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# Anarchism, Violence, and Brandon Darby's Politics of Moral Certitude

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2009

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Most self-identified anarchists I have met in New Orleans are like those I know across the United States: they don't believe in unity around an end goal. They recognize that utopian visions are more often than not components of authoritarian projects that justify violence in the name of "order" and "progress." They recognize the dreams of capitalist globalization and liberal democracy as possessing these imposing agendas, not unlike other political philosophies or projects that seek to create unity under state government, or one capitalist market.

Of utmost importance, anarchism offers no ultimate moral clarity for us to discover what needs doing, how it must be done, and why. Instead, it offers a political philosophy of freedom and responsibility to act against the organized forms of authoritarian violence and hierarchical oppression of the state, capital, patriarchy, and white supremacy. If it is anything, anarchism is a skepticism of concentrated power and authority and a creative exploration of increasingly egalitarian and free forms of relating to one another through cooperation. It requires humility and agnosticism to questions of what is ultimately right and moral. Instead, it challenges us to incessantly search for better means and ends, knowing that the search, the process itself is joyful and painful.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, anarchist truths found fertile, if toxic grounds to take root and grow in. New paths were walked on. Antiauthoritarian principles both emerged as an important guide for reconstruction and the struggle against disaster capitalism. A million or more equally important stories can now be told about mutual aid, cooperation, subversion of authority, disruption of state and capitalist plans. And yet Brandon Darby's morality tale has become a media darling, due in no small part to his perfect and full adoption of his role as a state agent, regardless of whether it was official in 2006, or whether the FBI is still cutting him paychecks. We owe it to ourselves to tell these other stories of New Orleans, St. Paul, and beyond.

I was in Austin, Texas of all places when the story of Brandon Crowder and David McKay first broke; two young men arrested in St. Paul, charged with planning to use firebombs during the protests against the Republican National Convention. They were quickly demonized by the media, portrayed as dangerously idealistic young men bent on terroristic violence. Crowder and McKay, now known as the Texas Two, have since been convicted and are serving sentences of two and four years respectively.

It was not long after their arrest when case files started to leak out. By this time I was back in New Orleans, a place I've been living and working, on and off since Katrina, since I came down here like thousands of others to work in solidarity with the displaced and dispossessed. From the big humid city One day I remember reading a press report in the big humid city identifying one "Brandon Darby" as an FBI informant who would provide key evidence and testimony against Crowder and McKay. Speculation was quick and intense: was this the same Darby from Austin, Texas who had worked in New Orleans after Katrina at Common Ground? Darby himself soon fessed up to the facts and revealed his status as an FBI informant in a now infamous open letter published on Indymedia ([publish.indymedia.org](http://publish.indymedia.org)).

Darby's role as an FBI informant has been incredibly destructive. He has directly facilitated the incarceration of two men through a diligent entrapment scheme. The Minneapolis Star-Tribune reported after the conclusion of both trials that, "McKay's claims that he was entrapped by informant Brandon Darby gained ground with some of the jurors at his trial. A mistrial was declared after the jury deadlocked."<sup>1</sup> McKay pled guilty before his second trial, facing an uphill battle against the prosecution and public opinion. It is also likely that Darby has supplied federal agents with extensive infor-

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, James. "Second Texan gets four years in RNC plot: The judge said McKay got a longer sentence because he did not accept responsibility in Molotov-cocktail scheme." Minneapolis Star-Tribune. May 21, 2009.

mation about dozens upon dozens of individuals who once worked with him — , some who called him a friend — , not just in Austin, but also in New Orleans, and perhaps elsewhere.

Darby's betrayal of antiauthoritarian organizers, and the damage he has done runs even deeper than this, however. Based on popular narratives being circulated in the media about Darby, told largely on his terms, he and his sympathetic profilers have developed a story about violence, morality and authority which tells us that for all its shortcomings, the state is benevolent, the police are our protectors, the feds are our friends, and in the end, authority is necessary. Darby situates the story of his conversion into an authoritarian in his experiences running with radical antiauthoritarians in post-Katrina New Orleans. In doing so he is now helping to obliterate some of the most profound truths about antiauthoritarian possibilities in the wake of the storm. This may be his most destructive and lasting legacy, whether he was a state mole from day one, or really is just a volunteer collaborator with Uncle Sam.

## **New Antiauthoritarian Possibilities?**

The quick and over-bearing presence of certain arms of the state and certain kinds of bureaucratic forces in Katrina's aftermath — the presence of heavily armed police, military units, and the private military corporations, as well as the highly criminalizing and punitive "aid" agencies like FEMA — revealed the most basic function of the state in Louisiana: the protection of private and corporate property, and the maintenance of violent class, race, and gender inequalities. The days and weeks after Katrina was a period of intense state (and white vigilante) violence directed at certain communities, the function of which was to make clear that the hurricane would in no way lead to any recasting of the social order along more egalitarian lines. State and vigilante violence was overwhelmingly designed to

ings with rights cannot accept this position, however. Anarchism doesn't offer moral certitude or eternal comfort in one's choices. It demands the recognition of ambiguity, complexity, contradiction, and the flux of life. It requires that each and every individual make their own ethical judgments, not to seek comfort in the morality of authority.

Antiauthoritarianism offers a collective way of coming to moral consensus, or not, which stands counterposed to the state's forceful hegemony. As violent as it is, bending to the state's demand for legitimacy, its Weberian core (the state being an entity which proclaims the sole legitimate use of force in a given territory) produces a feeling of comfort and assuredness in those who obey. If it is anything, anarchism is a most uncomfortable and burdensome ethic because it gives us all freedom, and excuses no act of violence, whether it is perpetrated by the state, or a "terrorist." All harm is harm. We are already born into a world of incredible violence. Most violence is in support of upholding ongoing structures of oppression. To choose freedom and make ethical choices in this kind of world is inherently antiauthoritarian and daunting.

A major significance of the Katrina crisis for anarchist theories and practices has been the multiple, complex, and often contradictory experiences of people organizing in this context. What can these experiences teach us about liberation? What went wrong? What did we do right? Where did we fail to build solidarity and where did we succeed? In what ways did we successfully respond to the state's omissions, its violence, or to the predatory behaviors of urban capitalism? And how did we respond to our own failures, our own acts of oppression and aggression?

The world is a complicated and contradictory reality of already existing forms of violence, oppression, suffering, all sedimented in durable sets of power relations in which we must act. While anarchists act toward common ideals, there are few self-identified anarchist who are utopian enough to believe that we can all agree on this end goal, or even if we could, that it would ever be reached.

Keep in mind again that McKay and Crowder intended to do nothing remotely approaching these hypotheticals. Their goal seems to have been to destroy police property as revenge against the police confiscation of a trailer filled with shields to protect RNC protesters from police assault.

Nevertheless, how would this hypothetical violence against the Republican Party's leadership compare to the massive violence they are responsible for through the weapons manufacturing companies they own (the majority of military contracting corporations are owned and operated by men who donate huge sums to the RNC, and sometimes take leaves of absence to run for office through the Party, e.g. George H.W. Bush, Richard Cheney, Don Rumsfeld. et al.). How would it compare to the federal, state, and increasingly private prison systems they operate (which disproportionately lock up people of color, especially blacks); the huge transnational energy and mining corporations they own and operate and which are responsible for unthinkable ecological crimes and human rights abuses, from the Gulf Coast to Nigeria and Indonesia (again, another pair of industries strongly aligned with the RNC)?

What about the violence McKay and Crowder now face from guards and inmates, the "people who will ass-rape us," as Darby described it to McKay and Crowder during one conversation? in which he During the same interchange he also teased them as "tofu-eaters," and told them point blank: "I'm going to shut this fucker [RNC] down [...] any group I go with will be successful. [The] process is developed by working together, not by sitting down like lawyers to work it out first." Darby said he "wasn't there to fuck around — direct action is intense, and we can all expect to have violence used against us." What about that violence?

One of the twisted lessons of Darby's parable is that that violence is excused and ignored because it is state violence. All state violence, were are to believe, has moral authority. Anyone who accepts their freedom and responsibility to treat all others as be-

reconstitute the pre-Katrina hierarchy by suppressing all thoughts of rebellion against wealth, power, and government.

Partly because of these ultra-violent state activities, Katrina's aftermath resulted in the simultaneous de-legitimization of state authority along with the exercise of collective, egalitarian powers through mutual aid and grassroots insurgency. Several criminologists have gone so far as to define the behavior of state officials and government agencies during the Katrina crisis as a "state crime of omission," marking them not only as illegitimate, but criminally negligent. According to these unlikely critics, "this failure to engage resources to lessen the impact of a known and profound threat represents a crime of omission in the same way that state crime scholars have framed governmental failures to address known harms such as HIV/AIDS, black infant mortality, environmental contamination, homelessness, and unsafe working environments."<sup>2</sup>

While many commentators have marked Katrina the nadir and unravelling of the Bush presidency, even more so, it was a crack in the monolithic authority of the US state through which the light of new political visions and possibilities stole through, if ever briefly. Many were willing and able to see anew and believe that forms of autonomous power could be exercised constructively inside the US. That this all occurred during one of the bloodier stretches of the Iraq war, an occupation that has elicited significant opposition from the beginning, especially among working class Americans,

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<sup>2</sup> This source of criticism is unlikely because criminology has largely developed as an interdisciplinary subfield of sociology, psychology and legal studies, in close cooperation with state institutions of repression (police, prisons, courts, psychiatric hospitals, etc.), and for much of its history has proactively abetted in the criminalization of whole population groups. There is, however, an insurgent school of thought within criminology that is attempting to subject the state itself to this treatment, approaching "crime" as any act of harm, including that committed by authorities. See Faust, Kelly and David Kauzlarick. "Hurricane Katrina Victimization as a State Crime of Omission." *Critical Criminology* (2008) 16:85–103.

further increased the significance of Katrina as a moment of anarchic angst and yearning.

More than yearning, this moment produced actual collective responses against the state crime that was Katrina. Gulf Coast communities banded together in spite of the state to defend themselves. Many communities have had to fight the government to secure a right of return. This struggle has resulted in an interesting social mobilization marked by its anarchistic formations, tactics, and desires. Imperfect and sometimes counterproductive, thousands of organizers and hundreds of thousands of regular folks have struggled across racial, class, gender, language, nationality, age and other lines of difference in ways that go beyond the standards of US activist reformism. Post-Katrina New Orleans has seen experimental forms of self-organization and resistance, — that while their practitioners may not describe as anarchistic, c — are nonetheless of like mind and spirit. New pathways of consciousness, solidarity, and struggle have been walked upon. New political possibilities now exist because of the Right of Return Movement, even if much went wrong and many potentials were underdeveloped due to our own racism, class divisions, patriarchal tendencies and other internalized oppressions. That these were evoked, challenged, and in some cases even transcended, all in the context of autonomous organizing has been a valuable developmental process in itself.

As the sociologist Paul Stock has pointed out, “post-impact disaster periods may be one of the best examples of actual anarchy we have in the United States,” because they involve local spontaneous cooperation and pro-social behavior, regardless, and often in spite of the state’s efforts to exert its authority and violent control over the situation.<sup>3</sup>

As Stock has also been keen to point out, state officials and the corporate media seem to have recognized this also, albeit in ide-

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<sup>3</sup> Stock, Paul V. “Katrina and Anarchy: A Content Analysis of a New Disaster Myth.” *Sociological Spectrum*. Vol. 27, No. 6, 2007.

may happen to be a Democrat, a Monarchist, a Socialist, Bolshevik, or Anarchist. You will find that this applies to all men and to all times.

Just what these conditions are is up to each and every individual to decide. This is the daunting freedom and discomfort of anarchism. When one becomes a “citizen,” even an agent of the state, as Darby has done, she or he in-effect makes a choice to no longer have to make choices. Now they can simply take orders, march in line, fire on command, and tune-in to the news at 10 where the corporate media presents parables like the case of the terrible Texas Two.

The Republican Party held its convention and at last count the only serious violence that occurred was police brutality against demonstrators. Of course the authoritarian will argue that there might have been more like McKay and Crowder who without the intervention of the brave FBI would have done harm to someone, somehow. But even if demonstrators had rushed police barricades, burned out police cars, stormed the convention and shut it down, even if they had gone so far as to physically attack, perhaps even kill some of those Republican Party bosses in attendance, particularly those in the party’s uppermost ranks who have more or less run the federal government from 2000 to 2008, how would this violence morally compare to that which the Republican (and Democrat)- controlled United States of America has been visiting upon Iraq and Afghanistan during this span of time? How would it morally compare to the torture operations, the secrete prison network, the extraordinary renditions, the assassinations, the firing of missiles and “collateral” killing of civilians in North Africa, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere? Is it equivalent? If it is different, how so? How is it different beyond the mere illusion of legitimacy provided by the state so that these murderers could gather last summer in Minnesota to nominate their next war president?



I disagree with the group I was associating with as much as I disagree with the Republican Party.” He has even implied that his actions were to defend the rights of Republicans and “peaceful protestors” to gather in St. Paul for the RNC and to express themselves through their constitutional rights. While McKay and Crowder never sought to kill or harm anyone, just to destroy police cruisers, they have been vilified along with the radical antiauthoritarian politics of justice they represent, their names and faces flashed across TV screens and in newspapers from coast to coast as examples of the enemy within.

All of which brings us to the question of violence and morality. Alexander Berkman, a brilliant and brave organizer, a thinker and direct actionist who once attempted to kill a man of great wealth and authority with his own hands, wrote up this possible exchange between an authoritarian and a radical to try to inject some clarity into the subject of political violence:

“Yes, Anarchists have thrown bombs and have sometimes resorted to violence.

“There you are!” your friend exclaims. “I thought so.”

But do not let us be hasty. If Anarchists have sometimes employed violence, does it necessarily mean that Anarchism means violence?

Ask yourself this question and try to answer it honestly.

When a citizen puts on a soldier’s uniform, he may have to throw bombs and use violence.

Will you say, then, that citizenship stands for bombs and violence?

You will indignantly resent the imputation.

It simply means, you will reply, that under certain conditions a man may have to resort to violence. The man

ologically polluted ways. Their various statements and reports to justify the enormous police and military presence following the flood portrayed it all as necessary to “prevent anarchy from breaking out.” Of course for them, “anarchy,” is a term drained of its actual meaning and instead serving only to conjure images of black looters and gun-wielding “thugs,” or irrational and incompetent activists playing in sandboxes while the real work of law, order, and reconstruction goes on around them.

These early attempts by politicians like Governor Blanco (who gave her infamous “shoot to kill” order days after the storm), and Jimmy Ries (the New Orleans power broker who hired Israeli commandos to patrol his un-flooded neighborhood) along with corporate news outlets to define “anarchy” during the catastrophe as a situation of antisocial violence was designed to make the heavy hand of the state appear necessary and good. Only state violence could restore rational, pro-social behavior, and commerce, officials and media pundits proclaimed. This was the first and foremost attempt of authoritarian institutions (state, military, media, corporations) to temper the larger post-disaster political narrative. They sought to eradicate the emergent possibilities stemming from the state’s obvious violence and antisocial prerogatives. Their goal was to stamp out the notion that explicitly antiauthoritarian and autonomous forms of organizing and aid had any positive role to play in the wake of the flood and future of New Orleans.

## The Crescent City Connection

Brandon Darby’s turncoat story, now popularized most conspicuously on state-funded radio’s *This American Life*,<sup>4</sup> and the flagship

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<sup>4</sup> “Turncoat.” *This American Life*. May 22, 2009. [www.thislife.org](http://www.thislife.org)

newspaper of the corporate media, *The New York Times*<sup>5</sup> (and many other media outlets) is the second major attempt by the culture industry to popularize a misunderstanding of antiauthoritarian politics — , one that is in fact totally anathema to anarchist history, theory, and practice. Darby’s desire to sanctify his behavior (and perhaps to recapture his heroic-rebel identity) has offered up a compelling parable to this wider ideological project.

Darby’s narrative has been seized upon in no small part because it offers a simple and defamatory story about anarchism in America: that it is a movement of naive idealists and violent terrorists. His story obscures many different, more widely experienced stories about antiauthoritarian currents in post-Katrina New Orleans (and the anti-war movement), stories that offer a much more complex, challenging, and hopeful body of knowledge about wins and losses, mistakes and triumphs, pitfalls and possibilities. Instead, Darby and the corporate/state media have managed to eclipse these knowledges with an egotistical morality tale and anti-political rant, one that ends with an anti-revolutionary conclusion.

On *This American Life* Darby’s interlocutor, Michael May, tells Darby’s story sympathetically and rather accurately, splicing in a few critical moments here and there. Darby, we are told, grew up in Texas, self-taught, troubled and angry with authority, and in his own words “believed for years that the government was out of control and that it didn’t have any concern for the average person, and then Katrina happened.”

Darby’s Katrina story is well known, even if it has been embellished and exaggerated over time. He went to New Orleans, made it into the flooded city, helped Robert Hillary King evacuate, helped to found Common Ground, and stayed on and off for several stints.

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<sup>5</sup> Moynihan, Colin. “Activist Unmasks Himself as Federal Informant in G.O.P. Convention Case.” *The New York Times*. January 4, 2009. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

that’s on social justice, you can become a law enforcement officer, you can get involved with the FBI, or a lawyer.”<sup>9</sup>

Darby justifies his work as an informant by explaining that he was out to stop two young men from possibly doing harm to someone, from doing violence during the protest against the Republican National Convention. As a contingency plan, after their shields had been confiscated by the police (due to a tip from Darby actually), McKay and Crowder had fashioned several Molotovs and planned to burn out police cars in a parking lot. According to trial documents acquired by the RNC Felony Working Group, Darby conferred with McKay about the plans:

Darby says he warned McKay of the consequences of using the Molotovs during this conversation, saying (to paraphrase in brief) “you have to be willing to go to prison for a long time if you get caught. I am a revolutionary but I don’t think there is any shame in backing out now and I wouldn’t tell anyone that you backed out.” Darby says McKay claimed he still wanted to use them. Darby says he asked McKay, “What if an officer gets hurt?” to which McKay responded “It’s worth it if an officer gets hurt.”<sup>10</sup>

## Moral Clarity and Violence?

This acceptance of an undesired hypothetical proposed by Darby was enough to send McKay to jail, along with Crowder, enough to malign the entire dominant narrative about the anti-RNC protests for those millions of Americans who simply digested it on the evening news, and enough to plant in the heads of millions of Americans reading stories about the Texas Two that “anarchy” is solely about violence and recklessness. Darby explains himself after the fact, saying “one morning, I woke up and realized that

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<sup>9</sup> “The Informant: Revolutionary to Rat.” *Austin Chronicle*. [www.austinchronicle.com](http://www.austinchronicle.com)

<sup>10</sup> “Tuesday 1/27- Day Two of David McKay trial.” [brandondarby.com](http://brandondarby.com)

his media profilers portray him as someone hurried to accomplish good, to save lives, and that his efforts were impeded by these wild-eyed, utopian radicals.

## Embracing the State

Ultimately, Darby explains his full and final betrayal of friends and fellow organizers as a moral issue. The invitation to meet FARC leadership, his realization that Common Ground was “undermining” the US government, that his colleagues were making dangerous alliances with the “Ayatollah,” the elder Black Panthers giving Common Ground and other organizations long-term vision; he seems to be concluding that it was all misguided, serving only to create unnecessary violence in the world.

Recently Darby has made statements to the press concerning his love for his country, his alliance with the FBI and state, and against anyone who would do harm to his patria. If we are to believe his tale as it has been told through the corporate and state media, then in the end Darby, like most Americans, is simply a terrified authoritarian. Sadly, this is the most conciliatory thing that can be said about him. In bad faith he has fled from the ambiguity of freedom and the inner struggle required to assess each and every act of violence or nonviolence, justice or injustice, within the wider field of already occurring violence and injustice. He has sought out moral certitude in the authority of the state, through an alliance with the FBI. No statement of his better sums up this retreat from the ambiguity of freedom than this bizarre piece of advice to those seeking social justice: “I’ve watched countless activists begin to work in the Legislature and begin to do things that participate in the system; we have a system that is wide open for our involvement. You can get involved and have a say so; if you disagree with the way our city is run, you can get involved. If you have an ideological bent

His days in New Orleans are remembered with very mixed feelings by those who knew and worked with him. Almost everyone agrees that he was often shockingly reckless and erratic. A statement from the National Committee to Free the Angola 3, a group that supported King during his time in jail as one of these three, expressed shortly after Darby published his open letter that, “there was always this manic, reckless side to him that was more than a little unsettling.”<sup>6</sup> Many agree that he was also passionate and hard working. Long before his role as an FBI informant was revealed he had gained notoriety among many organizers as a misogynistic and macho presence, an often loose canon.

After his open letter admitting his work for the FBI many New Orleans’ organizers remarked to me privately that they had always had doubts about the man. “Dude was nuts,” and “dangerous,” I have been told. Others who were at Common Ground for considerable time and saw Darby come and go, especially as Operations Director in 2006, remarked that they weren’t at all surprised, and that his behavior at Common Ground now made more sense. Some organizers recalled his “divide and conquer” tactics, his agitation, heavy handedness, and bullying ways. Fellow Common Ground co-founders Scott Crow and Malik Rahim are even quoted several times on *This American Life*. Both agree that Darby’s overall presence at Common Ground almost tore the organization apart. Many New Orleanians, including Rahim, have remarked that Darby must have been on FBI payroll then, employed to undermine Common Ground the organization and the Right of Return Movement. Whether this is true or not will be hard to prove, but it would hardly be the first time federal or local police tried to mow down grassroots New Orleans. Rahim and other black radicals have many tales to tell about the FBI and

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<sup>6</sup> news.infoshop.org

NOPD's calculating efforts to destroy them and their movements in the early 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Almost equally damaging as anything Darby could have done as an activists/agent in post-Katrina New Orleans, however, is what he is currently doing, through his eagerness to retell his story in the mass media. It is another example of his cooperation with authoritarian institutions bent on shaping many people's understanding of how radical anti-authoritarians responded to Katrina and the wider political possibilities that were opened up by the storm.

The looming narrative now being developed for a national audience is that Darby, once a radical and self-described "revolutionary," has seen the inside of the radical anti-authoritarian movement within the United States — , that a significant part of this inside scoop was acquired in New Orleans at Common Ground — , and that at its core this movement is a threat to peace and freedom. According to Darby, and told through the reporting of various journalists who have interviewed him, the antiauthoritarian movement is violent, irrational, nihilistic, and it must be stopped.

Darby points to several personal experiences during and after his days in New Orleans to justify his disillusionment and turn toward the badge of authority. On *This American Life* he recalls a trip to Venezuela to speak to the government about hurricane aid. He claims a Venezuelan official invited him to meet leaders of the FARC, a Marxist insurgency defined by the Columbian and US governments as "narco-terrorists." Darby says it was a major shock to him, and gives the impression to listeners that he refused out of moral repulsion. For a story about Darby and the Texas Two, Rahim told a reporter from the *Austin Chronicle* for a story about Darby

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<sup>7</sup> One of the more famous episodes involved police agents dressed as priests, knocking on the office door of the Black Panther Party of New Orleans, part of an assault against the Panthers that ended in a raid. There had previously been a shootout with the Panthers defending their ground. See "Malik Rahim on Black Panthers and Black resistance in New Orleans." [www.assatashakur.org](http://www.assatashakur.org), and; Arend, Orissa. *Showdown in Desire*. University of Arkansas Press, 2009.

ter in the Spring and Summer of 2006. According to Luft, a series of sexual assaults — , the vast majority perpetrated by white, male volunteers against white, female volunteers — was dealt with poorly by the group. Because these assaults were not approached intersectionally (in a way that acknowledges the co-constitution of racism and patriarchy) the group ended up focusing on an imagined threat from the external community (the majority black neighborhood around them) and failed to address the assaults occurring within.

Luft has coined a useful term for this and wider examples of sexism expressed in the post-Katrina context, "disaster masculinity." According to Luft, this is a mode of behavior in which hyper-masculine attributes are exercised freely to dominate others in a crisis setting. Darby, among others, has been extensively critiqued for this. Common Ground co-founder Lisa Fithian has described Darby's behavior as "Wild West shit," saying that, "he was able to set some patterns in motion that I believe led to systemic issues of sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and violence. He kicked the door down of a women's center at 2am to throw a guy out; he kicked in the door of a trailer where there were volunteers with guns on them. He did a lot of Wild West shit — Mister Macho Action Hero." Disaster masculinity was mostly unexamined by Common Ground and other antiauthoritarian organizers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Nevertheless, Common Ground's greatest failings during this phase in its existence had little to do with anarchism as an organizing principle, and a lot to do with the egos and authoritarian tendencies of many of the group's leaders. Ironically these were often expressed in a vulgar "I am more radical/anarchist than thou" fashion, or in Darby's case, in a creeping-authoritarian, masculine, and violent fashion posing as a pragmatic "get shit done" mentality. However, to read popular media accounts of Darby's time in New Orleans — where he locates the origins of his doubts about revolutionary politics — gives a sense that anarchism is an inept ideal leading to incompetence, and frustrated acts of violence. Darby and

## Common Ground Had Much Deeper Problems, Like Its Brandon Darbys

Common Ground has been called an anarchist-inspired organization mostly because of its founders' and volunteers' affinity to this political philosophy. It was built up by elder Black Panthers in cooperation with younger, mostly white radicals from Texas. Others have noted the organization's "chaotic" and "decentralized" structure, and the absence of a clear chain of command, which when compared to the major disaster relief NGOs like Red Cross is a fair assessment. But Common Ground was "chaotic" for reasons having less to do with its de-centered structure and more to do with egoism and internal power struggles between men like Darby.

Scott Foletta, a volunteer who left CG after a month to organize with migrant workers and the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund, wrote up an excellent critique of the organization, "Finding Common Ground." This reflection was circulated in the Spring of 2006 and generated some productive discussion. It mostly addressed the dominance of several male organizers, explaining how this obvious violation of egalitarian principles and a developing tyranny of structurelessness, combined with the raw bullying of some, was slowly debilitating the organization and preventing it from doing any good at all. This volunteer's main point was that making the organization more transparent, its leadership structure more accountable and representative of differences, and by making it all of it more participatory (all very antiauthoritarian suggestions) would strengthen Common Ground.<sup>8</sup>

Another excellent critique of Common Ground is Rachel Luft's "Looking for Common Ground," an article that explores the racist-colonial tendencies of the organization through a detailed study of sexual assaults that took place within its 9<sup>th</sup> Ward volunteer cen-

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<sup>8</sup> "Finding Common Ground" was written by Scott Foletta. I have not been able to find an available copy of his essay since first reading it in 2006.

and the Texas Two,, "I think that Brandon had a nervous breakdown in Venezuela and that when he came back he was messed up in the head[.] At the very beginning, he was helpful, but after Venezuela, he became harmful. ... He did everything he could to destroy St. Mary's, which was where we were housing the majority of our volunteers, by letting a bunch of crackheads move in there. And he also drove a wedge between me and Lisa Fithian and eventually caused her to leave, too. He was doing everything you're supposed to do as a government agent in that situation. Divide and conquer." Darby has recalled feeling angry at having been sent to Venezuela by Common Ground, and put in a position of seeking funds to "undermine the Bush administration," feeling that this was a violation of his morals.

Another example is Darby's recollection of his interactions with struggling New Orleans homeowners who when offered "Chavez Trailers" paid for by the South American leader Hugo Chavez, turned them down. "Nah bro, I love my country," Darby recalls them saying. "I don't want a home paid for by the Ayatollah." What an Ayatollah (a Persian-Islamic clerical title) has to do with Venezuela, and why Darby conflates this Islamic term with a secular Latin American state in his story is not explained, but the impression is he gives is that Common Ground was purely out to do things designed to embarrass the US government. He portrays the organization as making irrational anti-American postures, and seeking alliances with enemies of the Bush administration, anything but pursuing practical, egalitarian solutions to obstacles in the way of community recovery.

It's interesting also to hear Darby's list of reasons why Common Ground was problematic as it helps locate some of his own assumptions and motivations. On *This American Life* and in several interviews with the press he briefly revisits conflicts within Common Ground over the structure of the organization, decision making processes, and leadership, all which led him to believe that consensus doesn't work, that strong and clear lines of authority

are required, that the police are our friends. The “anarchism” he depicts is an idealistic and counterproductive mental illness. Again, this sounds like a scripted yarn, cooked up in some smoke-filled room deep inside the J. Edgar Hoover Building by COINTELPRO-like strategists to undermine the collective experiences many of us have had in post-Katrina New Orleans. In his radio interview he recounts railing against the attempt of kitchen staff to impose vegan diets on everyone, and against the attempts of other organizers to open up organizer’s meetings to wider numbers of Common Ground volunteers, or to delegate responsibilities more broadly in the organization. Darby vented to one reporter that “for some, Common Ground might have been about creating a little anarchist utopia. For me, it was about helping people have their rights heard and have their homes [restored], and it was about getting things done.” Getting things done, other organizers recall, meant to Darby that it was okay for him to run roughshod over others and assume positions of leadership without the consent of others.

Some of Darby’s broad brush criticisms about Common Ground and about the presence of self-identified “anarchist” (mostly visiting young white men and women) in New Orleans will ring with a kernel of truth for anyone who spent time in and around the organization’s various 9<sup>th</sup> Ward volunteer centers, distribution centers, and the House of Excellence (computer/legal aid/media center). I spent a total of two weeks at Common Ground in the Winter of 2005, so my own perspectives are gleaned mostly from discussions with other long-term organizers of that collective.

It’s true that Common Ground was often too disorganized to be effective on some fronts. Volunteers often made decisions that weren’t in the best interest of the communities hosting them, and with whom they were attempting to work in solidarity with. Many locals didn’t share some of the particular critiques of government, the police, and capitalism that some Common Grounders proffered (although members of the local community have actually articu-

lated more radical and complex critiques of government and power than the average Common Ground volunteer ever has).

Of particular importance, some locals steered clear of Common Ground and many of the organization’s political protest tactics because of their fears of police reprisal, but certainly not out of a collective opposition to the organization’s politics. For *This American Life*, the struggle of public housing residents against the demolition of their homes is presented as an example of the impracticality and foolishness of anarchist direct action. Many out-of-town, white, anti-authoritarians volunteered to conduct confrontational direct action protests against the demolitions, often involving trespassing, whereas many residents and other black supporters of public housing feared the Housing Authority, the police, and the federal government. It was clear to locals, especially blacks, that the authorities would arrest anyone in their way, and that getting locked up as a working class black New Orleanian is a whole different ballgame than going to jail as a white, out-of-town organizer. Locals often kept a low-profile at these protests, not because they differed with the visions and goals of Common Ground’s volunteers — indeed, CG volunteers were attempting to take their cues from local organizers working closely with public housing resident leaders — but because they feared violent reprisal from the state. Darby and *This American Life* leave us with an impression, however, of naive young radicals fighting a battle they knew nothing of, and which many locals didn’t support. The truth doesn’t matter to Darby, to Public Radio, and to millions of Americans for whom this little story proves a prejudiced point: cross-racial and class alliances in post-Katrina New Orleans were silly and often wrong. The state was acting responsibly and for the general welfare.