DISINTEGRATION AND DIS-INTEGRATION

The word “disintegration” has two meanings that are closely related. The first is “decay or destruction.” When something decays it dissolves into elements that are qualitatively different from the whole, parts that can no longer function individually. The second meaning is “a separation into component parts, a breaking up.” It is possible for the whole to dis-integrate by separating into smaller units that can still function as discrete entities.

Our global society is disintegrating in both senses of the word. Sometimes the disintegration results in individual parts that are too small and fragmented to function effectively; they fly apart in an explosion of violence and disorder. Then we get the kind of decay that is occurring in many U.S. cities. Alternatively, dis-integration can result in unified centers of power that are smaller, more human-scaled. Then we have communities.

Almost every country in the world contains groups that are agitating for more autonomy. In some cases these factions are ethnically exclusive; their methods of struggle are violent; their goal is to control land and dominate other peoples. But in some places we also see “special interest” groups that believe in tolerance and cooperation as well as greater autonomy. These groups are striving to define their individuality and gain more control over their lives. I consider this trend the positive side of disintegration.

“...sometimes societies fall apart in ways that release life-affirming energies. And what may look like anarchy from the viewpoint of the established cultural center may be the troubled birth of a new, more humanly becoming social order. There are creative, as well as destructive, forms of disintegration.”

—Theodore Roszak
Person/Planet

LIFE AND DIGNITY

All ideas expressed in this zine are intended to be provisional, offered in a spirit of play. I am not pushing dogma or ideology. I have no goal in mind, no vision of a perfect social or political system. History, like life, is a process.

I am not afraid of contradictions. What is true today may not be true tomorrow. We live in a time when we must be prepared to examine our beliefs each day, and not be surprised to find that everything we know is false.
If I believe that nothing is objectively true, on what basis do I make political, social and moral decisions? I have created my own truth, a core value that is inviolable and permanent. I can state my core value simply: human life and dignity are sacred. This is an ancient idea (Christians call it the *Golden Rule*) that has been buried over the centuries by the accumulation of cultural values. At one time, the purpose of these values may have been the preservation of life and dignity, but many have become antiquated, petrified and often no longer serve human needs.

As the world changes, the way I implement my core value changes. I make today’s decisions based on what course of action best seems to advance my core value in today’s social context. Tomorrow, the decision that best defends my core value may be exactly the opposite.

I recognize no rule, no principle, no law, save this one: human life and dignity are sacred. Within the framework of this moral imperative anything is permitted. From this core value I construct a network of temporary values that reflect the way I really live. This core value guides me as I struggle to help build a new kind of world, with social structures that are small, flexible, organic, and person-centered.

Such a conditional belief system requires that I think about the results of my actions, rather than blindly follow some moral code. It requires that I take responsibility for each of my choices.

Since I can not predict the future or envisage exactly what effect a particular action will ultimately have, the correct decision is never clear. Nevertheless, I must endeavor to make political, social and moral choices that lead me in the general direction of my primary guiding truth. Beyond my core value, I do not believe in absolute morality. Rather, my morality has a tendency.

**UTOPIA**

This century has seen the human race make great strides in science and technology. We have walked on the moon, eradicated diseases, unleashed the power of the atom. Yet culturally we are in many ways still living in the Middle Ages. It is a reflection of the control those in power have over our consciousness that whenever someone dares suggest ways to perfect our political/social/economic system, they are dismissed as a hopeless idealist or a nut.
I embrace utopian ideals. I believe the world can change in startling ways. Amazing things are possible. When social or political systems are empty shells they can collapse quickly, just as Communism did. The only thing that supports our present reality is our belief in it. We can hasten the destruction of that reality and undermine the antiquated values and institutions that prop it up by living our own truth.

Now we stumble through the rubble of the old world toward a new millennium. As decline advances, new forms come into focus—the outline of a new world. But some institutions seem stronger than ever: multinational corporations, the media, religion. These seem destined to survive, at least in some form. We must struggle to destroy such institutions, or transform them so they promote human dignity rather than degrade it. Once we truly believe things can change, and begin to act on our most utopian dreams, we may find there is no limit to our human potential.

NEW IDEAS

We are living in a historical era of unlimited possibility. The old world is dying and a new one has not yet been conceived. But the leading candidates for architects of this new world are the same wealthy elites who designed the old one. Truly new ideas that can lead to a more humanized society are not easy to find.

In the U.S., corporations, governments and churches are able to tightly manage and manipulate collective consciousness. The new, the revolutionary, the latest and the greatest are really just the old and moldy dressed up in new clothes. In the thinking of both the left and the right, the dead ideas of the dominant culture go largely unquestioned. Cultural precepts like patriarchy, hierarchy, the authoritarian family, religious ideology, fixed roles, alienated work, consumerism and militarism are all accepted without serious challenge.

So where will the new ideas come from that will allow us to build a new world on the rubble of the old? We know where they won’t come from. They won’t come from Congress or the public relations department at Exxon. You won’t find them on TV. Don’t count on hearing them from the fat intellectual prostitutes at the universities who gorge...
themselves with government and corporate funding.

Instead, new ideas will originate wherever critical thinking flourishes: the grassroots, the fringes of society, the underground—wherever common people are struggling to discover their individuality and seize control of their lives. This is the terrain that the ruling elites can’t control because it is too diverse, too decentralized.

None of the “great ideas” that changed history suddenly materialized out of thin air. The genius of Marx and Darwin was in their ability to assimilate and articulate ideas that were already part of the consciousness of the times, embedded in everyday life. We all contribute to the way human society evolves, especially when we think new thoughts, believe new things, and live in new ways.

We must learn to take our subjectivity seriously. What we believe in our deepest heart is true. Our wildest desires and dreams are real, and possess real power. The controlling force of all the corporate propaganda, religious guilt, and governmental coercion shrinks to insignificance in the face of a single human being with a profound belief in a revolutionary idea.

**SOCIAL REVOLUTION**

When the old institutions crumble, there is no guarantee that more human-centered structures will replace them. In fact, conservatives have their own ideas about how the world should be organized, and it’s not pretty.

That is why we all must participate in the transformation of society—to ensure that human values replace the values of the old elite. Because destruction is also creation, the methods we use to pull down the ruins will determine what kind of world arises from the rubble.
Our struggle should not be completely political because political revolutions simply deliver concentrated power into new hands, rather than dispersing it. Furthermore, political thought is rarely innovative: political change usually originates from social conditions, rather than the other way around.

Instead of political revolution, our goal should be social revolution. Social revolution is nothing more than a change in the way we live our lives. It springs from changes in the way we think.

In today’s context, revolution occurs when people stop believing one thing, and start believing something else; when people discard their old ways of living, and begin to live in new ways. When enough people lose faith in an institution and begin to act as if it did not exist, that institution disappears.

Values and institutions are social constructions. They were not handed down by God or created by nature. We invented them. And if they don’t serve our needs, we have the power to eliminate them.

Everything we do can have revolutionary implications: how we make money, how we spend our leisure time, how we relate to our family, friends, co-workers, strangers. Every activity that asserts individuality and autonomy from corporate/government/religious control is in itself a profoundly revolutionary act, regardless of content.

When we make our own music (garage bands, self-produced records), produce our own food (home-brewed beer, collective gardens), or create our own forms of communication (graffiti, zines), we strike at the heart of mega-corporation hegemony. When we engage in “do-it-yourself” projects that express our unique personalities and deepest desires, we participate in the transformation of the world.
THE CONSERVATIVE “REVOLUTION”

Conservatives say our social system is in decline. I agree. Conservatives say our traditional values are under attack. I agree again. But generally the conservative analysis stops there, appealing for a return to the good old days when “family values,” moral discipline and blind obedience to authority smoothed the way for unlimited industrial expansion and profits.

It’s not hard to understand why traditional values are losing their power. People’s desires, expectations and visions have changed. Today many of us demand more social freedom than ever before to live our own lifestyles, choose our own roles, and discover our true selves.

No matter how much they pray, no matter how much they preach, no matter how much they legislate, cajole and coerce, the conservatives can not turn back the changes in social consciousness that the last few decades have wrought.

Too many false values have grown up in the backwash of Capitalism and Christianity. We must clear the ground so we can start again without illusions, without ideological baggage from the past that drags us down, without the mind-set instilled in us by people who wish to subjugate us.

It is the rich and powerful who have the most to lose in the breakdown of the present system, so of course they are the ones who cry loudest for a return to the old values. Like men possessed, they will fight to preserve the privileged status their institutions afford them. In the end, however, they will lose because of one simple social principle: everything changes.

APOCALYPSE

Myths about the end of the world are as old as humanity. But whereas in past centuries the realization of such fantasies was a remote possibility, apocalypse today is becoming an increasing probability.

“Enmeshed in classical history and classical education, all he can do is to lapse into vague sermonizing, telling the Romans, as many a moralist had told them throughout the centuries, that they must undergo an ethical regeneration and return to the simplicities and self-sacrifices of their ancestors. Indeed, that is the one plan that can be expected of him, since he was only able to conceive the present in terms of Rome’s splendid past, when each successive obstacle had been triumphantly overcome. There was just no room at all, in these ways of thinking, for the novel, apocalyptic situation which had now arisen, a situation which needed solutions as radical as itself.”

—Michael Grant, writing about Roman historian Ammianus. The Fall of the Roman Empire

“The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking. Thus we are drifting towards a catastrophe beyond conception.”

—Albert Einstein
The dangers we now face as a species are all of our own making. Our failure to adjust our cultural values to changing material conditions (brought on primarily by technology) makes our long-term survival doubtful.

Two hundred years ago war was a kind of sport, a game for power and prestige played by the aristocracy. War in those days had little effect on the average citizen (unless he happened to be a soldier) and certainly did not threaten the fabric of society.

Today, despite the end of the “cold war” charade, there are still 50,000 nuclear weapons in the world, enough to turn the earth into a radioactive wasteland many times over. Yet the institution of war persists, little changed from the days of swords and muskets. We are still trying to play the same old game even though our toys have evolved into terrifying weapons of mass destruction. Our failure to adjust our cultural values to changing material conditions makes our long-term survival doubtful.

In 1950 there were 2.5 billion human souls in the world. Today there are 5.8 billion. Fifty years from now there could be 10 billion people on planet Earth. This staggering growth in population is a major factor in many of the problems that threaten to put an end to humanity. Pollution, famines, epidemics, resource exhaustion, ozone depletion, climate change, biodiversity reduction, and waste disposal problems are all aggravated by ever-increasing numbers of human beings.

Yet the mere discussion of birth control is taboo in many parts of the world, including some places in the “advanced” industrial societies. The Catholic Church, one of the most influential cultural institutions in the world, continues to forbid the use of any kind of birth control at all. Old beliefs, which may have once served good purposes, can become pernicious in a new context. Our failure to adjust our cultural values to changing material conditions makes our long-term survival doubtful.
THAT LIGHT WE THINK WE SEE AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL MAY BE THE FLASH OF OUR ANNIHILATION
Population growth alone is overloading the earth’s ability to support life. Adding to the crisis is the fact that per capita resource usage and waste production also continue to increase at an alarming rate. But even at current levels of population and consumption, we are depleting the ecosphere faster than it can renew itself. In the U.S. we are, in essence, borrowing from the earth’s future to sustain our wasteful lifestyles.

Yet it is almost universally accepted that the answer to all global problems is accelerated industrial output. Our major political/economic models—capitalism, socialism, communism—are all premised on the control and exploitation of nature to achieve ever-increasing levels of production and consumption. In the industrial world our obsession with consuming useless junk has taken on truly pathological dimensions. Shopping has become one of our most sacred institutions, rivaling religion as a meaningless substitute for meaning in our empty lives.

If we wish to avoid catastrophic ecological and social upheaval, we must make radical changes in the way we live, and in the way we perceive our role in the global ecosystem. Our failure to adjust our cultural values to changing material conditions makes our long-term survival doubtful.

While our values change slightly from generation to generation, our circumstances change radically from moment to moment. It seems impossible that world cultures can ever adapt quickly enough to avoid disaster. We may well be doomed.

Yet, in the meantime, we still must live our lives. And in that, at least, we have choices. We can choose to lose ourselves in the crowd, mindlessly embracing its nihilistic values and lifestyles, as it sweeps us along in an orgy of mass extinction. Or we can choose to take a stand and live with integrity, unafraid of new ways of living or radical forms of refusal that following our own inner truth might demand.

Our efforts to transform the world may be futile. It may already be too late. But by struggling to live in truth we can at least have the satisfaction of facing annihilation with dignity and style.

“We are no longer in a state of growth; we are in a state of excess. We are living in a society of excrescence, meaning that which incessantly develops without being measurable against its own objectives.”

—Jean Baudrillard
“The Anorexic Ruins”
From Looking Back on the End of the World

SURGEON GENERAL’S WARNING:
Shopping Has Been Shown To Cause Cancer In Laboratory Animals.
IF WE DESTROY THE EARTH, WE’LL ALL BE HOMELESS.
William J. Bennett, a prominent conservative, has written a book called *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* which uses statistics and quotes to document the decline in America values and the breakdown of public order. It’s easy to see how this book could terrify anyone with a stake in the New World Order (a euphemism for the Old World Order).

In the real New World, technology, perceptions, and social relationships are all changing rapidly and radically. But our values and institutions are changing very slowly.

Many of Bennett’s examples of “decline” are the result of a vacuum left by the dissolution of the old social system. Because we insist on clinging to antiquated structures as if they were still viable, we have not allowed more relevant values to evolve.

Humpty Dumpty can not be put back together again. Too many of our values have become broken, hollow shells that no longer relate to our real lives. We need to annihilate the remnants of these outdated beliefs because they contribute to our alienation and subjugation.
“The history of our time calls to mind those Walt Disney characters who rush madly over the edge of a cliff without seeing it: the power of their imagination keeps them suspended in mid-air, but as soon as they look down and see where they are, they fall. Contemporary thought...can no longer rest on its own delusions. What used to hold it up, today brings it down. It rushes full tilt in front of the reality that will crush it: the reality that is lived every day.”

—Raoul Vaneigem

The Revolution of Everyday Life
People will not stop seeking pleasure. People will not stop having babies outside the family. People will not stop trying to chemically alter their perceptions. People will not stop resisting pre-fabricated social roles. People will not stop individuating and searching for their true selves.

These are social facts. Yet curiously, all these practices are frowned upon, not only by "moral leaders," but by the general public as well. If our lives seem false, empty, unreal, it is because what we believe is in conflict with the way we live. We are living out of sync.

At times we are all frightened by the increase in crime, the dissolution of the family, vague feelings of disorientation, desperation and dread. But we must understand that we are living through a transitional period. We are drifting in the interstices of historical eras. Chaos reigns because we cling desperately to meaningless, obsolete beliefs that no longer address our present needs, yet we are still too confused and terrified to embrace a new vision.

What follows are some quotations from Bennett’s book and my comments suggesting how a misplaced faith in archaic social structures is contributing to our present crisis. Obviously, these are complex issues and no one can offer a single explanation for the diverse social problems Bennett illustrates. Nevertheless, it seems clear that much of the suffering, disruption and dislocation we feel in our lives today results from values and institutions that are totally out of step with conditions of real life.

“Since 1960, total crimes have increased by more than 300 percent.”

Greed, selfishness, competition, aggression, survival of the fittest, preservation of vital interests, domination by force: these are the traditional values central to our capitalistic/militaristic world view. Capitalism is built on the premise that society works best when everyone competes to grab all they can, as long as they stay within the rules.
But it has increasingly come to our attention that the rules are stacked against us, that in fact the rules were written by the wealthy to benefit the wealthy and to keep the rest of us in subservient roles. When we apply the capitalist’s values, but break the capitalist’s self-serving rules, the result is crime.

“While population has increased only 41 percent since 1960, the number of violent crimes has increased more than 550 percent.”

Violence is a traditional value in our society. “Legitimate” state violence (police and military) is the glue that ultimately holds the system together. When that same value is adopted by folks who have nothing, and folks who have plenty feel threatened and unsafe, it becomes a national crisis.

War deserves special mention as a widely accepted institution that has far-reaching destructive social impact on winners as well as losers, non-combatants as well as soldiers. If the government wishes to discourage violence in our streets, it sets a poor example by dropping bombs on women and children in Iraq.

“In 1991, in Los Angeles, there was a greater chance that a citizen would die from a bullet wound than from a traffic accident.”

Gun worship is a clear example of a cultural custom that is out of step with reality. When the gun fetishism of nineteenth-century rural America is imported into today’s tense, overcrowded cities, the result is mayhem.

“The fastest growing segment of the criminal population is our nation’s children.”

“One child out of every five in the nation lives in poverty, and of all age groups, children are the most likely to be poor.”

Concern for the poor is contrary to the basic premises of capitalism. Years of selfish neglect of our children and the underprivileged (and especially underprivileged children) have created, lets face it, a generation of monsters.
To a kid on the street with no money, no job, no skills, no future and no hope, white middle class values have no meaning—and either does anything else. Frustration, desperation, and despair breed nihilism—the lack of any values at all.

Even if we had the will, it would take decades to undo the damage we have inflicted on our city kids. Black leaders talk of writing off a whole generation and starting over. No matter what we do at this point, these young desperadoes will be paying us back with a vengeance for a very long time.

“The rate at which people are getting married is more than 25 percent lower than in 1960.”

“At present rates, approximately half of all U.S. marriages can be expected to end in divorce.”

Marriage and the nuclear family are two of our most cherished institutions, but too often they no longer fit our lifestyles. Although they may have served a useful purpose at one time, today they have become a source of much suffering and social disruption.

In the old days, when patriarchy went unquestioned, kids learned their roles well and performed them obediently. Most girls made the transition from second-class members of their father’s family to second class members of their husband’s family without missing a beat. Boys too knew their duty: as soon as possible find a woman who can bear your children and keep your house, marry her, and live happily ever after. If things didn’t work out (which was more than likely), partners would stoically accept their fate (with maybe a few discreet affairs on the side) rather than splitting up and violating the sacrosanct institution of marriage.

These days, people increasingly feel the need to break out of roles assigned to them. They often discover this urge later in life, after they have consummated the adolescent
mating ritual—hence the high divorce rate. This is not to say that marriage is wrong for everyone, or that it might not be right for someone at a particular stage in their life. The point is there are thousands of different ways that two people of the opposite sex (or the same sex) can relate to each other, besides the three or four models we have institutionalized. Kids should be taught to discover their own personalities at an early age so they can choose their own roles and lifestyles, without social and parental pressure to conform to outdated institutions.

“Since 1960, illegitimate birth rates have increased more than 400 percent.”

“Almost one-quarter of all unmarried women in the United States become unwed mothers.”

Women have babies out of wedlock for many reasons. Some make a conscious choice to do so because they can’t find a suitable (non-abusive) man, or because they are lesbians (traditional values make no allowances for “alternative” lifestyles), or simply because the nuclear family does not fulfill their needs. Other women, denied access to sex education, birth control or abortion, have babies by accident—a consequence of our sexist and puritanical belief system.

“I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole, for children, two-parent families are preferable.”

—David Popenoe
Rutgers University

This point is valid as far as it goes: two parents are better than one. But if stability is what we want for children, why not three or four or ten potential adult role models per family? There are many alternative family configurations that are healthier for children than the nuclear family, including communal organizations and multi-generational groups of kinfolk (the old-fashioned extended family). Perhaps no one paradigm is right for a given society. Rather, there might be a mix of models so people can choose the type of grouping that best suits their needs.
Capitalism thrives on the modern nuclear family. The family is the perfect consuming unit. Each member has their primary role: the husband earns money, the wife spends it, and the children consume.

When two people get married they need to buy a lot of new stuff. When they buy a house, they have to buy more stuff to go inside it. When they have babies, they have to buy even more stuff.

The fact that the nuclear family is a consuming machine is one reason why wealthy conservatives spend so much energy defending it. Large communal or extended families are too efficient in their use of resources to drive a consumption-based economy.

“Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among adolescents.”

“The prototypical suicide casualty is no longer an older, depressed male. The rate is rising most rapidly among younger males...who are not usually depressed but are angry, frustrated, resentful, often using drugs and unable to communicate their distress.”

Kids sense more acutely the hypocrisy of the society their parents have created. Trying to live within a social system that claims to represent the pinnacle of human existence, kids find nothing in the adult world but crooked politicians, lecherous preachers, ignorant teachers, greedy lawyers, broken marriage vows, dishonest business deals, shoddy consumer goods, cardboard food, rip offs, scams, and television lies.

Idealist by nature, kids find themselves torn between what they have been taught to believe and how they must live to survive. This estrangement from life can easily breed anger, frustration and resentment. With the world in shambles, their parent's lives in turmoil, and their own lives a swirl of meaningless confusion and chaos, is it any wonder some of them choose to opt out?
Kids see life drained of significance by values that should point to meaning, but in fact point nowhere. If there seems to be no future, it is because the present has been sucked dry of authenticity by phony ideals like consumerism, conformity, and competition.

“The social regression of the last 30 years is due in large part to the enfeebled state of our social institutions and their failure to carry out a critical and time-honored task: the moral education of the young. We desperately need to recover a sense of the fundamental purpose of education, which is to engage in the architecture of souls. When a self-governing society ignores this responsibility, then, as this book demonstrates, it does so at its peril.”

The goal of education in our society is to produce skilled, disciplined workers and citizens through indoctrination (“architecture of souls”). But many kids today are no longer interested in being cogs in the wheels of the industrial machine, and find the present educational system irrelevant to their needs and concerns.

“Students should be allowed to explore their own interests. The end result of education should be thinking, feeling, concerned human beings who are skilled in pursuing personal fulfillment. If this means we might have people walking around who can’t read or solve algebraic equations, so be it.”

“Education is obfuscation.”

—Theodore Roszak
Person/Planet
If we wish to have a human-centered society, we must allow human qualities to grow in our children. Of course, citizens who are humans rather than efficient, obedient machines might make poor workers and consumers. This is a possibility that the capitalists may find disturbing, since it conflicts with their most dearly held values—ever-expanding production and profits.

**The average household spends over 7 hours a day watching television. The average teenager spends 3 hours a day in front of the tube.**

TV is the ultimate alienation machine. Nothing else imposes the false values of the dominant culture and separates us from real life with such efficiency. I see no prospect of the necessary social changes taking place as long as we continue to allow ourselves to be packaged, bought and sold by this corporate propaganda machine. But maybe that’s just my limited imagination. (Too much TV watching.)

“America’s mainline Protestant churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Episcopal) have lost between one-fifth and one-third of the membership that they claimed in 1965, and the proportion of the population of Americans affiliated with them has reached a twentieth-century low.”

Organized religion ensures social stability by promoting obedience, submission and conformity. For some today, these values have been superseded by a drive for greater freedom and individuality.

Yet despite of the decline in church membership and the growth in personal autonomy, Christian values seem to be increasingly regarded with unquestioned reverence. Once again we see the gap between culture and reality.

“Meanwhile, ‘Biblically conservative’ denominations and other conservative Christian fellowships are among the fastest growing churches.”

Fear is the root of all religion. The more the world changes, the more fearful some people become, and the more these people wish to return to the safety of the past. Historically, we find this same nostalgic clamoring for “traditional values” during most periods of major social change.
Television says: Don't worry, everything is alright. Be happy and shop till we drop.
It is 1992, a warm Thursday afternoon in April and the verdict has just come in. The cops involved in the Rodney King beating have been acquitted. Reaction on the streets starts slowly as the word spreads. I sit huddled in my tiny Koreatown apartment, safely watching the uprising on TV as the media coverage cranks up. The excitement builds as fires break out in more and more areas of South Central Los Angeles. I sit back and enjoy the spectacle like it was some big-budget disaster movie.

But by afternoon the scene has changed. Innocuous images of entertainment on my TV have suddenly thrust their way into my real life. From the window I can see columns of thick black smoke in the distance. The fires come closer, sweeping in from the south and the east until there are dozens in view. The air is thick with smoke and danger, punctuated by the crackling of automatic weapons. On the roof of the market down the street I can see Koreans in battle fatigues firing down at those who have come to loot and burn, or just to watch. Panic sweeps over me and I have to fight the urge to flee the city for the suburbs.

Flipping through the channels, I watch my neighborhood burn from the perspective of the helicopters that rumble...
overhead. Local “news” personalities yammer moronically, bursting with excitement over the big story and the stunning footage, but trying to appear cool and professional lest it seem they were reveling in the destruction. Baffled and clueless, they whine: “How can this be happening?” Nothing in their privileged upbringing has prepared them for this. They call it senseless, stupid, inexplicable. Such violence can only be perpetrated by “bad” people, by criminals, and their analysis of the rebellion goes no deeper than this.

The next day I venture outside. Buildings are still burning. Firefighters dash from fire to fire. People are still looting. There are no police to be seen. Yet there is none of the usual sense of fear in the neighborhood. Instead, an almost carnival-like atmosphere prevails on the crowded streets. Everyone is friendly, talking and laughing and taking pictures of the destruction. Torn from our daily routine of work and habits of psychological subjugation, we are momentarily experiencing real life. We are living anarchy.

Is this the beginning of the Revolution? Will a new world finally rise from the ashes? Or is it the Apocalypse?

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**TV GUIDE LOOKS AT THE UPRISING**

May 16, 1992

*With TV, both taped and live, playing a central role in the Los Angeles riots, we created a special version of “Cheers ‘n’ Jeers.”*

✍️ **JEERS**

To the local TV reporters who contributed to the madness by revealing exact locations of looting and pointing out the absence of police, leading to what one print reporter called a “home shopping network for crooks.”

✍️ **CHEERS**

To Ted Koppel, for offering a special *Nightline* that originated in a church at the center of the riots... Koppel showed grace under pressure and offered several minutes of remarkable if bitter rap from gang leaders who described the upheaval as “renovating our neighborhood.”

✍️ **JEERS**

To Bella Shaw, host of CNN’s *Showbiz Today*, for her speculation after the riots on the coincidence of its being “May Sweeps.” And a second jeer to Shaw: in the midst of interviewing a group of actors calling for peace on the streets, she stopped the proceedings dead when she asked Wesley Snipes, “What’s it like to be a black actor in Hollywood today?”

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*FUCK THE POLICE: Rodney King’s Revenge*
If you drive around the South Bronx you’ll see block after block of rubble and burned-out buildings. In Newark the concrete in the bridges and roads is cracked and crumbling, and you don’t have to look far to see abandoned factories slowly collapsing under their own weight into ugly piles of bricks and weeds. But Los Angeles is younger, and the physical decay is not as evident as it is in many other cities.

The first clue that all is not well in the City of Angels is the graffiti. It is everywhere—on street signs, buses, trucks, freeway overpasses, on buildings in shitty neighborhoods and buildings in “good” neighborhoods. Rarely overtly political, it is nevertheless a revolt against alienation, a testament to the irrepressibility of the oppressed.

The subtle signs of decay are elsewhere as well. You can see them in the huge potholes that proliferate faster than the overworked street maintenance crews can patch them; in the black smoke belching out of buses, in the hazy orange air that stings your eyes. You can see them too in the buildings with iron bars across every window and door; in the ramshackle mom-and-pop convenience stores with dusty, half-empty shelves.

We can look at physical decay that is occurring in all our cities as a metaphor for a much more important underlying reality: social decay. And while the visual signs of disintegration in Los Angeles may

“Every level of our culture today focuses its strongest energies on the terror of dissolution. And our most potent image of what this dissolution will look like is the South Bronx.”

—Michael Ventura
Shadow Dancing in the USA
be more subtle, there is no lack of the usual angst, unrest, and desperation that typify other U.S. cities.

In Los Angeles destitution is everywhere, and spreading. Even in “good” areas you can see the unskilled, the unemployed, the immigrants hanging out on street corners, killing the day with talk and drugs and booze. Those who still have hope gather near paint stores or building supply stores, trying to get picked up by contractors who will offer them a few dollars for their labor and not rip them off after a hard day’s work.

Parts of downtown Los Angeles look like scenes from a science fiction movie about the end of the world. Hundreds of homeless people live in cardboard boxes or lean-tos built from the debris of disintegrating buildings. Angry and resentful, they swarm like hungry locusts over the garbage-strewn streets and sidewalks. The smell of urine hangs in the smoggy air. Even the pigeons look dazed.

Everyone with enough money flees to the relative “safety” of rich, white fortresses like Brentwood or Century City. The rest of us are left behind to fend for ourselves.

In this broken city do seeds lie somewhere, hidden and dormant, that might someday provide the blossoming of human potential at long last? Or is everything dead and dying, crushed beneath decades of poverty, oppression and neglect?

“In Los Angeles there are too many signs of approaching helter-skelter: everywhere in the inner city, even in the forgotten poor-white boondocks with their zombie populations of speedfreaks, gangs are multiplying at a terrifying rate, cops are becoming more arrogant and trigger-happy, and a whole generation is being shunted toward some impossible Armageddon.”

—Mike Davis
City of Quartz
MY NEIGHBORHOOD

I’m looking out the window of my fifth floor apartment. I see rows of neat front lawns and single-family homes owned by prosperous Koreans. Except for the Hollywood sign barely visible on the smog-shrouded hills in the background, it could be a typical suburban neighborhood. But it’s not. This is no Brentwood, no gated, guarded, hermetically sealed island of privileged whiteness.

I am a part of this neighborhood, but not a part of a community. I don’t know a single one of my neighbors by name. Most of the Koreans try to keep to themselves as well, rarely interacting with the rest of the city. They have their own stores, their own restaurants, their own churches. They try to keep their neighborhood neat and secure. But the reality of the city constantly intrudes.

When I walk in my neighborhood I must be careful of the broken glass—debris from bottles and windshields. Every weekend morning you can find at least one neighborhood car that has been broken into and ransacked. It happened to my car three times (once while it was in a “secured” underground garage). In the space of six months I had two cars stolen.

When I walk in my neighborhood, I keep my head down. Not only to prevent eye contact with beggars and surly gang members, but also to avoid the spit, shit, and vomit that accumulate on the sidewalk. Los Angeles has to be the spit, shit and vomit capital of the world.

My neighborhood is well armed. This is evidenced by the noisy firefight my neighbors have with the sky every New Year’s eve, blasting away with everything from handguns to heavy machine guns. It doesn’t make me feel any more secure knowing that most of them are (hopefully) “good guys.” During the rest of the year though, the gunfire at night is only sporadic. Much more common night sounds are squealing tires, car alarms, circling police helicopters, sirens, and screams.

Are cultural separatism, isolation and withdrawal trends that finally herald our liberation from the tyranny of mass culture?
Or is it that fear has overwhelmed what is most human in us, so we arm and armor ourselves to protect against anticipated horrors yet to come?

**MY APARTMENT**

The building I live in was built in the twenties. It is a large, ponderous, cinder block monolith divided up into small cubicles. About once a month a minor disaster occurs in the building, usually involving electrical or plumbing malfunctions, but occasionally related to domestic violence. An elaborate system of locks and buzzers is in place to keep out “undesirable characters,” but it often seems as if most of the “undesirables” in the neighborhood are already inside—they live here.

My cubicle consists of one room roughly the size of a shoe box, with no heat and lots of roaches. Outside light filters through shabby drapes, illuminating a few pieces of beat up furniture: a thrift store table, a desk, a chair; a lumpy mattress on the floor. A partially melted plastic clock (it got too close to the hot plate) sits on the table. The worn carpet is a mosaic of spots and stains. At night the room is lit by a bare light bulb that hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the room. It’s home, and for the most part I like it.

Are the places where we must live designed to instill in us human values, providing us with ideals and attitudes to build a truly humanized world? Or do they encourage us to live like caged animals, frightened and well trained, timidly prowling the tiny territory of freedom we are allotted?

**MY LIFE**

Sometimes I wake up late at night when it’s eerily quiet and the city seems to be holding its breath, resting up for the next crisis. I find myself lying very still in the cold dark, feeling alone and mortal. Unfettered by daily concerns and distractions, I see my life in cosmic perspective, with the raw hard logic of interrupted dreams. And I wonder why I am living in the belly of this sprawling, wounded beast.

Can the way I live lead to personal liberation, to transcendence, to joy? Is it possible to dig down through the urban rubble and find the very core of life, blazing in all its intensity? Or am I destined to live among the ruins like the walking dead, permanently numbed by alienation, oppression and fear?
“Decadence means ‘falling off,’ and it is possible for a civilization to experience a lesser fall from trust in its own ways without wrecking the entire fabric. The passage from what we call the High Middle Ages to the Renaissance and Reformation is one such falling away and new beginning. The era of the French Revolution is another. At both these moments...Europe saw old institutions crumble, long-accepted thoughts dissolve, feelings fade away, and new ones take their place.

Those times were ‘epochs,’ which strictly speaking means turnings. The old system comes to what looks like a halt, during which all the familiar things seem empty or wrong. Despair, indifference, the obsession with cruelty and death, the Samson-complex of wanting to bring down the whole stupid edifice on one’s head and the heads of its retarded upholders—these passions seize the souls of the young generations and turn them into violent agents of change, or else into what we now call dropouts from society. From both the activists and the negators come the new ideas and ideals which permit the march of civilization to continue. But it can also happen that not enough new ideas, no energizing hopes, emerge, and civilization falls apart in growing disorder, mounting frustration, and brainless destruction.”

—From The Columbia History of the World
Chapter 101, “The State of Culture Today”

“In present-day discussions of the contemporary scene the main topic is: Are we seeing the breakdown of our civilization?” This is the opening sentence of “The State of Culture Today,” an essay written by Dr. Jacques Barzun. It appears as the final chapter in The Columbia History of the World, a book written by various Columbia University professors. In his chapter Barzun examines “government, religion, morality, social intercourse, language, the arts, and that ultimate basis of civilized life, public hope” to determine the degree of civilization’s decline.

We can summarize Barzun’s main thesis like this: in our age we are witnessing the breakdown of consensus, the fragmentation of large social and political blocks into ever smaller special interest groups. This, Barzun feels, represents the end of the “liberal
ideal," where citizens conform their beliefs to the lowest common denominator for the sake of national harmony.

Barzun, no doubt a privileged academician with a stake in the status quo, reacts to these changes with near hysteria, claiming they presage the collapse of civilization. At times his exaggeration and alarmism seem almost comical. I, on the other hand, find this process of fragmentation an encouraging trend.

Barzun seems to have written this piece in 1971, while the 1960's counter-culture was still a social force. Though he doesn't mention it by name, this movement clearly provided the context for the essay and the target for many of his attacks. I find it ironic that the 1960's, when many of us felt a true blossoming of humanity seemed most possible, should appear to Barzun as a time when civilization was in greatest danger. In fact, the counter-culture did represent a peril for his world. Hopefully many ideas coming to the fore in the late 1990's will be every bit as threatening to the powers that be.

What follows are some quotations from Barzum's essay, each followed by some of my comments. I focus here mainly on Barzun's political observations.

“For sixty years or more, advanced opinion in the West has regarded politics and politicians as beneath contempt and the State as an imposition and an imposture. The law and its enforcers are increasingly held in opprobrium as mere tools of ‘the power group,’ variously defined but deemed to have won its position largely by fraud and force.”

“Political decadence occurs when the forms that a state pretends to observe are known to be empty of all meaning.”

—Gore Vidal

The Decline and Fall of the American Empire

Today it would be hard to find anyone (baring those who perceive themselves as members of the ruling class) who has a high regard for politics and politicians. This is a positive development. Electoral politics is a diversionary tactic deployed by those in power to channel the energy of genuine grassroots struggles away from effective strategies of change.

Real change will only come through social revolution.

Also a positive development is the growing realization that the legal system is run by and for those in power (defined as those with money). That “the power group” uses “fraud and force” has been dramatically demonstrated to all doubters by the O.J. circus trial and the Rodney King beating.
“These changes mark the end of the liberal ideal, which saw in universal suffrage for self-government and in the rule of law the keys to a good society. So far is this ideal sunk that the rightness of any minority has become an axiom, and more and more people feel themselves to be not sovereign, but shamefully oppressed—a desperate minority.”

The purpose of the “liberal ideal,” which was invented and promoted by the capitalist bourgeoisie, is consolidation and pacification. A homogeneous, compliant population is a prerequisite for the smooth functioning of industrial capitalism.

If people today feel that they are not sovereign, it is because they aren’t. In the United States business and money are sovereign, not people. And if more and more people consider themselves “shamefully oppressed,” it is perhaps a sign that they are acquiring a better understanding of exactly what their true desires are. We can only hope this growing awareness might someday lead to the overthrow of oppressive, centralized, institutions, clearing the ground for more diversity, experimentation, spontaneity, and freedom.

“...it is clear that the incessant eroding of faith and trust must in the end nullify all public authority and with it the general will. When the general will does not habitually prevail over particular wills, nothing is left but the arbitrary acts of improvised centers of power.”

For capitalists, consensus and compromise are excellent values to instill in a diverse population that has been melded together through the violence of nation-building, because order and passivity are necessary for a stable labor and consumer force. But the fusing of multiple cultures into a single national identity entails the loss of social freedom for everyone through majority rule.

While a world of “improvised centers of power” would certainly make command and control problematical for centralized political authorities and mega-corporations,
it might be a better place for people to explore their individuality and maximize their human potential.

“To sum up, rule by direct-action groups is gradually replacing rule by individuals supposedly free, who delegate their unit of power to a legitimate authority.”

I believe in direct action and participation. Delegation of political power is a recipe for alienation. It requires people to mold their desires to conform to social norms, because development of their individuality and selfhood puts them in conflict with others who wish to live differently. Moreover, “legitimate authority” rarely remains legitimate once power has been delegated to it, choosing instead to use that power for its own ends.

“Indeed, the only political ism surviving in full strength from the past is nationalism...But this nationalism differs from the old in two remarkable ways: it is not patriotic and it does not want to absorb and assimilate. On the contrary, it wants to shrink and to limit its control to its own small group of like-minded we-ourselves-alone. It is in that sense racist, particularist, sectarian, minority-inspired.”

Whereas nationalism of the past absorbed and assimilated minority groups by slaughtering them into submission (nation-building), the “new” nationalism excludes them through genocide and ethnic cleansing. Neither form of nationalism respects cultural diversity or embraces cooperation. All nationalist groups use violence or the threat of violence in attempting impose their hegemony.

In Yugoslavia it is not the breakdown of central authority that should disturb us, but the breakdown of human decency. There is nothing wrong with trying to preserve cultural identity; it is rather the methods that are so often used—military and political domination of other groups—that we should find abhorrent.

I reject nationalism because I do not believe in national borders. I reject...
ethnic exclusion because I believe in more cultural diversity, not less. I reject political violence because it brutalizes the perpetrators as well as the victims. The vision I have for a future society entails an interdependent web of communities suspended in a dynamic balance, each nonviolently struggling to pursue its own goals while practicing cooperation with each other.

“In short, the one political and social ideal, the one motive power of the time is Separatism, no matter what other rags of older philosophy it masquerades under. If this is not yet Breakdown, it is undeniably Breakup.”

How far can “Breakup” proceed before it becomes “Breakdown”? As long as the de-integrated units can still function as communities, we can consider “Breakup” a healthy, positive step toward the creation of a more human world.

One of the fundamental cultural conflicts of our time is autonomy versus assimilation. At one extreme is total autonomy for minority cultures, resulting in a world that is diverse and multi-faceted, with many lifestyles and points of view. At the other extreme is a homogeneous, world-wide culture (presumably resembling that of the Western industrialized nations). The former model implies eternal division, conflict, and struggle. The latter might promise peace and harmony, but would ultimately result in boredom, stagnation, and decay.

“There is no doubt that regarding the outer shell or container of civilization, which is the State, all our efforts tend against aggregation and toward disintegration. Yearning and action alike are moving us toward the small, self-contained unit which can be ‘free.’”

Only an apologist for big government and mega-corporations could make increased social freedom sound like a disturbing trend.

“So as the last third of the century opens we find both the social and the political impulses at one in urging

“Learned critics and responsible leaders may wag their heads and darkly warn of the social chaos that is sure to come of seeking to grant every person his or her right to free growth. They will be right in what they say. But theirs will be a small, cautious fact pitted against a mighty and inspiring truth. And whenever it takes hold, that truth will win out against their resistance.” —Theodore Roszak

Person/Planet
PA UBU: Hornstrumpot! We shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish the ruins as well. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine, well-designed buildings.

—Alfred Jarry
Ubu Enchained
flight or destruction; from science and the arts, little or no solace; from religion hardly a clear pointer to duty or justification. The observer feels himself carried back among the prophets and thaumaturgists of St. Augustine's day, with no better guide than dumb instinct to find the way out. If these are not the signs of an emphatic ending, they look uncommonly like it.

We agree that anyone in the 20th century expecting to find answers from science, the arts or religion is living in a dream world. We also agree that we have nothing but “dumb instinct” to find our way to the new world.

We see that instinct when people who have been taught to be selfish—are generous; when people who have been conditioned to be competitive—are cooperative; when people who have been indoctrinated to believe in the efficacy and inevitability of violence—are nurturing.

We see that “dumb instinct” every day, all over the world, in the strivings of common people for greater freedom, for more control over their lives, for the preservation of their cultures. We see it in average men and women, whenever their true desires break through the humdrum surface of everyday life.

Someday those struggles and yearnings will bring about an end to this phony, vacuous culture of desperation. Ironically, it seems likely that the end may be hastened by disasters provoked by the negative values (like greed, competition and aggression) that those in power have instilled in the masses. Meanwhile, we struggle toward the light together, guided by the truths that are within each of us.

At the end of this tunnel of darkness, however, there is inevitably a light, which we only have to fight to ensure its coming. All of us, among the ruins, are preparing a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism. But few of us know it.

—Albert Camus
The Rebel

DEFIANCE, REFUSAL AND PROTEST MUST BECOME INTEGRAL TO OUR LIFESTYLES.

FRAGMENTS #1
The “Disintegration” Issue

PDF version published March 2006
Original hardcopy published April 1996
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