

Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology

baedan

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In this time as in all others, there are those who are hopelessly on the side of chaos, unpredictability, chance. Who want nothing but to delight in the nothing and seek amusement in the unfolding of the cosmos.

But in this they are hindered and led astray by so many emissaries and preachers from a world where everything has to be—and is—just so. A world that insists on hard work served with a smile, a world of reward and punishment, of just choices and of wrong ones. A world whose evils demand redress, in which the door is always open to do something about anything, and in which everyone must find his or her place. A world which, so they say, is this one.

On their worst days, the anarchists believe the preachers must be right, so numerous are their flocks. No doubt it would be easier if it ended here, but as nothing is ever over they find themselves beginning, as if compelled, to question again the world of order.

Finding each other inexplicably resistant and entangled in a web spun ever deeper and more intricate, they play out their rituals. Anarchist bands are secretive to the extreme, and by all accounts they do not admit the existence of these rituals even to themselves. Nevertheless, one may observe certain rites crucial to the coherency, morale and mythology of anarchist bands.

The Ritual

Ritual, to the anarchists, exceeds the mere repetition of form. Repetition is one of ritual's aspects, and has several facets of its own. For one, there is the matter of survival. The issue of survival can be highly obscured, but is never absent, and the rituals are developed not only to ensure the survival of their practitioners, but also for their own endurance. When they are repeated, they are passed on, and when they are repeated, they recall the past. Thus another facet of the repetition is to stimulate the memory, so that one sees one's gestures in their place within a long chain.

The chain binds the practitioner—to the gesture, the past, the future—only in order to unbind. There is a point in the motions where one has to recognize them as metaphor, as parody, neither incidental nor an end in themselves. They say that the forms dissolve at the edges, where one is not looking directly, and ripple in and out of themselves. Gestures which corrode themselves because they must corrode the practitioner's habitual manner of perception.

For the anarchist, a ritual is not an exercise in adherence. It is an initiation, certainly. But rather than being a way into the group, it is just the opposite—a way out.

The Black Mask

*To live in society is to wear a mask,
more or less fitting,
and to encounter an array of faces,
more or less familiar.*

The black mask is the most visible symbol of the anarchist. Its existence is known to the novice even before he is contacted, but its ritual symbolism is unknown to him until his initiation.

At the time of the initiation, a time unrecognized until it has happened, the novice finds himself alone with a bag. He has found himself here by a strange and forgotten path, a series of subtle

maneuvers and unmemorable gestures. In truth, he has been brought here, led along by an unshakable sense of discomfort with the social game. There are ways this discomfort is manifested: talking about it, doing it differently, doing it wrong, sometimes refusing to do it at all. And these little refusals, with the scorn they earn from most and the interest they elicit in others, draw him into a band. The band has its own social games, its bad manners and inverted fashions, its parodies of social norms. It is when he has tired of these, when he contemplates with a similar sense of cynicism the macrocosm and microcosm; the verse, inverse, reverse, and perverse; the loyal subjects and the loyal opposition; it is then that he turns from the company and finds himself alone. Alone, that is, but for the bag.

Novice and bag are alone in a place. The place is a room, or it is a car, or a patch of earth or some other spot. The bag is unremarkable but familiar, and seems to vaguely offer relief of the present circumstance. The novice opens the bag with an anticipation diluted by cynicism: he half expects to find some secret message, and half to uncover nothing of interest. In the bag there is a small bundle of cloth, neatly folded, black as night. He withdraws it and he recognizes it as the mask of the anarchist.

He feels almost as if he could laugh. Faced with the fabric, he wonders that he has never before contemplated why the black mask is the face of anarchy. He has worn the mask before, thinking only of the practical imperative of anonymity. Now it has come to him as a strange answer to his question, not at all what he was looking for, but an answer nonetheless. The mask is a gift given by no one and carrying, like all gifts, its silent question. The anonymity it offers is not the cold anonymity of social nicety, but a warm embrace from something that cares about him not at all. It is not the nicest gift. It does not affirm. All it offers is a reminder to relax because, to the universe, he is nothing but a kink of its unfolding. With a deep sigh and a feeling strangely like being tickled, he accepts the gift.

As he walks back from the place where he was alone to the place where the group is, his steps seem only the fulfillment of inevitability, as if pulled by no force other than time's weird passage.

The initiate does not speak of the ritual. The mark of the initiation may be witnessed in how he wears the social mask (a bit less rigid, a little less important, as if seeking to amuse and be amused). He can still feel, with a certain sadness, its weight, and remember, with a certain nostalgia, how it disappeared into the black cotton. But he hears someone calling, and, recognizing an invitation to pass the time, he joins in.

The Bloodletting

All my life have I suffered, but always within.

The initiate's blood has always been for her a quiet reminder of who she is; or, at least, of what she is not. For as long as she can remember, blood has fascinated her. For nearly as long she has known this makes her weird.

When you fall and cut yourself, you are not supposed to stare at the wound. You are not supposed to like to watch when the doctor draws your blood. You are not supposed to enjoy the taste when you fall and split your lip, and you are definitely not supposed to get in the habit of making yourself bleed so you can experience the flavor again.

When you get sick, you are not supposed to have a crazy urge to open a vein and let the sickness out. When you like someone, you are not supposed to wonder what they taste like. When you are having sex, you're not supposed to want to tear into the neck with your teeth and into the back with your nails like you are trying to kill them. You're not supposed to have to wear long sleeves and high collars around like you have something to hide. You're not supposed to make people who care about you worried. You're not supposed to feel ashamed of who you are.

When you feel too much sadness to hold, you're not supposed to believe you can let it out of you in dark red tears that plummet into the basin and blossom there in shapes so beautiful they make you feel better. When you feel like a machine, or a part of a machine, and aren't sure whether you are alive, you're not supposed to have to open yourself up and take a peek to put your mind at ease. When you wish to make a bond to a place, you're not supposed to make a gift to the soil from your veins. When you feel for once that there is someone you trust, you are not supposed to beg them to let you cut open their skin to see their blood and taste it. And you are not supposed to mingle it with your own to feel another's pulse within your veins.

You are not supposed to feel there is no one else who needs this in order to let go. But you do. And every time you let go of a feeling, this other feeling sets in deeper. At the bloodletting, you can at last let go of this.

The Firestarting

And on the eighth day, we burned it.

Some time after his initiation, the initiate may become ready for the ritual of invocation. The anarchists having no laws to determine one's readiness nor elders to appoint the time, the initiates themselves must determine their willingness and make the necessary preparations. Though this can be done alone, it is usually the work of a few, for the invocation is not only a ritual of power but also one of bonding.

The initiates' motives for calling the fire are varied. They may do it to destroy, to cause trouble, to have fun, or to feel powerful, but none of these is the fire's allure. It is not a ritual of exercising one's own power but one of occupying a space through which power is transferred. There is little effort required for the initiates to acquire the materials and skills, and the power they invoke is far too great for them to call their own. Though they may know it not, they summon the fire in order to be transformed: forged by its heat and fused to each other by its light. Fire will break down and cast to the wind what it can, but what passes through it intact will grow in resistance to the forces that seek to break it. This is a quality much desired by the anarchist.

The fire started, the departure underway, the adept turns for a moment and stares at the shape of the power roaring as it tears through the world. She chokes on an attempt to give voice to the desire the fire's touch awakens: that she would like to pause for a time, to absorb the heat and light of this towering blaze, to let herself be awed by the power she has summoned. But she knows there is no time to linger, and tastes the bitter deprivation, even in her crime, of the desired encounter with chaos.

The Storytelling

When the bands are scattered and surviving, when there is work to do and little time to remember or to contemplate, and no reason to be idle, these are the times when stories are made.

Whenever some of their number have departed, when the ones who remain feel grief and emptiness, there is a time when stories are told. But the anarchists are never free from grief, and so the storytelling is the most common of their rituals, and it happens every time the anarchist bands come together, and it is the purpose of their coming together.

First, however, gathering times are spent dispelling urges and reorganizing energies, trading wounds and rehearsing plans. Only then, when the initiates have settled and space has been made for silence, may the storytelling begin. For the storytelling cannot be performed until all are ready to listen.

It is a feeling of puzzlement that undergirds this ritual of gathering—this and the quiet acknowledgement of a need to turn. The anarchist is accustomed to seeing the world from the outside. She turns to the storytelling to hear about the outsiders from their own outside—not from the society that has made them outsiders, but from a place beyond both—a place inhabited by the storyteller.

The mask of the storyteller passes freely among the initiates, and it is often impossible to say who wears it. But its wearing is naturally ripened by age, so much so that the mask often appears to be age itself, whispering of its secrets. Through it the initiates can slip as through a crack and watch the fringes of their lives flutter tremulously in the wind of time.

Through the story, one will often revisit a grave loss or some horror of the past. The story does not diminish the grief, it expands it until it overflows its walls. One is emptied by the storytelling, emptied of all but the most closely guarded embers, formed also in the story, abiding enough to last the night.

For though the story wanders many paths, they all tell of the length of the night, and of the ones who got lost, trying find their way back to the dawn.

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