs are no longer temporary.

Autonomous groups still terrify the state – as in cases such as MOVE and Waco. Groups which can stay invisible are able to survive and avoid persecution. At this stage, Bey maintains that the system might already be dead, and spasming violently. It becomes possible to wait out the storm in autonomous zones – perhaps ‘a nice anarchist monastery somewhere’.

One variant on the TAZ is the Pastoral Autonomous Zone discussed in *E(c)logues*, an anti-tech type of TAZ set up for ‘ecstatic communion with Nature’. Wilson suggests that, by experiencing this state before it’s too late, we can contribute to bringing immanence into the world. Pastoralism does not necessarily imply peace. Indeed, pastoral cultures sometimes practice indigenous warfare.

In extreme cases, people end up living in stone towers and guarding their flocks with weapons. Remote mountainous regions also have their own cultures, which often involve special forms of intensity. Sometimes, everyone is considered noble. Urban pastoralism is also possible in some cities, such as Benares (Varanasi). In a poem, Wilson suggests that ‘Scythians without horses’ are like centaurs cut in half, ‘half human half nothing’, wasting 12,000 years of co-evolution.

In ‘Back to 1911: Temporal Autonomous Zones’, Wilson argues for the reconstruction of alternative experiences based on past historical periods. This is achieved through restricting oneself to technology that existed or was possible in the period. The period he proposes is 1900–1914, the era of the ‘dawn of modernism’ which never came. The experience of this period can be reconstructed by using technologies and techniques of the period, such as letter-writing, and avoiding other technologies, such as television.
Tongs, Bees, and Other Groups

In works written after TAZ, Bey has increasingly focused on small-scale, immediate, often clandestine groups, with the terms ‘tong’ and ‘bee’ often recurring. In ‘The Criminal Bee’, Bey argues that TAZ and related structures rely on illegality, even when they break no laws. They break the framework of consensus reality. He advocates ‘bees’, or small-scale, task-focused groups, as the ‘only viable immediate means of realizing passional series in real-time, everyday life’. They are based on evasion and nomadism, rather than confrontation and seizing power.

However, Bey argues strongly against the reading of TAZ as an evasion, postponement or substitute for revolution. Instead, he argues that uprising, on a model similar to that of Sorel, emerges from the TAZ, which is a ‘matrix’ for it, and a prefiguration, a ‘pre-echo’. In Sorel, revolution is theorised as ‘general strike’, which is at once a future event and an organising ‘myth’. Particular uprisings and strikes serve as instances of the same energy, or as prefigurations, of the general strike. An effective TAZ in this sense should be both enjoyable and political. Bey argues that most groups are one or the other – either joyless politics or apolitical lifestyle events.

The tong, or secret society (a term for a certain type of revolutionary or criminal group in pre-revolutionary China), is a similar type of group. In ‘Black Thorn Manifesto’, Bey celebrates ‘certain anarcho-Taoist Chinese tongs’ and expresses a wish to reproduce their ‘mutual aid webworks’. In ‘Tong Aesthetics’, Bey suggests that the City of Willows was an imaginal space of the Chinese tong.

Bey argues that aesthetics, or style, is also important in the emergence of tongs today. A tong requires a cause and a legend. The legend is similar to a Sorelian myth – something one wishes to manifest in the world. The cause might be the Insurrection, which is prefigured in the TAZ. The legend is a passionate reading or psychological structure of the cause. For instance, it might revive radical millenarian beliefs.

In Immediatism, Bey claims to refocus from disappearance to reappearance, and, hence, organisation. Capitalism now recuperates artistic intensity almost instantly. The tong is again proposed as an organisational form. Bey defines a tong as a secret mutual benefit group for marginal or illegal purposes. Today’s tongs may be virtually secret simply by means of avoiding mass-media attention. Avoiding the media is crucial for maintaining the power of an activity. A tong may also be selective in whom it admits, and in how much information it shares. Bey denies that this is elitist, because the group does not restrict itself so as to coalesce power.

Overcoming isolation is itself a central goal of a modern tong. Such groups also operate to mutually enhance members’ lives. They would evolve into nuclei of ‘self-chosen allies’ seeking to seize back more and more space and time for play, eventually expanding into a network and a movement, and finally a new society. However, its networking needs to be slow and corporeal.

Bey later tries to systematise the different groups he discusses. They are different levels of expression of his project of ‘immediatism’. In ‘The Occult Assault on Institutions’, he lists a series of increasingly broad groups which he portrays as levels of immediatist organisation:

1. The gathering – any spontaneous action, such as a revolt, party, rave, or Be-in;
2. The potlatch, or exchange party;
3. The Bee, such as quilting bees – a group of friends meeting to work together on a project, or united by a common passion;
4. The Tong or secret society, or its above-ground equivalent, the club;

5. The TAZ, which can arise from any or all of the previous levels. A TAZ lasts between one night and a couple of years, but while it lasts, it fills the horizon of attention of its participants, becoming a whole society;

6. The uprising or insurrection, in which the TAZ seeks to become the whole world.

Of these, the Tong is the highest that can be predetermined. The others cannot be 'organised' – at most one can maximise conditions for them to happen. In another passage, Bey argues that the social model implied by ontological anarchism is the band or gang. Whereas families result from scarcity, bands express abundance. This echoes anthropological studies of bands.

All of the group-types listed above have a similar purpose and function. In 'Seduction of the Cyber Zombies', Bey argues for a principle of group-formation similar to Fourier's. The purpose of the group is to maximise pleasure or 'luxury' for its members. The cohesion of the group stems from passion, which for Bey is the only viable integrative force.

Immediatist groups are not based on 'group-think' or a common moral code. They are not meant to counter individuality. Instead, they are meant to enhance individuals by providing a 'matrix of friendship', and combating loneliness and alienation. This type of group is both the most natural possible for humans, and the worst abomination for capital.

An immediatist group has rules of play (as a game), but not laws. It seeks to resist capture, which follows from representation. Immediatist organisations have the goals of conviviality (coming together and enhancing each other’s pleasures), creation of beauty outside structures of mediation, destruction of the 'ugliness' of capitalism, and the construction of values through peak experiences.

Forming such groups is itself an act of resistance. Capitalism only allows a limited range of groups, based on production, reproduction or consumption. Simply coming together outside of these categories is already a victory – indeed, it has 'achieved virtually everything Immediatism yearns for'. This defiance of alienation and boredom will generate play and art almost automatically.

Forming such a group is a struggle, because time and work pressures militate against it. One must overcome the feeling of being 'too busy' for Immediatist projects – this is the whole point, to defeat the structure of capitalism which prevents conviviality. Another problem Bey identifies is the temptation to sell the art created through such projects. The temptation is strong, because it allows one to avoid work. However, it risks mediation, and hence being seen, and hence repression of the secret group.
Hakim Bey: The Pessimism of Autonomy

Hakim Bey’s theoretical creativity did not end with the publication of TAZ, and he has continued to produce new contributions for those seeking autonomy in a changing strategic field. In this essay, the seventh in a series of sixteen columns on Bey’s work, I examine his contributions from the 1996 book Millennium onwards.

Millennium: a changed strategic field

The strategic concerns underpinning TAZ recede in Bey’s more recent work. In Millennium, written in 1996, Bey reverses his earlier critique of revolutionary politics. With communism no longer an issue, he refers to a need for ‘revolutionary presence’, pitted against the alienation and separation of capitalism. However, he insists that this presence should also value difference. For instance, he celebrates the Zapatistas for wishing to remain Mayans without making everyone Mayans. They assert the right to be different. They also act to expel power, rather than seize it, knowing the state could not destroy their zone, which was already depleted.

During the Cold War, anarchism took a position as a third alternative to capitalism and Staliniteism. Today, there is no such possibility, as the second position has collapsed. This changed context thrusts anarchists into the position of being the opposition, the second pole. It forces Bey to rethink his previous criticisms of revolutionary politics. Bey argues that difference is the organic revolutionary response to capitalist sameness, or monoculture. Bey sees ‘tribal’ or communal differences becoming increasingly precious as sites of difference from capitalism. Often, such differences are recuperated as spectacle, customs, consumption options and so on. However, ‘organic integral difference’ becomes revolutionary today. There is thus a choice between a hegemonic particularity – integrated into neoliberalism – and an anti-hegemonic particularity.

Bey now calls for an alliance of particularities. Today, any unassimilable difference is potentially revolutionary. Some remain reactionary, as ‘hegemonic particularities’ seeking control, whereas others become truly revolutionary ‘non-hegemonic particularities’. Both right and left rebel against the system’s total control, and they are now hard to tell apart. While encouraging non-hegemonic particularities, Bey also argues for the development of conviviality which communicates across ‘false boundaries’. The unifying factor among such particularities is ‘presence’, or overcoming alienation through intensity.

Bey proposes a federalism similar to Proudhon’s, between various particularities. In such a model, autonomy and federation are complementary rather than contradictory. The key principle of such a federation would be to recognise freedom at every level of organisation, even the smallest. This should not, however, be a federation of orthodoxies. Islam, for instance, includes a range of different views of the sacred, irreducible to orthodoxy or fundamentalism. It is the unorthodox and heretical variants which Bey seeks to bring together in a global networked struggle with other particularities. Indeed, Bey suggests that Islam is indispensable to a global anti-capitalist coalition.
For Bey, anarchism is anti-ideological. One shouldn’t care if someone else wishes to be a Mayan, Muslim, or rationalist, as long as one can secede and individual autonomy is safe. This creates a possibility for broad coalitions of groups excluded by capital, on the basis of mutual tolerance. Autonomous enclaves of different groups are to be linked through anarcho-federalism (Islam and Eugenics). Anarchism is the only movement capable of being taken seriously, in a post-ideological age. In *Millennium*, Bey also argues for the creation of spaces for artists outside the commodified world of art. These spaces would reaffirm creativity in everyday life.

In the current period, contestation is intensified. Each zone either belongs to capital, or ends up in opposition. Whatever the system tries to destroy takes on an aura of life. Sometimes it differs from capitalism only by a hair’s breadth, but still this is enough to make it completely revolutionary, defying the rule of the one system. Bey likens this to the small distance in *satori*. Religion is faced with a choice of capitulation or revolt. Art, too, can survive only in opposition. Nationalism is on a collision course with capitalism because capitalism has reduced nations to ‘zones of depletion’, and because capital is interested in nations only for instrumental reasons. This issue could go either right or left, depending on whether the nation as particularity is defined as hegemonic. Capital also begins to clash with remnants of social ideology in liberalism, conservatism, the UN, the EU and so on. Politics is reduced to ‘cognitive dissonance’, as no ideology is really compatible with total capitalist rule.

Hence, the ground for TAZ’s has disappeared. Third positions have been eliminated. Everything is now either capitulating, or opposing capitalism. Capital can now turn its attention to what it formerly had to ignore due to the bipolar conflict. It also no longer needs former allies, such as Christianity, or to make deals with social sectors. It formerly needed allies in its fight against socialism or the Soviet bloc. Today, it reverses the deals it made with Northern labour movements and other allies. Everything becomes disposable. Regions of the North can be turned into regions of the South through capital flight. Any particular region, class, profession, sexuality, or attitude might be the next to be disposed of. For privileged people, however, the choice is between capitulation on comfortable terms and reinventing opposition. TAZs retain a strategic role, but the goal is now to extend them into permanent autonomous zones, which coalesce into the ‘millennium’ or new world.

Autonomy as such is now criminalised. Bey discusses the cases of MOVE and the Waco siege, and argues that both groups were attacked by the state because they wanted to be autonomous. The fact that people just want to ‘be weird – by themselves’, or be a group on their own terms, outrages consensus reality. Sociologically, millions of people from many backgrounds are dissatisfied. But they tend to be invisible, because they don’t vote or work in the formal sector. The middle-class is shrinking, which creates dangers of fascism and populism.

Neoliberalism claims there is only one world. Money is free within this one world. However, in practice, it divides the world into included and excluded zones, zones of security and zones of depletion, in which it sucks away all life-energy. Instead of clashing ideologies, there is now capital, on one side, and what it excludes, on the other. By declaring itself the one world – the only alternative – capital has called into being its nemesis. This nemesis is the last-ditch defence of everything that cannot become part of global capitalism. Bey suggests that the opposition that emerges in such a context will be profoundly influenced by the ‘Clastrian machine’, particularly shamanism. This machine will attack exchange itself, and promote reciprocity and generosity. He also suggests that power vaccuums will appear in zones depleted and evacuated by capital, providing radical possibilities. This analysis also implies that transgression and the critique of
binaries are no longer effective approaches to resistance. Without bipolar categories – with the system operating as oneness instead of binary – there is nothing to transgress. There is only capitulation or opposition.

In 'Islam and the Internet', Bey argues that there is a need for embodied resistance. We need something like an ideology, and we need to clarify (but not purify) language. Communication needs to be reconstructed as ‘communicativeness’. By this, Bey means that communication should be festive, dialogical, pleasurable, warm, and linked to desire – rather than being abstract and mediated. Bey also calls for a spirituality of and for the body, and a re-enchantment of the world.

Certain types of movements are partially resistant, but also problematic. Fundamentalism spearheads resistance to capitalist capitulation. But by closing the doors of interpretation, it represses the desire for difference and prevents the emergence of a fully-fledged critique of capitalism. Mafias are a kind of shadow government which emerges from the degeneration of the Pastoral Code (Clastres’s view of indigenous warfare) in struggle against the state.

In ‘The Obelisk’, Bey argues that resistance movements since the rise of centralised power are based on the gift economy, which preceded this rise. This is less clear today than in the past. But Bey suggests that today’s movements still seek ‘empirical freedoms’ defined by the economy of the gift – freedoms such as the absence of oppression, conviviality, bodily or spiritual pleasure, peace, plenty, equality, and so on. These same values appear in immemorial ‘rights and customs’, in the politics of desire, and in movements such as tactical media.

**Green Hermeticism and the Last Possible Outside**

From 2004 onwards, Bey has been increasingly interested in ecology as the site of altered consciousness. He has developed the idea of ‘Green Hermeticism’ as a potential philosophical matrix for ecology. He has also written a series of ecologically inflected works, such as *Riverpeople* and *Ec(o)logues*. Such works combine intense appreciation for local ecological sites with Bey’s older themes of mysticism, autonomy, disalienation, altered consciousness, and alternative history.

Other recent works have a more pessimistic tone. In *Escape from the Nineteenth Century*, Bey suggests that the present feels as if history has stopped, and we are trapped in the ruins of time. In ‘Seduction of the Cyber Zombies’, Bey suggests that a desperate global war is coming, between global capital and a world full of individuals and groups. The best we can hope is that it be a peaceful war, like Sorel’s General Strike. But we should prepare for the worst. In another piece, Bey predicts that the situation will become very ugly when capital is finally opposed.

If one finds oneself in a zone of depletion, or No Go Zone, one’s prospects for autonomy increase with the withdrawal of power into the virtual. Such zones are unlikely to be able to assert political autonomy. However, there are possibilities for freedom in everyday life. Today, such zones are already vacuums of control, but mostly suffer ‘negative chaos’. To become emancipatory sites, they need to be filled with ‘positive chaos’. Such possibilities depend on an appropriate model of the economy and the social. Bey suggests this might operate as a kind of borderless bricolage, a ‘melange of whatever works’. Technology is likely to be low-tech and ad-hoc, but ‘more human than green’. It should be constructed to resist hierarchy through each person’s will to power. Failure may be the last refuge from the ‘Capitalist heaven’ of simulation. One can at least be a beautiful spirit doomed to fail, rather than an ugly one.
In periods of defeat, the most pressing issue is survival as a trace or remnant, to be recovered later. Following the Anabaptists after their defeat, Wilson argues that, if the world cannot be saved (through revolution), at least a 'saving remnant' can withdraw into intentional communities based on pleasure. In a poem, 'Failure as the Last Possible Outside', Bey writes of a future in which entire nations are enclosed as 'literal garbage dumps', but are secretly inhabited by outcasts and bricoleurs. Even in the darkest dystopia, Bey creates hope of an outside, an autonomous zone.

Whatever slips past panoptical surveillance, perhaps because it seems futile, becomes the basis for this zone. In this poem, Bey appeals to the 'paradoxical productivity of all that refuses to be computed, that which “doesn’t count”'. Rebels disguise themselves as outcasts to slip through the cracks in the Empire. In another poem, 'Herm', he incites us to live like 'Them', the tri-racial isolates, as 'rebels against progress', as if with 'bad genes'.

In one poem, he suggests that, if our pagan deities have gone silent, we should do the same, and withdraw to a monastic or druidic site. He also refers in this era to 'endarkenment', or reversal of Enlightenment. This is another term for altered consciousness, this time associated with low-technology, low-mediation forms of life – such as, in one poem, 'flyfishing while under the Influence'. We cannot become ‘innocent’ or ‘primitive’, but we can still 'fall in love with the beauty of the Earth as a sign of divinity’. Recognising the archetype of ‘Perfect Nature’ in actual nature might be an illusion. But it is a necessary, creative error. It creates possibilities for altered consciousness.

**Discussion of TAZ**

In some ways, it is unsurprising that Bey is more pessimistic today than previously. The idea of TAZ seems to stem from a particular conjuncture. Bey’s theory stems from the fraying of the world-system in the 1980s and 1990s. As capital withdrew from vast zones and the Fordist control-mechanisms broke down, areas fell out of systemic control. The state collapsed in Somalia and Afghanistan, gangs took control of shanty-towns, secessionist movements seized control of regions. Only a few of these (such as Chiapas) became autonomous zones with emancipatory projects. Nevertheless, the fraying of the system provided hope for autonomists and anarchists worldwide.

Things have changed somewhat in the 2000s. The system continues to fray around the edges, with 'black holes' emerging in its power-structure. But increasingly these emergent autonomous zones are shut down, pre-empted, or militarised. Intensified control is eliminating or shrinking the spaces the system cannot see, at least within countries like the UK. With GIS, Google Maps, GPS systems, personalised laws and data mining, the gap between map and territory is growing ever narrower. What is more, the system is remodelling the territory to fit the map ever more closely. I would speculate that the state has found ways of seeing TAZs, firstly by defining anything it cannot predict as a threat, and secondly by focusing its gaze more closely on each micro-element of space and life.

Another possible issue with TAZ is the apparent necessity of an adversary, so as to keep it temporary. In early pieces (like *TAZ* and 'The Criminal Bee'), Bey tends towards the position that laws and oppression are necessary, to provide a target for rebellion. He seems to abandon this position in his more recent work. Is a permanent TAZ even thinkable? I think it *would* be possible...
to have a kind of society in which peak experience is the ultimate value, without requiring a repressive regime as a challenge to overcome. But it couldn’t be based on conflictual action-spaces of the kind seen in activism. The closest analogue are certain indigenous groups in which intergroup conflict and intense ritual experiences are common. The utopian work Bolo’Bolo provides an image of something akin to a society of permanent TAZs.

The idea of failure as the last possible outside sounds pessimistic compared to Bey’s earlier work. However, the emphasis on disappearance is continuous. If capitalism claims to be a unitary world, yet excludes zones which cannot be commodified, then failure and autonomy go together. Knight suggests that Bey speaks as if his generation were the last one with a chance at revolution, as well as at overseas adventures.

The TAZ concept is often used to interpret aspects of 1990s counterculture, particularly raves. In a video, Bey lists as examples of TAZ-like phenomena such events as neo-pagan festivals, rainbow camps, ‘open conspiracies’ such as Queer Nation, raves, collaborative art events, anarchist collectives, intentional communities, secret societies, and even drug dealing. These gatherings attempt to realise enjoyment, or ‘passional series’, in everyday life. Many groups fail to realise the depth of their threat to the spectacle, use the media, and end up recuperated. Political groups have mainly failed to master pleasure, and lifestyle groups to grasp politics.

Benjamin Noys lists TAZ as one of a number of recent approaches emphasising the role of space in liberation. Simon Sellars refers to ‘Reclaim the Streets’ occupations, raves, and occasions where protesters overrun police, as instances of TAZ. He also surveys a list of academic pieces which refer to TAZ in relation to themes such as popular culture, Critical Mass, areas of Deaf culture defined by sign language, Stonehenge, camping, hip-hop, and various Black, women’s, and gay/queer spaces. Williams uses a similar example of the Fare Dodgers’ Liberation Front, who held parties on London Underground stations to protest and subvert fare rises. Jeff Shantz sees Bey’s work as an inspiration for the formation of anarchist social centres in 1990s America. Sellars suggests that the idea of TAZ became widespread, but without a definite meaning. It had general connotations of anarchy and freedom, but was not always understood in Bey’s sense. This led to criticisms, such as Zerzan’s depiction of the term as ‘hip posturing’. Similarly, Geert Lovink has observed that TAZ is taken out of its political and cultural context in recuperated forms of cyberculture.

Williams suggests that TAZ, and some of Bey’s other concepts, tend to be ‘empty signifiers’: They have so many meanings and uses that they lack a definite meaning. He also draws the conclusion from Bey that fulfilment never comes, that a little enlightenment is better than none. He argues that Bey ultimately arrives at the conclusion that anarchism is unattainable. Instead, he seeks to make the current world a bit more anarchist. However, I’d suggest that there’s a core qualitative reference to intensity and disalienation which provides a core of meaning to such concepts.

It is true that Bey is sometimes strategically pessimistic. He is not confident that we can reach emancipation from the strategic options available today. However, he has a clear transformative perspective in which the ultimate goal is a society integrated by passion, operating as something like a permanent TAZ. Enlightenment is not an absent goal which never comes. Enlightenment means altered consciousness, which is a lived alternative.

Bey does not simply try to make the world a bit better. He has an antagonistic orientation to a dominant system, conceived as a ‘totality’ or Spectacle. Far from becoming more pessimistic with time, Bey becomes more revolutionary after the collapse of ‘communism’. He feels a need for
uncompromising opposition to a system which accepts only full capitulation. On this question, I believe Bey is right, and Williams is wrong. The Gramscian strategy of fighting in the 'trenches and fieldworks' of a complex society is increasingly ineffective in a 'joined-up', high-speed, low-tolerance form of capitalism. The system’s demand for total capitulation makes it impossible to make the world a bit better – especially from a standpoint inside it. Today, even the most reformist demands seem to require a near-revolution to succeed. Those who give up on revolution, and use their included position to seek small reforms, will have to settle for less and less.

Despite all the changes since 1991, TAZs still exist. The ZAD in France is an archetypal TAZ. There are also shades of the TAZ in Tahrir Square, Gezi Park and Occupy, though they are oriented to visibility rather than invisibility. Social movement-controlled spaces in autonomous communities in Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, South Africa and so on are arguably a variety of TAZ. Authors such as Graeber argue that autonomous zones continue to exist invisibly in areas such as rural Madagascar. The most effective TAZ’s, almost by definition, will be invisible to us, too. Yet the regulation of everyday life, and the extension of surveillance and repression to post-TAZ spaces, are rendering it harder to alternate TAZ with ordinary life. This, in turn, creates a need for something more permanent. Arguably, the possibility of TAZ relies on the semi-permanence of everyday practices of resistance, such as squatting, countercultural events, festival circuits and so on. If the everyday is too regulated, it becomes harder to carve a TAZ from the everyday.

There are strange echoes between Bey’s *Millennium* – the system versus anything that cannot be englobed – and the liberal idea of ‘Jihad vs McWorld’ (except in the latter case, the dominant system is valued). The main difference is that Bey conceives opposition mainly in terms of autonomous movements expressing powerful affirmative passions. In ‘Jihad Revisited’, Bey rejects the idea of any similarity between his dream of a neo-Sufi Islamic Zapatismo and the rise of ‘Islamism’. Bey has little sympathy for the anti-fun, anti-Sufi orthodoxy of groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda. He sees it as a ‘simulation’, a false conflict between the Spectacle and a self-defined energy which is not really anti-systemic. This leads to a fake conflict between ‘democracy’, meaning coca-colonisation, and ‘Islam’, taken to mean ‘emotional plague’ (Reich’s term for psychological repression). ‘Islamism’ cannot negate Empire because it is itself based on negation and resentment. In a later interview, Bey suggests their limit is shown by their lack of a critique of capital, and an economic model he considers fascistic. Such groups are only able to gain popular support in countries like Afghanistan – with a rich tradition of everyday enjoyment – as a lesser evil in a context of absolute destruction.

Bey here attempts to grapple with what I elsewhere discuss as ‘reactive networks’. Reactive networks lead to a certain ambiguity, because they clearly create autonomous zones (relative to capital), but these zones do not incarnate the affects Bey seeks. Indeed, the proliferating revolutionary oppositions of anything that cannot be incorporated are expressed just as much in reactive movements (e.g. ISIS, Boko Haram, Mungiki, gangs of various kinds) as in autonomous movements. This complicates the picture of ‘system vs autonomous particularities’ considerably. Anarchism and other radical positions (Marxism, pacifism, feminism, etc) seem to be back in the position of a ‘third’, but in a context where the system still defines itself as the one world and treats difference as enmity.

Another possible difficulty with TAZ is that it identifies excess with abundance. This is a strategic response to scarcity-based dynamics, but creates difficulties in the current context. Is it possible to be paralysed by excess, as well as by lack? Berardi claims so, and suggests that contemporary capitalism has recuperated 1960s-wave revolt in this way. People are now exposed
to attentive stress due to an excess of information and stimulation. Native American therapist Lewis Mehl-Madrona makes similar claims. He suggests that, without forms of meaning to provide purpose, chaos is paralysing and anxiety-inducing.

However, such critiques do not seriously problematise Bey’s argument. Bey is not saying that we should do without existential attachments or meanings. He is saying that meanings are rooted in desire, which is accentuated in altered states of consciousness. The tenuous construction of personal meanings may be the last structuring force possible in a world of information overload. In any case, intensity can be experienced as euphoric rather than overwhelming, given certain conditions. Much of Bey’s theory seems designed to produce these conditions. Bey also observes that information excess can lead to darkness rather than enlightenment – a ‘lite age’ in Bey’s terms. The problem is that the excess is itself mediated and de-intensified.
Hakim Bey: Strategies of Resistance

Hakim Bey’s general strategic perspectives, such as the TAZ, are complemented by a range of tactical proposals for political action. In this essay, I will explore the strategic underpinnings for Bey’s political proposals, and will examine his focus on resisting recuperation, his emphasis on “empirical freedoms” as means to liberation, and his theory of immediatism.

Bey’s strategic approach

There is a transformative strategy at work in Bey’s theories, which stems logically from his ontology and his view of the dominant system. He favours a range of tactics which produce altered consciousness and peak experiences. In his theory, peak experiences provide a means to transform values. They are also a challenge to the Spectacle, which is unable to provide them.

This strategy is based on Bey’s ontology of chaos. His approach is driven by the ‘desire for desire, for Eros son of Chaos’. No ideology or normativity is adequate today. An adequate ethics must be situational. Peak experience is part of this. However, peak experience is not a goal in itself. TAZ is not purely hedonistic, but insurrectionary in intent – seeking to infect or become the ‘social’. Experiences such as those of a TAZ can serve as the matrix for a Sorelian myth of uprising. (In Sorel, a myth is a mobilising idea which inspires action, regardless of its truth). The point is to provide the hope, the morale, necessary for transformative struggle and personal enjoyment. ‘Whether or not you believe you’re going to save the world, you have to act like you believe it or your life will be crap’.

Chaos is ontologically primary. Therefore, every social order is ultimately illusory. It is made real only by coercion. Even so, fighting the system’s agents is less important than breaking down the self-alienation which underpins it. There is a danger that fighting the state helps sustain it as an effective illusion.

This leads some of Bey’s critics and supporters to interpret him as opposing social struggle. Despite these concerns, there is a recurring orientation to insurrection, or the ‘Uprising’, in his work. The ‘Uprising’ is a moment, like Sorel’s General Strike, when the TAZ comes to encompass all of social life, and becomes permanent.

Bey insists on altered consciousness against consensus reality. But it is not necessarily a rare occurrence. Esoteric, mystical and magical forces are found in unusual, everyday places. Ice-cream, for instance, is a mystical mixture of ice, fire, ocean and space, holding natural appeal for children. It has its origins in Persian hermeticism and the discovery of rock-salt.

Resisting Recuperation – Exodus not Revolution

Resisting recuperation is a central aspect of Bey’s strategy. The Spectacle is a trap for revolt, because rebellion can also be turned into an image or a product. People are failing to create
an outside because they are too glued to, or hypnotised by, televisions and computers. Visible militancy can become an image of itself and be recuperated by the media.

If mediation is the main enemy, the system’s main means of control, then effective resistance takes the form of disappearance, disengagement, immediacy (instead of mediation) and presence (instead of representation). Refusal to be mediated, or to engage with the Spectacle, creates spaces which are outside the system. While Bey also argues periodically for sabotage, reappropriation, and tactical use of the media, refusal seems to be the privileged tactic. His tactics are similar to the tactics of détournement used by Situationists. In an interview, Bey suggests that a strategy irrecuperable by the system has to involve altered consciousness. Altered consciousness or peak experience is irrecuperable because it cannot be represented, or reduced to mediated forms.

Strategically, Bey opposes a head-on collision with the state for two reasons. Firstly, he thinks it is futile. Secondly, he thinks the state is ‘terminal’, or dying of its own accord. The system is violently spasming in its death throes. In this context, there is no point confronting a power-system which has lost all meaning and is just a simulation. The best tactic is to avoid this spectacular violence which cannot reach the substance of social life, instead disappearing.

Insurrection and armed action are tragically counterproductive, because they are recuperated by the Spectacle. Also, radical action or organising should not be a sacrifice, but self-liberation with immediate psychological reward. Struggles against the system risk recuperation. As an alternative, Bey proposes personal and cultural actions. His alternative is to live as if the struggle were already won, to realise alternatives immediately, in the present. He discourages purely destructive acts (without a constructive element), and direct attacks on people. Instead, he defines the task of radicals as finding cracks in the system’s power and images, chipping away at the Spectacle and its influence. With enough success, such tactics might cause the system to lose its coherence and assurance, and thus also its power.

Armed attacks are ‘tragically counterproductive’. What counts today is personal/cultural action and ‘bearing witness’. Attacks like 9/11 are ‘automatically recuperable’ and always produce the opposite of their intended effect, because they are incorporated in the system’s internal image of the enemy. On another occasion, Bey reportedly expressed disapproval of the mass murders, but called 9/11 a ‘brilliant piece of artwork’ falling into the broad category of ‘bad shamanism’ which underpins reactionary movements.

Bey feels there is an obligation to feel joy, and not postpone it until the future or the afterlife. Feeling joy is necessary both to do justice to oneself, and to deal fairly/beautifully with others. Bey seeks to tap the energy of insurrection, without risking martyrdom or capture by the image. Insurrection must relate to the media today as it used to relate (in Bey’s historical examples) to religion as heresy. It is effectively a heresy against the Spectacle.

Resistance to the Spectacle occurs mainly through images and imaginaries. Simply being conscious of the Spectacle, sameness, and alienation cannot overcome them. Rather, opposition needs ‘counter-imagery’ and a kind of spirituality or marvel. In Millennium, Bey suggests that there is a lack of an inspiring ‘myth’ or ‘metanoia’, a focal point for dissident energies, both in above-ground radical movements and in countercultures and underground groups. The present task as he sees it is to build an anti-capitalist resistance movement out of the remaining fragments of radical movements.

In line with this perspective, Bey proposes a range of different tactics, the goal of which is to free desire from a state of capture or bondage to the system. Everyday life is the main field for insurrectionary self-empowerment against the system. Bey suggests that everyone knows what...
is going on and what to do, provided s/he can break free of 'false consciousness', the Spectacle, interpretation, or scarcity. Bey calls for a type of resistance which melts into the wider resistance of the excluded. It avoids confrontation on unequal terms, but breaks down the system's monopoly on violence. It occupies cracks in the system of control and reproduces techniques of indigenous warfare.

Viewed as a general strategy, this is not a strategy of resistance at the level of theory or art alone. Rather, it seeks dis-alienation through the strategic use of images, culminating in an alternative consciousness geared towards the Uprising. However, some of the tactics do focus on theory or art. Before the world can be changed, we need to destroy the dominant archetypes, the 'cops in the head'. This is the only practical insurrection possible today.

Bey suggests that it may also change the landscape around us. An insurrection against false consciousness will sweep away the power, the technology, of oppression. Attacking power is no longer possible because it is no longer 'there' – it is pure spectacle. The state, as an outer institution, is increasingly irrelevant as a focus, because of the spread of virtual capital. Yet spaces cannot be neutral. Either a zone is part of capital, or it is in opposition.

Bey’s position leads to certain general propositions. In 'Post-Anarchism Anarchy', he provides a nine-point manifesto which includes ‘Zerowork’ or anti-work, opposing the education system and the ‘serfdom of children’, promotion of sexuality, and addressing the issue of land in the context of de-spatialisation of capitalism. However, Bey also critiques single-issue politics as playing into the commodification of opinions. Specific oppressions cannot be separated out from the general problem of the system.

**Strategies and Contexts**

In some ways, this is a consciously anti-strategic strategy. Politically, Bey criticises the idea of revolution as a goal, instead valuing insurgence, uprising, or insurrection as an inner process of rejecting power. There is no overarching programme for revolution. Worthwhile struggles are always for ‘empirical freedoms’, rather than ideology. 'Strategic autonomy is made up of tactical incremental empirical freedoms not ideology’. He theorises uprisings as an equivalent at the social movement scale of peak experiences at the individual level. The aim is to get outside mediation by creating different ways of being.

In this context, the TAZ is not only a tactic, it is also a ‘psychospiritual state’ or ‘existential condition’. The physical TAZ is a way to sample this state of being. It is a way to create a psychological and political ‘outside’ – from which resistance can happen. Sometimes the insurrection itself is a zone of freedom, regardless of whether it is successful. Its temporary nature can be a virtue. The process of revolt is arguably preferable to the sleepiness of a realised social form.

In a sense, even dropping or reforming repressive rules is unnecessary, since rules and the morality of the herd are there to be overcome. They are something to prove and measure oneself against. Bey’s main point here is that one should break the rules, instead of trying to reform them. The imperative to resist does not disappear even in miserable conditions. If rebellion is not possible, then Bey advises what he calls a ‘clandestine spiritual jihad’, or struggle to disalienate life and culture.

Bey’s strategies vary greatly with context. Each situation has a particular strategic structure and needs to be approached situationally to find sources of power. ‘Situation’ here seems to
mean something like a social structure or opportunity structure in relation to which strategies and tactics are formulated to create autonomy or conditions for its emergence. In his early work, Bey conceived of TAZ in Deleuzian molecular terms, as a tactic used as part of a worldview distrustful of strategy. In his later work, faced with the totalising effects of the post-Cold War ‘end of history’, he suggests that he’s now forced into trying to formulate a strategic position, without the authoritarian implications of strategy (Interview, Sakhra).

At various points, Bey also calls for creating alternative economic institutions, and for anarchist involvement in wider social movements. For example, the strategic position of TAZ changes a lot through Bey’s writings. In the book TAZ, Bey wishes for the ‘eruption of the marvellous into the ordinary’. This means spiritualising everyday life. For Bey at this time, spiritualisation is the most tumultuous and urgent political demand. In Immediatism, Bey claims that he staked and ultimately lost on this position. He now seeks to find hidden treasure instead. This later position suggests that the marvellous is contained mainly in secretive small groups. In ‘The Occult Assault on Institutions’, he argues for a strategy to optimise conditions for TAZ’s to emerge.

There are thus major differences in Bey’s strategic perspective over time. Overall, however, his varying strategies and tactics pursue a consistent goal of immediacy, intensity, and altered consciousness. In Escape from the Nineteenth Century, he argues that capital is based on same-ness and separation. The antidotes are therefore difference and presence. In an interview, he counterposes ‘real immanence’ to the ‘false transcendence’ offered by the Spectacle.

In ‘Post-Anarchism Anarchy’, Bey argues that anarchism is caught between a tragic Past and a utopian Future, but it needs to find a present in ‘true desires’ and things we can do ‘before it’s too late’. It starts from the question, ‘What is your True Desire?’ A first step in ‘utopia’ is always to look in the mirror and demand to know one’s true desire. This requires at least temporarily overcoming anxiety, or fear of one’s shadow.

In some works, Bey redefines the Islamic concept of jihad in terms of the struggle against alienation. The greater jihad is the struggle against the separated self and the suffocation of the true self. The lesser jihad is the struggle against the Spectacle. In ‘Jihad Revisited’, Bey suggests that he was hoping for a kind of ‘Islamic Zapatismo’ when he wrote Millennium, possibly derived from neo-Sufism. This jihad he imagined has not come to pass and it is ‘probably too late’.

**Immediatism: Tactical Resistance to Mediation**

Bey sees mediation as a central aspect or cause of alienation. All experience is mediated, but mediation differs in degree. Embodied experiences are the least mediated. Certain sensory experiences – such as taste, touch, and sexual pleasure – are less mediated than others. Live or performance arts are less mediated than recorded arts. Even among recorded arts, there are degrees of mediation depending on how much imaginative participation each work demands. When hearers or readers play an active role in imagination or dreaming, there is less mediation.

Books draw on the reader’s imagination, but involve a hierarchical relationship between producer and consumer. Spirit-possession is less mediated than theatre, which is less mediated than film, and television is especially mediated and in need of overcoming. However, the point is not to do away with any means of artistic production. The more imagination is freed or shared, the more useful the medium. In other words, mediation is a continuum, ranging from the barely-mediated to the extremely mediated, with many shades in between.
The idea of mediation is central to Bey’s analysis of art. Capitalism propels art towards increasing mediation, and recuperates art increasingly rapidly today. Authentic art is play. Play is one of the least mediated experiences. Bey seems to connect artistic creativity with peak experience. Immediatism is a means of creative, liberatory and playful energy-production, without alienation or mediation. Today’s art and advertising promote endless images of death and mutilation.

On the other hand, images of life are sometimes punished. Bey argues that art cannot exist for itself. Art functions as political power, a way of expressing or changing the world. Even if there is such a thing as art without political content, it would still be political in its means of production and consumption. Immediatist art expresses its radicalism in its means of production and consumption. It is kept within a small group of friends and ideally leaves no trace at all, except self-transformation.

In the 1990s, Bey theorised disappearance as desirable, to avoid recuperation. Disappearance is a way to save something from dying of mediation. Capitalism has created a kind of closure in which a single image of the world dominates. Other images cannot emerge because of the hegemony of this image. This leads to a dead process of endless reproduction of sameness. Any image which ruptures this hegemony would have to come from outside. And it would have to be asserted as a kind of 'Image War'.

The ‘outside’ here is presence, or the gift economy, as something which cannot be represented. In Riverpeople, Wilson claims that publication sometimes ‘profanes’ (dirties or despiritualises) secret knowledge which is better transmitted in less-mediated forms, such as manuscript or word-of-mouth. These less-mediated forms retain a small chance of enchantment, of becoming ‘Poetic Facts’ with truth in the archetypal world as well as the real world. In contrast, mass-published facts become mere data or information. They lose any relationship to the imaginal world. Bey also claims that ‘secrets still exist’. Secrets are powerful, against the system’s claims to see and represent everything. Secrecy is central to the tong, immediatism, and Bey’s conception of ‘tact’.

In ‘Media Creed for the Fin de Siécle’, Wilson argues that the mass media alienates whatever it captures. One cannot express one’s true subjectivity in the media. Instead, what is expressed is rendered meaningless. Therefore, he calls for a refusal to let the media possess one’s image and extract ‘vampiric power’ from it. Instead, one should invest energies in intimate or subjective media, and either evade or destroy mass media.

Virtual reality failed because human reaction times are faster than vision. VR caused sickness and illnesses by separating embodied and visual experiences. In ‘The Obelisk’, Bey argues that voluntary self-restraint in relation to the world of representation and images can lead to flows of power to the autonomous imagination. The point is to imagine ourselves, rather than to allow ourselves to be imagined through words or images. Things which are unrepresented and unseen – deliberately or fortuitously – tend to maintain their lived meaning. This in turn creates optimal conditions for the emergence of the ‘marvelous’ in lived experiences (or of altered consciousness).

In Immediatism, Bey proposes to practice art in secret, so as to avoid ‘contamination’ by mediation. All spectators should also be performers. Artistic products should be shared with participants only, and never sold. Techniques involving physical presence are preferred. This practice is framed as a response to alienation and to the ‘death of art’ due to mediation.

Art should be created from inspiration, as a free gift, which may or may not be reciprocated. Today, instead, it is produced for money. Art is meant to provide a kind of 'healing laugh', which is serious, but not sober. It is to be a boast, not an excuse. Bey suggests that art which is not
produced through alienation is today classified in terms such as ‘insane’ and ‘neo-primitive’. It appeals because of its imaginal presence.

As an example of an immediatist project, Bey proposes a variety of the potlatch, or ritual feast. It should be made without ready-made ingredients. The main point is to give and receive gifts. Another piece, ‘A Lunar Garden of Legal Phantastica’, suggests modern items for creating a Greek pantheon. Priapus could be a garden gnome with a painted-on penis; Mercury a hood ornament from a car, or the Western Union logo.

Similarly, in ‘The Occult Assault on Institutions’, Bey argues that actions to promote TAZ should avoid mediation, directly realising their goal. They should also add up to more than the sum of their parts. Such actions should both ‘damage or destroy some real and/or imaginal time/space of “the enemy”’, and create a strong chance of a peak experience. In terms of enemies, abstractions like ‘the state’ are of little use. Resistance must target specific functionaries. The aim is to provide a particular ‘occult effect’, projecting power back at the media.

One way to avoid recuperation by the Spectacle is to ensure that symbolism has depth or ‘fractal dimensions’ which cannot be reduced to the flat imagery of the Spectacle. In such cases, even when others try to recuperate an image, it will continue to carry an uncertain, anti-systemic subtext. Sabotage, for instance, is too easily recuperated by being classified as crime. It might avoid this if combined with information, beauty, or adventure, provided one does not get caught.

For instance, media employees might be sent powerful imagery or magic art-objects which are said to carry a curse. The curse is that it will cause them to realise their true desires. The aim of such a tactic is to infiltrate the images into their dreams and desires, to make their jobs seem boring and destructive.

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