

Where Do We Meet Face to Face

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Alienation is not a psychological disorder, an inability on the part of certain individuals to adjust to a basically healthy society. Alienation is an inherent part of the present social order, objectively verifiable. The present social reality is based on a hierarchy of power that requires a system of representation through which society can reproduce itself. To maintain this social system, it is necessary that the lives of individuals be made alien to them, not self-created, but defined in terms of roles and rules of protocol for the proper relationships between these roles. The healthiest individuals in this society are precisely those who most deeply feel the anguish of their alienation, who know that real life is not here and, therefore, refuse to succumb.

Alienation is as old as civilization itself since the dawn of civilization corresponds with the origin of institutionalized power structures. But resistance to alienation is just as old. Every structure created by those in power for the purpose of controlling the interactions of individuals has met with resistance from those who do not want to be controlled. However, since this resistance has remained, for the most part, unconscious, un-willful and, thus, incoherent, social control has advanced to the point where now it often seems that there is no place left where individuals can truly meet face to face.

The main purpose of city streets and sidewalks is commercial traffic — moving goods for sale and those who buy and sell them where necessary. They are intended to create a particular form of social relationship, one centered around a market economy. But streets and sidewalks, along with city parks, became gathering places for those who simply wanted to talk and play and enjoy themselves. The so-called idle poor particularly found such settings useful for creating the interactions and pleasures that made up their lives — often to the detriment of commerce and the needs of the power structures. In recent years, streets and parks have been increasingly policed and restricted with laws against loitering, vagrancy, gathering in groups and sleeping outdoors. In addition, urban architecture and city planning, which have always reflected the interests of the ruling class, have become increasingly sterile and oppressive, creating an atmosphere in which conviviality and festivity are smothered. The most recent examples of city planning simply have no center at all. It's becoming increasingly obvious: the reference they propose is always somewhere else. These are labyrinths in which you are only allowed to lose yourself. No games. No meetings. No living. A desert of plate-glass. A grid of roads. High-rise flats. Oppression is no longer centralized because oppression is everywhere.

Even as alienation has increased and taken on more encompassing forms, festivals and holidays such as Carnival and Halloween have acted as vehicles for the expression of genuine life, its passions and desires. Precisely because these events are separated from an everyday existence in which the separation of one's life from oneself is the most essential quality, they have allowed people to temporarily re-appropriate their lives and passions — often protected by the anonymity of a mask, a crowd or generalized drunkenness. But these celebrations are being increasingly restricted and ordered when not completely suppressed. Concerns for public safety (conveniently forgotten when real dangers such as automobile traffic, industrial pollution or job-related accidents are at issue) are used as excuses for increased policing of such celebrations and their restriction to increasingly smaller, often enclosed spaces and highly orchestrated events. It is irrelevant that these alleged concerns for public safety are mostly based on hearsay and exaggeration. When these celebrations are restricted to small spaces and orchestrated events, commodification comes to dominate. Most of the permitted events become entertainment spectacles for which one must pay or temporary markets for the sale of junk. The genuine festivals of the exploited become increasingly illegalized by these processes, and the pallid, impoverished pseudo-festivals that are offered in their place are often too expensive for the poor — and too much like ordinary existence in this society to be attractive on any more than a superficial level anyway. The spirit of free play is being suppressed and channeled into the dispirited consumption of commodities.

The attacks on street life, both daily and festive, are essentially attacks on the exploited and marginalized of this society. The rich have long since retreated from the streets except as a means to get to or from work and the shops, preferring the imagined security of their atomized existence in which all interactions happen through the proper channels. (Even in the business districts of most cities where these managers of the economy find it necessary on occasion to walk from one building to another, they will always be walking with their cell-phone to their ear, safely regulating how and with whom they interact.) But those at the bottom of the social hierarchy have little access to these channels, and the increasingly illegal sphere of street life has been where they can meet. And here they could meet face to face.

The increased restrictions on permitted interactions on the streets and in the parks did not put an end to relatively free interactions. Taverns and cafes continued to be gathering places for discussion, the sharing of news and ideas and occasionally even for the development of subversive projects. It is true that cafes and taverns have always been places of business, places where one is expected to buy, but they have also provided space where people can meet and interact with very little mediation. Now this is changing as well. Not even considering the fact that increasingly such businesses are instituting policies of kicking individuals who don't buy anything out, the environments themselves are being made inhospitable to real interaction. In the United States, most taverns are dominated by televisions and loud music. It is not uncommon for a tavern to have several televisions so that there is no place to turn to escape its domination. At times, the music may be fun to dance to, but when there is no way to get away from it, it becomes another attack against genuine, unmediated interaction. In a setting so unwelcoming to genuine conversation, it is easier to interact only with those you already know or to conform to the protocol of roles imposed by the social order.

Cafes remain outside of the realm of domination by the television and can still provide a setting for real interaction. But here as well there are trends which tend to move away from this. Probably the most insidious of these is the cyber-café. Along with coffee, these cafes offer computer use to

their customers. Rather than talking to each other directly, people in these cafes drift into their own little cyber-world, checking out abstract and distant information or conversing electronically with people halfway across the globe. This sort of mediated interaction guarantees that ideas remain safely in the realm of opinion and makes practical projects extremely unlikely. This is not the setting from which movements such as dadaism or surrealism, or groups like the Situationist International are likely to spring.

The cyber-café is a trend that reflects the growing domination of the cybernetic over interactions of all kinds. The tedium of everyday interactions in the present world makes a virtual world very attractive to some. Certain cyber-utopians tell us that the development of computer technologies will put end to cities as we know them, as all (of the ruling and managing classes — the poor and exploited don't count in this vision) are able to work, play and shop through their computers from suburban homesteads which they never have to leave — a more pastoral and ecological version of the luxury high-rise in which well-to-do people can live, work, play and shop without ever leaving the building. A darker, more realistic version of this vision sees the cities becoming reservations for the excluded classes and other social misfits who can't or won't fit into this cybertopia. The laws and restrictions limiting the use of streets and parks that are currently being put into effect are aimed precisely at these excluded ones who would be the urban dwellers of this vision. The well-to-do suburbanite is already well integrated into a system where face-to-face interaction is an anachronism to be dealt with through a protocol of surface courtesy which reinforces isolation and the atomized existence of well-oiled cogs.

This cybernetic vision, however, whether in its utopian or dystopian version, does not take the exigencies of class struggle into account. Would it, indeed, be in the interest of the ruling class to bring the exploited together in an even more concentrated manner? Could the mechanisms for creating social consensus and public opinion continue to function adequately for the maintenance of social peace in a situation of such unmitigated misery? In fact, this dystopian vision is comparable to the presently existing detention centers for undocumented aliens. These centers, which exist throughout Europe, in the United States, in Australia and so on, are places of frequent unrest and revolt (as are the urban ghettos that presently exist). In fact the very existence of these camps are indicative of a process that is going on now that is very different from the one suggested by the dystopian perspective described above. Many cities are now being heavily gentrified with the ruling classes and their managerial lackeys moving into the center of these cities, driving out the urban exploited, leaving them with nowhere to go. In poorer countries, people who have lived on the land, taking care of their needs for themselves, are being driven off their land, proletarianized and forced into a precarious urban existence that often drives them to immigrate. In fact, rather than concentrating the exploited classes in the cities, the general trend at present seems to be for capital to force them into increasing precariousness, with no place to stay and an increasing difficulty for maintaining ongoing relationships. This could be perceived as a frontal assault by the ruling class against face-to-face interactions among the exploited, particularly those of the sort that might stimulate revolt.

Of course, this process of deconcentration is gradual and the exploited do continue to have many opportunities for face-to-face interaction. So it is presently necessary for the rulers to provide a substitute for such interactions which can act as a pacifier and can guarantee that when explosions of rage do occur those involved are not really used to talking with each other or acting together. Thus recreation must be made less interactive. Of course, this tendency toward increasingly solitary and atomized forms of recreation is not only found in the opportunities

for commodified play available to the poor, but throughout society. The affluent must also be kept from real interactions of pleasure, because otherwise they might realize that the present society only offers them a larger portion of the generalized impoverishment of life that is this society's main product. Thus, television, films, video games, computer games and virtual reality provide forms of recreation in which millions of individuals passively observe the same simulated events, maybe making the minimal response of pushing a button or flicking a switch to stimulate a programmed reaction that is the same for everyone who makes that response. Real action and interaction have no place in these recreational non-activities. Even dungeons-and-dragons type games are so thoroughly programmed that no real interaction can happen among the players who must completely transform themselves into roles determined by the rules of the game, acting in terms of these rules which often seem like the random hand of fate. In other words, these games are merely fantasies mirroring the present society. The trend toward mediated interaction and play, particularly in its cybernetic form, has caused some people to lose touch with reality, undermining their ability to distinguish actual life from simulated life. People become more gullible, open to all sorts of lies and deceptions. This is probably a major factor in the recent rise in religious and superstitious beliefs. When television, films and computer technologies can portray supposedly supernatural events in ways that appear real and when people's experiences are increasingly mediated through these technologies, then such mystical paradigms are enforced in their minds as methods for interpreting the world, and the healthy skepticism that is so necessary for effective resistance to authority is obliterated. Strange events may very well happen, but any tale of such an event that reinforces mystical, religious, occult or superstitious belief is immediately suspect, because it fits in too well with the social insanity imposed by an increasingly mediated existence.

This society is becoming more insane every day. Involvement with actual people and actual environments is being suppressed along with any space — physical or psychological — in which individuals can create their own interactions. This alienation, which is imposed on everyone whether they are aware of it or not, can be viewed as a kind of schizophrenia, but this insanity is not that of individuals; it is society as a whole that is schizophrenic. And the methods by which it is imposing its insanity are bureaucratic and intellectual with the latter methods becoming increasingly dominant.

As I have already said, the imposition of alienation has never been without resistance. Recently, I read about various cafes and taverns opened with the intention of promoting face to face interaction by people who desired revolution. In the early twentieth century, hoboes created informal "hobo colleges" for the same purpose. People such as Emma Goldman or Ben Reitman might speak and the hoboes and others present would discuss the speech with passion and intellectual incisiveness. Such projects were not revolutionary in themselves, but they were a form of resistance to increasing alienation. In Chicago, when Bughouse Square, a park where anarchists, communists and others who opposed the present social order gathered, argued and discussed how to fight that social order, was closed down, several cafes and taverns were opened with the specific purpose of providing a space for the same sort of intense, passionate discussions of how to transform the world. But where are those cafes and taverns now? They were a form of resistance, but they were not revolution, and as businesses they couldn't keep going forever since profit wasn't their motive. They were a form of resistance to alienation that was still trapped in the logic of that most basic form of alienation, the economy, a logic that inevitably killed these projects.

Another form of resistance to alienation is described in a pamphlet entitled, “The Battle for Hyde Park: ruffians, radicals and ravers, 1855–1994” (available on line at www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/7672, or e-mail them at practicalhistory@hotmail.com to find out how to get a paper copy). This pamphlet documents the potential for festivity and free play in the context of social conflict. It describes four riot situations in Hyde Park in which free play was an essential element. In these situations, the potential for insurrection could be seen. The last of the events described happened in 1994 and was witnessed by those who put the pamphlet together. Unfortunately, in their attempt to give an overall historical view, the writers of the article describing this demonstration turned festive riot completely ignored the question of personal interactions and the role of affinity in this situation. Certainly these elements are essential for understanding this event. When these questions are ignored, events such as those of October 9, 1994 in London remain, for us, events separated from life, events that happen purely by accident, having no relation to our projectuality as insurgent individuals, because we (and even most of those who participated) have not been able to develop an understanding of how such events connect to our lives and the affinities we develop. An analysis along these lines may be essential if events such as these are not to be carried along in the trajectory of alienation that I have been describing which would transform such riots into events like tornadoes, earthquakes, blizzards — something that happens to people, not something they create.

As long as the present social context exists, alienation will continue to expand, making our lives ever more distant from us and our interactions ever more controlled by the protocol of the commodity and of the institutions of power. So it is essential to destroy this society, to raze it to the ground. But what can such a vision mean on a practical level right now? It is essential to resist the progress of alienation with all our might, creating projects for ourselves which promote real interactions outside of the roles and relationships that social reproduction demands. This resistance must be willful, a conscious refusal of the imposition of alienated and impoverished interactions. This resistance needs to move beyond being merely defensive to become an offensive attack against the institutions and structures of alienation. This attack needs to take up every weapon available to it: detournement, subversion, sabotage, vandalism, irony, sarcasm, sacrilege...and, yes, physical arms where appropriate — carefully avoiding any specializations. Each would use the weapons she finds most appropriate in terms of his situation and singularity, but there is no use in judging those who choose weapons we did not choose. I know such a call frightens most anarchists. It calls them from the little world of their subculture, their micro-society with its own alienating roles and structures which parallel those of the larger society, into a realm of real risk where imagination must be used to create insurrectional projects based on actual affinity between singular individuals. All of the models and structures in which we've taken refuge must be fiercely examined and critically dismantled, and we must learn to depend on ourselves. If we do not wish to find ourselves in a world where no one really lives, where no one really knows anyone else, where everyone has become a mere cog in a machine meshing with other cogs but remaining truly alone, then we must have the strength to attack alienation in every way we can. Otherwise, we may just find there is no place left where we can meet face to face.

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