

Matthew Woodman

Decolonization

Fire ant rank and file report in two sizes: minor workers as small as one-tenth, major laborers as large as one-third of an inch. Queens (and winged, reproductive, unmated queens) scale a step up from the biggest of the lower orders.

Gross domestic product (GDP) indicates the monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country's borders. Economists, politicians, and think-tank analysts monitor nominal GDP estimates to determine economic performance and construct international comparisons. However, GDP fails to account for A) non-market transactions, such as household production and volunteer or unpaid services; B) barter economies in which legal tender does not function as medium of exchange; C) sustainability of growth; and D) wealth distribution or income variances among disparate demographic groups.

One nest incorporates thousands of fire ants. When the nest is disturbed, a million legs may irrupt and climb the source of disorder at speeds of up to 1.6 centimeters per second. Ten to twenty seconds after ascending the subject-object, the collective simultaneously stings. What triggers the crowd to commence? What mechanism enables such coordination?

Brett, visiting his Spanish mother-in-law, texts me: "Heading out of Salamanca back to the village... my favorite graffiti today was this... *Haz de tu vida una amenaza!* Make your life a threat!"

Do you feel threatening? Do you feel threatened?

Clench your fists. Thrust back your shoulders.

Unlike bees, a single worker ant can bite and sting repeatedly. Mandibles pull, pinch, and elevate the skin while, arching the petiole node, the abdomen thrusts the stinger. After the first pierce, the ant may regroup and, considering its options, stab again and again, crafting a circular pattern of envenomed puncture sites.

Just outside Bodrum, Turkey, on the grey cinderblock

walls of an abandoned house, someone has spray painted in black “*ilkel ol.*” This translates, roughly, to “live primitive.” Is this a sarcastic insult directed at the owner of such disrepair? Or does the scribe protest the developers razing olive orchards for *pansiyons* and upscale shopping? An imperative to re-center? What would living primitive exclude? What would one need to disconnect or abandon? What would one die to hold?

The oily aliphatic piperidine alkaloid, Solenopsin A, creates the burning “fire” sensation and kills cells at the site of injection. The body’s defensive white blood cells accumulate at the injection site, forming a white pustule, and if scratching breaks the skin, bacteria may slip into infection. Ironically, some of the venom proteins kill bacteria, which may explain why ants sow venom around their nests. Other venom proteins bind pheromones and may help the fire ant broadcast a chemical trail to communicate alarm or aggression to other colonists.

In 2007, in Tehachapi, California, graffiti of a cobalt blue ghost drafted the side of a stationary freight train door: nose an “X,” eyes two spirals circling the drain, tongue extruding as if the ghost itself were rusting the rail lines.

A series of neurotoxins not commonly found in the venom of social insects may explain the hallucinations reported by some fire ant subjects.

Salvador, or “Sal” as his badge indicates, works for the Department of Parks and Recreation. He warns me and my six-year-old son about the spiraling nest at the feet of the monkey bars and tells us how he has been to this park twice already to attempt eradication.

“The city doesn’t *kill*,” he chuckles. “The city *controls*. Pest *control*. Weed *control*.”

I think of the city’s recent settlements for police shootings, of the budget that devotes over fifty percent of revenue to law enforcement. I keep telling my son not to throw dirt clods at the ant hills.

Infants, the neurologically compromised, the elderly, and the otherwise immobile or unaware are at a higher risk of multiple stinging incidents, but even one sting can lead to the major allergic reaction anaphylaxis, the symptoms of which include

dizziness, nausea, sweating, low blood pressure, headache,
shortness of breath, death.

We're coming for you, too.

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