

How to Start a Fire

An Invitation

Anonymous

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STRAIGHT TO THE POINT:

Our civilization is in collapse.

This collapse is well-documented: philosophers, scientists, politicians, military strategists, economists, and even NASA have begun sounding the alarm for ecological catastrophe, the technological singularity, and the general collapse of life as we know it. The news anchors appear no less panicked than the environmental and survivalist fringe of the past: the Arctic is melting, Japanese teenagers refuse to have sex, a private company wants to build a colony on Mars, Europe is being looted by hooded protestors, and humans may be extinct by the end of the century.

Through all of this, at the precipice of insanity, there are those who are organizing to save mankind by dissolving all civic life into a continuum of *warfare*. Urbanists work alongside military specialists. SmartGrowthers and green capitalists hope to maintain present levels of exploitation without the parking lots and fossil fuels. Cyberneticians can no longer conceal their imperial fantasies: *"imagine uploading a criminal mind onto a computer to simulate eternal imprisonment! Think of all of the resources we could save!"* Holding it all together are the citizens who long for quiet, who will defend this civilization and its false ideas just as so many peasants once fought for Louis XVI, Tsar Nicholas, and a million other dying regimes.

And yet, a global struggle — a tremendous global struggle — has emerged from this crumbling edifice. An insurrectional wave has washed over every inhabited continent. Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Greece, Italy, the United States, Libya, Syria, France, Chile, Japan, Canada, Brazil, Turkey, Bosnia, Taiwan, Ukraine, and beyond. Everywhere people have decided to fight for another way of being — for a life actually worth living. The same techniques appear across the globe and have been refined for local conditions: the occupation of plazas and buildings, flaming barricades, the reappropriation and automatic communization of food and clothing, masked demonstrations, molotov cocktails, street clinics, information hacking and leaks, highway blockades, and strikes. In 2008, we watched in awe as Greece was engulfed in flames. Today, scenes like this are astoundingly normal. We do not expect this scenario to end soon.

In sum, there is a side organized to preserve this civilization through every crisis that signifies its impending collapse, and there is a side getting organized to usher in a very different future from the one in store for us. These two sides, situated on either pole of a collapsing order, are the forces that constitute a global civil war. This conflict cannot be reduced to a debate over

who should run the government, nor what sort of government we ought to have. This conflict transcends questions of the economy or social inequality. This conflict has to do with the future of human and non-human life, of what it means to be alive in a time where all social interaction produces computerized information. We have entered a new geological age marked in its emergence by a fantastic tragedy. We must grapple with the real questions of our time: What does it mean to be human in the 21st century? How will we feed ourselves in a desert, in a nuclear wasteland, in the ashes of a city? How do we shut down a metropolis? How do we meet with those trapped in the rural-suburban mess? How do we pursue our desires? With whom do we live — and how? How do we learn? How do we love ourselves and each other? We must be willing to see our situation for what it is and to provide practical answers to these questions. The whole world is at stake.

We would like for each insurrectionary event, witnessed on a global scale, to make itself permanent. We would like to live inside of these phenomena, inside of these communes which feed themselves, clothe themselves, debate, dance together, fight together, grieve together, and expand. A number of obstacles rush to meet us — a number of ready-made answers to the questions we never should have asked, barbed wire at the edges of the path to prevent us from wandering elsewhere. So what now? We'd like to make a break for it, right away, to really be done with it all — but at the end of the day, the force of our “no” depends on the collective power behind it. That power must be built.

Get property. Pirate radio. Build stoves. Learn to cook. Learn Languages. Get arms. Open street carts and businesses. Occupy buildings. Set up cafes. Diners. Restaurants. Pizza shops. Book stores. Permaculture. Mend wounds. Lathes. Giant pots. Orchards. Build friendships. Acquire film equipment and make documentaries. Talk to old comrades. Learn martial arts, Read. Travel. Learn from each other. Write newspapers. Weather the hard times. Loot. Hold regional gatherings. Write internal journals. Refine the art of sabotage. Distribute counter-information. Offset presses. Raw materials and the means of production. Three thousand camping bowls. Survival packs. Organic seeds. Share thoughts, feelings, and practice. Learn history and learn from history. Build tables. Make art. Go to the woods. Summer retreats. Dance parties. Get cars. Steal money. Move close to each other. Start uncontrollable riots.

Over the course of the last four years, we have deliberately and serendipitously begun the process of constituting ourselves as a material, insurrectional force. We have found each other in the parks and the streets, transformed as everything was for those months during Occupy. Although our story finds its origins in chance encounters — high schools, punk shows, art scenes, cafes, bars — we locate the emergence of our collective power in the wave of unrest we have had a hand in shaping. Along the way, we have been inspired by many others who have gotten organized in their own ways: hacker collectives, urban farmers, DIY art spaces, crisis cults, and everyday hustlers.

In this time, we have learned well that the environment we currently inhabit — call it capitalism, civilization, empire, the West — is constructed to prevent the foundation of any real threat to the present system. The political identities offered to us — anarchist, environmentalist, Marxist, socialist — were constructed for a historical moment which has passed. They have not, for decades, equipped themselves with the means to actually fight. We leave behind the baggage that left us weak and burdened but still hold onto what has given us strength. As we have struggled together, as we have grown older, we have been confronted by a number of forces that have threatened, and still threaten, to pull us apart. Against the tendency to drift away, to become

lost, to return to the lonely solitude of capitalist normalcy, to become mired with negativity, we have chosen to hold on to one another. This is not merely a theoretical decision, but a lived practice. Having witnessed the fact that every social movement and every struggle ends because of a failure to create the conditions for its survival, we have chosen to create an offensive that can sustain itself.

We must discover in every moment that which puts each of us in touch with our power, with our potential. We must defeat that which separates us from it.

The process of building a force has both already begun and requires infinite new beginnings — beginnings that occur within what is immediately present and available. With this text, we intend to incite the formation of a revolutionary territory across the region. We are writing to answer the question we ask and are asked daily: “But really, what should we be doing?” We have spent too long avoiding an answer, and have found the common responses impoverished. Too often, the people we meet only briefly encounter the possibility of living differently, and are either lost in the compulsion to return to normalcy or mistake an existing political community as the only opportunity to begin. While friendships are crucial to our struggle, we believe wholeheartedly in the capacity of everyone to immediately begin the process of building a revolutionary force from wherever one may stand. It should go without saying that there are no gatekeepers: anyone, anywhere, can and should begin from wherever they are. Immediately.

In what follows, we will present our vision of a possible near future and offer steps toward its realization, from a weak starting position of isolation to a situation of ever-increasing revolutionary force. The vision is one that we have elaborated together over the course of several years — in car rides and late night conversations, in bars and in parks, with comrades from our own city and from across the world. The practical suggestions contained here should be understood as real possibilities, each connected to the next in the coherence of a strategy. We ask that you think of your own life, your own friends, your own inclinations — and consider fully, beyond what is expressed here, the possibility of *making a permanent break*.

One thing is clear from the start: there’s no way in hell that any of us is going to succeed alone. What is required is something that transcends “me” as individual actor and every way that I’ve been taught to relate to my world, my friends, my self. Hence, the first practical step in a war against the status quo: Find each other.

In truth, the potential insurgents are everywhere. Where the workers movement had factories to meet each other and the strike to reveal the cowards, we have the entire metropolitan space to link up and innumerable methods of subversion to identify who’s who: the riot, theft, the blockade, the occupation. Cafes, restaurants, bars, gyms, universities, community gardens, book stores, reading circles, art galleries, parks, hacker conferences, farmers markets, salons: all of these places are crossed by lines of antagonism, by sides and partisans, conflicts and consequences, which are hidden just beneath the surface of civil discourse. With certain attention, we can become sensible to these antagonisms. For us, this means that potential comrades are lurking in places we wouldn’t ordinarily think to look. In order to compose new rhythms of revolt, we must become attuned to melodies of struggle and passion which exceed or otherwise evade recognition through the sociological and political categories we have been taught.

What is political in friendship emerges when you and I are affected by a similar leaning, when our knowledges and our powers interact and intersect in ways that make us stronger. *I am bound to the friend by some experience of election, understanding, or decision that implies that the growth of his power entails the growth of my own. Symmetrically, I am bound to the enemy by election,*

only this time a disagreement that, in order for my power to grow, implies that I confront him, that I undermine his forces. Certain events make us more than what we are, while others dissolve us, make us less alive. We must become sensible to this reality and run head first toward the former and flee, despite how it may hurt, from the latter.

Initial encounters can give way to ethical-political intensities, but only if relationships are elaborated to that end. The problem isn't that people do not know the stakes, but rather the general state of separation and neutrality. In our society, people are unified by petty aesthetic commonalities and identities given to them by the economy or the charade of politics. These false unities either constitute limitations that suppress differences, thereby allowing the production of homogenous, directionless forms (mass organizations, revolutionary cadres, political scenes), or they provoke false distinctions, *deconstructing* the first signs of intensity. Relationships are typically held together by mere *common interests* — the currency of social clubs, cliques, collectors, Instagram “communities,” and subcultures everywhere. When what is common between us is left at shared interests or aesthetic similarities, our relationships are easily knowable, and therefore easily manageable as they harden into a digestible, safe, and controllable identity.

We will only overcome the limits of superficial subjectivities by elaborating — creating, generalizing, concretizing, and defending — an ethical disposition in the world. An ethic, not a morality: a morality consists in a million little rules about how we ought to live our lives and a thousand hypotheticals for producing them. Morality is what is performed in the courtroom, the classroom, the church, and and as such provides no path to a new way of living. An ethic, not an identity (worker, student, poor, rich, black, woman): identities are always provided to us by a nefarious collusion between democracy and Facebook. In contrast, the ethical question is the question of *how* I am in the world. Not existentially, but tactically. An elaboration of an ethic is precisely what is prevented by the array of mechanisms and devices that constitute the hostile environment we currently inhabit: the cops and the prison, of course, but also the metro turnstiles, the commodification and privatization of technical knowledge, the management of revolt, the interstate. If any ethic at all is permitted in this world, it is only the epidemic of existential deficiency: the hegemony of a one-dimensional way of life which requires that every idea be divorced from its consequences, that every passion “ends where it begin.” *The unification of what we believe with what we do is the basis for any true liberation.* When this happens at a party, a concert, a protest, a factory, a grocery store or elsewhere — the police always show up.

We would be remiss to say that all things passionate are equally good — this is the pluralist liberalism which has come to dominate consumer markets and academic circles for the last half century. While the environment we inhabit is coordinated to prevent the emergence of any conflict, the fetishism of conflict alone misses the mark. As we've seen in Ukraine, antagonisms against the state can take a multiplicity of forms — and that includes fascists at the barricades. A common disposition — which is to say, *the abolition of property and its state* — will be the continuity tying together each of our actions; an anarchic refusal of control and reification will be the basis for the proliferation of insurrectional possibilities.

The emotional and affective intensity of our relationships must be manifested into a material consistency. A failure to do so will inevitably result in our being pulled part. Every life decision — where we live and whom we live with, where we get food and how we share it, how we get money and what we do with it — is a question that can be answered differently. What appears initially as an individual duty or responsibility can be understood as an opportunity to increase our collective strength.

At first, what is shared is small and presents itself in fleeting moments: a gourmet meal of stolen food; a few graffiti kids racking paint, sharing the loot, and hitting the town together for a single night; a conspiracy of baristas stealing coffee from the back to share with their friends at home. Over time, get organized to be able to put more in common. Live together. Share meals. Share money. Get everyone on food stamps, build farms, share techniques for theft and resource misallocation. Learn how to cook for two, then four, then twenty, then a thousand. Building a force means that we always search for ways to increase our power together and get organized to actually do it. Skills and specialized knowledges must be looted from the intellectual market-places they're meant for. Herbal remedies, auto-repair, home construction, business accounting, permaculture, programming, and legal work can all be put to use. An established practice of sharing everything with the abandonment of all forms of balanced reciprocity can create a feeling of ease between us that could be dangerous on its own. Ordinarily, these sorts of mutual care and mutual support are never allowed to spread past the formation of a monogamous couple or a nuclear family. As we build our life in common, the need for money and accounting between us should become less practical, less necessary, and generally more absurd. We can share so much more than our Netflix queues.

For this, we need places. Places to meet in, whose addressed can be publicized because they're not connected to any name, places that can hold the crowd of fifty that won't fit into a house, places that can hold a thousand who won't fit inside. Places to get productive in, that have enough room for the supplies necessary to repair the sound cart. Places to print the newspapers, equipped with industrial printers and drawing tables. Places of encounter: a cafe, a restaurant, a pizza shop, a book store, a gym, a bar. Rent space. Better yet, buy buildings, get property. Don't let rising prices push us further and further from the parts of town we should be in.

To be clear, we do not propose the mere possession of land or crafts to "withdraw" into. We want to build a struggle, an insurrection, which occurs at the level of everyday life and not as a vacation from it, a revolt which could be a pulsing, angular rhythm of small events and breaks, of constant subversion. A communal house in the middle of a small town can be a node of partisan reality or a burden to everyone involved. It will never be enough to simply acquire property, buildings, land. We must *become territory* by increasing the circulation and density of partisan relations in an area and between places. There's little sense in obsessing over the morality or "internal dynamics" of such ventures. Avoid exploiting each other and always hold together what this society separates: practice with thought, action with contemplation, thinking with feeling. What becomes a burden can be abandoned. We want more strength and energy with time, not less — so do what moves you.

Together, we must learn how the devices which control us function and develop sciences for uncovering their vulnerabilities. We must share tools for tactical thinking, for strategic vision, for poetic connections. We must understand how our surroundings constrict and divide us, how ideologies keep us docile, as very concrete operations. But we must also learn and share methods of resource accumulation, of scamming, and of insurrectional conspiracy. When strategic employment opportunities arise, they should be ours in a heartbeat. When opportune shipments come in, we should have ways of collecting them — "*it fell off the back of a truck.*" When a riot breaks out, we must know how to spread it and how to crash police communications. When immigration enforcement is about to raid our neighborhoods, we should know how to tip people off and how to help them escape. When a comrade is washed in depression, they should have no doubts that they are loved. The technical nature of these problems must be reckoned with.

In the century before last, the South was zigzagged by a vast conspiracy. A strategic consistency linked teamsters, sharp-shooters, translators, look-outs, saloons, hostels, churches, farms, rumors, and slaves across literally thousands of miles. Partisans of this conspiracy were followed, surveilled, hunted, and repressed. Their ability to transform their lives into a collective practice made them resilient to these operations. They smuggled a hundred thousand runaways out of slavery. Whether or not this was an attack on the commercial institutions of the time or the mere construction of alternatives does not concern us here and we doubt it concerned them then. We believe that our current scenario could benefit from adopting this legacy as a historic vantage point to be contextualized and refined.

We will be confronted on all sides by those who wish to fracture our struggle by insisting we seek only to build a new society inside of this one or that we are extremists who are concerned only with destruction. We can do nothing but shrug at the morons who call us nihilists one day and lifestylists the next. We recognize these divisions as a fundamental binary in imperial logic: normal and abnormal, citizen and criminal.

Struggles and antagonisms are normalized when they are forced to articulate themselves as a negotiation with the state, business, or other institutions. This is the purview of activism and social justice movements. The temptation to be sucked into community organizations, on the left or right, is persistent and understandable. What these groups — churches, nonprofits, unions, political parties — offer people is continuity, stability, sometimes money, and always the false pretenses of pragmatism. But the activist approach has always mirrored the structures it supposedly challenges, responding to the forces that divide our lives into separate spheres of work, race, medical aid, marriage rights and so on with piecemeal demands. By conforming to governing discourses, activists have always missed what is really at stake, confusing life for a collection of distinct issues.

On the other hand, and often in reaction to the forces of recuperation, others retreat into the “abnormal” category, allowing themselves to become insulated from society, from its pathetic slogans, from its awful methods of pacification. They allow themselves to become *militants*. But just as workday traffic is a primary consideration in the planning of interstates — traffic jams are avoided by, say, an addition of new lanes, a carefully regulated speed limit, and tactically placed exits and bridges — political dissidents are accounted for. Government needs a militant subject. No police operation is complete until an organizing cell, a hang, a mafia, a terrorist, or some other criminal subjectivity has been identified and eliminated. By adopting a position inside the debates of government, as the antithesis to their thesis, the violence to their nonviolence, the militants are doomed before they begin. Their fate is already determined — isolation and death. Still, the most pressing threat the militant poses to an insurrection is the specialization of revolt: that millions of people will become assured of their spectator position in the private conflicts between the police and the “rebel forces.”

The normal and the abnormal, the citizen and the criminal, and every variation of these dichotomies co-substantiate one another — which is to say that neither position offers us a way out. Our strength lies in our ability to affirm neither, and occupy both. We must learn to be visible to the movement and invisible to the State. This is what every drug front does, what every encrypted email does, and what we must learn how to do. A mass of kids willing to riot doesn't mean shit if they're not smart enough and fast enough to not get caught and if there's no money to bail out friends afterward. Similarly, a network of gardens might as well be the aesthetic indicator that the yuppies have moved in if we do not remember what kind of struggle real

autonomy entails. What matters isn't a particular action (medicine, intellectual labor, cooking) or a particular object (printers, spray paint, Mason jars, metal), but how it's connected to every other object, every other practice — and how we circulate between them. Anything we do and everything we touch can take on a new character when linked up to other practices, spaces, and comrades. Do not allow yourself to be fooled by detractors: just as skills and crafts can serve as distractions, many have lost themselves in alienated cycles of petty vandalism and militant activism. The point is to get on a common path with others and to use whatever means must be used for the purposes of overcoming obstacles — which are everywhere.

The crisis, the disaster, the emergency have become a foundational element of contemporary government. The crisis as reorganization of space, of attention, of people. The crisis as emergency government, as the force of law itself. As many have been forced to learn, crises are named when things are about to be restructured. The *state of emergency* — the governmental state of anarchy — is the name given to the polarization of the world under the present arrangement of forces: the state versus society. We have seen this in the days following the Boston Marathon bombing when tanks rolled through the streets of an American city looking for a single teenager. Natural disasters, pandemic flus, droughts, power outages, insurrection, and invasion: for the contemporary governmental regime, all of these events are simply times of disorganization to be capitalized on. If this is opportune for our enemies, who seek to return these temporary disturbances into a new, more brutal, more empty normal, then *could* be doubly opportune for those of us who hope to dissolve this society for good. When crisis comes to the surface, we should push it to its absolute conclusions: every strike, a general strike; every black out, a looting spree; every protest, a riot; every riot, an insurrection; every picket, a permanent blockade. We must make trenches of every crack in society.

What begins on a local scale should be pressed across the boundaries of neighborhoods, towns, cities, and states. Open up lines of communication. Be smart: if comrades in a town an hour away have a printing press, it might make more sense to start a permaculture farm in your city. Instead of duplicating the things a larger “we” can already do, set up networks of resources through which all of us can circulate.

At every turn, the hostile environment we inhabit and the mechanisms that constitute it are ready to prevent us from getting in touch with and building our own power. The counter-insurrectional process occurs at both the profound, nearly invisible level of the production of everyday life and the highly visible level of outright domination. Get organized to overcome everyone one of these obstacles, one by one.

In the attempt to build a revolutionary force, we are struck by the impotence of our own imagination. Upon reflection, our immediate desires can feel as foreign to us as the environment that produces them. We meet our own stagnation and our own frenzy, the two automatic responses to uncertainty. Some withdraw into depression or spectatorship, waiting for others to take the initiative. Others rush to do something, anything, to stave off anxiety or boredom. By beginning with a plan to take on the task of building greater access to our potential, next steps should become more obvious. When they are not so obvious, there is conversation. If that fails, there is always the gamble.

In the attempt to build a life in common, we are confronted immediately by limits imposed by the capitalist economy, of jobs, rent, and unfavorable housing. That comrades and friends are compelled to work is a sign of profound weakness. This is a collective problem that should be treated seriously. Work must be rendered voluntary: a tactical or strategic consideration, a

pleasure, not a necessity for survival. Of course, the most pressing expense is nearly always rent. It keeps up working and needlessly vulnerable to the whims of landlords, emergencies, and city planners. Comrades should organize to purchase housing as soon as possible. It's cheaper than renting and provide us with greater permanence and, therefore, strategic insights to the conflicts around us.

In the attempt to hold on to one another, we come up against our own ignorance — our utter inexperience in building friendships and maintaining them, our utter confusion as to what it means to love one another, our utter weakness when it comes to supporting one another emotionally, spiritually, materially. None of these conditions should cripple us, but if we allow them to define who we are or what we're doing, they very well may. Each is simply an obstacle which, like all obstacles, exists in order to be overcome.

Inevitably, at moments, we will experience our own weakness. A neighborhood is demolished for a new mixed use complex; a meeting spot gets raided; a movement dies out. The depression that comes as each cycle of struggle closes can only be encountered with the conviction that time itself is on our side. The urgency imposed by the impending collapse of civilization gives us no reason for haste. The fall of Rome took centuries. We must find comfort knowing that we can be a part of an anti-imperial movement that spans generations. History is not the linear progression that it is usually made out to be. Thoughts, ideas, and actions circulate and reappear throughout time, and things you thought would endlessly grow suddenly drop off. Like a garden that dies every winter, the movements and riots will come, provide us with excitement and energy, and then fade off. If we understand ourselves as a force that persists through time, we will survive the depression of a loss not with exhaustion, but with strength. Next time, we will be even more prepared.

Different groups of people cycle through the farms in neighborhoods outside downtown, ready to provide food for thousands of people occupying Woodruff Park. A warehouse on the west side has trucks and teams to drive to abandoned hotels and industrial waste facilities, gathering "raw" material — metal, lumber, kitchen equipment — that can be used to build brick ovens and fix up the new building. A partisan cafe downtown functions as an entry point for visitors and newcomers, as well as a drop-in point for insurgents from around the state, the region, the country, and even the world. The dance club lets people in to blend with the crowd after a rowdy demo while giving them a way to blow off some steam. Pirate radio transmitters broadcast from secret locations outside of the city to spread sedition and heresy into the heart of a great metropolis. University copy machines are hacked for free prints for this weekend's assembly — the print shop is already running overtime. A friend walks out of the store with a backpack full of goods and a knowing wink. Doctors and herbalists are at hand, equipped to deal with any injuries that might ensue from tonight's riot, well trained from treating common ailments and injuries. The family lake house is repurposed to sleep a hundred for a summer strategy meeting. Slowly, something is growing.

We need neither words nor promises, but the steady accumulation of small realities.

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