

THE NEW CAPTIVITY

Which way to the egress?

"If there no longer seems to be any alternative to so-called reality, it's not because the real finally stands naked before our eyes. Far from it. What calls itself realism is really a kind of idealism. These days, we live as though underwater, submerged in a representation of the world and of ourselves which forecloses on every objection, every alternative. And this total intolerance is its claim to glory."

"Naturally, it's a coercive technique, but one that the prisoner has to agree to first. Consent must be given from the very beginning; the individual must allow the electronic bracelet to be placed on his wrist. And once the detainee is promised his freedom in return for wearing the bracelet consent is easily acquired."

A man stands still. He's suffocating. Transparent walls rise up around him on all sides, clear as glass, but he doesn't know they are there. There's a ringing in his ears, a vast clamor of voices, opinions, and messages telling him relentlessly that he is free to choose, free to dream, even free to rebel if that's what he chooses to do. It's not the clamor of a department store. It's not talk radio, he's not in a movie theater. Like the six billion other people on the planet, he's locked inside the New Architecture of the United World. He's heard a thing or two about his prison: this world, the world we live in now, is all there is. There's nothing left outside it and there's no other world possible. Or: there's no such thing as distance anymore. Or again: only capital-

ism is truly revolutionary. And finally: the world today is complete, one and indivisible.

He can't remember where he first heard these ideas. He doesn't know who decided it should be that way. All he really knows is that sometime in the not-so-distant past, capital had licked its lips one last time and swept the last anti-establishment vestiges at the corners of its mouth into its gullet. And boom! the N.A.U.W. was here to stay. He'd gone through many changes in his search for a way out. He'd fought to improve the lot of the Third World. Later on, he'd become a Situationist. Next came Trotskyism. Some of his friends from that period are still in prison for terrorism. When punk came along, heroin in tow, he had done both. This, he had figured, might finally be what he had been waiting for. He'd OD, go out with a big fuck you. Finally, he settled for resignation. And really, resignation wasn't all that bad. After all, the New Architecture of the United World is democratic and generous. In the N.A.U.W. human beings are born with equal rights, including the right to happiness. Through education and work every single one of them has a chance to acquire every single convenience of every modern lifestyle. And finally, doesn't the N.A.U.W. guarantee peace among all nations? Doesn't it hold out the promise of economic development to poor countries everywhere?

"Anyway," the suffocating man said to himself, "if capital co-opts everything, even its best and most driven critics, then why fight? You get fed, right? Outrage, resistance, fighting the power, subversion, revolt, revolution-it's all so last century now."

And the suffocating man was not mistaken. Capitalism's project had changed. Capitalism had become so thoroughly modern-so thoroughly postmodern as well-that frankly even those who rejected capitalism looked conservative. From within the corridors of economic and cultural power, now the same power, the malcontents now just looked like people who didn't know how to have a good time. What was their

problem anyway? Thanks to the way the New Architecture of the Unified World was laid out, rejecting the establishment was now part of the establishment's very foundation. Abolishing all values had become the only value. You could listen to your poets and your rock stars, you could mix it up, shoot it up, and have your acid visions, it all still ended up being good for the bottom line. The establishment had warmed to its rebels and raging visionaries a long time ago. Now they were sought-after celebrities, picking at caviar with the elite, making copy with their bouts of air rage in first class. In fact, all the aesthetic norms of capital had morphed. The king of pop culture used to be a heavily perspiring white man. No more! Today the old empire has fractured into a thousand provinces, exotic, hybrid, and sensual. World music is the world's music. We've come a long way, baby.

So the suffocating man jumped aboard the N.A.U.W., and surrender was not without some surprises. His name began to appear in print. Journalists and multinational corporations alike smiled on his progress, and behold, their smiles were the same smile.

He discovered that he could turn tricks with his alt-culture savvy. It could make him rich.

No sooner was he on the payroll, he found his salary growing. Rapidly. It was one thing after another. He became an art director with an ad agency, then the publisher of a hip magazine, then a booster for the new economy. Next stop was the host spot on a voyeuristic reality show that fed hungry mainstream audiences showfuls of ever more exotic deviances. And from there, it was a small step to a job with a UN agency created to bring the wonders of modern communication and information technologies to the benighted peoples of under-developed countries.

From these experiences our man concluded that humanity's sole destiny was to work toward reform, and reform was only possible under democratic capitalism. It was impossible to go beyond that frame-

work and as for the counterculture, its only possible destiny was the total and specific commodification of every last one of its modes of expression. So why, you might ask, why was this man suffocating? This man, for whom rebellion had proven so lucrative? He had no idea.

He ran his hands along the invisible walls. Back when the barriers were shaggy with coils of razor wire it was all much more simple. When the other side had a name and an address. Beads of sweat oozed from his forehead. A pissed-off looking young guy suddenly rounded a corner and booked past him. They were not all that different from one another, though he figured he had about thirty years on the newcomer. He watched as the kid pulled two cans of spray paint from his pockets, red and black, and with a flurry of forearms the words Power is invisible until you provoke it appeared dripping as if suspended in air along the flank of the invisible barrier.

The suffocating man tried to keep from smiling, but it was no use—he knew that soon enough the slogan would end up adorning a pair of Nikes. The kid took a step back and watched outraged as his graffiti melted away. Then he reached out and punched the space where a moment ago he had tattooed his anger. His fist sunk deep into the wall. He hit it again, harder, and this time the momentum of his punch carried him right through the wall. On the other side, he found himself confronted by a smiling human resources director who promptly offered him a job at a design studio. "It's 100% employee-owned," human resources enthused, taking the kid by the hand.

As this scene unfolded, the suffocating man absently unbuttoned his shirt collar and groped for the edge of one of the soft walls of the New Architecture of the United World. Fingers grazing the wall for guidance, he took off running, slipped into a small alleyway and began weaving away from the arterials, up the shrinking feeders, farther and farther from the center. After a while he figured he must be reaching the outer edges of the fortifications. Soon, he thought, the walls would

be old and crumbling, full of cracks. Instead, he rounded a corner and emerged blinking into what seemed to be some kind of bizarre theme park.

Subcommandante Marcos was digging out scoops of ice cream and whacking them into cones for the visitors, people like, yes, there was El Ché, pumping away at the joystick of a virtual reality game. They also had this haunted mine ride where you could take an old-timery mine train with a bust of Marx bolted on the front like a figurehead and rocket down into fake caverns.

Five Pillars

My soul has asthma. I mean that the atmosphere of these times causes me severe respiratory distress. It's not the old problems, the familiar problems that we all know by heart. My suffering is less public. None of the usual symptoms here-no coughing fits, no hawking and spitting. I have observed, met, or been a part of almost everything people say exemplifies the spirit of the times, and in every case I have come away from these pathetic excuses for nourishment choking even harder. I need air. That's why I have been rooting through the debris of my 1990s for such a long time, looking for a place where I could come up for air, for one or two ideas that could give me some breathing space. I'm sure I'm not the only one. There's no way. I'm willing to bet that the suffocating I'm talking about is a suffocating we. The we of a generation whose outlook was formed between the poles of two strangely symmetrical dates: 11/9-November 9, 1989, and 9/11, that September day not so many years ago. On one of those days a wall came down, on the other two towers fell. Boombehind, Badaboom in front. Two times nine, two times eleven, double collapse. Both of those days are history now, but during the years in between "capitalism" became for me another word for maturity. I mean that I came to understand

growing up as the process of resigning yourself to Reality ... the brute reality of egoism, the idiotic reality of competition, the imbecilic reality of the incentive-driven life and the duty not only to exist, but to exist with a cozy layer of lard on your ass and a protective patty of bullshit on your eyes. Two times nine, two times eleven. Like dust clouds rising from the double collapse, a special kind of consciousness billowed up from the debris of this decade, as yet unaware of itself, mine, ours: 119911. The palindrome-consciousness of my generation. A generation for whom all there was to see in front or behind were immense clouds of dust and debris. But it's worth trying to understand it, this palindrome-consciousness. I don't think anyone really has, not yet anyway. Its elders have gagged it. It's supposed to just shut up. Well, maybe it can make a little noise, maybe it gets to speak a few lines, but only if they're watered-down, sugar-coated, shrink-wrapped, and sanitized for consumption. The plan is to keep its voice stifled until the members of yet another generation grow old, petrified and contaminated, a thousand little renunciations stamped into their faces like crows-feet. And all this so that when the moment comes for this generation to claim its place in the history books and walk out onto life's big stages, it will be too late. By then, that beautiful spirit forged by the double collapse will have been entirely co-opted, its need for air sated by snack food and other assorted trivialities. This is why I have set out here to document the phenomenon before rot sets in, before life has eaten away what is left of my innocence. I've had it with the sage advice of the compromised and resigned. Let me say right away-I know it's true-our generation-the sons and daughters of the BOOM and the BADABOOM-our generation now has within its grasp the kind of power and the kind of honesty that can work the great changes, that can create real works of art. Every day I watch as our elders shamelessly extend their empire and spread their bullshit around and it makes me nearly blind with rage. Why don't they just finish dying for

fuck's sake and take their miserable egos with them, their nostalgia, their State, their sexual liberation, their failed revolutions, their shattered illusions, their political parties, their parliaments and their putrid corpses. We don't want any more of the history they are writing. Here's ours, right here!

For the children of the double collapse, the initial motivation behind the new spirit of revolt isn't economic. It's respiratory. It starts with a vague, unpleasant and overpowering feeling. A stifling feeling of being cornered, boxed in, buried alive! Does that do it justice? It's a violent claustrophobic reaction to the idea that the world is a finished piece of work. That among other things, it has finally been confirmed that there is only one system of political, social, and cultural management available to humanity. You get strangely ill from having your options cut off like this; it's a disease without obvious symptoms. Its first sign is an overpowering sense of powerlessness. Then nausea sets in, it moves up through the gut, chokes the throat and then spreads throughout the entire body. This is the malaise that is driving the spoiled children of the West as they attempt to rediscover the possibility of resistance. Was it just some kind of panic attack? I don't think so. The last twelve years were clogged with despair. If we're still here, it's because we were forced to invent a reason to go on living. We had to forge an outlook that **REJECTS RESIGNATION**.

"What is a rebel?" Albert Camus asked in 1951. "A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. A slave who has taken orders all his life suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command. What does he mean by saying 'no'?" The market has been systematically co-opting revolt ever since, for 50 years now. The question today isn't any longer what does he mean by saying "no"? What we need to ask now is why "no" doesn't mean anything anymore. Say no to whom exactly, to what? This impossibility,

absolute until the demonstrations in Seattle, Prague and Genoa suggested otherwise, is the keystone in our globalized prison's invisible architecture, the linchpin of what I am calling the new captivity. This is the sea into which we were cast as teenagers, where the main choices were limited to despair, suicide or irony. Despair? Despair over a destiny that is finished as soon as it has begun to unfold. Suicide? A way out. Irony? A means of survival. As the walls closed in the wake of the disappointments of earlier generations, principled revolt became increasingly difficult: its causes were discredited, its inspiration was polluted, and its value was restated in terms of the money-making potential of its different poses. This fate was not imposed from above. No one was forced into cynicism. People just heard the same message over and over: "Well, all this has been tried before, and look what good that did." We were already jaded, and anyway, Camus's "no" was beginning to bore us. No one even noticed as the different forms of revolt unraveled, and turned into what were at best quaint sound-bites and at worst marketing strategies. People would express their rage and there would be all this angry noise and every time it all just ended up seeming like a temporary pose. In spite of this, we can still feel the sincerity of that righteous indignation, late at night when we are by ourselves and undistracted by the drone of entertainment. But it has become something obscene, something we must hide from others.

This is how life is in the new captivity. My goal in setting out on this exploratory mission into its invisible architecture has been to try and understand how revolt has been neutralized and how in our resulting helplessness-since there are apparently no other options open-we seem condemned to seek shelter in irony. I want to suggest that our bondage rests on five pillars, five conditions that are the building blocks, as it were, of the impasse our generation finds itself in today. The first pillar has come down squarely in front of History, and so History has stopped moving. The second ensures that anyone attempting to resist

will be instantly condemned. The third pillar is the co-option of any and all efforts at subversion. The fourth pillar is a machine that has sucked up everything marginal and spat it out into the mainstream. And the fifth is the dispersion of economic and political power so wide that it has become impossible to confront it. This pentagon has been our school of despair. Between those five walls an entire generation was trained in the sciences of cynical laughter and in the arts of what I am going to call mass dandyism.

(Continues...)