Some old things to live by, some new things to live by...

Anti-authoritarian ideas to hold onto in these times of virus and crisis

Darkness Outside

March 27, 2020

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We're all living quite a situation here. Before the virus had got near most of us, we were thrown into this necessary mode of life called social-distancing. Our lack of knowledge and the speed it has covered the globe and is transmitting within the locations we live has produced feelings of shock, confusion and fear. While these feelings make sense, we should also recognise and counter the tendency that they produce towards individualism and isolation.

Fear. Individualism. Isolation. Currently the circulation of these sentiments is exponentially bolstering the power of the state. As Crimethinc have said, "social distancing must not mean total isolation. We won't be safer if our society is reduced to a bunch atomised of individuals". Such an atomised society is the path to least resistance. Even as the virus spreads we must not become too isolated and disconnected from each other to be able to resist state control and the implementation of measures that fuck most of us over in a desperate attempt to save the economy.

We've never organised in a situation like this before. We've never organised where the idea that to be responsible to each other requires us to stay away from each other is common sense. And yet, we're still finding ways to set up networks of mutual aid and support, to get supplies to people who need them. As things progress – as what is a medical- scientific issue expands further and further into the terrain of the social – we'll find ourselves returning to the things we always knew, that we'd learnt in all our experiences of struggle and resistance.

Consider this a simple reminder of some of those things, to keep them in mind now, before fear and isolation means we've ceded too much ground to an increasingly authoritarian state.

Disclaimer: These suggestions are not meant to cover the entirety of things to consider in these times. Additionally, this was written from within the territory of so-called Australia with some specific references to the context here. Hopefully it might also have broad relevance for anarchists in other places.

Stick with your crew, look to your neighbours, connect with broader networks of mutual aid and solidarity

As our concerns move between those closest to us to all of the most marginalised people trying to survive, we can begin to enact mutual aid by building from the relationships of affinity, care and support we already have in our lives. Even if there are people more in need – who we hope to be able to extend support to – skipping steps without being able to look after and organise with your closest crew will result in grand intentions with little capacity to follow through.

So stay in touch with the people around you. Check in on what mental, emotional and physical needs they have. Find ways to support them. And then find ways to organise. But also know that some of the best spontaneous examples of mutual aid arise from relationships you hadn't considered to be your closest. Reach out to your neighbours and keep an eye on what broader networks of solidarity are starting to form and how you can participate. Or, if you (and your crew) feel good enough and have your shit together, start building towards those networks. If we allow the power we have and our connections to be decimated, when the virus is finally contained the transformed world we step back into will be a terrifying place. Have each others' backs.

Fuck borders and racist paranoia

The state-enforced response to the spread of the contagion has resulted in ever more borders proliferating throughout our lives, cordoning off homes, neighbourhoods, cities, regions and countries. These are considered necessary measures for containment – even by 'radicals' – so that a sentiment that has white nationalists nodding along in agreement is treated as common sense. But every wall that goes up, no matter how necessary, involves a fear of the dangerous other who lurks outside. In colonial, racist countries such as this, that fear of the unknowable, not-white outsider bringing disease and crime has upheld white nationalism for centuries. The beginnings of the coronavirus outbreak saw the latest wave of anti-Chinese hysteria – an Aussie tradition that goes back to at least the 1850's.

This is a simple reminder: fuck borders and racist paranoia. We can accept the responsibility of social-distancing without mobilising the sort of sentiments upon which detention centres and the violent militarisation of borders are built. The state's capacity to shutdown the borders so easily now is a precedent that will be used to ensure an even greater control of people's movement in future. This containment will prioritise balancing capital's demands for cheap labour and the paranoia of a racist population. The economy of this country has been built on the labour of precarious migrant labour and international students, yet it always measures them as outsiders against the interests of white society and makes them expendable and scapegoats in times of crisis. Should the state's stimulus packages exclude these people, our struggles must fight to extend support to them. We must ensure that our solidarity is anti-racist, anti-nationalist and directed to those who have no status or without full (resident/ citizen) status.

Dismantle all capitalist relations

Every measure that the state proposes in this time is as concerned with the maintenance of the economy as it is with public health. Even now, as governments implement packages that might bring a bit of relief to some of us, the main purpose is to keep the economy ticking over and the property market viable – that is, to ensure that we can keep paying rent. Capitalism has enshrined social relations built on the extraction of maximum value from all and any possible terrain, leading to: the extortion that is the rental market; the degradation of the environment while dispossessing First Nations people of their land; the inequities of access to medical care (even in this country that retains more public health services than many); and of course, the exploitation of our very bodies as a source of labour.

While a return to 'normality' will at times seem preferable to the existence we face now, we need to be prepared to resist a return that prioritises the reinstatement of these modes of social relations. We've seen how crucial casual and precarious labour is to all sectors of society and how the mass of us who work under these conditions are the first ones to wear the fallout of economic decline. When the peak of virus transmission passes and recovery becomes the objective, government and business will apply all social, moral and material pressure for us to 'pitch-in' as workers in their efforts to restore profit-making capacity. There will be sweeteners given to entice us, and these may be hard to turn down in our material circumstances. But we must reject a return to conditions that thrive on alienation and exploitation. Instead, we can build on the collective structures of mutual aid and support – the ones currently getting resources to people

in need or pushing towards a rent strike – to assert different forms of social relations in defiance of capital.

Learn about boundaries, ask questions

This is a time where we need to be able to talk about our needs and boundaries clearly. In our usual day-to-day lives, we're all implicated in crossing each others boundaries: the negotiations of life and survival within conflicting oppressive systems mean we're infringed upon and we infringe. We do our best to respect each other, acknowledge and learn from mistakes and build our resilience. But this virus is a stark reminder that how we respect boundaries can have major consequences. Recognise the boundaries people are setting and try to understand the conditions – material, physical health, psychological – that result in the necessity of certain boundaries.

The nature of the contagion has disrupted norms about how affectionate we can be with each other. There's awkwardness and discomfort as friendships incubated in warm hugs become stand-offish, or as doling out daps all over town becomes frowned upon. Ask questions instead of assuming is common advice in terms of consent around sex and intimacy. Do it now. Here's a chance to extend our understanding of consent. But also take stock how the boundaries that you set aren't simply related to what you feel are your individual capacities, but reflect a responsibility to keep those around you healthy and safe. There is no pure individual cocoon, everything is interconnected.

No snitching, ftp forever

The fear is compelling and true, but we must resist everywhere that it produces reactionary responses. As sentiments of paranoia, self-isolation, righteousness and shaming culture spread, they are opening the door for snitching. In the face of this, we need to build social solidarity and resist authoritarianism, not partake in leaders' calls to 'dob in a mate'. Snitching is never ok. Some people are not in the material, social or psychological situation to cordon themselves off in a comfortable home with a fully-stocked pantry. Instead of being boot-lickers, create the structures of support and care that provide an alternative example.

The threat of the virus has become a fear that seeks out the comfortable embrace of the state. Wherever people are demanding more of it, the state responds by doing what it knows best – rolling police out onto the streets and increasing surveillance. As always, it will be marginalised people and communities who have the most to fear, as well as anyone attempting to enact mutual aid and solidarity outside of state control. We should understand well the advice of Plan C that "if we demand security from the state, we disempower ourselves and our communities". We should realise that if we cede too much ground now, we are allowing the state to set the terms of the post- virus recovery.

So FtP forever and cough on every cop you encounter (not really, there's better things to do than getting nicked for nothing).

Do your illegal shit as a way to extend resources and support

What is legal or illegal is most directly about protecting wealth and property from being taken by those who need it most. These divisions of legality and illegality are inextricable from the circulation of capitalist social relations that promote individualism and a profit-driven mindset over forms of collectivity and communalism. Owning multiple houses and charging rent on them is not illegal. Buying every last roll of toilet paper in a supermarket is not illegal. We know that what is legal or not has little relation to our capacity to live with, and provide for, each other.

In opposition to all that, many of us have developed skills and abilities that allow us to survive at the edges of the system. From simply being able to gather food for free or to opening abandoned buildings, to whatever else you feel capable of and have experience in. Use these skills now and build upon them to extend our capacity to provide resources and support to the people around us and to help sustain the larger networks of solidarity that are forming. But be extra careful and prepared. Understand that the conditions of surveillance and policing are changing, amping up as the state has seized this moment to assert its authority. Be brave, be clever, stay strong.

Fuck landlords and hoarders, scam and loot for your people.

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