

# **Without a Trace**

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Dominant culture rarely interests itself in evidence other than that which shows willing and enthusiastic complicity from its subjects. Acts of refusal and revolt are effaced from the historical record when they expose the tenuous control of authority. Even when they do appear, presence, motives and behaviour are all mediated through the lens of elite partiality which works to deny that we are capable of generating the ideas and means of our own liberation.

That much most of us recognise; it is the premise of class history developed in the 1960s by the likes of EP Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm. But theirs is also a particularist history, focused as it is on the same level of *public* appearance as that of the Establishment. Just as real life is elsewhere than on television, so the history of resistance is at the very least written between the lines of the official record of leaders, followers and climatic events. In the interests of self-preservation, the ruling class and its official recorders – journalists and other such vermin whose social position depends upon the maintenance of class society – invariably work to keep attention only on a protests leaders (whether real or imaginary) and particularly on those with superior status or privilege.

But as well as those who lack the influence to have their words and actions recognised as important are those who have no intention whatsoever to be identified. It is this realm of individual and collective refusal that has proved the most resilient to exposure in the historical record.

A vast area of active political life is ignored for the simple fact that it takes place at a level we rarely recognise as political. Trained by the mass media to applaud the spectacular action rather than the incremental and prudent, all is in the appearance, the *image* of revolt as reproduced through that same mass media. But much political activity is elaborated among an intentionally restricted public that excludes or is hidden from the gaze of authority. So it is not only that the historical record is kept by elites, for elites, but that subversives themselves have an interest in concealment of their activities (for starters, this gives us greater personal security and self control). Such acts as these were never meant to be recordable, and they were often successful only insofar as they were invisible. The most successful poisoning of class oppressors, for example, are those never known as such. Just like the perfect crime, the subversive act seeks to escape all detection, cover its tracks and avoid appearance in the archives; for the perpetrators to strike (anonymously) again. Only those who wish to be martyrs, self-publicists or media personalities would wish to wait around to offer their names and have their picture taken.

Though the point, by its very nature, is impossible of proof, *apparent* docility is the measure of subterfuge, and is only broken by those crises of ruling class confidence that allow insurrectionary breakthrough. Our ability to capitalise on these favourable moments must be understood in the context of a long term struggle that is only successful insofar as it is invisible.

So a view of politics focused either on the official and formal relations of power (the command performances of consent), or on open protest and rebellion, represents a far too narrow concept of political life. The body of historical knowledge that we must grapple with is for the most part only a record of that which has broken through to the public sphere. There are undoubtedly important instructive events and occurrences among them which can give strength, through popular memory, to protest and resistance. But the lens of hindsight and reportage is a distorted mirror. 'History' records what is most spectacular and most easily located: the start, the peaks, the decisive break with the past. We see the climax, the (only possibly decisive) invasion of public space. As such it implodes the development of movements of refusal and social trans-

formation, for it freezes our attention on a single frame in time, disconnected from that which made it possible. As Dickens remarks in *Barnaby Rudge*; “We note the harvest more than the seed time.” Despite the claims of the media, these moments almost never come from nowhere; they are, rather, the acceleration of continuing processes through timely public manifestation. The agitation and preparation that precede and underpin the demonstrative act are *always* beginning and never end. It is at the point of certain rupture that the perpetrators of everyday acts of refusal consider it safe to appear on the public stage. Unless provoked by the State into desperate measures, open collective defiance is rarely undertaken unless it is practical and likely to succeed. Until that time, the mechanisms, structures and struggles which necessarily precede it remain a closed book.

It is the accumulation of ‘petty’ acts of defiance and refusal that make critical upsurges possible. They are not a substitute for revolution but a necessary condition for it. That is why the insurrectionary moment invariably escalates so rapidly – “as if from nowhere” – and is why revolutionary elites (the clownish ringmasters of the vanguard) always find themselves hopelessly overtaken.

## No More False Prophets

An understanding of previous movements for change is not merely an exercise in historical interpretation. Knowledge gained is the means by which we can understand how to take effective action, ourselves, today. When we recognise what has been, we can plan for what might be.

Movements that attempt to create a groundswell of opposition by initiating public (usually publicity seeking) protests will always meet with general indifference not because most people don’t care, but because we are a lot more realistic about the utility of such initiatives than the protestors.

The art of the possible is discovered rather in those anonymous, immediate (but not by any means spontaneous) short run collective actions that apply the principles of guerrilla warfare to everyday life. Cryptic and, above all, *surreptitious* actions are best adapted to resist an opponent who can probably win any open confrontation. We must be ever ready to melt away as soon as faced with unfavourable odds.

Spontaneous forms of popular action can be, and are, deliberately chosen because of the tactical advantages for all those involved. What might be called ‘low intensity class warfare’ is always pressing, testing and probing the boundaries of the permissible – so as to take swift advantage of any fissures that may open up in moments of crisis. It is not then our ‘incapacity’ to sustain permanent political organisation (most sensible people vote with their feet and avoid these formations like the plague) but that the choice of fleeting, direct action represents a popular tactical wisdom developed in conscious response to the political constraints realistically faced. Anonymity and avoidance of formal organisations are enabling modes of resistance, a measure of our understanding of both the danger and the futility of spectacular mediated action.

While such action precludes formal organisation, it most certainly does not eschew effective co-ordination, achieved through the informal networks of affinity, kinship, traditional and intentional community, workplace and, yes, even perhaps ritual and religious practice. Socially embedded networks, developed at the level of the everyday, are as opaque to the authorities as they are indispensable to subversive activity. Let what’s left of the Left engage in monumental

plans for grandiose national — now even global — federations. (Federations and movements of what? Parades before the worlds TV cameras? No thanks.)

Effective subversion must be organised out of the gaze of domination, in a sequestered physical, cultural or social location; those areas that are least patrolled by authority. (Anarchist and eco-activist meetings are mostly conventions for police informers, wannabe reformist politicians and loonies.)

For those who look only on the surface of things, those seduced by the spectacular *image* of defiance, the strategy posed here might be seen as a retreat from ‘conventional’ class struggle. But all things are precisely not as they seem; this is the very form that traditional successful class struggle has *always* taken. The clandestine, apparently innocuous, maybe even anti-political assembly provides the fluidity, the guerrilla mobility, for effective subversive action.

## **No Name No Slogan**

For us, there are immediate uses and gains in formations such as these; no leaders to round up, no hierarchical organisation to wield power over us in our name, no membership lists to investigate, no manifestos to denounce, no mediators to meet (and then join) the power holding elite. No public claims are made, no symbolic lines are drawn, no press statements to be deliberately misconstrued and trivialised by journalists. No platforms or programmes which the intellectuals can hijack as their exclusive property, no flag or banner to which to pledge a crass and sectarian allegiance.

Then what concrete forms will our subversion take? Well, the forms it *already* takes; theft, feigned ignorance (all the better to dissemble our intentions), shirking or careless labour, foot-dragging and the go-slow, zero work (with a little preparation we might come to enjoy the next depression), secret trade and production for sale (for barter — or even better for free), squatting, defaulting on all payments for anything, evasion of taxes, destruction of official records, sabotage and arson, assassination, impromptu riot (for the hell of it) and the detournment of State sponsored celebration into moments of joyous destruction.

If we were to undertake all this with the objective of attaining a complete self reliance in the satisfaction of all our needs and desires, we may well find it sufficient for the move from surviving within this system, to superseding it.

Let the daily celebration of life be but a dress rehearsal for insurrection. It is the accumulation of small, instrumental acts that will bring authority to its knees. Let us rise!

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