Return Fire
Division of Labour
2014

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For us as anarchists, a key question should be – what modern institutional foundations prevent non-hierarchical relations flourishing? One of the processes that contribute to the social order as we know it is a highly institutionalised division of labour (or rather many forms of the above). **In its narrow definition, division of labour is simply when tasks or responsibilities are separated out into social roles (even temporarily), but for our purposes we mean something far beyond different people having different capacities, interests or talents which they could or do apply in a non-hierarchical manner**. Rather, the problem becomes when social systems are constructed in which individuals are *forced* to live according to pre-determined divisions of activity, and the power relationships that are the result. The deeper the division of labour becomes as the basis for social life, the more abstract and alienated the forms of interactions that go towards daily existence, and more static *systems* replace free or spontaneous exchange between people as and when chosen. While we're not interested in flattening all of our social life into a cycle of duties all must participate in, it seems clear that the more people know how to maintain themselves and the more readily-understandable the processes by which

their culture navigates the world, the less potential for coercion and alienation there is. So although we don't imagine that, for example, an individual within a group having a particular flair for herbalism, interest in fishing techniques or love for music-making constitutes a division of labour in the sense we oppose, the problem seems to become when there is no possibility for knowledge to be generalised if desired, and people are instead locked into their designated stations. **And while it seems there can be certain divisions of labour without civilisation, there can be no civilisation without an enforced division of labour**.

We identify civilisation as completely antagonistic to our desires for freedom. By civilisation, we could briefly and incompletely summarise: urbanised societies which imply large-scale demographic growth and the constant need for expansion and conquest, complex social structures which coercively administer political, economic and military power, and which are served by mining, deforestation, agricultural domestication and the like. **In short, mass systematic domination and structuring of human and non-human lives, oppression and alienation of the individual and hence the truly communal**. This has been the common structure of civilisations, whether Western, Eastern, Mesoamerican, Asiatic, etc.

In essence civilisation depends on individuals being stripped of their capacity to live in communities that, through the connection of that community to (and understanding of) their habitat, are fairly autonomous of other human social groups. One of the key ways this autonomy is prohibited is by making people dependent on systems of production where tasks are divided out into set roles, which become so consuming that they close the role-player off from the whole until they can see little past the one fragment they're engaged with. Obviously we're talking here about large-scale social organisation where it's impractical to skill-share or generalise knowledge from close contact with people who might have a particular passion for a subject; under mass social organisation it's more likely that you'll be too busy toiling away at some other

specific events, but in the power to grasp ***what kind of world we are living in.****"* But, however, Ancient Greek society was largely run on the back of chattel slaves – a pretty clear division of labour – and also spawned various cults of science and number, so in a way the example is redundant, if intriguing to note.) Indeed it's hard to imagine how anything like current systems of domination could have even got a foothold without certain divisions of labour. How else could the orders run on time, the factories keep on producing, newspapers be printed everyday or the scientists focus on their theorising, if it wasn't for a whole plethora of well-managed positions, each taking care of a specific item of modernity and so enabling the overall structure to function? And in the epoch of the computer, the business-people and administrators are more certain than ever that in the future we will all "learn less and achieve more"; that is, surrender all the more efficiently our vision of ourselves as free agents, rather than predetermined machines.

We must exit this labyrinth if we are to stand any chance of experiencing a life dis-alienated, de-civilised and accountable; one in which our actions can be plainly understood and considered, one which we can choose and shape ourselves. **We could start by rejecting the hierarchy of roles in our friendships and struggles, the latter of which too often follow the formalised patterns of the dominant society they claim to oppose. We can develop our skills, individually and communally, and begin to demolish the absurdity that modern life has become by focusing on the forms of relating and subsisting that allow for minimal technical complexity and a healthy scepticism towards expertise**. This is at the core of the struggle of the exploited, the dispossessed and the disempowered against their condition as such.

niche yourself to have chance. **This masks the reality of a subtly violent system where the knowledge or expertise required to transcend the divisions of labour (and thus the set social structure) is withheld**. Life is increasingly compartmentalised and alienated from us.

A classic instance of this division of labour is the existence of politics; one of the more explicit alienations from our own power to act. This is instituted in the form of the State, and maintained by politics of all kinds, apportioning alienated power to those who claim to represent others, often through permanent organised structures. *Anti-politics* means self-organisation, against all delegation, reclaiming the force of our desires.

While certainly effective (in a strictly utilitarian sense) for creating complex productive systems of specialisation that enable greater *control* over the surroundings by the greater social order (at the expense of *intimacy* with those surroundings for individuals), the social reality that complex division of labour tends towards is one of centralisation of knowledge and so of power over others. Some roles are given more social value than others, developing and reinforcing a dominant owner-class. Privilege to perform some tasks in isolation, for instance intellectual exercises or politicking, belongs to those who are relieved of other tasks by the labour required of others. Meanwhile institutions crystallise around separated roles, institutions such as the State, the Justice System, Religion, the Nuclear Family, the Military, the Economy. This actually entails generalised *de-skilling* and reduction of opportunities from a wider and potentially more fulfilling experience and understanding of the world, and reinforces and extends hierarchies and class distinctions based on who *performs* what, when, for whom, and who *consumes* what, when, and from whom.

In civilisations, some forms of specialisation have led to more, until tasks or technologies emerge that are simply incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who are affected by them. Since no single person has the ability to conceptualise and cre-

ate these overall processes on an informal level even as they contribute to running them, an institutional division of labour is necessary for complex productive and disciplinary systems. In the current world the division of labour is extremely pronounced, with specialisation running right through almost all facets of civilised life; from how we entertain ourselves in our 'free' time or the technical workings keeping industrial society afloat, to how we raise children or even gain knowledge of other species (reduced from understanding to 'facts'), so much is relegated to the experts, and we barely have time to notice (much less question) what gets taken away at the same time, while our lives fly by through our fingers. The individual is lost in the mass as an interchangeable cog, benefiting an overall system impervious to desire.

In 'Some Notes on Industrial Society and its Ecology', someone noted: *"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-organised butchering: because it renders the relationship between actions and their consequences increasingly obscure. [From financial speculation] to the nuclear industry, everyone can find examples for themselves."*

The alienation that stems from such divided thought could be said to account for many of the largest atrocities in history (as well as an infinite number of daily ones); certainly those we have witnessed since industrialism began and propelled us into whole new quantitative fields of misery. Jacques Ellul tells of the results: *"In a society such as ours, it is almost impossible for a person to be responsible. A simple example – a dam somewhere has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Who is responsible for that? Geologists worked on it. They examined the terrain. Engineers drew up the construction plans. Workmen constructed it. And politicians decided that the dam had to be in that spot. Who is responsible?* ***[...] In the whole of our technological society, the work is so fragmented and broken up into small pieces that no-one is responsible. But no-one is free either****. [...] Just consider, for example, that atrocious excuse... It was one of the most horrible things I have ever heard. The person in charge of the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen was asked, during the Auschwitz trial, the Nuremburg trials regarding Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen: "But didn't you find it horrible? All those corpses?" He replied: "What could I do? The capacity of the ovens was too small. I couldn't process all those corpses. It caused me many problems. I had no time to think about those people. I was too busy with that technical problem of my ovens." That was the classic example of a totally irresponsible person. He carries out his technical task and he's not interested in anything else."*

Key ideologues in Western history have put great emphasis on praising this narrowing of experience and ability. (Although interestingly, apparently the Ancient Greeks had great mistrust for specialists and experts; believing that anyone misguided enough to unbalance their life in that way might be useful in limited situations, but showed signals that they clearly had bad judgement in general as a result. We're reminded of George Orwell, speaking at the birth of the intensive bureaucratised era of the 20th Century, who commented: *"Where I feel that people like us understand the situation better than so-called experts is not in any power to foretell*