Signals of Disorder: Sowing Anarchy in the Metropolis

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In an article in the recent book, We Are an Image from the Future: the Greek Revolt of December 2008, I briefly made a point that a friend convinced me needs to be elaborated. The idea is that of “signals of disorder,” and their importance in spreading rebellion.

As far as Greece is concerned, the argument is that by carrying out attacks — primarily smashings and molotov attacks against banks and police stations, which constitute the most obvious symbols of capitalist exploitation and State violence for Greek society — insurrectionary anarchists created signals of disorder that acted as subversive seeds. Even though most people did not agree with these attacks at the time, they lodged in their consciousness, and at a moment of social rupture, people adopted these forms as their own tools, to express their rage when all the traditionally valid forms of political activity were inadequate.

An interesting feature of these signals is that they will be met with fear and disapproval by the same people who may later participate in creating them. This is no surprise. In the news
polls of democracy, the majority always cast their vote against
the mob. In the day to day of normality, people have to be-
tray themselves to survive. They have to follow those they dis-
believe, and support what they cannot abide. From the safety
of their couch they cheer for Bonny and Clyde, and on the
roadside they say “Thank you, officer” to the policeman who
writes them a speeding ticket. This well managed schizophre-
nia is the rational response to life under capitalism. The fact
that our means of survival make living impossible necessitates
a permanent cognitive dissonance.

Thus, the sensible behavior is not to reason with the masses,
to share the facts that will disprove the foundations of capital-
ism, facts they already have at their fingertips, and it is not to
act appropriately, to put on a smiley face, and expect our pop-
ularity to increase incrementally. The sensible thing to do is to
attack Authority whenever we can.

Attacking is not distinct from communicating the reasons
for our attacks, or building the means to survive, because we
survive in order to attack, and we attack in order to live, and
we communicate because communicating attacks the isolation,
and isolation makes living impossible.

Why do signals of disorder constitute attacks on capitalism
and the State? After all, the police are basically the punching
bag, the shock absorbers, for the State, and one of the limita-
tions of the insurrection in Greece was that anarchists focused
too much on police, rather than on the State in all its mani-
festations. And what about smashing insured bank windows?
Creating a signal of disorder could even involve mere spray-
painting, or hanging out on street corners. Isn’t this just the
ritualization of aimless and impotent rebellion, as the naysay-
ers are so quick to say?

Turns out, the devil is in the details.

In a way, the idea of signals of disorder is an inversion of the
Broken Windows Theory of policing. Wilson and Kelling’s ar-
ticle, “Broken Windows,” first advanced the policing theory of
at our peaceful march!”) and those who are around town cooking and sharing free communal meals, holding street parties, projecting pirated movies on the sides of buildings, running libraries and bicycle repair shops, and appearing at protests (“oh look, it’s those lovely anarchists again!”).

We will be safest from the right hand of repression and the left hand of recuperation when everyone is thoroughly confused as to whether we are frightening or loveable.

The same name in 1982, but it wasn’t until Kelling was hired by the NYC Transit Authority later in the decade that this flagship of minute social control was launched. When Rudolph Giuliani was elected mayor of New York in 1993, Broken Windows policing took on city-wide dimensions, and it soon spread to the rest of the country. By the early ’00s, Broken Windows was being adapted for the social democracies of Europe.

Among the technocrats, Broken Windows is controversial, because it easily blurs causation with correlation: just because broken windows and other signals of disorder often accompany higher crime rates does not mean they are the cause of crime. Occasionally, you’ll hear a whimper that without proper sensitivity training, Broken Windows policing encourages harassment of minorities.

All this misses the point: the State is not interested in reducing crime, the State is interested in increasing social control, and Broken Windows policing is a critical expansion of its arsenal. Giuliani’s reign of “zero tolerance” didn’t just go after fare-dodgers, graffiti writers, and the squeegee men. Under his stewardship, the NYPD became the first ever police department in the history of the world to log more arrests than reported crimes. Entire neighborhoods became depopulated of certain demographics as young black men were shipped to the prisons upstate. A policing that targets the petty details of every day life, that criminalizes our minor strategies to cope with the impossibilities of life under capitalism, is part and parcel of an expansion of police power as a whole.

Why does the city government in San Francisco want to criminalize sitting or lying in the streets? Why did the city government in Barcelona ban playing music in the streets without a license? Why did the government of the UK prohibit a detailed list of “anti-social behaviors”? Because the goal of the State is total social control. Because the trajectory of capitalism is towards the total commercialization of public space. Every time we identify another invasion
of State and capitalism into the minutiae of daily life, every
time we confront that invasion, we are potentially fighting for
revolution. As Authority increasingly manages us at the nano
level, the can of spraypaint, the rock, the molotov, deserve the
same significance as the AK-47.

Spreading signals of disorder accomplishes a number of
things. It increases our tactical strength, as we hone a practice
of vandalism, property destruction, public occupation, and
rowdiness.

It interrupts the narrative of social peace, and creates the in-
disputable fact of people opposed to the present system and
fighting against it. It means the reason for this fight, the anar-
chist critiques, have to be taken more seriously because they
already exist in the streets. In this way, the attacks create the
struggle as a fact in a way that would otherwise only be possi-
ble in times of greater social upheaval and movement. To have
this effect, the signals of disorder need to explicitly link them-
theselves to a recognizable social practice, one that would other-
wise be ignored or chopped up into disconnected eccentrici-
ties of lifestyle. People in the neighborhood must know that
the graffiti and broken windows are the doing of “the anar-
chists” or some other group that has a public existence, be-
cause signals of disorder that can be isolated as phenomena
of urban white noise can be legitimately and popularly policed
with techniques reserved for inanimate objects and aesthetic
aberrations; they would rub us off the streets with the same
chemical rigor as they clean graffiti off the walls.

Signals of disorder are contagious. They attract people who
also want to be able to touch and alter their world rather than
just passing through it. They are easy to replicate and at times,
generally beyond our control or prediction, they spread far
beyond our circles. They allow us, and anyone else, to reassert
ourselves in public space, to reverse commercialization, to
make neighborhoods that belong to us, to create the ground
on which society will be reborn.

In a neighborhood where the walls are covered with anar-
chist posters, beautiful radical graffiti stands alongside all the
usual tags, advertisements never stay up for long, the windows
of luxury cars, banks, and gentrifying apartments or restau-
rants are never safe, and people hang out drinking and talking
on the street corners and in the parks, our ideas will be seri-
ously discussed outside our own narrow circles, and the state
would need a major counterinsurgency operation to have just
the hope of uprooting us.

Whenever we can break their little laws with impunity, we
show that the State is weak. When advertising is defaced and
public space is liberated, we show that capitalism is not abso-
lute.

But at the same time, we cannot make the mistake of exag-
gerating the importance of the attack, of signals of disorder.
At times it may be necessary to be a gang, but if we are ever
only a gang, if at any point only our antisocial side is visible,
we are vulnerable to total repression. There is a lot of rage cir-
culating, without an adequate outlet, which we resonate with
through our attacks. But there is equally a lot of love that is
even more lacking in possibilities for true expression. People
desire the community and solidarity that capitalism deprives
them of, and our way out of this labyrinth of isolation is to
going looking for the others and meet them where they’re at. To
encounter people, in our search for accomplices.

Except in the magical space of the riot, we cannot safely find
spontaneous accomplices for the attack. But in the stultifying
oppression of everyday, we can find accomplices to share in
the little gestures of defiance, the small tastes of the commune
we are building — a random conversation, a flyer someone is
actually interested to read, the passing around of a stolen meal,
collaboration in a community garden, the giving of gifts.

The anarchists must simultaneously be those who are
blamed for acts of startling indecency, of inappropriate ex-
tremism in all the right causes (“they burned four police cars