

A METICULOUS PROCESS OF INQUIRY



The Hamilton Institute

technologies bring into existence ways of living) and mapping this to specific development projects is an important first step. It gets us out of certain dead ends in how we approach conflicts (e.g. gentrification is caused by people from Toronto moving to Hamilton, therefore don't move here), but without further inquiry, it can make the challenges seem hopelessly large – it can leave us back in the realm of monsters.

Like Diderot and D'Alembert visiting foundries to understand the production of steel that allowed the church's goons to arm themselves, can we understand not just where the pipelines and pump stations are, but how they work? In the event of a sustained uprising, would we be able not just to stop the flows of fuel, but to distribute fuel ourselves and deny the state the power to say who still has access (because we know well who that would be). Same for the electrical and water infrastructure – we might well be able to disrupt the flows on which this world depends, but if we cannot also produce our own flows, our own web of relationships and inter-dependencies, then our actions can only be temporary and symbolic, with the real power over the infrastructure remaining safely in the hands of those who govern.

Some Inspirations from Chapter 4 of À Nos Amis // To Our Friends

From Hamilton, with Love

not preserve a neighborhood, it very well might impoverish one and, most of all, it cannot as easily be turned on its head to buttress the functioning of this repressive society.”

To Our Friends suggests that the process of inquiry needs to be taken further, beyond an identification of targets: “For a revolutionary force, it is meaningless to know how to block the infrastructure of your adversary if you don’t know how to make it work to your benefit when you get the chance.”

“Insurrections draw their force, their capacity to lastingly ravage their opponent’s infrastructure, is simply their level of self-organization of collective life.” The trick though is that infrastructure is not what we want – we want real relationships, collectivity: “Whoever says ‘infrastructure’ speaks of a life separated from its conditions. Which means conditions have been placed on life. That life depends on factors over which it no longer has influence.” *To Our Friends* goes on to explore in the next chapters how every technique brings into existence a way of life — creating new flows and complicities through struggle means nothing less than producing new ways of life, a proliferation of possible worlds that block up the system of domination as they come into being.

What does this mean concretely? Here in Southern Ontario, our movements are increasingly aware of the infrastructural nature of control – the network of oil and gas pipelines through this region produce certain forms of life on a national scale; the construction of transportation infrastructure like highways and commuter trains produces a more flexible, mobile workforce and fuels gentrification by extending the pressure of Toronto’s housing market to the surrounding cities; regional policing bodies pool their resources as temporary formations to attack political opponents during moments of heightened social tension; progressive pro-development groups disguise the physical transformation of our neighborhoods as revitalization; borders, be that at airports or at bridges over the Niagara river, are redesigned to simplify the flow of commodities and restrict the movement of people; the rise of the internet and platforms like facebook as the most important social spaces leaves us collectively inside, alone, and under permanent surveillance... an endless list.

Identifying that infrastructure reproduces society (as all

A Meticulous Process of Inquiry

When we look at the world around us, the scale of the disaster can seem overwhelming. We know that many processes on which we currently rely are in fact harming us, but can we imagine stopping them? And if we succeed in stopping the flows, how do we sustain the social forms we produce through our resistance? How do blockades produce new forms of self-organization?

In the chapter “Power is Logistical; Let’s Block Everything!”, the anonymous authors of *To Our Friends*, a follow-up to *The Coming Insurrection*, argue that “Power is the very organization of the world, this engineered, configured, and designed world. [...] Whoever determines how the space is organized, whoever governs the environments and the ambiances, who administrates, who controls access – it is they who govern people. [...] The true structure of power is the material, technological, and physical organization of the world.” Therefore “A revolutionary perspective is not focussed on institutional reorganization of society, but on the technical reorganization of worlds.”

“This world manages to maintain itself by keeping us materially dependent for our basic survival on the good working order of the social machinery. We need to equip ourselves with a deep technical knowledge of the organization of this world, a knowledge that at once permits us to sabotage the dominant structures and that allows us the time necessary to disentangle ourselves from the general progress of the catastrophe ... For as long as the prospect of a popular uprising inevitably means scarcity of medical care, food, and energy, there will be no determined mass movement. In other words, we must undertake a meticulous process of inquiry. It is only from there that movements will truly dare to block everything.”

Although it's not necessarily true that a mass movement is the best or only way of pursuing liberatory goals, it is interesting to consider how mass insurrections become revolutionary by taking control of their material organization and producing 'new worlds'. That we can prepare for these moments of upheaval by undertaking a meticulous process of inquiry is perhaps an interesting goal for us during the seemingly endless periods of social peace.

In 1745, 45 years before the revolution that would set in motion the destruction of monarchy and religious tyranny in western Europe, a massive process of inquiry began in France, under the ponderous title of "The Encyclopedia, or the reasoned dictionary of the sciences, arts, and trades". This colossal work took 30 years to make and finally would include 35 volumes with 72 000 articles covering a huge range of subjects, with a special focus on philosophy, science, and engineering. From our present moment, where information is considered fundamentally powerless and its free and flow is central to how society maintains itself, it might be hard to imagine that The Encyclopedia was heavily censored, its authors persecuted, copies of it destroyed by authorities, and it had to be smuggled across borders to reach its readers.

However, to its authors, this repression was predictable, because they knew their central premise was totally incompatible with the dominant powers of their time: that the world is knowable, that all phenomena have a natural explanation, that knowledge comes from inquiry and not divine right, that even complex techniques can be taught to anyone, and that with this, people can take power over their own lives and conditions. The Encyclopedia was a thoroughly bourgeois project, but it took clear aim at the obvious contradictions of a parasitic ruling class and contributed to the material and theoretical groundwork that would allow people to create their own worlds without rulers.

In our present context, information is considered fundamentally harmless, and even the expression of supposedly 'radical' opinions has been subsumed into the pacifying democratic logic of free speech. How do we undertake a process of inquiry in such a way that it can actually threaten the systems of power? When society is mostly controlled by managers, engineers, brokers, and bureaucrats, what kinds of information actually allow us to combat their dominance? A 2012 article from Bay of Rage

called "Oakland is for Burning? Beyond a critique of gentrification" offers what might be an answer:

"As the entire physical space of the metropolis is constructed to reproduce a certain set of relations (capitalist, patriarchal, alienated), the entirety must be destroyed or subverted. The revolutionary project (to use a term of convenience) must be anti-infrastructural: Anything less can be turned on its head to buttress the functioning of this repressive society. This project, of course, is suicidal. The networks of domination and control no longer administer merely our death or our imprisonment, they also administer our lives and the reproduction of our conditions. To refuse the constraints and control of society is to attack the very thing that gives us life. When we enter into refusal together, we occasionally find sustenance outside the flows of capital. This sustenance has, at different times, been called "communism", "friendship" or maybe doesn't exist at all.

"By focusing on the material situation in the city, we can direct our attacks against the apparatuses that reproduce society. The power to reproduce the misery of society is exchanged in the material realm, not in politics. The success of anti-infrastructural projects is that they actually disrupt the spread and strengthening of empire, rather than engaging on a spectacular level."

We can see these authors are getting at a similar point as those of *To Our Friends*. They define infrastructure broadly, to include business associations, lobby groups, security and surveillance, urban improvement schemes, housing and commercial construction, 'public' transit, and industrial transportation like ports and rail lines. There's a saying in certain corners of the anarchist space: "There are no monsters". A monster is an enemy that we fear but do not understand – by understanding our enemies as complex, technical, and tragically human and not as monsters, we can more accurately work to dismantle or subvert them. However, there's a nihilistic (or maybe just realistic) edge to Oakland is for Burning?:

"Attacking the very functioning of this society, the way it moves commodities and mediates exchange, is opaque to the logic of the left. A praxis of critique and attack positioned against progress (which is only the refinement and spread of empire) will not create jobs, but rather destroy them, in will