

We Live to Tread on Kings

**Report from the 2006 CrimethInc. Convergence, July 26–31 in Winona,
Minnesota**

CrimethInc.

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Supernatural Powers of Enjoyment

Not long after the convergence I went to a family function. Picture me in the pews at Catholic Mass, the priest wearing a robe straight out of the seventeenth century and quoting obscure theology as he holds forth on how to be a model of obedience to God's will—and they say punk rockers' subcultural baggage is alienating! A good part of the people present at this particular event are not Catholic or even Christian, but this one man is in control of the proceedings to such an extent that those of us who aren't down with his program can't even recognize each other. The paths that brought us here, the dreams and desires we carry with us, the relationships we might have with one other—all these are inaccessible, irrelevant. Trapped like this, it's unthinkable that we could do anything together but sit in mute compliance.

Exactly eight and a half days earlier, two hundred of us have gathered on the green of a college campus outside an auditorium. Inside, bourgeois couples and theater enthusiasts watch a Shakespeare classic in a ritual not entirely unlike the one in the church.

We're no longer part of any recognizable ritual, however. Many of us are clad in dumpstered burlap sacks, cut in approximation of peasant frocks and adorned with individual slogans: "SERFS UP," "A wealthy man's heart is a slum," "We live to tread on kings," that last one taken from Shakespeare; the rest sport more absurd costumes. A complete drum corps, formed perhaps two hours earlier, confers excitedly. A lunatic without any protective gear is looking for a partner to join him in bicycle jousting; a teenager is perfecting his fire-breathing techniques; a couple of us hold wide-eyed children. Somebody has obtained an armload of copies of that day's edition of the local newspaper, which features front page coverage of our adventures the preceding evening. A dozen-foot placard hung from a lamppost reads **KINGS WITHOUT KINGDOMS—KINGDOMS WITHOUT KINGS**.

The clock advances another minute; the audience must be politely applauding now. The atmosphere is charged; the hum of the mob swells and subsides and swells again. Security guards have arrived, but they look puny and petrified, like a couple of scarecrows trying to face down a tsunami. This breathless anticipation is familiar to many of us, but here we get to experience it gratuitously—usually, we would be about to drag a mattress into traffic or storm a line of fully-equipped riot police.

The doors of the theater daintily open to release the first patrons, the drum corps breaks into deafening rhythm, and mayhem erupts. From behind a nearby building, to the wonderment of all, the much-anticipated but as-yet-unseen king appears, thirty feet high, dragged by ten bent-backed attendants like a catapult or battering ram. The mob heaves forward, then opens to reveal a costumed squire and queen, the latter held aloft by four bearers and wielding a scepter inscribed "I RULE." The theater audience gathers at the edge of the throng, all ears and eyes.

Squire: Hark, ye citizens, and cease thy celebrations! Thy king hath come with further declarations. Citizens (shouting in unison): The king hath come! The king hath come! With laws and taxes and impositions anon... Squire: Bite thy tongues! Thy useless dissent! The king will legislate with or without thy consent. Thy social contract was signed at conception And hath no clause permitting insurrection. Citizens: No documents are needed to guarantee freedom! We deny thy sovereignty! This king hath no kingdom!

The crowd surges upon the colossal king, tearing him to the ground and pulling the crown from his head. Pieces of the giant puppet are flying everywhere the way they would in a cartoon; two hundred dancing, shrieking maniacs trample them into the ground. With a series of

reverberating booms, fireworks shoot up from the grass and fill the sky. “Who is this king?” shouts someone balanced precariously on the arm of a park bench. “This king is a landlord!” “A rapist!” “A vivisector!” “A politician!” “The economy!” “The police state!” “The prison-industrial complex!” “Our apathy!” “Our boredom!” “Our past!”

But wait—what’s the purpose of all this? Surely the bourgeoisie aren’t going to drop their handbags and join us in our bid for civil war just because we turn up at their theaters blowing fire and hot air.

No, let’s be upfront: this is chiefly for us, the participants. In a world that squelches our fantasies, in which we so rarely get to determine the content of our lives, in which we’re perpetually made to feel alone and insane, it’s terrifically empowering to join a couple hundred comrades in affirming a reality that has nothing to do with profit or propriety. Had we not already reached record highs of openness, comfort, and morale, this would be a dismal charade for sure; the fact that it can be such an ecstatic, bacchanalian experience attests to the successes of the preceding days of this convergence. Afterwards, equipped with the energy and connections we’ve built up here, we’ll go back to our home communities to step up our activities where it counts.

Even setting aside consideration of the future, of strategy and morale and momentum, there’s something tremendously powerful about enjoying ourselves this much outside a nightclub or stadium. One thing anarchists can do is develop and employ tactics to defend our and others’ interests from those in authority, and that’s an approach to which many of us here have dedicated our lives; another thing we can do is explore ways of enjoying that take us beyond the consolation prizes of capitalist entertainment and leisure. Presumably, if hierarchy is as crippling as we say it is, non-hierarchical games and pastimes should be more compelling than their hierarchical counterparts; presumably, if we pioneer some of these, others will join us in them and in our other activities as well. In doing so, we can unlock dormant parts of ourselves—playfulness, good faith, willingness to risk—and give others, also desperate for forbidden pleasures they can’t even imagine, a reason to invest themselves in the long shot of revolution.

A More Anarchist Convergence

Speaking of formats that put the participants first, let’s compare the model we’ve developed over the past half decade of convergences to the more standard approach exemplified by the National Conference on Organized Resistance (NCOR) and the various anarchist book fairs. In the latter case, a circle of organizers book a few presenters and tablers and reserve a space for a few scheduled events; much of the needs of those who attend—housing, for example, and sometimes even food—are left to be handled on an individual basis.

Often, these events take place at college campuses and rental halls; arguably, these are accessible to a wide range of people (ever tried to get around a campsite in a wheelchair?), but their very architecture is designed to serve capitalist ends, and that cannot help but color the interactions that take place within. Likewise, in providing for their own needs, participants rarely stray from the standard fare of dominant society: small groups go out to eat, visitors stay with friends in isolated houses and apartments or even rent hotel rooms. People who show up without having coordinated their roles far in advance find themselves cast as spectators and consumers. Some leave conferences like this with a hollow feeling; it can be a demoralizing experience to be surrounded by so many people who share your politics and commitments and yet still feel that you

are separated from them, interacting the way you might interact with anyone else in consumerist society.

In contrast, the model used for CrimethInc. convergences draws more on the Earth First! rendezvous format, promoting autonomous organization and collective means of meeting individual needs. For the duration of the convergence, everyone stayed at one campsite, where all the events not specifically intended for the local community took place. Transportation, child care, kitchen work, conflict mediation and emotional support, camp infrastructure, and every other aspect of collective living were organized on a volunteer basis. Unlike at many conferences, neither registration fees nor donations were asked of participants, and nothing was offered for sale; the bulk of necessary resources were obtained outside capitalist channels—here's to being part of a community of petty criminals!—and the rest were obtained with money raised at benefit events. The entire group involved in the convergence formed, for its duration, a working model of a miniature anarchist community, which was an exciting and heartening experience.

Likewise, although workshops and performances were solicited far in advance, a great deal of time was set aside for more spontaneous presentations, and everyone who attended was encouraged to share something in this way¹. This broke down the artificial hierarchy of presenters and listeners so everyone could learn from one another and develop their speaking skills. Some who turned up intending just to watch from the sidelines ended up presenting workshops to great acclaim. Similarly, rather than individual tables at which merchants sold competing products, there was a library in which everyone set out the materials they'd brought to give away and collected whatever they needed for their communities. This was quite successful; a great many participants left with a full bag of 'zines and papers.

In addition to the library, there were several other stations set up around the campsite, including a child care station, a mental health sanctuary, an arts and crafts center, and a prisoner support station at which over sixty-five letters were written to prisoners and participants learned how to organize their own prisoner support programs. Each of these was bottomlined by a small group who solicited assistance from others as necessary.

To be fair to the organizers of NCOR and the San Francisco anarchist book fair, the smaller scale of our gathering probably made it easier to get by with less formal structure, and there are many things accomplished at those events that would be impossible at a campsite in the middle of nowhere. But the essential lesson, that people are more powerful when they organize themselves collectively on a volunteer basis than they are when they are directed by a small group, stands. The bulk of the advance organizing was actually carried out by a couple eighteen-year-olds—that'll teach us older folks to be ageist! The last-minute cancellation of the original campsite and the group that was to handle all the cooking didn't phase us a bit, thanks to the initiative and self-organization of the participants.

In contrast to last summer's convergence, at which there was a sexual assault and a controversy about whether a known informant should be permitted to attend, there were scarcely any internal conflicts this year. Some of us attribute this to the decision to make our consent, security, and exclusion policies for the convergence explicit in advance. Organizers also asked that there be no drugs or alcohol at the site or at any of the off-site activities save one. This went over surprisingly well. Participants in the convergence represented a wide range of relationships to substance use,

¹ *This was not intended to be taken as a slight by honest sex workers. The author extends the utmost respect to wage laborers in all fields, while cherishing dreams of a day when both wages and work itself are things of the past.*

but no one complained about it as an imposition on their freedom. Many people found their social interactions at the convergence more candid and intimate and ultimately more intoxicating in the absence of intoxicants.

There's still room for improvement, of course. While many people who did not come planning to do workshops ended up doing them, including some folks from far outside the demographics one would expect at a CrimethInc. gathering, the ratio of male presenters to female and trans presenters was still dramatically skewed compared to, say, the ratio of men to women and trans folks volunteering for kitchen shifts. Clearly, some people felt more comfortable and entitled in the atmosphere of the convergence than others did, and the ways we solicited and encouraged participation didn't help to offset this.

Similarly, while a couple of the most pivotal organizers were people of color, the overwhelming majority of participants were white. The average age hovered in the low twenties, if not younger, though people twice that showed up. Those of us who mail out CrimethInc. propaganda know it's exciting to a lot more than just suburban white youth; we have to figure out how to organize future convergences so they can invite and include those from other walks of life who are also seeking escape routes and comrades.

The Locals, the Media, and the Authorities

Two events—Friday's Critical Mass bicycle ride and Sunday's Really Really Free Market—provide excellent examples of what does and doesn't work when it comes to connecting convergences like this one with local communities. In the former case, the vast influx of out-of-towners swelled the numbers of an existing local project, making for the most successful Critical Mass in Winona history. This was possible thanks to the efforts of the local Down'n'Dirty bike collective, which had fixed up several dozen bicycles in advance for visitors to ride. The 'Free Market, on the other hand, was the first of its kind in Winona. Although it was flied heavily and a few locals did turn out, the bulk of the attendees were subculturally identified visitors, which if anything made for an environment that discouraged more local participation. This is the second year running of us attempting to hold a town's first ever Really Really Free Market as part of a convergence, and in both cases we've seen the same results. We can only conclude that whoever plans to host next summer's convergence had better start holding regular 'Free Markets now if they want one to be part of the festivities!

In the course of the weekend, three different front page articles about the convergence appeared in the local newspaper; all provided fairly positive, if vacuous, coverage. It helped a great deal that the local organizers had thought about media relations in advance and were already in touch with sympathetic reporters. This coverage must have made it less tempting for the police tangle with us; demonizing us in the media is usually an essential part of their strategy when they plan to disrupt an event. The absence of a local media liaison proved catastrophic for the CrimethInc. convergence in Louisville in 2003; organizers should be sure to take this into account in the future as well.

After police disruption at previous convergences and the recent escalation of anti-anarchist repression in this country, some of us feared that there might be serious trouble with the authorities. However, although they'd clearly been briefed from on high about us—beat cops were

able to rattle off our consent policy while harassing stragglers days before the convergence even began—they didn't make any serious moves on us.

What does this say about the authorities' strategy for dealing with the anarchist menace at this historical juncture? First, though they are aware of us and have in fact declared us domestic terror threat number one, they are not in a position to make wholesale war upon us, so we can be done with our paranoid fantasies of the whole anarchist community being marched off to an internment camp and get back to work on community organizing and clandestine direct action. Second, they are watching us, so we have to be extremely careful. We now know that there has been at least one federal infiltrator present at the last two CrimethInc. convergences—unfortunately, we learned this because she subsequently arranged the arrests of three other participants on conspiracy charges. We can assume that they regard events like these as prime opportunities to fish for further victims. Form affinity groups to carry out illegal activity with people you've known for years, after meeting their families and getting to know them intimately; meeting someone at an anarchist convergence is not enough background to share sensitive information with them, let alone high-risk undertakings.

The Road Ahead

I think almost all of us came away from this convergence with an expanded idea of what events like this can be and a strengthened commitment to making them happen. The authors of the "CrimethInc. Stockholder Report" published earlier this year concluded that the primary defect of the CrimethInc. experiment thus far has been its failure to interconnect those moved by its outreach efforts, and in that light it is all the more important that participatory and accessible events be taking place. We need to put energy into building networks and offering visible points of entry into the anarchist underground, building on our successes and honing our abilities to bring people together in exciting ways. The infrastructures we build at gatherings like this one are not especially important in and of themselves—they are merely infrastructures for infrastructures, designed to enable people to do the local organizing that really matters—but they are a start.

Sitting in church with our families, or in our workplaces with our fellow employees, or in shopping malls with neighbors we may not even have met yet, we're often lucky to have a chance to speak at all, let alone make a compelling case for a different way of life. But if we organize our own social events and networks, building up enough visibility and social leverage to be known outside the so-called radical ghetto, one day we won't be the only ones starting these conversations. To that end, let this report conclude with an exhortation that you, dear reader, be thinking about how and where the next CrimethInc. convergence should take place, and what you might bring to it.

Footnote

Among the over forty workshops were urban exploration, traveling for free, the situation in Palestine and Lebanon and what to do about it, Proudhon and mutualist banking, local radical history in Winona, stories from the G8 protests in Scotland last summer, squatting to own, several self-defense workshops, a reading group for which literature was given out a few days in advance, a discussion for survivors of sexual abuse, and a discussion entitled "Lucy Parsons and Post-Left

Anarchy in the 1880s.” The last of these occasioned some impassioned debate on the extent to which class can offer points of departure for revolutionary organizing. This might be surprising to those who stereotype all in CrimethInc. circles as “anti-worker,” but the real question is—is there as much debate at NEFAC meetings about the role of criminal activity in liberation struggles, or at conferences organized by the Institute for Anarchist Studies about the ways plagiarism can topple intellectual hierarchies?

Appendix: Letter to Infiltrators

This was read at the opening ceremony of the convergence. We can only assume there was at least one federal infiltrator present this year, as there has been before. If you are an infiltrator or FBI agent, please make sure to spend some time dwelling on this.

“At last summer’s CrimethInc. convergence in Indiana, there was at least one federal infiltrator present disguised as a human being. She insinuated herself into a circle of friends and used their trust to frame them with conspiracy charges after buying them bomb-making supplies and renting them a wiretapped cabin. We can only assume that we are similarly infiltrated this summer. I would like to address the following to our infiltrator or infiltrators:

Some of the most beautiful, compassionate, socially conscious young people in North America has traveled across the country to gather here. They have come to meet like-minded friends, to exchange skills for caring for themselves and their communities, to build a struggle for justice and freedom, to fall in love and make a world conducive to falling in love. But not you. You have come, cynically, to hunt like a wolf in sheep’s clothing for young people you can entrap and ensnare. Where others see comrades, you see quarry. We are here to create; you, to destroy.

You may tell yourself that you are here to keep an eye on antisocial elements—but who is the deceitful one, lying to everyone, disguising malice as common cause? You may tell yourself that you are here to protect others from violence—but you are the only one here who has come expressly to do harm. Your employers, the FBI, have a history of murder and injustice stretching back long before the notorious COINTELPRO assault on the Black Panthers. They spied on Martin Luther King. When Earth First! activist Judi Bari was bombed, either by right wing terrorists or government agents, the FBI refused to investigate and instead tried—and failed—to frame her for bombing herself.

Anarchists, not the FBI, are the ones who oppose violence in this society. In the past twenty years of anarchist activity, the only injuries have been minor ones in cases of self-defense, in contrast to the slaughter and mayhem the US government perpetrates indiscriminately across the globe. If you really hope to protect others from violence, why aren’t you working at a rape crisis center? Do you really think anarchists pose a greater threat to people than rapists do? Or is it the threat to hierarchy, not people, that concerns you?

You may tell yourself you are nobly serving your country—but there are nobler causes to serve. Your masters want power for themselves at any expense, while we struggle for respect and coexistence among all living things. You may tell yourself that you are here to do good—but you are the one on salary; we do what we do for free, for our consciences, not for a paycheck. Essentially, you are a prostitute¹; and should you have sex with your targets in order to entrap them, as other infiltrators have done, that will come as no surprise. Imagine the conscience of a

person who sleeps with others not out of love or desire, not just in return for money, but in order to ruin their lives!

You must be ashamed of yourself. Think how many people in the world would be disgusted with you, if they knew what you are doing. Anyway, the gulf between us is too broad to be crossed now. The most we can ask is that you do your job badly, like a worker at McDonalds who must feed his family even though he knows his employers are destroying the rainforest, the health of their customers, and the future of all species. If one shred of humanity remains within you after a lifetime of brainwashing, please—do your job badly.

As for the rest of you, who are not infiltrators or informants—if you disapprove of paid agents coming here to endanger you and your friends, don't do the same thing for free. Don't speak of your involvement in illegal activities, don't speculate as to others' involvement—and above all, should you ever find yourself in an interrogation chamber with the ones who really hate our freedom attempting to terrorize you into helping them frame your friends, don't cooperate, don't sell out everything you believe for them.

Our freedom, our safety, are under our control, not theirs. Freedom is not a matter of how many fences are around us, but of abiding by our consciences in any situation. Safety is not the condition of being temporarily outside the grasp of our enemies, but of being able to trust ourselves never to deliver others into harm's way, never to become something we despise.

The FBI, which exists to protect the interests of the most powerful, selfish, and destructive men in the world today, hopes to intimidate us out of our struggle for a better world. But we are here because we feel that the lives waiting for us in their society are unlivable, because we see that the injustices that create the foundation of their power are unacceptable, because we know that the pollution and destruction of their economy are unsustainable. There is no future for us except through change—so attacks on our freedom can only mobilize us to struggle more urgently.

Even if there are one hundred federal infiltrators here and only two human beings, those two human beings can be more powerful than the entire apparatus of the state. Find each other and do something beautiful. Thank you.”

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