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In The Open Air — Notes on repression and related matters

A friend of Ludd

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The notes that follow spring from a need: that of reflecting together on the current situation with the aim of finding the thread of a possible perspective. They are the fruit of various discussions in which the critical balance of past experience, the dissatisfaction with endeavors of struggle now going on and hope for existing potentialities blended together. They are not the line of one group in competition with another. Nor do they have any pretense or illusion of filling the voids — of life and projectual passion — with any more or less formal agreement on a few theses. If they contain unpleasant critiques, it is not for the sake of advancing them as an end in itself, but rather because I believe that it is still necessary to say unpleasant things. Like all the words in this world, they will only find an echo in those who feel a similar need. In short, a small basis for discussion in order to reach an understanding of what we can do, and with whom.

«We must abandon all models, and study our possibilities.»

— E. A. Poe.

We know from experience that one of the greatest powers of repression is that of spreading confusion and instilling distrust in others as well as in ourselves, or else of determining rigid attachments to identity and more or less paralyzing suspicions. In this sense, it would be best to examine certain problems in depth as soon as possible. Difficult years lie ahead that will shake up many of our mental and practical habits. If it is true that the most dangerous prejudice is that of thinking one has none, I would still prefer that these notes get criticized for what they say, without preconceived interpretations. Such a desire will explain their tone and even their style.

An Uninhabitable House

The condition in which we find ourselves seem to me to be that of someone who barricades herself inside four walls in order to defend a space in which no one has any desire to live. So much discussion of opening out, of expansion, of alliance, hides the fact that we are defending a tumbledown house in an uninhabitable neighborhood. It seems to me that the only way out is to set fire to the defense posts and go out into the open air, shaking off the moldy odor. But what does this mean beyond the metaphor?

The age in which we live is so lavish with disruption that our very capacity to interpret, and still more, prefigure events is collapsing beneath the rubble. If this is valid for all revolutionaries, the visions of the world and of life based on authoritarian and quantitative models have come out in particularly bad shape. The more or less knowing managers of other people's struggles manage only useless political representations of already pacified conflicts; the struggles that burst through pacification don't leave any space for managers. The illusion of the party — in all its variants — is now the corpse of an illusion.

The spreading out, aligning and breaking up of forces on the field, in small as well as great conflicts, becomes increasingly mysterious. The thing that has always been our distinctive trait — a nonhomogeneous, non-cumulative vision of force, a repugnance for the dictatorship of the Number — corresponds in part to the current social conditions and to the unpredictable possibilities for rupture that these conceal. From the transformation of the ruling order itself — through its network of structures, technologies and knowledge — to events like the guerrilla struggle going on in Iraq, we can draw some lessons. It seems clear that conflicts occur less and less in the form of the confrontation between two armies or fronts, and more and more in the form of a myriad of widespread and uncontrollable actions. A ruling order made of thousands of centers of vital points pushes its enemies to make themselves more unpredictable. Thus, a

The Great Game

It seems to me that the great game lies in the capacity for uniting a certain amount of daily daring (disrupting social normality is possible everywhere, from public debates to fairs of consumption and cultural stupefaction, from work to the paranoia of control) with the readiness to act when moment is opportune. In order to be catalysts of the joy of living, and not Cassandras of the future capitalist collapse. Because anonymous and destructive action expresses the construction of a life that is not anonymous. Too vague? Of course, and it cannot be otherwise. Being the most serious of games, the match concerns everyone of us. Difficulties most certainly exist, considering the progressive loss of autonomous spaces, tragically eroded by the present social system and its many technological narcotics. And yet, the limits are often, above all, in our resoluteness and our imagination, weighed down as we are by the burden of habit in gestures, words and relationships. A wider encounter between various local realities will be come to be from respective autonomous pathways in thought and in struggle, not from an adding up of forces dictated by urgency. Then discussion will not be a motionless dance of set phrases, but rather the opportunity for learning from one another, for finally making the ways of living, i.e., the mutual worlds, communicate. Then, confidence and enthusiasm will be found again, and something resembling a common experience will be born.

Revolt is where levity and rigor meet.

A friend of Ludd,

September 2004.

non-centralized way of conceiving actions and relationships is not only more libertarian, but also more effective against the nets of control. If such an awareness exists on a theoretical level, we don't always manage to maintain it in practical proposals. On the one hand, we affirm that power is not a general headquarters (but rather a social relationship), but on the other hand we propose endeavors that depict it as just that. I think that we have to start seeking the forms of action most fitting to our characteristics, to our (quantitative and qualitative) strengths. Unfortunately, we still think that acting in small groups must necessarily mean acting in isolation. This is why, in the face of the arrest of comrades and the more general increase of repression, the usual proposals always come out: the rally, the march, etc. Of course, it isn't a matter of criticizing these forms of action as such, but the mentality that usually goes along with them. In certain contexts — at present, particularly, local ones — , the march or rally might have their meaning as part of a series of endeavors. But when this weaving together of various forms of actions is lacking, and especially when we are thinking within the narrow circle of comrades, I think that repeating certain models ends up creating a sense of powerlessness and reproducing the wellknown mechanism of more or less militant set dates. Here as well, there is a need for fresh air. Even by organizing with a hundred, if we want, we can intervene in interesting ways in rather huge marches. But if there are just a hundred and that is all, let's ask, why a march? What can a hundred comrades do in a city where they know the key points well? What do all the struggles going on around the world that are rediscovering a passionate and potentially subversive use of the blockade have to teach us?

Many have become aware that the problem of repression cannot be reduced to the sphere of revolutionaries. Repression — both direct and indirect — involves ever broader portions of the population. It is the response of a ruling order that feels the earth slipping under its feet, aware of how wide the gap between general dissatisfaction and the capacities of its historical servants (the parties and unions)

is becoming. Without looking into the reasons for all this here, it is enough to say that subversives speak so much about prisons because it is so much easier to end up inside, and at the same time, they feel the need not to limit themselves, within the totality of life, to the defense of their arrested comrades. Here problems arise. If we can only oppose repression as it relates to those on which it falls, then everyone will defend her own friends and comrades, those with whom he shares ideas passions and projects — and this is unavoidable. Solidarity against repression that strikes revolutionaries with whom we don't have any affinity has to be quite clearly distinguished from support for political projects we don't share that are downright antithetical to our anti-political desires. Now, the more we limit the sphere of our endeavors to revolutionaries, the more we risk precisely giving a hand to reviving authoritarian theories that are fortunately in ruins. On the other hand, the broader this sphere is, the easier it seems to be to distinguish the two levels (that of solidarity against and that of solidarity with, i.e., complicity). It is therefore rather astonishing that, despite awareness of the social and universal range of the repressive blade, the “solution” proposed from most sides is unity of action among ... the revolutionary elements. In this way, we don't just isolate ourselves from the rest of the exploited who feel the weight of social control and policing like us, but we also fool ourselves about an important facet: such “unity of action” has a price (maybe not immediately if the relationships of force are favorable, but certainly in the long run). If , instead of one hundred anarchists, there are one hundred fifty people involved in an endeavor because fifty Marxist-leninists join in, and to accomplish this, we have to sign manifestoes and flyers written in a relatively impenetrable jargon, is this really about “expansion”? Wouldn't it possibly be more meaningful for even just ten people to organize an endeavor that confronts problems felt by many and expresses contents closer to our way of thinking and feeling? As to the solidarity that relates specifically to comrades inside, quite different forms exist...

existed without yet reaching those instructive difficulties typical of expanded conflicts. Once again, we are at a crossing. Some practical reflection has been born on the basis of various blockades carried out by workers and others. Many of us have thrown ourselves into it, asking much more of these struggles than what they could express — safe then to turn around and complain of the servility of the exploited. Other occasions will not be lacking, nor perhaps will a greater attention on our part be missing. But that isn't enough.

I think that this is not at all the time for abandoning the taste for direct action, still in small groups. It's just that this should be better linked to social contexts, to perceivable dissatisfaction. How many opportunities have we lost (after Genoa, during the blockades of the death trains, after Nassiriya, during the tragedy of Cap Anamur, etc.)? Time is the element in which human beings live, and revolt is made of opportunities. We will have to study our possibilities better, instead of chasing our tails. Obviously, there have been a few noble exceptions (various actions after Genoa, others against biotechnology or the mechanisms of expulsions, some sabotage against the war, etc.), but they have been sporadic, surrounded by the clamor provoked by useless rhetoric, by proclamations thrown into the wind and by a practical (and ethical) distinction utterly lacking in clarity about who the enemies are. Precisely at a time when this clarity is necessary in the face of the indiscriminate violence that more and more often takes over in the moments of resistance and potential liberation of the damned of the earth. Those who continually repeat that the best theory is practice, but then leave much of what they do up to chance, particularly need this clarity. Maybe, blinded by the special effects of the spectacle, we either have too little trust in the consequences of our actions (allowing ourselves to get sloppy), or else we exaggerate their importance (allowing ourselves to be caught up in media illusions). There are effects that go on producing their causes.

Don't Say that We Are Few...

Say only that we are. This is how a famous anti-militarist sticker from many years ago began. It then went on to say that it was only some black cloud that darkened the sky. It wasn't just an artifice of optimism, but also a real experience.

For several years — at least fifteen — in the anarchist direct action movement (the one autonomous from the Federation and from syndicalism, to clarify), there has generally been little attention given to social conflicts and the more or less significant forms of the self-organization of the exploited. Aside from the historical reasons (the great pacification of the 1980's), this has been due to a problem of mental attitude. Many comrades who spoke of insurrection — an unquestionably social event — perceived society as a space inhabited almost entirely by the servile and the resigned. With such a vision they thus remained suspended between declarations of principle and their effective experience: undecided with regard to an openly solitary revolt, slow to open the door to collective possibilities. (Who knows, maybe this is what gave birth to a certain rancor that spilled out in the disputes between comrades). Alongside this low sensitivity toward struggles that break through massification — but that nonetheless come out of massification — a certain capacity for autonomous intervention has developed, with a significant spread of practices of attack against the structures of domination (among them the nuclear industry, the military, banks, equipment of technological control and vivisection laboratories). Now something is changing, as if a confused individual need met with new social conditions — and from this come the comrades who speak unexpectedly of class struggle, perhaps even taking on loan interpretations and jargon from Marxism. It's just that often, aside from the rhetoric of flyers, their vision of society has remained the same: in short, that we are surrounded on all sides by accomplices of power. I believe that a lack of experience in directly lived and incited social struggles plays a major role in all this. Some local attempts have

I don't want this attitude to be interpreted as an "ideological closure" or as a search for hegemony over other groups. Precisely in order to avoid reasoning in terms of acronyms, strained ideological interpretations and formalism, it is best to keep our proposals broad and clear, without any particular political groups acting as spokespeople, but rather everyone who feels involved speaking for herself. After that anyone who wants to participate as an equal among equals is welcome. If other revolutionaries apply the same methods, it will benefit everyone. There is an atmosphere of alliance based on reciprocal favors that I find unbreathable. United fronts, unity of action among revolutionary forces — quite apart from any specific objective of struggle in which anyone who was interested could meet together, whether comrades or not — are a part of the defense of an uninhabitable house for me. And this, regardless of what fine, correct or sympathetic people these guys may be. It's a question of perspective. Once in response to Bordiga, Malatesta said, "But if, as these Marxists claim, the difference between us and them is not so substantial, instead of making us join their committees, why don't they come to ours?" Doing things among anarchists, then? Not at all. Acting on clear foundations, even in small groups, but addressing all the exploited, all those dissatisfied with this social prison. And including in what we do and say — whether it's a struggle against incinerators, against expulsions or for housing — the problem of prisons (and thus of our comrades inside). Not juxtaposing and pasting the "prison question" onto the rest, but rather exposing the real connections on the basis of common experience. Every autonomous struggle sooner or later comes up against repression (whether it faces it openly or retreats in order to avoid it). House occupations also pose the problem of the police, of the interests they defend, of ghettos and jails. Social self-organization is also always self-defense against repression.

Leaping to the Heart of the Opportunity

In certain respects, we have an opportunity: the opportunity to intervene in social conflicts — present and to come — without mediation. If the second-rate followers of authoritarian forces that have smothered so many subversive drives are down-at-the-heels in terms of numbers and projects, why should we help them out of their troubles? Why linger among the mummies when a strong wind blows? They make political calculations, we do not. In practical experience, it will be seen who is really for self-organization. We base ourselves on this.

With the general reformist retreat, the few realities about anti-capitalist and anti-institutional positions are like a fire in the night — and so the temptation is strong to keep them tightly clasped on one side of certain barricades. But our strength is not there. Fourier said that a passion is revolutionary if it brings about an immediate increase in the enjoyment of life. This seems to me to be the most trustworthy standard. I know from experience that various young people have embraced some anarchic realities because they have discovered that in solidarity and with the courage of one's ideas, one lives better. Why? Because the weight of the commodity and of work is not so heavy if we face it together, because outlaw behavior is contagious for those who love freedom, because loving relationships without restraint can be more sincere and fulfilling, because in the union of thought and action, as Simone Weil said, the pact of the spirit with the universe is renewed. Here then is the enthusiasm that should inform our practice — the enthusiasm of thoughtful levity, not of demeaning frivolity. Because “bringing panic to the surface of things” is thrilling; because there is no festival without a rupture with normality. Let's leave certain words of sad militants to others and avoid the models that power knows and expects.

We will not manage to get across the river we find ourselves in now through any single endeavor no matter how good it is. We'd

better say that it will take quite a bit of time. To find real affinity, to experiment with new articulate and imaginative forms of collective action, to mock police control, these are possibilities for us to reinvent amidst thousands of obstacles. One might respond, “Yes, but in the meantime there are comrades inside, in the meantime, repression is on our tail.” But isn't the best thing that we could undertake for the imprisoned comrades perhaps to make those demands for life for which they have been locked up become socially dangerous? In this sense it is useless to look into political mirrors that tell us that we are not nude. Better a conscious nudity than any garment woven from illusions. Better to start again from scratch, far from the odor of corpses and the ideological rubbish incomprehensible to the undesirables of this world.

Thus, from so many sides, there is a need for a strong breach that brings unheard-of behavior into individual relationships as well as into the public squares. Not in the dramatic and self-promotional sense preferred by the sort with an artistic streak — notoriously corpse-like — , but rather in the sense of a new urgency for life that affirms itself without shame. There is a need for a class hatred that does not know what to make of the old complaints, and attacks the myriad nodes of daily exploitation. There is a need for an ethical tension that never confuses oppressors and oppressed, and that doesn't waste its breath against the slaves of power — because it seeks to free itself from them, even with violence, but in order to go beyond. There is a need for a new generosity, armed and resolute, capable of overturning the shopkeepers' calculations of our contemporaries, capable of making contempt for money an individual and social behavior. In short, there is a need for us to find ways to express the unbearable reality of this world — of its jobs and its houses, of its consumption and of its morality — daily, constantly, insatiably. The social war plays out in our lives, because it is in daily life that capital weaves its web of alienation, of dependence, of great and small capitulations. Here is the alpha and omega of all social subversion.