

# Letter From Appalachia

## On Primitivism, Participation, and Tactical Retreat

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Tonight I am alone, which is rare, and the air is cold and clear, so I blow out the oil lamp and make my way down to the clearing to take in the new moon, the milky way, and the unsilent forest. It's autumn, the season when we harvest the last of it from our gardens and the rest becomes compost to build on next year. It's a natural time to look around, evaluate what we've been doing, and think about where we might go from here.

I live in a region where diversity of resistance to the megamachine is vast, but tonight there are two distinct "movements" or trends on my mind:

First are the well-publicized primitivists, who I often cross paths with in these mountains, as they maintain an enclave nearby. These are exciting folks, eager to explore the cutting edge of living in harmony with nature, of getting as much as possible of what they need from the wild, and of building face-to-face culture and oral traditions, sometimes even throwing out the books to do so! However, I'm often dismayed by the clash of two simultaneous but very different motivations for pursuing primitivism and re-wilding: On one hand is the perhaps romantic but undeniably compelling desire to immerse oneself in a lost ancestral lifeway in order to discover the old martial art, the old spirituality, the old shamanism and bring it forth as a vital contribution to the effort of creating a better world. To earn this consciousness through deep and sustained first-hand experience and not just by imbibing old stories. On the other hand is the desire to push reversion to the hunter-gatherer as a unilateral prescription for humanity, as the only way to save the earth and live an authentic human life. If nothing else, this prescription is clearly murderous when there are six billion of us on the planet. What's also disturbing is that, in a society that sells soda pop by calling it "extreme," primitivism also sells itself and wins converts by appealing to the desire (born of jadedness and ennui?) for the extreme. According to this pitch, primitivism is the most radical stance, the furthest you can take it, the most extreme, as if rejection of authoritarian society can be measured on a linear scale. Hopefully as the movement matures and finds fuller means of expression for its dreams of wild living, the pursuit of the alienating ideological angle will become less appealing.

Another anarchist movement I see a lot of—that I'm actually most intimately familiar with—is the retreat into more-or-less drop-out communities. Most of this retreat is not physical, to distant locales or to rural communes, but rather as much as possible away from work and consumerism in favor of inexpensive communal households, lots of free time for music, art and other projects, and daily face-to-face support and conviviality. This current, which flows strongly in my generation, is of the same current that includes dada, the Situationists, and the writings of Hakim Bey. The ethics of the liberation of desire, the revolt against work, freeing consciousness from the media trance, and opening temporary autonomous zones have taken hold. Revolutionary sacrifice is not held in high esteem (in fact there is often a wariness of any endeavor that smells very "activist" at all), and we endeavor to maximize the freedom of everyday life. Indeed, the most beautiful, natural and spontaneous adepts that I know at creating anarchy in their lived relations with their fellows can be found in this realm.

What worries me is that more and more it feels like this movement relinquishes the goal of having any impact on the world at large. While community and lived anarchy are definitely ends in themselves, tactical retreat practiced

without the complementary aim of influencing the course of human events loses its tactical nature and becomes quite literally a half-measure, divorced from the transformative vision that nurtures it and makes it whole. To borrow a metaphor from Nietzsche, building autonomous zones is, among other things, the pulling back of our collective bowstring in order to project the arrow of liberation far into the world.

Now I'm not saying that everyone who withdraws gives up the fight, but there are some forces at work here that we need to be aware of. For one thing, the outpouring of our liberated creative energy coupled with our desire to avoid mediation and compromise means that schemes and creative projects tend to feed back into the group more and more exclusively, forming a kind of closed system where everything we do is "for ourselves." We play music with and for our friends, circulate art as gifts within the community, etc. This is great for creating culture and building dense and supportive social networks, and it's a hugely satisfying antidote to the alienated and barren middle-class backgrounds from which many of us spring. But if we don't share outside the circle, if we keep our backs turned to the forces arrayed against us and those possibly allied with us, we run the risk of forming another beautiful vibrant egalitarian tribe simply to be added to the long list of those already decimated or assimilated by the machine. I see signs of this already, as loved ones are exhausted and desperate from the ravages of shitty jobs, development, eviction, marginalization, and others take shelter from the stress and instability in societally-sanctioned institutions (career, school, marriage) that damage the community.

Another pitfall on the path of tactical retreat is that our efforts will attract the alliance of true nihilists, cynics, and defeatists. And here we get into murky waters, because some of these folks can actually be good friends and allies. They share our refusal of the existing order and act on it by focusing on the present, stubbornly avoiding the vices of civilization, and working to build and protect autonomous enclaves of pleasure and mutual aid. And what's more, as dada and punk have shown us, "fuck it all" negation is capable of liberating vast stores of erotic and creative energy. But ultimately their insistence on the futility of all efforts of resistance and their acceptance of the "reality" of eventual doom poisons the social field and encourages the disconnection, the heightened sense of exclusion from the processes that shape our world. Defeatism is a powerful force, especially among those who've inherited the legacy of the 1960s, and without at least a vision of the possibility of radical and systemic change, it's too easy to give way to helplessness and paranoia, feeling that even though we may be living rich full lives inside the bubble we've created, the world is tearing itself apart outside, the machine is getting stronger and more penetrating, it's diabolical forces are gathering on the doorstep, and our sphere of autonomy becomes more fragile every day.

I could go on, but already this terrifying image demands a counter-image, an antidote. Something expansive to counteract the claustrophobia of being pressed in upon from all sides. Something extensive, extending ourselves out from our roots in the intensive intensity of our intimate lives. What I'm picturing on this night is the loosening of the restrictions of our packs in favor of a co-mingling with The Others, an infestation of the social fabric with the goal of widening the circle and sharing the abundance, the joy, and the strength and determination that we've cultivated in our communities. To establish a revolutionary presence to complement our withdrawal. For this to be effective, we must present ourselves not only as a mass, but also as individuals, in small groups, sometimes in disguise (sneaky but not deceptive) but with our principles intact. We would naturally benefit by avoiding the playing fields of power (our jobs, the courthouse, the marketplace) and instead seeking out arenas already geared toward cooperation and local autonomy.

In recent years a handful of friends and I have been making our home on a piece of remote mountain land here in the southern Appalachians. We are off the grid—no electricity, no telephone—and have spent our time getting to know these woods and the surrounding area, as well as gardening, planting fruit trees, building trails and recently a few small houses. This rootedness has given me new appreciation for basing one's radical action on an intimate sustained connection with a place. I had this appreciation reinforced last winter while working in free clinics run by the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans, a city where I have lived and to which I maintain a strong connection. From my dual perspective as a volunteer (the vast majority of whom are from out of town) and a part-time New Orleans resident, I witnessed both amazing solidarity and feats of resistance, and a dark manifestation of the young rootless traveling anarchist scene, in which anarchist activists acted as a kind of mirror-image of predatory capitalist real estate developers, swooping down from all corners on the disaster-struck city to push their image of a rebuilt New Orleans, bypassing local activists and grassroots groups in the process. Though I'm grateful for Common Ground and they have done a lot of good, this "dark side" showed me there is definitely something to

be said for starting at home (or finding one!) and cultivating the connections and sensitivities that allow one to act as a part of one's environment.

In the rural area where I live, for example, there is a strong sense of local identity, pride, independent spirit, and a history of self-sufficiency. There is also an intact gift economy where resources (such as fresh milk, corn, vegetables, building materials, use of machines, and labor) circulate among neighbors and acquaintances without monetary (or any other) exchange. Anarchists everywhere find models and inspiration in historical examples of gift economies, but for us it is a tradition that we can (and do!) actually participate in. In fact, I see the foundations of a movement for local autonomy and self-sufficiency as the cost of groceries and even of driving to the grocery store puts strain on the mostly poor inhabitants, and more diversified farming is creeping back, fueled by the fall of tobacco and the search for a sustainable economic base from which to resist real estate development. As for the more recent transplants to the county, they tend to be earthy liberal types, unless they are wealthy retirees. This is the kind of terrain where anti-authoritarians can participate, if not as "activists" then as vital humans, carriers of the virus of anarchy. The fact that this terrain is largely conservative, with church and family as the dominant institutions, does not preclude us from joining in the fray. There are rebels everywhere, and many (young people especially) are increasingly disillusioned by precisely these constrictions of rural America.

In a recent *Fifth Estate* there was a call for not just more CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture: a type of food distribution where consumers "subscribe" to weekly produce from a local farm and/or collective of farms, thus cutting out the middlemen, insuring farmers that they have a market for what they grow and that their produce is consumed locally, and forming a bond between producer and consumer) but for "anarchist CSAs." Though I would love to be part of an anarchist food distribution network, I am wary of the fortress mentality that insists that anarchists are a breed apart, and we must be concerned primarily with protecting our own. Anarchy is not an identity, it is a way to live and a way to organize social relations, and in practice it is a contagion.

I would like to see us overcome our fear and distrust of the Others, our fear of being "diluted" by the masses, and instead embrace presence and participation. Not evangelism—we're not looking to convert anybody! Not assimilation—we'll still be the radical, transgressive, freaky people that we are! Not even transparency—because we still thrive in ambiguity and secrecy. Simple presence, visibility, and participation. As ourselves, doing what we love, in good faith, radiating ever outward. Despite, or maybe even because of the current reactionary political climate and the war on dissent in America, I believe it to be an auspicious time for just this kind of political action. Every creature needs sanctuary, but we also need to leave the nest.

That's all for now. It's getting colder and I'm taking this spinning head to the bed. Goodnight!

# **fifth Estate**

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