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Spectacle of the Symbolic

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Life is an interconnected web of beings. This is existence, this is life. Without that web we are all nothing. Take a look around your Reality and try to find what is necessary to your existence, what will you die without? This isn't like playing the game of our Culture, the Culture of Commodification, where we ask what we would die for, what would we kill for (overlooking all the things we are killing for). Instead, this question is an honest search for what we need in life.

The focus here will be on the way symbolic culture, the mentality of civilization, has invaded our consciousness. The kind of power relations needed for governments to exist rests on our recognition of that power. While not believing in their power won't make civilization just go away, the realization that life exists beyond the survival that we've had to deal with. Recognizing our own potential is one step in reclaiming our lives.

The creation of power

Before we begin talking of civilization, we must understand what we are talking about. Civilization moves off power yet no where on Earth does power truly exist. Power is not a thing, but a relation of domination and ownership, an idea. Power is the product of property, be it place, person or what have you. In a world of limited wants and unlimited means, ownership (which can not exist without property) is useless. The world of the forager must be one that can follow the migrations of herds or adapt to the seasonal availability of plants, insects, and any other flora that makes up the majority of the diet and such a world has no place for 'possessions'.

A nomad is limited by what they can move with, although this is hardly a limitation. The creation of 'property' is the product of being sedentary or staying places for longer periods of time. The more attached you are to a particular area the more able you are to keep things you would normally have to move with regularly. What we have learned from anthropology and the failures of domestication is that our way of survival is very recent. We have seen qualitative differences between the spiritual wealth of foragers, which anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has called the "original affluent society", and the poverty of our materialistic 'wealth' addictions.

As anarchists, the most important difference here refers to autonomy. Power is the result of institutionalized specialization. Foragers recognize those who tend to excel in one particular area of life, a role which we commonly misperceive as 'leaders'. However, as anthropologist Pierre Clastres points out in his book *Societies Against the State*, foraging societies are not just stateless (as if the state just hasn't happened yet), but "societies against the state", meaning they had no

will to give up their autonomy or recognize that any particular person should control the lives of others. So in 'primitive' societies across the world, you see social taboos that keep any individual from acquiring power.

This has been recognized in foragers like the !Kung of the Kalahari who will insult or chop down the hunter/s who brings in a lot of meat. To an outsider this would be considered deeply offensive, but the point is to keep the people all at one level so no individual can have a big ego. Customs like this are nearly universal, and they signify the conscious recognition that power over others doesn't benefit the rest of the peoples.

What has been further studied by Clastres and others is that while certain individuals are acknowledged as being particularly good at certain activities, there is no institutionalization of their role. Although they are recognized as more able or useful during certain periods (i.e., hunts, battles, or medicine), that role dies with them. When a particularly good hunter passes on, there are no elections to 'fill that slot', because no real 'slot' ever existed.

What this signifies is the kind of flexibility that foraging existence allows. It is recognized that there is typically a sexual division of labor in 'primitive' societies, but again the people are autonomous in the sense that positions are not institutionalized, meaning there is no systemic ruling that men will do this or women do that (foragers don't apply sexist standards or values). In every sense of the word, these peoples live in anarchy, a life devoid of power relations and offering full autonomy.

These kinds of specifics are not the focus here because they are rather well covered elsewhere and I can't recommend enough that people seek this knowledge out. What is important here is an understanding that life exists beyond the sacrificial order of civilization, and that things such as 'power' can only be maintained so long as their role is upheld. A revolt against the power/civilized mentality is a big step towards taking down this beast.

The repression of being and wildness

Humans have spent over 99.9% of our existence on this planet as foragers. Our food was scavenged, gathered or hunted. To exist this way means that you must be an active member in the larger community of life: the world around and of you, the state of wildness. If you cannot be a part of this, then there will be nothing to sustain and support you: when an animal is separated from their wildness, they become separated from life. It's even simpler than this really, if you do not understand, respect and place yourself in the world around you, you lose a place

in that reality, and because of this you can't take and give as one would to survive. Our groundlessness and depression only feeds this reality.

The forager has nothing more than a completely intimate relationship with their extended selves: the world around them. Civilized understandings must misrepresent this so that it can continue to exist and devour. To know the layers of growth and life in the world is more than just a question of survival, but knowledge of the self, since it gives placement and the knowledge of being within. The forager never destroys this; it serves no purpose to exploit something that is a part of you.

The Civilized being has devastated one of the most intimate aspects of life: eating and fulfilling the needs of our bodies. When we are getting food, we are buying pieces of our own death, wrapped in cellophane, priced by the pound and canned. We have pieces of paper that represent pieces of our lives sold off to someone who gets more use out of us as machines than as beings. We exchange these two things as objects and the whole process is burnt into our minds.

You see our separation: pieces of wildness, long since tamed and beaten into the right packages, shined up and ready to be sold off. Each bit is a replica of the shining, glorious product of years of mixing and matching, of buffing and waxing the gene pool: throwing away millions of years of adaptation and existence, taking and giving for whatever immediate need there seems to be. It's all there before our eyes and through our bodies, as seen on the charts or on the TV or in the textbooks. These bits of our giant, decaying corpse are taken in, they are symbols of parts of life, which has long since been chopped up and served to us.

The food becomes a symbol for Nourishment; you have to eat according to the planned pyramid scheme in order to stay afloat: which is represented by the notion of Health. And it's all a delusion, what we're eating is isolated death: warped shadows of our wild selves, sprayed, infested, exploiting, shipped and handled, all removed from anything living and sustaining. What we eat is no longer to be taken in and let out, in order to continue the cycle of life. It is plastic, and it only sustains an image, a giant Symbol, to be devoured, wrenched dry by the suffocating innards to be thrown out and flushed off into the nothingness that will only haunt the world as a symbol of the most destructive epidemic to face this planet.

Mediation and symbolic life

Inherent to the poverty of this way of survival is something so simple that it can be frightening. All the drudgery and disgust of everyday 'life' comes from the separation of ourselves from the rest of the world. This isn't some quick solution

or easy answer, but the reality of our situation. What is making the distinction between us and everything else is what we call symbolic culture.

So it seems right now might be the perfect time to kick it down a step, take things back, especially when the words ‘symbolic thought’ or ‘symbolic culture’ alone are enough to bore someone either back to sleep or just get some kind of disinterest in an intangible idea, but what is going to be shown here is that this isn’t anything like that. The effects of symbolic culture come through in every aspect of daily life and its side effects. So what the hell is all this anyways then? The best way to look at it is back.

Human beings are animals, that is, you and I and every single person is an animal. No matter how much we try and act like we aren’t, and especially when we kill off most of the planet to try and prove otherwise, we are and always will be animals. The driving force behind this supposed ‘Progress’ and actual Destruction comes from an ideology that has been about 10,000 years in the making: symbolic culture.

As John Zerzan points out in ‘Running on Emptiness’, symbolic culture is the outcome of excessive symbolization. It occurs when the senses have been domesticated into a “symbolic cultural atmosphere”. What symbolic culture is then is an institutionalization of symbols, removing them from the direct senses into a single vision that becomes a basis for the group/tribe/clan/empire. This is the dawn of Civilization.

Everything that we have come to accept as Reality and base our perceptions on spreads off of the base of sedentary, intensive agriculture: the great settling which gave rise to power. This isn’t to say that the first seed planted was some kind of fall from heaven. Humans have been taking an active part in their surroundings for the millions of years that we (and our predecessors) have existed. Growing food was no new idea and living mainly this was hardly novel. What separates this (horticulture) from sedentary agriculture (and thus Civilization) is the point at which settlement becomes permanence.

This idea has much more behind it than one might think it could. The difference between an Agricultural society and others who would grow even large percentages of their own food is a mentality: a basic sentiment of detachment. Maybe we should look back further.

Possession

“Some of the people who left the human communities remembered some of the qualities. They remembered some of the joys of possession—not possession of things but possession of Being.”

—Fredy Perlman. *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*

Those who have shaped our Reality (from the shaman on to the priest, politician, scientist, and so on) would have us believe that what is essential to life are ‘Things,’ bits and pieces of a shattered world replaced by objects that can be bought, sold, inherited or auctioned. Understanding this only takes our search further back, but what is it that we (as individuals) associate with? We see objects that reflect an imaginary ‘collective consciousness’ (the ‘collective consciousness’ as individuals associating their own abilities and actions with that of some kind of ‘collective’ with others they share some traits with, think nation, race, culture, and so on), that is all the of us determined consumers as individual versions of civilization, all of us as proto-cyborgs (we are physically alive, but lack all qualities of ‘life’, and our interests are technologically driven): multi-functioning parts of the giant Mega-Machine.

We might respond to such comments as absurd, surely there are people in our lives that we value over things! Yet we lack the ability to separate our relations with others any more than treating them as ‘things’. Our relationships are weighable by capitalist standards of what we can ‘gain’ or may ‘lose’ from each situation. We have those that we are ‘close’ to (perhaps we fall under the same ‘personality’ type or have a capitalist valuable relationship) and then there are those who just, consequently, fall on the other side of the scale, just underneath those shoes or cars we ‘had to have.’

The beginning of ‘things’

“People do not exploit a nature that speaks to them. But a nature that, as two famous nineteenth-century ethnocentrics expressed it, ‘faced humans initially as an entirely foreign, all-powerful and unassailable might, towards which they behaved as animals, and which they allowed to lord it over them as if they were brutes’; such a nature has no language of its own any more, it is merely matter.

“... people do not exploit those they understand. But when out among strangers, there is a tendency towards barricading oneself in ones ‘subjectivity’ much more even than at home, and what is strange is alienated by blocked the avenues of trust.”

—Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*

It could be said that power was the origin of symbolic culture. The ability to subject others is necessary to begin a system of pure domination. The symbolic mediation of language was still capable of keeping some attachment to the world. The language of foragers is tied to that time and space. With civilization, there is conquest and colonization, as uprooted people begin spreading. In order to grow, it is required that you have standardization. Languages became universal and the detachment completed, their use was removed from direct experience to the realm of power relations.

It is important to understand that you can't just live within a hierarchy, it must be internalized and the individuals must think, breathe and speak it. This is the role of symbolic culture, to internalize the will of the powerful. The world that we are a part of has, since agriculture, become a thing. Our lives are removed from the chaos of life in search of artificial order.

Turning myth into stone

“[Writing] initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist.”

-Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*

What Zerzan does in his essay 'Running on Emptiness' is point to the progression of symbolic thought as it not only mediates, but replaces life. We are seeing the split of the wild and the tamed. The split becomes more defined over time and the world we are of becomes another object to fully subjugate. We unleash Reason upon the world, a system of justification for our exploitation. Reason acts against its opposite 'instinct', as it tries to move humans out of being animals (although it begins at first along the lines of culture, race and sex).

The language of Reason is a pure symbolization. As we know it now, it is the product of the 'enlightenment' and comes from literacy. In his book, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong boasts of the joys of literacy while doing us the service of charting its disruption to human consciousness. Civilized oral (without writing) cultures were capable of creating destructive ideologies, but writing perfected the process (see 'Writing our Fate'). The deed essentially perfects systems of barter, but also begins to remove itself fully from the present.

Myth serves as memory for oral peoples. The myths could shape reality and be shaped by events, positively or negatively. With writing, those myths would be cut off from the fluidity of life. People become fixed to what is 'written in stone'.

The great religious texts serve as witness to this. The myths of the Old Testament are co-opted from pagan cultures and others who recognized a fall from bliss but wouldn't turn back. It seems that the power of the great monotheistic religions had to exploit the world with such vigor came from the written 'word of God' which was frozen in time.

Writing perfects Reason as it extends justification away from the 'real world' to the world of ideas. Our current epidemic needs no other justification than the written decree of the 'experts'. In this way, we can disregard our exploitation of the Earth because it has been written otherwise. We keep our face in books and media as life is being killed right before us. Symbolic culture is essentially what allows us to turn our cheek as our lives have become fully mediated.

The symbols spectacularized

The processes of Science and Reason rationalize and suppress the chaos of life. We categorize, therefore we are not: the foundation has been laid to divide and conquer our world. Our world has become symbolic and we are free to manipulate at our will. Without this alteration of perception, we could have never done what we (the culture of cities: Civilization, not individuals, or our 'species') have. Modern life is symbolic culture spectacularized. Through our mega-technology we've succeeded in creating a candy-coated mediation.

Situationist Guy Debord noted the problem of symbolic culture in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation." Our world has been reduced, quantified and qualified to the point where we are all just spectators to "an immense accumulation of spectacles."

Our religious/scientific rationality becomes tangible through the media. Social critic Susan Sontag made the effects of visual media the focus of her book *On Photography*. She recognized the issue of tangibility:

"Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images. . . ."

What Sontag is pointing to is this process of reification, basically the process of turning reality into symbols, things.

At this point, aided by print and audio-visual recordings, symbolic culture has become autonomous. While in the past symbolic culture existed to mediate human relations to all life, it was still stuck in that moment (although looking forward). With these new recording technologies, the past becomes as real as

the present. Time and space become unimportant/indecipherable, and we are constantly reproducing a reality.

Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, comes to mind as we exist in timelessness like his main character. With a recorded memory we are able to put ourselves back into any time or situation recorded. We live in virtual reality as this constant surreal world becomes our obsession. The civilized seeks to absorb all experience so we flock to movies, television, theme parks, malls (shopping for new identities), and the internet. People pour into 'new and bigger' possessions seeking new pain killers and distractions searching for that pure experience. With our minds turned towards the virtual reality, we only become absorbed and forget to look outside the box-world for life.

What this 'autonomous spectacle' means is that it continues for its own reasons. Our reality is becoming more and more groundless as our level of technology soars past the amount of authentic experience. Civilization seeks perfection for the sake of perfection. Suppose full automation and simulation was possible, we have to ask ourselves if this is what is desirable. We must ask, what does it mean to be human?

In his book *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* Fredy Perlman recognized how spectacularized, mega-technological civilization is essentially devouring the entire world as it searches for more. The deprivation is all around us:

"From the day when battery-run voices began broadcasting old speeches to battery-run listeners, the beast has been talking to itself. Having swallowed everyone and everything outside itself, the beast becomes its own sole frame of reference. It entertains itself, exploits itself and wars on itself. It has reached the end of its progress, for there is nothing left for it to progress against except itself."

The spectacle of symbolic culture has essentially become a 'reality' TV show rerun. All is predictable and equitable as the media produce and sell reality. We are consuming ourselves and our situation is sounding like F.C. described it in 'Industrial Society and its Future', that we are only being formed into the technological system. I stand by that conclusion that: "It would be better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences."

The worker and the consumer

Our current values are predetermined by Capitalist notions of what is important and what it means to be a person. The Consumer takes their value by their freedom

to choose buying habits, and maintaining a prescribed level of self determination, taking pride in the product availability that colonization and exploitation have brought them.

The Consumer is the extension of the Worker identity, being pushed further into the Consumer category in this Culture by the importance of a stronger breed of people willing to fill their spiritual void with more and more crap. The Worker is identified by their labor (“what do you do for a living?”), this is what they have brought into existence. We take pride in the fact that every thing we bring into existence makes us just that much more similar to God, but the novelty is quickly wearing.

The role of the Worker has lost it’s little bit of shimmer as the Worker ends up being more and more a piece of the Machine itself. Capitalism succeeds in making beings into nothing more than machines. We have become proletarianized, that is we are worth no more what we can ‘contribute’ to the capitalist economy. Those who have no ‘value’ or aren’t worth being ‘added’ to the economy are considered obstacles to the ‘inevitable’ Progress.

For those of us living within civilization this has meant a number of things. The past ‘revolutionary’ movements have sought to reform the means of production because they had completely internalized their worth as ‘proletarians’, as workers.

The Industrial Worker has been the extension of the Agricultural Worker, someone who is directly connected to the ‘production’ of something necessary to life. They are involved full time in alienation from the way things are and will be, the connection is directly severed.

We see that this could go on and on even further into boredom, but there is an initial problem here that keeps us going down the long, dark path of separation and makes us isolated beings in a time of mass overpopulation, crowding and high technology. We’ve become walking ads for the life that is sold to us at an hourly wage, and yet we can be ‘happy’ about it while every single one of us requires some kind of drug or escape to make it through each day (even though ways of dropping out are becoming more deadly).

We have moved beyond proletarianization now in the first and second worlds. There is hardly anything left to produce here outside of the spectacle itself. Our purpose here is solely to ensure the ‘Progress’ of civilization on its path to ‘perfection’. This is us, this is now: we are homeless and soulless worldwide. Similar to the science fiction movie the Matrix we are becoming batteries for the machine to carry on for its own sake. Where is the human in this?

The revolt against mediation

So how does this all fit in with everyday life? All of these notions may seem abstract or like a meaningless mind game, but the reality is that these basic ideas shape our entire perception of the world. It is clear that Civilization is more than just some 'thing' out there: a tangible enemy to be dealt with in physical terms, but an entire system. It has been brought into existence as ideas that have solidified in Symbolic Culture and have become mentalities,

Ideology, an entire way of perceiving your Reality: it has become our Reality itself. The concrete formulations can only have come into existence through the spreading of this warped relation to each other and the world: it has separated us from everything that we are, and this is what we are up against when we talk about ending the death trip that our culture has brought about.

For these reasons, it seems imperative that we address the issue directly and try and find a way to overcome our complete alienation and rediscover our being. Only when this is done can we come together as complete beings and bring ourselves back to a complete world. But this is all part of a great process, the only way to liberate ourselves from our domestication is to understand what it is that is keeping us back, and that digging will only come through revolt against the domesticating force of Civilization, within ourselves and what is being imposed on us. The true revolution begins with the insurrection against the mediation and alienation of our being, and this is a battle to be fought on every front. With this we seek to understand what we are up against.

So I ask again, what does it mean to be human? This is something that can only be lived, not told. The greatest journey of life is to realize your being. The answer comes in the form of experience which shows that there are no answers. What we will find is that our questions are over-looking the real world that lies before our eyes. The original question posed here isn't rhetorical, nor is it a simple question, it is a beginning point and all of us must start there if we hope to ever live fully.

This is only one step in a long path. The institutions of power carry much strength because they have possessed so many. In this late hour, our options are becoming clearer. We can either accept full automation and continue the symbolic life or we can try and find our way to an unmediated reality. The implications of this are to be lived and the revolt against Reason implants the seed of insurrection. Our option is to fight against the system of domestication so that we may arise as full beings. That choice is yours to enact upon.

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