

Beyond Amnesty

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“If one does not know how to talk, it is because one does not know what to say, and vice versa. And one does not know what and how to speak because everything has been banalized, reduced to mere symbol, to appearance. Meaning, which was considered one of the greatest sources of revolt, a radiant form of energy, has been eroded. They have shattered, pulverized and minced it...What does one say, what does one do, in the midst of a desert? Deprived of words with which to express rage for the suffering one has undergone, deprived of hope with which to overcome the emotional anguish that devastates daily existence, deprived of desires with which to struggle against institutional reason, deprived of dreams toward which to reach in order to sweep away the repetition of the existent, many subjects become barbaric in action. Once the tongue is paralyzed, the hands quiver to find relief from frustration. Inhibited from manifesting itself, the compulsion toward the joy of living is turned on its head, becoming its opposite, the death instinct. Violence explodes and, being without meaning, manifests itself in a blind and furious manner, against everything and everyone, overturning every social relationship. Where there is not a civil war going on, there are the rocks thrown from overpasses or the murders of parents, friends or neighbours.”

Chrissus & Odotheus, Barbarians: Disordered Insurgence

Sometimes I catch myself laughing...and the sound of joy in the dead, walled space that is the civilised world catches in my throat.

Is it provocative or contentious to say there are times when I long for an enemy I can see. That my soul yearns to be a guerilla, an insurgent, to experience insurrection, and, with that, that I also accept that I or my friends might be injured, imprisoned or die in battle but that we do this with the joy of clear-drawn lines and the sense that something better than this might follow. My body longs to fight and to free itself. To move. To climb. To dance. To make love. To push past and through. To run. To smash.

I long to live among people who know there is a war on. A war against life. Against spirit. I want to live among people who don't look down at their hands or take their eyes away from yours when you talk of struggle and of insurrection because they know in their hearts they have acquiesced, and because — maybe, just maybe — they never really hated the system. Amongst people who haven't been bought out. Who didn't take the pills offered because they preferred to struggle with their feeling of dis-ease than to live in the dead zone. Who don't pretend they are still fighting when it is obvious that they are making a garden out of a battlefield. I wish to be somewhere the war is admissible.

I see someone I haven't seen for 5 years. We talk about the people we share and some we don't — how they are doing, what they up to. Many of them are broken. Depressed, lost, on the edge. Some have committed suicide. Still others have settled down and found contentment, striking an emotional compromise with the system because, as a friend wrote, if it was easy they wouldn't call it struggle and sometimes you just get too tired to fight the phantom anymore.

You don't need a gun to kill someone.

You don't need prison walls to make a prison.

I want an enemy that isn't me, that isn't the enemies I create of my relationships. I want my sense of stress and embattlement — my emotional and political sense of being under siege, of being under occupation — to match the outside. Someone once said that going to Palestine was a relief because suddenly the external reality matched their daily emotional experience of life in the UK: a state of crisis. And I feel this too. In riots, in gangs, on actions. Where I live, the enemy is so big it is everything, including myself. There is no hope of anything other than this reality. After all, this is a place people come to find asylum. This is still a promised land where the streets are paved with gold. How do you fight that? There is no outside and no inside the system. And there seems to be no way out.

One of the most poignant events for me in recent years was the Paris Riots — or at least the reports I read of them. A young man was describing his rage, his scream of refusal. Many could make no sense of his rioting — he had burnt out friends' cars, he had trashed the place where he lived. Confusing? I don't think so. For him, there was no future, and no hope of change. So he trashed what he hated. His life. Just like the 'senseless' acts of suicide and self-harm committed every minute by people in the UK and around the world, it was an act of rage, defiance and grief. It was an attempt to be affective, even if the act itself seems to some pointless and chaotic.

Sometimes the only thing to do is scream in the hope that something will shatter.

I'm trying to understand the politics of self-directed violence in the UK and, as always, my writing is an extended thought, an idea, a perspective, an intuition, a work in progress and of course, it is embedded in my own experience and position in life and society. Sometimes, when my life takes an upturn, I feel very far from the ideas I explore here. And then I stumble again, my ability to cope falters and I am back in that darkest of places this piece of writing was born in and it makes sense again. So, take from it what you want in the places you find yourself.

I was originally inspired to write because I suspect the idea that we are privileged to live in an advanced capitalist state such as Britain persists even amongst those who consider themselves to have a radical political perspective, that is anti-capitalist and/or anti-statist. This is revealed in the most casual of comments, by some people's insistence when talking about mental health and living in Britain that I cannot compare living here with living in a third world or developing country.

There is indignation. There is a certain...defensiveness. How could I presume to even compare these things? And I feel uncomfortable with what I am writing too because even though I am not trying to set up a comparison, the propaganda of privilege is deeply engrained in me too. Of course, you can have a place of privilege within the terms of reference of a particular system — being a wealthy, white male for example is very different in capitalist society from being a poor black male. But that is different from thinking that out of all potential human social, political, spiritual, emotional and economic systems, we in the UK have created a system in which we are able to fulfil our human potential and satisfy our needs and desires.

I do not want to set up some sort of comparison of experience nor do I want to belittle the horrors, the poverty, and the struggle of people in other countries, nor to glorify it. And of course, people from other countries risk their lives to get here and, sometimes, find a refuge from other political systems and a better quality of life and health. But I still think it's possible and vital to point to the impact on our humanity, our freedom and our health of living in an advanced tech-

nological, capitalist, high-surveillance society and to attempt to challenge any notion of privilege without entering into a competition between worlds, between experiences at different stages of the global capitalist system.

If we don't do this, people here will always be fighting for 'the other', crippling meaningful resistance as expressions of solidarity hide a sneaking sense of 'how lucky we are', of patronage, and provide an excuse not to push the boundaries of struggle here. You get 100s of people to a benefit night for Latin American struggles, only 20 to a night supporting prisoners incarcerated as a result of struggle in the West.

I think the poor mental health of a large proportion of Britons most clearly undermines any notion that there is a good place to be in capitalism. Mental health problems are pandemic but I only know what it feels like to grow up and to live here and so this is the place I am going to look at. Depression in the West is one of the major causes of death. Where I lived in North East Leeds, out of a population of 170,000, roughly 25% of that number is currently identified (i.e. they have sought help) as suffering from a mental health problem at any one time. That's a lot.

The first thing I want to do when I wake up is smash the walls...

Hundreds of thousands of people across the UK deliberately injure themselves every year and it is estimated that someone takes their own life on this island every 82 minutes. The despotic biomedical, pharmacological and psychotherapeutic models of mental health will try to persuade us that the problems lie with us, as individuals, as malfunctioning and maladjusted organisms. I would agree with this in as much as the conditions of our daily existence have an enormously detrimental effect on our physical and mental health: poor nutrition, stressful environments, unstable relationships, pollution (air, light, material and noise), generalised aggression, loneliness, work and technological fallout do, I believe, make our capacity to create and maintain good health, good brains, good social relationships and good moods extraordinarily difficult. But this aside, I think our mental health, or lack of it, is mostly a normal response to abnormal circumstances and is in some sense the frontline, the trenches, in the war against humanity by the nation state and economic onslaught.

...the second thing I want to do is smash my self.

There are 23 walls in my one-bedroomed flat. There are 6 windows, 4 of which let in some light, and all of which let onto more walls. There are ceilings and floors. There are 4 flats in my block, not including the 2 garden flats. I rarely see the people who live in them. There is a heavy electric door opening into the institutional communal hallway with its brick walls, thin weathered carpet and narrow metal bound stairwell. The block, as one arrest warrants officer joked to me when they finally caught up with me, is a fortress.

I leave the flat to go for walks, to have appointments and meetings or coffee with friends. Sometimes I don't leave at all. I have no reason to. Or no motivation. I am depressed. I am suicidal. I find activities to fill my time. When I leave the flat, I am surrounded by noise, people, buildings, traffic, stench, cameras and uniforms – police, community support officers, street wardens, traffic wardens, bouncers, bus drivers, office workers, the occasional cadet, cybergoths and emo kids,

chavs, antifascists, smackheads, parents, anarchos, hippies. I never see a horizon, I rarely see the moon. Or stars. There is a little green space but it is a walk away and I seem to get addicted to my cage. I remember when I was a kid, I had a hamster. It spent most of its time trying to tunnel its way to freedom in a corner of the cage, so I let it out. It didn't miss a beat. It headed straight for a corner of the room and continued digging. It wasn't fooled by the bigger cage. I am like a dog on a chain who can only go so far before the leash around my neck pulls me back and reminds me there are limitations, that the only revolution in my life is the relentless circularity of it. That I have a circumference, that I am not free – no matter how much I berate myself and persuade myself that I am in control, that I can have an effect. I am crushed by the illusion of choice. I feel like I am being made to choose between a million kinds of orange when all I want is an apple. Surely life is meant to be lived with urgency, with imperative or at the very least with some meaning that comes from outside my own invention. Surely I shouldn't be wondering at what point I will choose death...

My sense of smell has changed. Heightened to the stench of civilization. Honeysuckle and sulphur. Perfume and piss. The exhaust of a bus as if someone had just slammed my face into old carpet. Like an epileptic before she fits, warned by the smell of pear or almonds. Hold me down to stop me struggling. Biting down on my tongue because if I start screaming, I will never stop.

Deliberate self-harm is thought to be the second highest reason for hospital Accident and Emergency admissions in the UK (with the highest being 'accidents'). The definition of deliberate self-harm (DSH) refers to self-injurious behaviour such as cutting, ingesting toxic substances (including drug overdoses), burning, head banging, hair pulling and attempted suicide. Other more socially acceptable and widespread risk-taking behaviour such as alcohol abuse, smoking, eating disorders and unprotected sex are also described as self-harm although these are not included in self-harm statistics.

Amongst the grinding poverty of Lincoln Green, I lie in a hospital bed, a momentary place of safety – cold, alone, scared, ashamed, guilt-ridden, embarrassed, desperate for a way out of my head. I just want to stop being me. To stop being here. To do something that will break open my life and reveal something better. Something more tolerable. I have two wounds on my left wrist and stab wounds in my right thigh. I guess it isn't normal to attack yourself. A concerned-looking doctor reads my notes. Are you glad you're alive, he asks? Not especially, I reply. Whatever. As long as something changes.

Reliable figures for self-harm rates are problematic. Self-directed violence is often carried out in secret and many incidences of self-injury never make it to an Accident and Emergency department. However, government research published in 2001 suggests that as many as 215,000 adults throughout the UK may have harmed themselves over a twelvemonth period and more than 24,000 teenagers are admitted to hospital each year as a result of injuring themselves. Again, these figures do not include domestic violence, substance abuse, suicide, eating disorders and other self-destructive behaviour. In her essay *The Politics of Torture: Dispelling the Myths and Understanding the Survivors*, Joan Simalchik writes that "...the systemic and widespread use of torture today is unprecedented...Amnesty International describes torture as the twentieth century epidemic." In Britain, it would seem there is an unprecedented epidemic of deliberate self-harm, a brief look at which presents a disturbing picture of a culture equally defined by systemic and widespread violence, but, here, self-inflicted.

Self-inflicted violence is a complicated issue and one that many people do not understand – even those who do it. There are also people who will publically profess not to understand while

privately self-injuring, or who engage in other more socially accepted forms of self-abuse, some of them historically constructed by governments and industry precisely for the purposes of social control and profit, most famously alcohol, drugs (recreational and prescription) and tobacco.

The reasons generally given for self-harm are basically the need for control, communication and punishment. Much like torture is about controlling the individual, forcing the victim to communicate and punishing the victim and their community. Self-injury has been described as a 'normal response to abnormal circumstances'. It is an indicator that all is not well in someone's world. And the fact that it is such a huge problem in our society – along with mental health problems in general – shows that all is not well in our collective world. Animals in captivity self-injure, and human beings, particularly in the West, are increasingly prone to it.

It seems to me almost as if there is no need to 'disappear' people, to torture them, to directly force the compliance of a population by those that control them. We have been trained to do all this to ourselves.

The system we live under has been developing and honing its techniques of social control for hundreds of years: mass slaughter, religious persecution, colonisation, press gangs, mass hangings, slavery and servitude, enclosures and clearances of common land, transportations, the asylum, the factory, the prison, the schoolroom, fascism, East German surveillance society where there existed a Stasi agent for every 50 citizens (not including informers), and in contemporary Britain a neo-fascist state in which each citizen can expect to be filmed by CCTV cameras at least 300 times a day ('Let's give them something to watch' says the advert at the end of my street), and where a huge database is being constructed as the foundation of an ID Card scheme that will provide access to all your personal history (family profile, school records, medical and mental health records, DNA sample, retina scan and fingerprints) to whichever authorities require you to present your ID Card to access services, and which will also provide a profile of your activities such as how much alcohol you buy.

Britain is rooted in violence, extermination and torture: of the earth, of other species, of individuals and communities. And before the Empire could go out and conquer the world, it had to conquer the people at home. The system we live in is founded on genocide and enclosure. And some theorists are now describing our transition from nature-based living to agriculture, industry and technology as an 'original trauma', the psychological result of which is a nation populated by people suffering post-traumatic stress disorder as a way of life.

Some of these events happened so long ago we don't remember them. But the consequences are all around us. And here, the government, the educators, the institutions and the profitmakers have learnt valuable lessons from history and have achieved a quality of social control that makes resistance a complicated act: because the obvious perpetrators of violence are not the state but frequently ourselves against ourselves.

Chellis Glendinning talks about the original trauma that all western-grown people suffer from. The original trauma is grief: loss of place, loss of people, loss of purpose. Imagine being stuck in a perpetual cycle of grief. Dysphoria. You don't have to imagine it, we live it. How far away are your biological family? How often do you see them? When did you lose them or when did they leave you? How many of your chosen 'family' ie your friends and important adult relationships live within 100 miles of you? How often do you see them? How many bits of land you used to play on or walk through have been fenced off or built on? How many lovers have you had and lost? Can you even go into a relationship anymore without wondering how and when it is going to end? How many places have you lived in and left? How afraid do you feel? How lost do you

feel? How many times have you felt immense purpose and a sense of collective purpose and then, through no agency of your own, times have changed and people have or you have and you feel purposelessness and alone again?

We are not supposed to deal with this much grief. Are we?

I am a baby, a toddler, a young girl. We live in a grim naval town, my grandparents live in London. We see them fairly regularly but when they go home, I hold on to them and scream. I don't want them to go. I start school. I leave school. I start another school. Different friends. My brother goes to boarding school, paid for by the Navy. I miss him. I am sexually abused and I lose my body. I leave school. My father leaves. I never hear from him again. I try to hang myself. I start another school. Different friends. My mum remarries. I lose her. A grandmother dies. Her husband remarries and moves up north. We never hear from him again. I leave school. I go to college. I try to kill myself. I go to university. Different friends. Different city. I love someone. We split up. I never hear from them again. I love someone. We split up. Intimacy, then silence. I leave university. I move towns. I love someone. We lose each other. I move towns. I move towns. I move house. I move towns. Intimacy. Withdrawal. I move country. The same friends. In different places. I love someone. We split up. I move towns. Friends in different places. Friends move. I move. Connection. Recoil. Hope. Fear. Annihilation. Alienation. I am in holding cells. I am in prison. I am in hospital. I am in work. I am in my flat. Nowhere feels right. Nowhere feels safe. No one feels safe. No one feels right. I don't feel safe. I don't feel right. I don't want to be alone, but my relationships seem mostly to damage me. I don't know how to love, myself or anyone else. I don't know how to be loved. I don't know how to live. And I keep fucking it all up.

A brief comparison of self-harm techniques and official torture techniques is sobering. And self-harm is most prevalent among a similar population to those that are at highest risk of torture: women and children, their relatives, prisoners (where the incidence of self-harm amongst men matches the incidence of self-harm amongst 'free' women), oppressed ethnic groups, anyone who has suffered systematic and systemic violence. More men successfully commit suicide, but then more men than women die in combat too.

Looking at the reasons for and socio-political function of torture, the definitions and techniques of torture, and the consequences for the victim and communities involved, is, I believe, a useful and revealing way of understanding self-harm in core capitalist economies such as the UK.

The socio-political function of torture is about disempowering the individual. It is a way of breaking the psychological will of the victim and creating a culture of fear, not only for the individual being tortured but also in the community from whom the next victim might be drawn. The torturer rarely has death as the goal. It is a means of social control with the victims of torture as the tool.

The techniques employed by the torturer are wide-ranging. They include beating, penetrating injuries such as slashing and stabbing, burning, electrocution, forced experimentation, removal of tissue and appendages, extreme physical conditions, sexual torture, mental torture (threats,

mock execution, solitary confinement and sensory deprivation). The techniques of self-harm are similar.

“Do you cut yourself with knives, razor blades, broken glass, needles, nails, paper clips, pins, scissors, tacks, anything you can get your hands on? Do you bang your head against walls? Punch walls till your hands go all bruised and bloody? Do you throw yourself through panes of glass? Do you ever set your hair and/or skin on fire? Do you swallow batteries so they’ll open up inside you, burning your organs with battery acid? Do you ever hit yourself with blunt objects? Do you punch yourself in the stomach, legs, head? Do you try to break your own bones? Expose your body to extreme weather conditions without wearing protective clothing so you’ll get frostbite or sunburn or chills and fevers? Stare directly into the sun until it nearly blinds you? Do you pull out your hair? Bite or scratch yourself bloody?”

Razor (website about self-harm)

A directive to operatives of the Stasi in the former GDR (East Germany) on ways to cripple ‘oppositional’ citizens describes the aim being to “develop apathy (in the subject)...to achieve a situation in which his conflicts, wherever of a social, personal, career, health or political kind are irresolvable...to give rise to fears in him...to develop/create disappointments...to restrict his talents or capabilities...to reduce his capacity to act and...to harness dissensions and contradictions around him for that purpose.” Of course, the way the GDR operated was very different from what goes on in the UK, but these descriptions pretty well describe the mental state of many Britons today. The Directive ‘Zersetzungsmassnahmen’ means literally the ‘annihilation of the inner self’ to include “making compromising situations for them by creating confusion over the facts...(and) the engendering of hysterical and depressive behaviour in the target person.” Here, there are no secret agents engineering whether or not you get this or that job, or house, or into this or that school. There is just social engineering. There are no secret agents compromising us by confusing the facts or engendering depressive behaviour in target persons. There are no secret agents: there is only an intangible but brilliantly oppressive system where the jailer is everything you desire (and which we are told is what people world-wide desire), everything you think, and everything around you. There is mass confusion perpetrated by the media and there is an entire culture of fear created by the government and its war on terror, kids, the homeless, and asylum seekers as well as traditional methods of creating fear through the imposition of cultural norms such as work and the nuclear family. There is the poor mental health of millions of Britons. There are no secret agents and yet the result is the same. There are no target persons, just a society of individuals largely disengaged, alienated from each other and from themselves, out of control, fucked-up and either apathetic, depressed or chaotically angry.

Here, in Britain, citizens are not routinely tortured. There are examples of obvious violence practiced against individuals by the state or institutions – most notably within the police system, the prison system and the mental health system with compulsory detention, forced pharmaceutical neutralization and practices such as ECT (electro-convulsive therapy – basically, brain damage) and neurosurgery (the infamous lobotomy which is still practiced here) – but nothing

many would frame in the context of torture. Most violence in Britain seems to occur between citizens or against themselves.

Torture occurs in small rooms, blood-stained cells presided over by psychopathic prison guards. Torture happens in other countries with dictatorships and wars. Torture is about threat. Threat to our integrity: as a mind, as a body, as a soul, as a community. Torture is about the creation of a culture of fear, circles of silence and absolute obedience to something that is not you. But isn't it possible that the capitalist society we live in is nothing more than one vast torture chamber regardless of place using highly advanced psychological techniques, so cunning that here we take a state of torture for a state of privilege?

Wherever you are in the world, there are people with scars. After all, this is global capitalism. What do you think of when you think of scars? Do you think of pictures published by Amnesty International of black skin scarred by instruments of torture in distant dictatorships? Do you think of the scars on the bodies of women, children and men at the mercy of a perpetrator of domestic violence? Do you think of the track marks on the arms of smack heads in the dark parts of town? Do you think of the scars on the faces of men who have fought in pub brawls or who have been mugged or set upon by "kids in hoodies"? Do you think of the small round circle of vaccination on the upper left arm of every adult to protect them against the diseases of civilisation? Do you ever notice the scars on the arms of 'normal' people. Strange, inexplicable, white ladders of cuts that ride up the arms of ordinary women and men, of all ages. Look around you. You'll see them. It's like removing a blindfold to become sensitive to these marks and to ask what lies behind them. Scars are not the prerogative of the third world, of overt dictatorships, or of official war zones. The war against life does not have borders, and at whatever point of capitalism we live in, wherever we are in the world, however privileged we are told we are or however underprivileged we are told we are, we are all of us wounded and scarred by it. These scars tell the story of civilisation. They are all you need to know.

"There is a difference between poverty in the third world and in the west...when my [Filipino] friend asked why so many people attempt suicide here, I just didn't know how to explain. To people who have never experienced it, the poverty of our culture is very strange...there is another solidarity that exists at a more fundamental level of struggle. And that has to do with the daily act of living—the struggle against alienation in our own lives."

From a pamphlet by Solidarity South Pacific

More and more people in the UK are being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, or with DESNOS (Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified involving prolonged and repeated trauma/s). I mostly think diagnoses miss the point, but here I think it's useful. PTSD used to be a problem applied to survivors of torture and war situations, threat to physical integrity and natural disasters. But even the psychiatric authorities have had to admit that there are many

people fulfilling the symptomatic criteria for PTSD while not meeting the trauma criteria (ie they could not always explain their symptoms as the result of one single identifiable traumatic incident such as a war or imprisonment), hence DESNOS.

Child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, marital breakdown, parental divorce are all known to contribute to the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder. But all of the symptoms that make up PTSD are also common to many other mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, and the problematic 'personality disorders' (any personality or behaviour which marks you out from the somatised, wage earning, product-obsessed, compliant, politically disengaged consumer, invented by pharmaceutical companies so they can sell more drugs and by the psychiatric and potentially the 'criminal justice' system so they can invalidate and take out of society those people who refuse to comply).

Twelve years old. A year after my father leaves. A year of my mother going mad, breaking hairbrushes on my head every night in frustration, emotionally abusing me, beating me, shoving my face in the snow because she is angry and alone and is taking it out on the wrong person because the right person won't listen, leaving me alone because she can't bear to be in the house they had shared any longer. I stand in her doorway at night, unable to sleep, desperate to say something but lost for words. She begs me to go to bed, to leave her to sleep. I can't move. I can't speak. My father pretends he doesn't know us if we see him in the supermarket or at the beach. My feelings stop counting. I try to hang myself, full of hate and anger, of smashed love, of smashed trust and smashed hope.

I am dragged to a psychiatrist. Literally dragged, kicking and screaming, across the South Coast wasteland in the shadow of warships and prison ships and old fortresses, below Ports-down Hill and its redbrick defence research facility, past estate upon estate of decaying council houses and naval quarters, in the rain, to a psychiatrist and from there to here, it is me who has done something wrong, from here on in, there is something wrong with me. My father sends my mother chapters on transactional analysis and my mother revels in the fact that the first psychiatrist refuses to see me because I ask too many questions, forcing him, in my childish way, to look at himself. I am a difficult child, I am told. Uncontrollable. Too clever for my own good. My own worst enemy.

So what in our world could lead to PTSD or DESNOS?

"Traumatic events that are experienced directly include, but are not limited to, military combat, violent personal assault (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, crime, natural or man-made disasters, severe automobile accidents or being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. For children,

sexually traumatic events may include developmentally inappropriate sexual experience without threatened or actual violence or injury. Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing the serious injury or unnatural death of another person due to violent assault, accidents, war, or disaster or unexpectedly witnessing a dead body or body parts. Events experienced by others that are learned about include, but are not limited to, violent personal assault, serious accident, or serious injury experienced by a family member or close friend... (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association DSM IV 1994)”

A 1989 report estimated that by the age of 14, children in the West have probably witnessed about 11, 000 murders on television...

We have more food than we can eat. We have access to diverse media to keep us entertained – television, films, radio, the music industry, the internet, Playstations. Our children have toys and technology with which to occupy themselves. We have freedom from armies, paramilitaries and secret police. We can transport ourselves easily from one place to another. We can live where we want and travel the world. We have education for all and employment opportunities. We have enough money to live on – some more than others, but few of us have no money at all. We have recreational drugs for our enjoyment and medical drugs to keep us alive and to stop us feeling too much. Most do not fear for their physical safety, our houses are protected and our prisons are literally overflowing (the solution is to keep prisoners in modified shipping containers).

People here are dying of malnutrition not through starvation but through obesity. At the very least, the lives of many Westerners are severely impaired by these. The foods we eat have been described as ‘anti-nutritious’ by some nutritionists – imported, packaged in toxic materials, and produced by a process of mass industrial agriculture (poor soil and pesticides). Fast food and snack food is not really food at all. The food we eat is not healing, it is damaging. And the knowledge and process of growing, picking and foraging our food has also been lost – along with the healing physical activity of this process and our connection to nature and sense of autonomy over our own basic needs and survival.

We endure information overload – a kind of white noise – which is banal, anaesthetizing and paranoid. Concentration spans have shortened and human interaction is increasingly mediated by technology. In place of our ‘real’ lives, we have reality TV. Our conversations as well as our private spaces are constantly interrupted by mobile phone calls, our friendships are enacted via text messages and email.

We live in a culture of fear of the other. We are plugged into computers and TV. Education—as it always has been— is about teaching us not to ask questions, to pass tests, to learn only what the government wants us to learn, to break us so we can be a cog in the machine. A recent report by UNICEF on children in the UK described them as the unhappiest in the developed world.

Here, we have the welfare state. We have credit cards. We have relative poverty instead of absolute poverty, together with the propaganda of opportunity and choice.

We no longer remember how to heal ourselves. Even if we could remember, the diseases produced by techno-industrial society probably go beyond the abilities of traditional remedies, and industrialization has destroyed many of the plants that make up herbal medicine. Britain is an agricultural and industrial wasteland.

We are subject to constant surveillance – increasing numbers of police, street wardens, security guards, CCTV, video vans, audio-monitoring equipment in MacDonalds and train stations,

electronic tagging, mobile phones with cameras, and record figures for phone tapping and email surveillance.

[pubs] [shops] [restaurants] [parks] [eating] [walking] [roads]
[city centres] [office blocks] [cash machines] [changing rooms]
[bedrooms] [undressing] [dressing] [swimming pools] [doorways]
[motorways] [sports fields] [beaches] [rooftops] [helicopters]
[video vans] [talking] [embracing] [fighting] [macdonalds]
[courtrooms] [coffee shops] [cop shops] [mobile phones] [crying]
[dancing] [clubs] [bars] [health centres] [running] [taxi firms] [cabs] [prisons]
[school corridors] [school rooms] [school playgrounds] [playgrounds] [car parks]
[airports] [train stations]
[bus stations] [trains] [coaches] [ferryports] [street corners]
[billboards] [webcams] [learning] [travelling]
[staying still] [gait analysis] [hallways]
[elevators] [town halls] [starbucks] [houses] [banks] [army barracks] [face recog-
nition] [group pattern analysis] [planetariums] [cinemas] [theatres] [gyms] [theme
parks] [rioting] [industrial estates] [council estates] [petrol stations] [satellites]
[stairwells] [watching]
[coughing] [scoring] [smiling] [dying]
[shoplifting] [loving] [fucking] [kissing] [holding]
[drinking] [meeting up] [parting] [buying]
[smoking] [loitering] [sleeping] [working]
[waiting] [playing] [praying] [disobeying]
[universities] [shopping centres] [art galleries]
[libraries] [hospitals] [selling] [markets] [in the UK you are on camera an average
of 300 times a day]

Imagine all the different uniforms patrolling the streets, skies, buildings and city centres of Britain and now put them all in the same uniform, let's say an army uniform...

Speaker systems are now being introduced into UK shopping areas: these bark out messages from an unseen body telling you to pick up the litter you just dropped or to watch out for pick-pockets.

We have drugs to make us happy – legal and illegal – to make us forget that we are stressed and anxious, to make us feel close to other people or simply to make us feel nothing at all, to keep the economy functioning, getting us up in the morning and sending us to sleep at night. We have talking therapies to help us adjust to the system that our minds and bodies are rejecting. If the drugs and the talking don't help, we have stronger drugs, mental hospitals and other prisons. We have an ever-growing dictionary of 'mental illnesses' most of which can be described very simply, civilization and the refusal of civilization.

Death, disease or injury from substance abuse including smoking and alcohol, sexual activity, transport accidents, obesity, pollution, stress, suicide and self-harm are epidemic. People do fear for their lives. Ask the Samaritans. Ask the thousands of people each year who end up in casualty departments because they hurt themselves, or drank too much, or couldn't guarantee they wouldn't kill themselves before the night was out. Ask all those killed or maimed by road traffic accidents, or heart failure or cancer.

The way we live is a captive, schizoid state. Interestingly, many of the mental health problems experienced by urban, industrialized, technological man and woman are also paralleled in the behaviour of animals in captivity: escape reactions (rushing haphazardly around, injuring themselves or collapsing in a state of stupor), feeding disorders (anorexia, bulimia, compulsive eating), over-grooming, rocking and pacing, self-mutilation, abnormal sexual behaviour and stereotypic behaviour (obsessive-compulsive disorder), apathy, abnormal parent-infant relations (abandonment, infanticide), prolonged infantile behaviour including lack of social confidence, and uncontrolled aggression due to overcrowding or isolation and directed at the 'wrong' individuals or objects (the right target of captors and zoo-keepers being beyond their reach). We've all heard the stories of dolphins trying to break their heads open against the glass wall of their tanks and we know that captive animals are notoriously difficult to breed, infertility and miscarriage being either a stress response (infertility is a huge problem for Westerners too) or as a 'choice' – bringing young into a state of captivity could, after all, be considered a strange act of cruelty.

In recent years, kids in the UK have been put under curfew, are not allowed to congregate in groups of more than 2, are forced to take academic examinations as young as 7 years old, will have to undergo an interview of 200 questions 'establishing who they are' to get a passport, are a particular focus for the draconian anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), and are fingerprinted in schools (many of which are covered in cameras and no longer have walk-through corridors but doors which have to be locked and unlocked by a 'teacher' making freedom of movement impossible).

Captive animals, like modern humans, have an arguably comfortable life: they are fed, cleaned, safe from the savagery of the wild, they have access to sexual relationships, a bit of space, and some stimulation. As with our 'good life'. And yet, they don't seem to thrive on it, and neither do we.

Some aspects of civilization are obviously torture as defined in the manuals. Some definitions of mental torture include: "forcing the victim to torture another person, to witness the torture of another person, and to witness killings and rapes...detention in complete darkness, exposure to bright lights, exposure to constant noises, or sleep deprivation. Poor conditions includes lack of food, ...medical care and communication." (from *Clinical Signs and Symptoms*). And applying these definitions to the way we live is easy: violent news footage, films and games, alienation, excessive policing, misinformation, exposure to constant light and noise and poor – at the very least, almost endemically stressful – conditions for the majority of people.

And the result:

“...the following associated constellation of symptoms may occur and are more commonly seen in association with an interpersonal stressor (e.g. childhood sexual or physical abuse, domestic battering, being taken hostage, incarceration...torture): impaired affect modulation; self-destructive and impulsive behaviour; dissociative symptoms; somatic complaints; feelings of ineffectiveness, shame, despair, or hopelessness; feeling permanently damaged; a loss of previously sustained beliefs; hostility; social withdrawal; feeling constantly threatened; impaired relationships with others; or a change from an individual’s previous personality characteristics.” (American Psychiatric Association 1994: 425).

She cries. She stops herself crying, tightening two fingers against the bridge of her nose until the tears stop. She is sat on the edge of the bath with only the light from the hallway shining through. She doesn’t have a reason for crying. She just is. She just wants to. She’s just sad. She’s ashamed of this but that’s just the way she is. It is often commented upon that her face descends into a deep sadness, whenever there is a lull in the conversation, when she is unaware of being watched. Not that she isn’t sometimes joyful too. She has laughter lines. But she often notices her laughter as if she were catching sight of an animal she thought was extinct. And her sadness is the sadness of a trapped animal – as is her anger, her lethargy, her hatred – if not at her jailer, then at her fellow inmates though it seems to her that sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. Intimacy is just a slingshot being readied, a gun loaded with the safety catch off.

She stands knee deep in the muddied waters near Chichester. They have come to the estuary to swim and play. Her, her godbrother, her brother. She is wearing a bikini. Electric blue with a pink edging. She is 13 or 14. She has small breasts, barely grown and she stands about five feet tall. Her godbrother is older, by now 15 or 16, not tall but strongly built. They are standing knee deep in the water amongst reeds a good two or three feet taller than them. He is trying to get her to take her bikini off. She doesn’t want to. But he is older, and he comes from a family her mother looks up to. She thinks in some way that she has to do what he says even though she just wants not to be here, even though she feels sick and wants to cry. This ‘game’ has already been going on for years. She does not want to offend him or have a confrontation. She is not important enough. She has no right to deny him what he wants. Later he fills her bikini with mud when they are swimming, grabbing her tits as he does so, making out it’s a playfight so her brother won’t think anything is going on. In the evening, they sit down to dinner with her godparents and his girlfriend. He doesn’t talk to her or look at her but when they go to bed, he sneaks into hers and tries to take her clothes off. This time, she resists. She doesn’t want this. Even now, many adult years later, when fucking, when making love, when being touched by a lover, she has to grit her teeth and resist the urge to hit out or push off or simply get up and run.

So what do people do in captivity, in torture chambers? Some people keep their heads down until the ordeal is over. But if the situation is ongoing and indefinite – if it is everything you know,

then the mind will find another way out. “Marx predicted, erroneously, that a deepening material immiseration would lead to revolt and to capital’s downfall. Might it not be that an increasing psychic suffering is itself leading to the reopening of revolt; indeed, that this may even be the last hope of resistance?” John Zerzan, *The Mass Psychology of Misery*

The incidence of self-harm amongst men incarcerated in Britain’s burgeoning prison system equals that of ‘free’ women. Self-harm (in addition to domestic violence, substance abuse, eating disorders) is the response of the survivor to the form of torture that can be described simply as ‘the way we live’. Civilization and all that define it are in essence the very techniques of the psychological torture handbook applied on a massive scale. The self-abusive behaviour of many people here in Britain (and also in the States) has a two-pronged implication: it is both an attempt to survive the system by externalizing that which we have been trained to internalize, and simultaneously a compulsion to carry out the state project – that of social control and the necessary displacement of despair and anger from its rightful but nebulous target (the system comprised of the state, industry, finance, trade) onto the only accessible target, the individual isolated in a culture where insurrection, where widespread refusal, is increasingly unthinkable.

In some ways, the inability of so many people to maintain a reasonable standard of mental health in this country is encouraging. It reveals the struggle of the living, vital organism against the oppressive and deadening institution of the state and the economic world order. It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society. It is a rejection of a state of being that is intolerable. It is the inability to adjust to that which is damaging and unnatural, despite the existence of what John Zerzan describes as the Psychological Society which through therapy and drugs do their utmost to adjust us when the “real question is whether the world-that-enforces-our-inability-to-change can be forced to change, and beyond recognition.”

We only have to understand that there is a war going on right here, right now. If you always believe that you are fighting for someone worse off than you, then aren’t you implicitly saying that you have it better and therefore that actually bits of capitalism—your bit— are ok?

Wherever you are, there is a war of attrition between the capitalist imperative and the lust for life of the people subject to it. Self-harm is commonly understood to be a coping strategy, and it is, finally, about staying alive in the face of intolerable odds. It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that self-injury is the same as resistance, although mental health problems are a huge cost to the economy. It is a reaction, response and refusal. It is the scream. But until it has been politicized, it remains simply an attack on the individual by the individual.

If the struggle of those who suffer mental and emotional distress were not so contained, displaced and stigmatized even by those who consider themselves to be ‘radical’, who knows what sort of society that misplaced lust for life, that intelligence, that refusal would seek out, would desire, would forge. We will never know – as long as we locate the enemy within, encouraged by a whole system from education to bio-medical models of mental illness, and as long as we see these behaviours essentially as an illness from which there is a hope of recovery based solely on changing the internal world of the sufferer rather than based on overthrowing the system. The advanced capitalist-imperialist societies have been so efficient, so brilliant at controlling and defining every aspect of human life and psychology (lovingly culled from totalitarian and fascist histories) that it is not possible for anyone to see it anymore. It is everywhere.

I believe the majority of people in the UK suffering from a ‘common mental health problem’ including many who selfinjure (and this includes anything not conducive to a healthy body or mind) are simply revealing the massive psychological stress brought on by prolonged exposure

to and the condition of living under an inescapable system of advanced capitalism, elected dictatorship, a deliberate culture of fear, a highly alienated and polluted environment and a system of highly developed and pervasive surveillance.

There is no place of safety to which we can flee, there is nowhere we can go to claim asylum from the conditions we struggle under. The West is, possibly, the end of the line. We are, we are taught to believe, in the safest and the best place there is. The place that people from other places put their lives at risk to reach and to enter. But the psychological, physical, spiritual, economic, political and emotional trauma we endure is, despite this illusion, this propaganda, unremitting and interminable, where stress after stress, trauma upon trauma (experienced either directly or indirectly), fear upon fear, pointless choice after pointless choice, is heaped one upon the other on a daily basis. There is no good place to be in the global capitalist system, there are just different torture chambers with tools appropriate to the target and to the stage of battle.

There is a story of Augusto Boal, radical Brazilian theatre practitioner and pioneer of the Theatre of the Oppressed, who when he found himself in exile in Europe during the 1970s commented that he could not understand why people were so unhappy since they did not suffer from political oppression. However, after a while, he came to the conclusion that while many European states were not so overtly oppressive, this was because the people had somehow come to internalize that oppression and even sometimes did not see authority as the enemy: this he called the 'cop in the head'.

In the most mutually abusive relationship I have been in, when I was emotionally fucked with to the point that my entire sense of reality, self-knowledge and meaning was turned on its head, I was definitely fighting for my life. He wasn't about to kill me with his bare hands, but he left me speechless. When someone renders you mute by twisting everything that comes out of your mouth and, when it suits them, anything which comes out of their mouth, you have to fight with your fists. I rarely fought him – only as much as he fought me: he pushed, I slapped. I fought myself. I burnt myself, I took overdoses, I slit my wrists, I thought of murder, I pushed away the people that loved me, I drank myself into a near coma many nights, I stopped eating, I broke things, I got arrested, I tried to bite a cop's fingers off, I tried to bite my tongue off and I screamed. It was not a vocal scream. It came out of my whole body. A shocking scream that went on for 5 minutes until I ran out of breath and which I didn't know I was capable of. A scream of absolute, unremitting, unconsolable, trapped, barbaric, voiceless, powerless, historical anguish. It was the only thing that could get through the bars, a sound like a hand held out with no hope that the body could follow. It was the only thing left to say.

That scream is still there. It is in all the people who know they are fighting for their lives: the self-harmers, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the parasuicides and the suicides, the victims of domestic abuse, of police abuse, of racist abuse, of homophobic abuse, the undereaters, the overeaters, it is in the throats of kids trapped in nuclear families and broken homes and no homes and schools and young offenders institutes, in the mouths of prisoners and prostitutes, in the bellies of all the millions of people doped up on prozac, lithium and ritalin. It is in everyone, but some are closer to that scream and what it means than others.

If you don't think you're fighting for your life, think again. If you know you're not fighting for your life, maybe you're on the wrong side.

"We need a program of psychosurgery and political control of our society. The purpose is physical control of the mind. Everyone who deviates from the given norm can be surgically mutilated. The individual may think that the most important reality is his own existence, but this is only his personal point of view. This lacks historical perspective. Man does not have the right to develop his own mind."

Dr. Jose Delgado, a psychiatrist who was recruited by the CIA for the MKULTRA program of mind control after having served the fascist regime in Spain.

"...the barbarians' ears are sensitive only to the voices that call them to assault against the Empire, to making a clean sweep of the existent. Their fury even inspires terror in many enemies of the Empire who indeed desire to defeat it, but with good manners. As civilized cutthroats, they share the dissent but not the hatred, they understand the indignation but not the rage; they hurl protest slogans but not war cries, they are ready to shed saliva but not blood...For barbarians, as for children, whose nature has not yet been completely domesticated, freedom does not start with the elaboration of an ideal program but with the unmistakable din of broken crockery."

Chrissus & Odosseus Barbarians:Disordered Insurgence

Resources:

www.freak-animals.org

www.activist-trauma.net

www.somaterapia.com.br

Anti-Ciivilizaton Gathering: luddites@nodo50.org

re-pressed: re-pressed is a non-profit UK-based anarchist book distribution collective. 145-149 Cardigan Rd Leeds, LS6 1LJ, England or go to www.re-pressed.org.uk

325 (Journal and website for anti-prison, insurrection, autonomy) www.325collective.com

A Murder of Crows: Journal for Social War and the Subversion of Daily Life at www.goecities.com/amurderofcrows1 or by post at po box 20442, seattle, wa 98102, USA

...etc.

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The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



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Beyond Amnesty
2011(?)

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theanarchistlibrary.org