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Anonymous

From Thought into the unknown

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Contents

How is thought cut from its root?	5
Where do we go from here? The utopian imagination	6

Other Amazonian groups have complex political ranking systems but the Machiguenga borrow social terms from nearby groups. They have no term for family. There is a word for kin but only egocentric kin, and they use a borrowed word *noshanika* or my people for those that live nearby. Some anthropologists have suggested that the Machiguenga live in very small groups because of a dispersion that occurred after the epidemics of colonial times. But their lack of social terms suggests that this is not the case. There is no evidence that the Machiguenga ever had political terminology.

The Machiguenga are not only hunter-gatherers (they also farm), and they are certainly no longer “pristine” primitives, but this is not the point. I am offering them as an example that primitive communism may have existed during the Paleolithic but exclusively as an absence of private property. Living peoples show us that in all probability Paleolithic peoples lived in various types of social formations ranging from the more communal to the more dispersed. This is of course all speculation, but the case of the Machiguenga challenges the utopian image of primitive communism, the idea that human beings naturally prefer to live collectively. This idea is a reaction to the fragmentation we experience in a society dominated by capital, we crave the relations we lack and assume the opposite of capitalism is the collective.

Let’s keep the utopian visions that expand our possibilities and discard the rigid models that limit us. To proceed away from the established into the unknown we must have a thought process which is expansive. We must direct our thought back towards its subjective root and away from the scarcity of options dished up for us by capital. To explore life’s possibilities outside these narrow confines we need to have the courage to discard impoverished visions of that which lies beyond the existent.

How is thought cut from its root?

When we think of the imagination what comes to mind? We might think of human creativity at its source, of a living and thinking person. We also might think of the imaginary, a realm that is separate from this world we live in, daydreams that are divorced from our lives: fantasies that serve only as escape mechanisms, fantasies that are filled with mass media produced images of other planets, green aliens with 14 fingers, or sex with bionic humanoids with geometric silicone features. The word imagination has been corroded along with its root word: the image. The images that confront us everyday appear to have no human origin. They are created for the market, and have the qualities of the market, they leave little trace of their human creators. When we see an ad for Apple computers we do not think of the person who put the advertising image together. That person is probably thousands of miles away. That distant worker expressed little of their personality in the image they created. So, as was intended, we think only of apple computers. That image was the expression of a thwarted and recuperated creative impulse of someone sitting an office far away. Creativity that increases one’s own life possibilities is now rarely respected. When someone comes up with a particularly inventive idea, people have the gall to say, “you should market that”. Capitalism is such an effective system because it so effectively channels and uses human creativity for its own aims. In the process, it reduces creativity to as colorless a process as the money transaction. It reduces the individuality of creativity to a minimum. This uniformity is also a result of the monotony of life in a society filled with mass produced objects, images and spaces; as life becomes more uniform thought follows closely behind.

The fact that the imaginary can be thought of as divorced from an imagining subject reflects the degree to which the fragmentation we experience in our daily lives has implanted itself in our very thought process. When every creative impulse has been severed from its subjective source and channeled into the markets of technological and cultural production, when there is no one to share our insights with because only marketed creativity is given a place to be seen or heard, there is no need for censorship. This dismembering results

in thoughts that lead away from the subject, it crushes the will, produces atomized desires for commodities, and results in actions that do not expand our own lives but the life of the vampire that feeds upon us. Instead of increasing our own power, our thoughts lead us to travel a straight line between the place where we puke out fuel for the market, stop by supermarket to buy its refuse, and go home where we eat its shit. In order to interrupt this process it is necessary to change our very thought process, we need to reconnect thought to its source: the thinking subject. In order to do so we must expel the poltergeists that haunt us, poltergeists that bear a suspicious resemblance to those in a Steven Spielberg movie.

For thought to become an instrument to the expansion of one's life projectuality, it is helpful to find others with whom to speak a language other than that of the market, with whom one can explore life's possibilities outside the limited choices offered by capital. If there is no language with which to express ones thoughts, and no one to speak to, thought will not be a sharpened tool but a dull implement. In this society, one who along with a few likeminded companions aims to increase life's potential, will quickly run into obstacles in her path. This society is a maze of barriers to anyone that wishes to function outside of it, anyone who wishes to live by their own rhythm and not that of the clock. To destroy the obstacles to our own expansion we need all of the tools we can get; we need both ideas and fire.

Where do we go from here? The utopian imagination

To move towards the destruction of this society and the creation of new relations, we need to have a clear conception of how to proceed from here, but we do not need a concrete model of where we will end up. Although any future world would contain traces or ruins of this society, that world may be beyond our present capacity to imagine. It is important to ask ourselves whether or not an idea increases or decreases our possibilities. When does an idea become a fossilized

model that limits us? Utopian visions can be useful openings out of the present order but they can also confine us. The Paleolithic has been a useful reference because it breaks us out of the dominant idea that human beings by nature need to create institutions of authority. Living hunter gatherers have also shown us that anarchy is a real possibility, not merely a utopian dream, and that in fact it is most probable that humans lived in anarchy for most of their past. But when we begin to create a utopian image on the specific practices of hunter-gatherers we are creating a primitivist model with inherent limitations; such an image limits our vision of what a future world could be. Besides, it is improbable that people throughout the world during the Paleolithic actually behaved predictably enough for any model to be based on such multifarious relations. Living hunter-gatherers have a variety of types of social relations. What these people have in common is the absence of odious institutions of authority, the absence of exploitation. Beyond that each group has its own characteristics, its own choice of social relations. Perhaps the greatest lesson that living hunter-gatherers as a whole teach us is found in their lack of predictability: a variety of relations that cannot be contained in precise models.

The Machiguenga of the Peruvian amazon are unusual in their strong preference against living in any community larger than the immediate family. When outsiders visit the Machiguenga, it is common for them to explain "no somos muy unidos aqui". They expect outsiders to be surprised that they prefer to live away from concentrated settlements. The Machiguenga are settling in towns more and more often in order to send their children to school and because they are becoming increasingly dependent on iron tools which they need access to outside markets to acquire. In the 70s interviews with Machiguengan town dwellers revealed that most people begrudgingly made this change. Previously most Machiguenga hunted, gathered and farmed with their immediate families. They met up with nearby families for beer feasts and for fishing expeditions. When asked why they preferred not to live in a community they generally had two answers: they had greater access to forest resources in smaller groups, and community living brought unwanted restrictions. The Machiguenga language lacks terms for social categories.