

Beyond the Screen, the Stars

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“Nothing is boring if you are aware of it. It may be irritating but it is not boring. If it is pleasant the pleasure will not fail so long as you are aware of it. Being aware is the hardest work the soul can do, I think.”

— Solitude by Ursula LeGuin

As technological expansion hurtles forward at an increasingly dizzying pace, the presence of smartphones threatens to become normalized across the anarchist space; in many places, this presence has already been normalized for a long time. Among anarchists in the US, critiques of adopting smartphones, or any other new tech gadget, have generally failed to escape the dead-end binaristic logic of moralistic lifestyle politics. Choosing to live without technology is reduced to a form of consumer activism — an arbitrary personal code that is irrelevant to the struggle, or even harmful in terms of redirecting hostility against the state into judgments of individual consumer choices.

The concept of *‘there’s no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism’* has, predictably, become a banner of the ‘radical’ social media consumption frenzy that has engulfed anarchist milieus in these territories and paved the way for the current state of things. Today it is nearly unheard of to live without a smartphone; when attending a meeting or event, one must assume there is a smartphone in each and every pocket, and any critique of this reality is largely viewed as the squawking of old-timer, out of touch wingnuts.

In some places anarchists have resisted this process of normalization and maintained a clear and consistent critique of the impact of smartphone adoption, warding off the incursion from taking hold in the first place. Everywhere that this is not the case however, including but not limited to the US, where any such critique has long since faded, is there any going back? What would it look like to propose that anarchists ditch the technologies we have become increasingly dependent on and addicted to for over a decade, that have come to mediate so much of our lives, relationships, and forms of struggle?

This text will attempt to construct such a proposal, taking a hard look at how we got into this mess, and sketching out some possible escape routes, both individual and collective. I am particularly interested in looking at how smartphone adoption relates to the general erosion of anarchists’ ability or desire to critically examine how we structure our lives on our own terms, instead shaping ourselves into the alienated, flattened personas that digitization demands. When

we start to adapt to, and even defend, this alienation as our de facto point of departure, we quickly forget how to be anything else. The only way out, then, is to remember.

Most analyses that I find relevant use the term ‘technology’ as shorthand for the technologies of industrialism which contain and reproduce the power relations of dominant society, rather than engaging in debates about what is or is not a technology. Although these debates can be valuable, too often they are useless spirals that breeze past the realities of industrial devastation and technological domination in the present. I am more interested in considering smartphones in particular as the linchpin that has made my generation of anarchists accept digital capture on a level I still find hard to fathom, but it’s the nature of this capture that I wish to focus on, rather than just the gadget on its own.

Hand in hand with bureaucratic obstacles, social pressures to have a smartphone, to be connected and reachable at all moments, push us into an ultimatum: adapt or be left behind. This framework is foisted on us from all angles, supplanting our own questions with those constructed by the digital world. How do we want to connect with the people we care about? With strangers? What type of relationships do we want to nurture? These considerations are paved right over with fear and threats – you’ll lose all connection, you’ll lose touch with what’s going on, you’ll become irrelevant – a parasitic and relational blackmail. We are denied even the dignified option of solitude, which in the digital world is rewritten as isolation, loneliness, depression, irrelevance.

As many analyses about technology have pointed out,¹ we don’t just use machines, they also use us, mutilating the way we think and feel to fit into the pathways they have constructed for us. So it is not only the devices themselves that encroach upon anarchist spaces, but these ways of thinking, these ways of feeling and relating – replacing our living spiderweb of affinity relations with a digital web of disembodied connections. The ability to consider a path of struggle that doesn’t depend on optics, on public opinion, on spectatorship starts to feel unrealistic or irrelevant.

There’s much more to say about the horrors of smartphones, but on some level, everyone who finds themselves caught in this net already knows. Continually using this technology is in itself a process of numbing and adapting to what you and this little box are doing together, and to the extreme violence and destruction required to bring it to your hands. The anxiety that creeps up after being away from your phone for too long, and the feeling of satisfaction when you get back to the screen, finally able to get your fix – these sensations are not incidental and can’t be reduced to individual pathologies; dependency is part of the design. That feeling of your focus flitting around like a fly in its death throes, trained by years of flipping between internet tabs, scrolling through riot porn interspersed with memes, selfies of people you don’t even like, videos of police violence. We all know what’s happening, deep down under the layers of numbness and denial, and it’s terrifying.

Interventions of recent years typically focus on how we use technology, not if we should be using it in the first place. This makes sense as a reaction to the reality of the social terrain where smartphones are and will undoubtedly continue to be ubiquitous, and the urgency of getting people to stop unwittingly snitching on themselves and one another by, for example, planning crimes via Signal.

These debates and cycles of advice are endless, confusing, and typically result in a kind of broken telephone where people adopt tech security tips in bits and pieces without seeing the

¹ ‘Caught in the Net: Notes from an Era of Cybernetic Delirium’ offers a comprehensive analysis to this end.

whole picture. By way of example, I got into an argument with a stranger after a demonstration who pulled out their smartphone to look up directions to the bus stop. When I told them they shouldn't have brought their phone, and definitely shouldn't use it now, they got defensive and informed me that they had it on airplane mode and were keeping it in a Faraday bag, so it was okay. This logic made my head spin, since it didn't take into account the police getting access to their phone if they were arrested, which neither a Faraday bag nor airplane mode would do anything to prevent.

This anecdote is absurd, and I would like to believe that most anarchists would follow a more sensible line of reasoning and either leave their phones at home during sensitive moments or ditch them entirely, but I'm not at all confident that this is the case. Judging from this person's behavior, they had put a great deal of thought into their approach and it was likely based on recommendations shared by others in their environment, reflecting a tendency to heap tech-security measures one on top of the other in a manner that effectively puts the underlying assumption — that they need their phone in the first place — beyond question. And interestingly enough, the false security engendered by their nonsensical precautions might endanger this person and their comrades more than if they had taken no precautions at all.

The text titled “Never Turn off the Phone: A New Approach to Security Culture” reflects a similar mentality, though using a more internally coherent logic. By taking for granted the fact that “we all” use and will continue to use phones as the basis of their approach, the author surrenders any possibility that we might live any other way, instead arguing in favor of structuring our behaviors around the metadata created by constant phone and internet use. While building awareness of daily patterns is a useful starting point for confronting surveillance, the solution — never turn off the phone — proposes expanding technology's hold over our lives, omitting any consideration of the consequences of this expansion.

Given how widely this text was circulated, and translated into several languages, a significant number of people clearly found the proposal valuable, testifying to the level that smartphones are entrenched and normalized in the surroundings of people who also want to act against the structures of domination. So how to approach this reality? With more technical guidance recounting what people already know — that they are carrying a cop in their pocket? I don't want to discount technical advice in general, which is clearly extremely valuable for sharing knowledge about how to avoid putting information into the hands of our enemies, especially given the constant developments in technologies of surveillance. Rather, I think that any technical approach has to be based in a qualitative critique of technology or it risks further normalizing this horrifying trend by “thinking more about how to adapt to technological nuisances than how to get rid of them.”²

The most recent issue of Return Fire republished “Never Turn off the Phone” with a long footnote quoted from “Here... at the Center of the World in Revolt”, problematizing the text's understanding of security culture by warning against the separation of “technical knowledge from the strategic” —

“A broadly shared suspicion of communications technology, academics, journalists, and police, in the hands of an entire community, will be far more effective at blocking State intelligence-gathering than a sophisticated array of counter-surveillance techniques in the hands of one affinity group; but the one need not and should not exclude the other.”

² For a more in-depth critique of “Never Turn off the Phone” see “Fermer le clapet” in Avis de Tempetes #13.

At least in my surroundings, not only is the technical separated from the strategic, but any hope of an expansive projectual approach seems to be abandoned entirely, anarchists focusing instead on shaping struggle to fit the increasingly claustrophobic technological enclosure.

Leaving aside what the author means by “community”, their words also raise the problem of the faultlines formed between those who refuse this enclosure on an individual level, possibly along with their close comrades, and those who are ensnared — who maybe have never lived without a smartphone, were given ipads as babies, have always had to swallow the feelings of heartbreak and rejection when their loved ones pull out their phones instead of looking them in the eye. Constantly sharpening hostility towards the digital cage is a valuable and necessary process, and can also be an important gift for all those whose hostility is buried under the anxiety and fear nurtured by smartphone society. The timid approaches that accept the eternal ubiquity of smartphones, likely out of a desire to avoid alienating all those enmeshed in digital networks, are not only weak, they are ineffective and insulting in that they underestimate others’ desire to escape the trap they are stuck in.

This perspective is based in my own experience, as someone who has (very gratefully) received this gift from comrades many times. Being surrounded by the sense of inevitability wears one down, no matter how deep their hostility to technology. Proposals that focus on resisting the current of digital consumption through the force of individual will can be important, since at the end of the day we must each decide how we want to live. However, the paradigms and logic of compulsory connection seep into the fabric of one’s life, and it’s extremely difficult to even recognize what is happening, let alone take the necessary steps to banish it. I have gone through the process of being sucked in by technology and, guided by the uncompromising spirit of my comrades, cutting myself free, only understanding the extent to which I was plugged in by experiencing the literal chemical withdrawal that follows tearing out the plug. Sharing stories about living free from this technology, challenging one another to think on our own terms, to find solutions to the problems that arise when we stop depending on robot servants, is a basic form of solidarity in this technological nightmare, and an essential one.

My attempts to share this gift with others in my environment, starting with my closer comrades and moving into more extended networks of affinity, have been extremely well received and reciprocated. Younger anarchists in particular have reflected about how miserable they were as children of the smartphone generation, sharing how it feels to have never learned how to function without this technology and the difficulties of figuring it out for the first time. Rather than being defensive, as I cynically expected on some level, they launched head-first into the possibilities that ditching their smartphones could open up. Exceptionalizing young people as being a lost cause is, again, insulting given the reality that technological dependence traverses all corners of society. Those of us who lived without smartphones, maybe even for most of our lives, and then gave in at some point are perhaps faced with an even more difficult task of self-reflection and reckoning.

Thinking through how to shift social norms away from digital communication together is more effective if it considers all the ways we relate and move through the world. Starting to just drop by your comrades’ houses without texting or calling first, for example, something that has come to be seen as invasive or disrespectful, can change the fabric of these relations — it forces us to learn how to tell people we care about that we’re busy and don’t have time to see them, and on the flip side, how to accept this without internalizing it as a rejection and falling back into the “ease” of avoiding face-to-face interactions altogether. We need to learn that this avoidance

isn't actually easier, as it destroys our relational skills, our ability to confront each other when necessary and to maintain trust and respect throughout conflict. This is a simple example that illustrates the importance of a deeper shared commitment to re-learning, or learning for the first time, how to escape the net. If we can't share this commitment, what are our relations based on? I don't want to know about the weather forecast from the app; I'll bring a map so you can leave your phone; Can we just ponder this question together for a moment instead of running straight to google? — all of these interventions may be small, but if consistent and mutual, such little challenges (alongside the bigger ones like actually GETTING RID of the damn phone!) can open up space for connection that we didn't even realize was stolen from us.

On an individual level, we must make this same commitment to ourselves, regardless of what everyone around us is doing, and renew it whenever necessary. This is a process of earning back our own trust, doing everything we can to avoid breaking it and, if we do break it, learning how to earn it back again. Smartphones, the internet, etc. teach us to mistrust our instincts, our own sensory perception of the universe, trusting only the expertise of the search engine. Ditching smartphones, therefore, cannot be reduced to a technological 'detox', another means of adapting to, and so accepting, the world as it is. The task at hand is not so simple. Nor can we rid ourselves of phones as a mechanism of distraction to avoid facing ourselves, to numb our fears and grief, only to substitute in another such mechanism — TV, internet surfing, etc. If we fail to challenge the core approach, the phones will just sneak back in sooner or later.

“Many were the evenings when, after her friends had gone home, she would sit by herself in the middle of the old stone amphitheater, with the sky's starry vault overhead, and simply listen to the great silence around her. Whenever she did this, she felt she was sitting at the centre of a giant ear, listening to the world of the stars, and she seemed to hear soft but majestic music that touched her heart in the strangest way. On nights like these, she always had the most beautiful dreams. Those who still think that listening isn't an art should see if they can do it half as well.”

— Momo by Michael Ende

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