

A SURROUNDING FOR US TO LIVE WITHIN

Notes on Industrial Society and its Ecology

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The forest and the village

“A surrounding for us to live within”, this is how a little boy defined the environment in a theme proposed to various classes in Rovereto, Italy and vicinity. It is one of the most beautiful definitions I know. In fact, it is necessary to start precisely from this: looking around. It is glaringly obvious that what surrounds us is not made for “us to live within”. One can survive here – that is all –, and increasingly at the expense of millions of people.

In the notes that follow, we will try to bring to light some relationships between the progressive loss of individual and social autonomy, environmental devastation and the sharpening of repression. Not in order to update the endless catalogue of horrors and complaints, but rather in order to reflect on some possibilities. Just this once, we will start from a “for” and not an “against”.

What is a “surrounding for us to live within”? I would say a place in which the pleasure of solitude and the pleasure of meeting are artfully intertwined, whereas we know from experience that industrial society destroys both. With a telling expression, Günther Anders described contemporary city-dwellers as “mass hermits”, more and more atomized in their relationships and more and more massified in their activities, pleasures and movements. Complete solitude is just as difficult as a truly mutual and unmediated encounter. If we consider wild nature as the place of solitude and the inhabited village as the place of encounter, a “surrounding for us to live within” is an uninterrupted interchange between the forest and the village, continuous movement without violence between the one and the other. It is the possibility of departing from one’s fellow human beings in order to later return to them – more, it is the constant awareness of such a possibility. Leaving in search of new thoughts, new bewilderments, even new fears. The forest that becomes the countryside, the countryside that becomes the garden, the garden that becomes the village square, the path, the house. But a “surrounding for us to live within” is above all a humanity that knows how to travel through and inhabit these spaces, that knows how to master its** ** uses, habits and techniques.

Our autonomy is an unceasing relationship between what is pre-individual and what is individual. The pre-individual is everything that is common and generic, like the biological faculties of the human being, language and the social relationships we find when we are born. The individual is what we snatch away through our activity. We *become* individuals through our way of entering into relationships with nature and with history. In this sense, solitude and encounter, forest and village are a threshold between the past and the present. Just as the individual ethic is born and stands out in a collective dimension (the concept of *ethos* refers – not randomly – to the place where one lives, the usages and customs), living spaces are the encounter between generations and their art of *inhabiting*. Industrial society, however, makes it increasingly impossible for different usages and customs to live together, just as it abolishes all harmonious interchange between the various techniques worked out in the course of history, in this way destroying the basic creativity of communities.

In short, a “surrounding for us to live within” is a place in which the “art of uttering great speeches and carrying out great deeds” (to take back the splendid definition of politics that is found in Homer) responds to two basic necessities:

- that activity is not separated through its representation;
- that techniques employed are not irreversible.

One of the essential characteristics of present-day society is that within it we are witness to a growing gap between the activity that we carry out and our capacity to depict its consequences. Due to the extreme division and specialization of labor, due to a gigantic technological apparatus that makes us more ignorant every day about the tools that we use (incapable as we are, individually, of understanding their nature, of mastering their production, of repairing their breakdowns), we aren’t aware of the significance of our activities. This is why the product of our activities can be calmly falsified and artificially reconstructed for us. To give an example, someone noted that it is easier – in terms of the real repercussion of the action on the awareness – to bomb an entire population than to kill an individual person. A bombed population is only whatever flash of light on a screen, whereas a murdered person is a reality whose complete weight the consciousness bears. This is why the current society is able to make us tolerate a daily scientifically organized butchering: because it renders the relationship between actions and their consequences increasingly obscure. From financial speculation to military production, from necrotechnology to the nuclear industry, everyone can find examples for themselves.

A “surrounding for us to live within” is a place in which activity is not separated through its representation (meant in the political sense, as delegation, in the media/spectacular sense, as a system of images to be passively contemplated, and in the mental sense, as the dimming of awareness) [1].

Another decisive characteristic of the current society is that it has taken techniques (for producing, building, exchanging) away from any local and communitarian dimension, distancing them in a *megamachine* the consequences of which are increasingly irreversible. From nuclear waste to genetic mutation, techno-science has lost any experimental – and thus reversible – character because its experiments now have the world as *laboratory* – and there isn’t any spare world.

A “surrounding for us to live within” is a place in which the question of technical efficacy is always subordinated to ethical and social considerations, in which it is possible to turn around if a path leads to the impoverishment of human relationships, hierarchical specialization and power. Only a totalitarian ideology legitimates everything that is technically realizable as scientific, thus imprisoning human becoming in a mechanical succession without end.

Any progress deserving of the name – in customs, in mentality, in social relationships – is sought against this force march.

A Spare Tire

State ecology – of which the COP9 summit represents a fine concentrate – is only the spare tire of industrial society. In fact, it is increasingly the *police* management of “environmental resources”. Without ever questioning the generalized dependence on the most polluting materials and technologies, it seeks to “moralize” atomized city-dwellers subjecting them to further controls and vexations. Since this society no longer knows where to put its trash (in both the narrow and the broad sense), let’s go rummage in every family’s garbage and punish the wasteful.

A shining example of this ecologist ideology is the proposal made by *Legambiental* [2] with regard to new energy sources for stopping greenhouse gasses. For the entire duration of the summit, by sending two electronic text messages per euro through the cellphone, one contributed not only to the spread of cancer, but also – courtesy of the mobile phone companies – to the acquisition of an Aeolian power plant in Swaziland. When these court environmentalists at times launch catastrophic alarms (about ozone, the icecaps, the scarcity of water), it is only in order to push the civilized still closer to the institutions and their supposed experts. To put it briefly, this ecology is the state solution to state problems, the capitalist solution to capitalist problems.

Up to now the most beautiful – and involuntary – response to the summits of the earth destroyers was given by the Milanese streetcar drivers, announcing the heated return of the wildcat whose absence had been noticed for so long. Beyond their wage demands, maintained outside of any union scenario, these “irresponsibles”, these “criminals”, these “urban terrorists” (as the media and political choir described them) have posed an important problem of social ecology: that of movement in the big cities. A simple blockade of the transit network paralyzed an entire city. Rather than questioning themselves about how much they really control their lives and movements, city dwellers cried about the scandal, assembled on the sidewalks, throwing the very fact of existing in each other’s face. The ecologists were not missing, scolding the strikers for causing pollution to increase due to additional car traffic (as if delays or absences at the workplace would not have, in reality, cleared the air a bit).

A sensibility and its world

In the last few years, there have been some struggles that were able to intertwine that necessity of conflict and direct action with the reality and the dream of a “surrounding for us to live within”. I think of the many initiatives and actions in solidarity with Marco Camenisch. It seems to me that most of the time these have been able to go beyond the limits usually present in mobilizations in support of any particular prisoner, communicating a sensibility and its world. I’ll explain. In the face of repression there is often the tendency to almost suspend one’s struggles in order to talk about prison and the comrades inside, involuntarily reducing the condition to a conflict between us and those in power. In the case of solidarity with Marco, however, starting from his struggle, the battle for his liberation has defined itself as a continuation and reinforcement of the reasons that led to his arrest: the practical critique of environmental and social harmfulness.. We know from experience that this resistance to the tyranny of progress has been able to speak not only to comrades, but also to others, and that some mountain-dwellers and shepherds have considered Marco to be one of them. I noticed

the same thing with the campaign against Benneton. Initiatives against multinationals often lead neglect of the normal despotism of industrial production in order to concentrate on the excesses of a specific globalized economy – I don't think there's any need to give examples. Linking the environmental devastation caused by Benneton to the life and resistance of the Mapuche has been able to bring the problem close, instead of distancing it in an exoticism of sympathetic hues. These are small signs. Still it shows that an opposition to harmfulness based on direct action could generalize as happened recently in Basilicata, Italy. [3]. I am not saying that we need to talk more about the environment and less about prison. On the contrary. I am saying that it is possible to pose the problem of prison – in discussions and in practice – in a social sense, not starting from "our misfortunes". The best way of expressing solidarity with imprisoned comrades is to radicalize our struggles in their totality.

There is no doubt that a strong repressive wind is rising. I think that the decisive stake in play is that of being able to interpret this repression. Current living and working conditions can be imposed through an increasingly massive use of terror (terror of remaining unemployed and of not being able to pay quickly rising rents, terror of the police and of prison). Repression acts against atomized individuals whose increasing dependence on a bankrupt way of life is rendering them incapable of any material or ideal solidarity. It is a mistake to separate the repressive attacks from this progressive disintegration of the world – in the sense of a direct experience of reality and of one's fellow human beings, outside of the media and mercantile bell-jar, outside of the tomb-like apartments of the concentration imposed by urban planning. Knowing how to interpret repression also means not falling into the illusion that those in power strike us because we are a real threat (with all the locking up of identity that such an illusion entails). If we are a detonator, as someone has said, the aim of those in power is to separate us from any explosive material, i.e., from any social context of struggle. In word and action, we should do the exact opposite.

In anti-industrial circles, reference is often rightly made to the luddite insurrection against machinery (1811-1813). If the English government had to use more soldiers against the destroyers of machines than against Napoleon's troops, it is because they were facing an authentic social uprising, anonymous and leaderless. An uprising in which the weapon of sabotage – always the pre-eminent tool of proletarian struggle – carried within itself a "surrounding for us to live within". It was the work of a true and proper social intelligence, as is shown by the fact that during the attacks against industrial machinery, the machines that could be used, interchanged and repaired on a local and communitarian basis, that is, outside of the factory system, were spared. Despite the accusations of all the progressive and Marxist historians, there was nothing "blind" in this revolt. A subsistence economy that made extensive use of collective lands came into conflict with the system of property; an autonomy in the art of building homes and producing where the village met the countryside came into conflict with the dislocation into cities. Industrialism has had to train sensibilities – through beatings – in order to make them fit into its world, its techniques, its values.

Repression is the bulldozer of a capitalism that is destroying the world, of a civilization that isolates men and women in order to later socialize them into its virtual community.

Utopia in the mud

It seems to me that the current situation is full of possibilities. If we were not so often incapable of practicing poetry, i.e., “the art of making illegal marriages and divorces between things”, as Bacon said, we would grasp many connections between situations that seem to be distant from each other. An example might be the one made earlier, of the wildcat strike of transit workers on the opening day of the environmental conference. There are many others. In this regard, I would like it if comrades were to deepen a discussion: the guerrilla war in Iraq and the questions that opens up.

What is going on there confirms a reality often expressed by revolutionaries: what no army could do (opposing and making things difficult for the greatest military force in the world), a social guerrilla war is able to do. Once again this suggests the necessity – in much smaller situations as well – of considering the concept of force differently. But I am not so interested in speaking about this, because we still have very little information about the role that the clans linked to the old regime play in the resistance (although the extreme diversity of techniques of attack against the occupation troops suggests that there is a social conflict in action that cannot be reduced to a war between powers). In the same way, I take for granted here the important occasion we have, especially after Nassiriya [4], of speaking about who the real terrorists are (the state and its lackeys), considering the propagandistic use that is made of the “terrorist alarm”, with its immediate repressive fallout. The governors know how to link the external Enemy (whoever impedes military aggression) to the internal Enemy (whoever remains outside of the choir of consent) much too well. We will have to draw some lessons from this in a hurry.

The Iraq situation, nonetheless, offers food for thought with regard to the relationships already sketched out between industrial society, ecological emergency and repression. I will emphasize a few of these.

There is the question of oil. Numerous studies commissioned by the oil companies are in agreement in pointing to the exhaustion of crude oil resources within the next ten years (not the absolute exhaustion, but rather the exhaustion of that portion of the oil that can be extracted using less energy than what could be gotten from the extracted oil). The curve indicated for natural gas is not many years longer. The same studies inform us that all the alternative energies (nuclear included) would not be able to satisfy even half of the current requirements. Without going into detail here [...], a question is posed. Even without considering that capital has not provided for alternative projects, kept opportunely hidden for the moment, there is no doubt that the problem exists, and that it brings to light some of the historical – if not downright ecological-planetary – limits of present social organization. To give an example, let’s consider that modern-day agriculture depends 95% on oil (herbicides, pesticides, tractors, industries for manufacturing pieces of machinery and other tools, means for assembling and transporting them, power stations to allow all this and so on). This oil society has generalized dependence on a single resource to such an extent (even the extraction and distribution of water are subordinated to it, and not just for the famous tubular wells actioated by diesel), that the scarcity of such a resource takes shape as a catastrophe. Alter-

native solutions or not, the leap will not be painless, and the rulers know it. Here is the second point I want to emphasize: anyone who sees the war in Iraq only as a military occupation for taking control of the energy resources is mistaken (though this is certainly also there, as the fundamental role of the oil companies in supporting the Bush administration shows). What is going on is a huge political and social experiment: testing the capacity of for resistance of entire populations placed in limited situations, situations that will be more and more frequent in the future. Iraq is a laboratory of economic investments, of military strategies, but, above all, of social engineering. The ruling order – dealing with necrotechnology or oil – is increasingly carrying out a kind of experimentum mundi: experimentation on the world as such. The civilized must be adapted to all this with increasingly massive doses of control, vexation, terror. In the United States, there are now more prisoners than farmers. In the face of this reality, the Kyoto accords are a macabre hoax, or rather, an ultimatum that sounds like this: you will have no other world except me. And here, the curtain falls on all ecology that doesn't want to subvert this society and its institutions. All the alternative energy and all the most diligent organic cultivation in the world run up against this fact: when agriculture itself, now entirely mechanized, cannot do without a system of death, there is nothing to reform. This is what the war and the guerrilla resistance in Iraq are telling us.

No more illusions. The “surrounding for us to live within” that we have in our hearts will be born from the mud, but even in the mud, it is always necessary to affirm the way of life for which we are fighting.

A friend of Ludd

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1. *In the preceding paragraphs, a phrase is used in Italian, “l’attività non si separa dalla sua rappresentazione”. This phrase can be translated both as “activity is not separated through (or by) its representation” and “activity is not separated from its depiction” (or our capacity to depict it in all its consequences). The author of this piece uses the phrase in both senses, but there isn’t a single way to say both in English.*

2. *Environmental League, one of the best-known Italian environmental organizations.*

3. *In November 2003 blockade movement organized through general assemblies shut the region down, forcing the regional government of Basilicata to cancel plans for installing a nuclear waste deposit site.*

4. *Where 19 Italian troops and 7 Iraqis were killed in an attack.*

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