

The Promise of Defeat

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Sometimes I think about my life as a series of schemes, plans, plots, and experiments. Everything I've tried, every hare-brained scheme I've hatched, every implausible thought I've run with up until this moment. And if I'm really honest with myself, the trail of ideas that disappears into the horizon behind me is completely and utterly mined over with failures. Comic failures, tragic failures, dramatic failures — failures of all types.

Anarchists are best known for their failures. They lost the Spanish Civil War, the Soviets prevailed in Hungary '56, the Paris communards were shot to death, and the status quo continued after May '68. And yet, far from trying to suppress these histories, these are the stories that anarchists recount. Even anarchist holidays tend to commemorate moments of dazzling defeat: Haymarket, Sacco & Vanzetti, Berkman's botched assassination, etc...

This is unusual. American Patriots do not speak, with a gleam in their eyes, of the incredible number of battles that George Washington lost (and he lost almost as much as anarchists do). Instead he's there, at the bow of that boat, guiding the way through the expansive darkness, as he crosses the Delaware river to victory. The prevailing holidays of the various nation states, religions, and authoritarian movements that we've grown up with do not generally harp on their failures. Instead, they choose to celebrate Independence Days, Resurrections, and the Wars They Won.

The difference between the ways Nationalists and Anarchists talk about their histories seems critical. Of course, it's very possible that anarchists talk about defeat simply because they have no other histories to choose from. But I like to think that it's because Anarchists see past the tendency towards quantifiability. That they know there are moments in time, even preceding defeat, where people learn more about themselves, and feel a greater sense of inspiration from what they're experiencing, than from all the George Washingtons victoriously sailing across all the Delaware rivers of the world.

Here's a story about defeat.

I live in a city that some people would call a "high pressure zone" — a place with a thriving service sector and a centrality to the workings of the global economy. Real estate values here have been exploding for decades now, and the difficulty that this presents is something that I'm almost constantly dealing with.

The ways that we choose to respond to difficulty are interesting. Cultures of all types are constantly institutionalizing certain responses, and to some extent the responses we choose often

reflect cultural rules as much as anything else. Anarchists are not immune to this. If you're hungry, the anarchist answer is dumpster diving. If you need space, the anarchist answer is squatting. But maybe it shouldn't be as simple as this. We live complex lives in the midst of complex situations, which to some degree will always defy recipes and generalized responses. Besides, trying the same things over and over again causes them to eventually lose their charm. Shouldn't the anarchist response embody inspiration, dynamicism, and experimentation in an unpredictable way?

At some point I started to think critically about my strategies for dodging the high rents and impossible space constraints in the city where I live. The anarchist recipe of trying to squat the few empty buildings I could find didn't really work for me in a town where the pressure is so high.

Instead I started to wonder about the possibilities of the ocean; where the harsh lines of property ended, and an apparent sense of possibility began. The idea seemed obvious: pirates. Here it was, the experiment that I'd been looking for all along. The story I'd known about since the naive Halloweens of my childhood. A floating piece of autonomy, off the shores of capitalism, but still within cannon range.

I didn't know anything about boats, sailing, or what might lay beyond the horizon. But I suspected that, like anything, the secret was to begin.

And so with only a sense of inspiration under our belts, some co-conspirators and I started to try and make this happen. We found a very old, very derelict, 55' triple-masted schooner. Finding this boat was like finding another world, and the shape of my time changed completely. Suddenly I was fiberglassing, caulking, and epoxying. I was sanding, painting, and scraping. I was cursing dry-rot as my sworn enemy, and finding a friend in fungus-hunting epoxy. I was going to sleep with sunburn on my face and waking up with sawdust in my hair. I felt strong at the end of the day with engine grease on my hands and soot on my neck.

I would question the whole ocean experiment when, in time, I would find myself alone on a boat in the Pacific Ocean, with no land in sight, trying to repair the rigging as I swung violently from the top of the mast. Or in the Caribbean, when I finally saw Haiti emerge from the horizon, only to spend two days completely becalmed before it under the blazing hot sun. It was easy to start questioning where I was going, and why I was traveling by the slowest means possible. But it felt right. I learned about survival, isolation, and adversity. I came to know things about the ocean, the wind, and the sky. I even learned a little about insanity.

Years later, after being out of town for a few months, I once again found myself without a place to live upon my return. Rather than pass the time as a houseguest, I started sleeping on the roof of a large building. It was just before an anarchist bookfair, though, and so I was preparing zines and CDs to table there. As the inventory of my possessions on-hand grew far beyond the size of my backpack, I found myself in an increasingly absurd situation. Every night, as stealthily as possible, I'd carry spools of three hundred CDRs, an external hard drive, a desktop inkjet printer, and a bike up to the roof of this building. It was the kind of situation where, rather than going to sleep with the anxiety of being caught, I'd doze off while chuckling about the image of what that would look like. There I would be, caught squatting a rooftop, surrounded with the accouterments of a full CD pressing operation.

Not to mention that I'd finally broken down and gotten an electric toothbrush for my ever-depleting gum line. I mean, it's acceptable to charge your cellphone in a cafe, but your toothbrush?

People were constantly looking at me like "Is that you're toothbrush you're charging?" And I'd give them a look that says "Fuck yeah, that's my toothbrush. Sonicare 2000."

It couldn't continue, though. The weather was preparing to change, and there were things that I wanted to do which required more space consistency than what my rooftop provided. Instead, as a part of all that I'd discovered off-shore in my sailing experiments, I resolved to try building a floating house along the derelict waterfront of my city. Something that would provide a lot of room and remain more-or-less stationary, but which I could dock more mobile boats to. The home base for an emerging armada, with room for friends to build their own adjacent floating islands.

I talked with some friends who were excited about trying the same thing. We didn't know anything about building floating houses, but decided to test a design and see if it worked. So we drew up a rough sketch that was essentially a series of 12'x8' platforms, each floating on six sealed 55-gallon barrels. The idea was that the 12x8 platforms could be built and floated one at a time. Then they would be joined together once they were in the water. From there, we could build structures on top of them.

Scotch and I went out together on the late-night material scavenging missions. We rode our bikes through unknown parts of the city, discovering strange abandoned warehouses on collapsing piers that have become islands in themselves, surreal concrete anomalies, and mazes of unusual relics from a long-past shipping industry. Our shadows played over the wreckage of the forgotten landscape under the late-night sodium lamps, as we clambered over fences, crouched in the dark, and stared in wonder through broken windows. It's amazing how something as simple as scouting for active construction sites can shake up your sense of geography so significantly, by forcing you to take the roads you don't normally take, and to go slow enough to really look at the things around you.

We'd have races up the hill to the bike cart while carrying sheets of plywood, our lungs stinging with the cold night air. We'd do our best to stifle laughter every time we'd drop something with a dramatic crash, or every time the bike cart toppled the entire load into the street. There's nothing quite as funny as watching your friend try to *quietly* throw an empty 55-gallon steel drum over a razor-wire fence. And it's hard not to smile when you realize that there's nothing quite as conspicuous as towing a bike trailer down empty city streets at 3am, with ten 16' lengths of 2x4 extending far into the road behind you.

Our days were spent down at the abandoned waterfront with a brace (manual drill / screw driver) and hand saw, where we'd assemble the platforms and attach the sealed barrels to them. The work was fun, we were by the ocean, and we ended up meeting a number of interesting characters. All the construction was happening on a giant piece of concrete embedded into the shore, which had a number of small holes in it. One day a guy suddenly appeared behind me out of nowhere, and when I turned around he scared the daylights out of me. He explained that he lived below the shore, and motioned to one of the holes in the concrete. I looked down into the dark depths below, and he offered to take me in and show me around.

We both barely fit through the hole, but it opened up into a large cave that echoed with the lapping sounds of the ocean. My new friend liked to drink gin, and he told me all kinds of stories about that section of the waterfront, everything he's seen, and the various riff-raff (referring to me) that he'd encountered over the years. I asked if my construction project was disturbing him, and he assured me that he was interested in seeing me carry the thing through.

So a few nights later, some friends and I floated the first section — all alone on the derelict shore, with only the moonlight glinting off the water to help us. It took five of us to flip it over and get it poised above the rising tide. It went in with a splash, and rode high. Seeing it actually float was amazing, and we all looked at each other with huge grins. We jumped on it, danced on it, and eventually just sat on it together as we talked and looked out over the bay. When it got late, we rowed it a little ways off shore and anchored it, where it would wait for other platforms to join it.

And so I spent the next week, gradually getting to know some of the other strange characters who had made this wreckage their home. The platforms slowly came together as we managed to find more and more barrels.

One day I came down to the shore, ready to put the finishing touches on another platform. But when I looked up, I noticed that the entire floating apparatus was gone. All that remained was an empty patch of water. With a shock, I searched up and down the shore, but didn't see signs of it anywhere. Eventually I found some people fishing, who said that they saw a boat full of people with orange vests arrive, unmoore it, and tow it away.

I called the police and the coast guard, before eventually determining that it had been done at the behest of a man named Hadley Prince, from the Port Authority.

Hadley Prince.

The name alone conjured images of some robber baron industrialist, twirling his handle-bar mustache with menace and condescendingly adjusting his top-hat. In reality, he was your average looking bureaucrat with a demeanor that embodied the typical lack of sympathy. He admitted to having been the one who ordered the hit on my floating house, and when I showed him the relevant sections of the state and city code (which prohibited him from taking such an action), he was very clear about his ability to do whatever he wanted — regardless of the law. When I pressed the matter even further, he looked down at my highlighted stack of paper, paused, then stood up abruptly and shouted "Get the *fuck* out of my office!"

I wasn't entirely surprised, but it felt terrible.

Objectively, this was defeat. In one swift move, my whole project had been destroyed by the Port Authority. There was not even any sign that my floating island had ever rested amongst the odd pilings and concrete slabs along that waterfront. And they had laughed in my face as they did it. It made me incredibly angry, and I did my best to portray that contempt.

But in a way I was prepared for it. Just like with the task of destroying capitalism, there were dizzying odds against me that I couldn't ignore.

For anarchists, I think that victory is a kind of anathema. Will there ever be a night — one glorious evening — when the world is won? Where suddenly civilization, the spectacle, class, racism, and patriarchy all simultaneously topple and remain in ruins?

Will there ever be a day when my housing desires are sated? Where I suddenly come into possession of a palace — under a maze of linked treehouses and a large skylab telescope — with room for all my friends and loved ones? Where property tax is on holiday, and all the building inspectors are out on permanent leave? Where me and all my housemates have finally overcome all our neuroses, mental anguish, and trauma to live with perfectly fulfilling relationships?

It seems unlikely to happen in one moment.

The George Washingtons of the world offer success. This is based on "realism" and the logic of quantifiability, where it is necessary to make compromises, pass laws, and assert control. Because these are the things that can be won; this is where success is found. According to them, at the

end of this experiment I was left with nothing, and so it would have made more sense to sell my soul to a mortgage for a mediocre house (that doesn't even float!) or pay rent as best I can for the rest of my life.

Anarchy, by contrast, offers us defeat. This is a logic that transcends quantifiability, emphasizes our desires, and focuses on the tensions we feel. Anarchists are such failures because, really, there can be no victory. Our desires are always changing with the the context of our conditions and our surroundings. What we gain is what we manage to tease out of the conflicts between what we want and where we are. What I "won" were the wistful moon-light bike rides, the realization of hidden geography, the time spent with friends, the dance parties, the nights of discovery, the chance to be in control of my surroundings, and those fleeting moments of elation. Not to mention the opportunity to give Hadley Prince the contempt that he deserves.

I wish that they hadn't destroyed my project. Longevity by itself, though, says very little. The state has been around longer than I can remember, and capitalism has been around for quite a while as well. Not to mention, how many anarchist infoshops or community centers have been around for years, but have lost the spark they'd started with long ago?

This is to say that we should never cease, even if all the banks burn and the dams of the world over come crashing down. It's what allows us to resist the institutionalization of our desires, the creeping bureaucracy, the language of patriarchy, or whatever we might find. My wish is to always hold that tension with me.

This is not to say that we should all sacrifice ourselves by hurling our bodies indiscriminately against the crushing walls of capitalism. Just the opposite. That given the anathema of victory, it's important to consider just how defeat should look.

Remember that success is a word used to measure. It describes dollars made, people counted, votes cast. In other words, it's a swindle. The rejection of quantification, the emphasis on the role of the individual, is what makes anarchism unique. There is no one battle I can fight to win this, even if I were to sail across the Delaware to fight it.

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