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On the poverty of "Joyful Militancy"

**A book that made militancy more shameful still,
by attempting to re-brand it as joyful.**

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hilist attack and *excretion*⁶ (after all few things are as joyous as a good shit!).

Sadly, there's no shitposting to be enjoyed in their text, which is made to rest dignifiedly in shelves. They mention "Baedan" and salute attack only to equate it to militancy. Do they think the writers and readers of "Baedan" to be easily placated? Certainly, their intended audience does not include them, nor you, nor I.

Obviously, we can't all get along, and there will always be harsh conflict between us. Militancy -no longer distinguishing between sad, rigid, or ostensibly joyful- shames and forbids attacking savagely. It forbids reveling in cruel revenge, in willful disobedience, in the enduring passion for criminality, in incivility, in the hostilities beyond recognition, in the wild indiscriminate attacks, in the attentats beyond strategy or tactics, in the sublime art of nothing. If anarchy is an "everything bagel", "Joyful Militancy" is a bagel without a single "Black Seed".

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⁶ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/baedan-the-anti-chamber>

different language. We are not suggesting that all joyful struggles share an ideology, a program, or a set of tactics. What the above examples have in common is that they express a form of militancy that is attuned to their local situations and arises from people's needs, desires, and relationships. What we are calling joyful militancy is not a shared content, though we do think there are some shared values and sensibilities. Rather it is an attunement and activation of collective power that looks different everywhere, because everywhere *is* different.

Besides these highly visible examples, joyful militancy also lives in art and poetry that opens people's capacities for thinking and feeling in new ways. It is expressed in quiet forms of subversion and sabotage, as well as all the forms of care, connection, and support that defy the isolation and violence of Empire. It is not a question of being a certain way, but a question of open-ended becoming, starting from wherever people find themselves."

With full flourish of wishy-washy double-speak, they put on display their obsession with reconciliation. "Joyful Militancy" only deserves merit in the degree in which it manages to minimally recuperate commonly misunderstood ideas whose pivotal moments have passed. Like when it sometimes graciously, sometimes awkwardly, seems to pre-digest and present nihilist and post-left anarchist insights in a way palatable to an idpol leftist and liberal audience. Like when they mention "Baedan" without reveling in forbidden carnal pleasures, criminality, ni-

works of justice -whether restorative or transformative- as well as militant pacifists of anti-violence movements.

One of the people that they interviewed said in their testimony:

“...What’s always prior is agency of Indigenous peoples, and capital and the state are constantly on the defensive, reacting. As opposed to thinking that we’re always reacting to colonialism, when we privilege it. It’s this resurgent Indigenous subjectivity that the state is constantly trying to quell or subdue. And it’s successful, but never totally successful. And it boils over, comes to the surface, and some new technology is deployed in order to manage it, **and reconciliation is the latest tool that is doing that work**. But it’s always because of our persistent presence: we’ve never gone away and we’ve been articulating alternatives in words and deeds.” [Emphasis in bold added.]

Almost immediately after that quote, the authors of “Joyful Militancy” write: “This means it will always look different, based on the emergent connections, relationships, and convictions that animate it.” They’re so obsessed with reconciliation that they can’t even hide it to keep with appearances when it counts. Or are they in such a hurry to gloss over this testimony? What’s always prior to the machinations of these managers will always be the agency of each individual being who rebels against them.

A bit further on, they say:

“We hope that joyful militancy allows for questions and uncertainties that are too often smothered by conventional conceptions of militancy. We also recognize that many will still prefer

A book that made militancy more shameful still, by attempting to re-brand it as joyful.

Preliminary considerations

The authors want to make like Marie Kondo¹ and give joy through organizing, and she’d be happy to stumble on such a big mess. The name-dropping in “Joyful Militancy” serves to confer it academic standing, and to point out where they’re coming from, and what they’re intended audience is. Since my reply to it is not academic, I will not engage with the ideas of each of the big-name authors they cite. Yet responding in kind, I’ll drop² the name of those authors and texts I’ve tastefully plagiarized, to point to where I’m coming from, and to whom I’m corresponding with.

The challenge with engaging this text is that it really does take many things into consideration. But it does so in such a way that upon the first reading, you come out with a gist of their intended message, as well as a critique of its failings. Then upon a closer and more careful reading, while trying to pin down its defects, you recognize that its faults are not so often glaring omissions, but including everything, while not embodying or rejecting anything. It seems that the message “we don’t want to anger anybody” was emphasized at the expense of clarity.

When I began to write this text, first I jotted down my impressions after a first reading. Then I proceeded to go by each section, writing down the merits and follies of each, and potential zingers to reply to them. After becoming very tired, and realizing that a rebuttal to each line of “Joyful Militancy” is not

¹ I’m at peace with this reference being already dated, and perhaps unknown, to my correspondents. This should be a given, considering the topic I chose for this essay.

² As in “omit”.

a very joyful use of my time, and would produce a text at least twice as long as the one I'm replying to, I decided to cut this exercise short at an arbitrary point.

Since their book is chock-full of vague generalities of some merit, I will not attempt to reproduce them all here in their full lethargy-inducing potency. Instead, I will try to season their flavorless dish, with the spice of snark. I'll only concede, by way of a backhanded compliment, that they wordily and too politely express commonly circulated complaints of the broadly and vaguely defined liberal activist, radical left, and anarchist milieus, that have been better expressed elsewhere, and more succinctly.

The authors openly recognize that the terms they use, "joyful militancy" vs "rigid radicalism"/"sad militant", are merely placeholders. In a way, they admit "joyful militancy" is not wholly appropriate since it retains the word "militancy" which carries much of what they're trying to avoid or heal. Nothing would be lost, and much would be gained by dropping this term altogether. Yet they want to have their cake and eat it too. As we'll see, they want to have everybody's cake and eat it too. They express at length their misgivings on militancy. After all, they had so much to say, that they wrote a whole book! Yet they still cling to it for dear life. They call this "holding ambivalence", or as we know it, "standing on the fence".

The authors of "Joyful Militancy" make the kind gesture of making clear that they intend to start a conversation, and not give directions, much less orders. Yet when they foist the word "Empire" in every other sentence, it seems pretty rigid radical of them. In their book, they mention distinct disparate groups, each with distinct different endemic problems, and then a whole another set of problems that are endemic to the wider context in which they are nested in. All of that is then aggregated and confounded into the black box of a variable called "rigid radicalism"/"sad militancy". This allows to them point fingers at the general direction of a single vague

erase power relations. It can end up pathologizing so-called "negative" emotions like fear, mistrust, resentment, and anger. It can legitimize tone policing and a reactionary defense of comfort. It can fall into simplistic commandments to "be nice" or "get over" oppression and violence. Similarly, pointing to the importance of trust and openness can be dangerous and irresponsible in a world of so much betrayal and violence. These misgivings have taught us to be clear that trust and vulnerability are powerful *and* irreducibly risky; they require boundaries. They can never be obligations or duties."

I don't know whether it's lamentable or commendable that they proceeded in spite of these misgivings.

They mention a whole litany of names of writers, and people from different places, some of which they interview. At its seams, it seems many parts were consulted in order to be placated. They cite Jackie Wang's catchy phrase, that a cult of innocence has lead to a politics of safety. They allude to Fanon's work, via Wang's, and to his thoughts on violence, term which they replaced with the multipurpose euphemism of militancy, which smooths out all the rough edges. At this point we can witness the Santa-Clausification of Frantz Fanon, as well as Malcom X by quoting him completely out of context, for the mere effect of the name-drop.

How can a project be so unintentionally ambitious as to simultaneously aim to produce a comprehensive survey of such diverse and antagonistic movements and groups, just to whitewash them all with a single word? And that this will bring about their reconciliation and subsequent a peaceful coexistence alongside a "common struggle"? They need the term "militancy" to whitewash advocates of violence against authority, so that they can fit-in neatly alongside proponents of frame-

just charity, plus activism, with no real meaningful affective relationships being formed.

The basis for our complicities should not be if their looks and writing resembles those of punks, or hippies, or yoga instructors, or therapists, or care-bears. Though those who resemble pastors and their congregation, as well as the feel-good vibes of hippy cults, elicit my suspicion. I'm wary of letting a nurturing disposition pass as a front for a helicopter-parenting of "movements".

Joyful militancy is against savage joy

While they're evidently trying hard to not rub any particular group the wrong way, they seem to only pay lip-service to being empathetic to "rowdier" crowds, so to speak, while unfortunately, and unadmittedly, ultimately "throwing them under the bus". Maybe not so harsh as throwing them under the bus, at least packing bags and leaving on the bus without them. In their manifesto against meanies, hard-asses, and smart-asses alike, they advocate *feeling-thinking* which, instead of balancing thinking with feeling, they make it seem to be a type of heady feeling, a sublimation of libidinal urges through intellectualization and overanalysis, and not so much gut-feeling or thinking with your loins. But alas, if we read closely enough, we're sure to stumble upon another safeguard. This too can be undone by a caveat:

"We learned a lot from the apprehensiveness of some of the Indigenous people and people of color we interviewed, whose emotions are constantly policed and regulated, and whose struggles are constantly appropriated or erased. We heard from them that centering things like kindness, love, trust, and flourishing—especially when it comes from white people like us—can

problem, without pointing at anyone who might feel guilty. It also has the uncomfortable distasteful result of lumping together merchants and politicians of bankrupt ideologies, with those that embody their negation.

Given that they base a considerable part of their theoretical wailings on the scribbles of the Invisible Committee, critiques directed at them often apply wholesale, like in the case of this quote from "To the Costumers", by Anonymous:

"...there is only one sure method for making their words infallible: saying everything and its contrary. Flip through the pages of the Invisible Committee and you remain certain that every one of its statements, peremptory as befits a piece of evidence, will know a few pages later an equally peremptory denial. In this way, what it maintains will always be true and those who criticize it will support, by force of circumstance, the false."

By saying everything and its opposite, they give a semblance of coherence to incoherence. Naturally this absolute lack of coherence is also and above all what attracts "Joyful Militancy's" intended audience, the thing for which they are doubly grateful; for producing well rounded and smoothed-off, comfily cushioned, and tastefully upholstered critique that allows them to enter into the virtual reality of conflict resolution, of living a thousand adventures, rubbing-off the right and wrong ways among the variegated milieus, without risking getting scratched.

To the readers it's enough to leaf through this book to see themselves seated at a group therapy session, all milieus attending, all of their most caring and giving organizers heading the peace committee that will finally end all the bickering and the in-fighting. Under the all-inclusive umbrella of "joyful militancy", everyone can one day unite with the true revolutionaries, those who look neither at intentions, nor the direction of

individual attacks, but only at affective competence and compliance to the sacred forces that binds us to the existent. This is why “Joyful Militancy” ultimately doesn’t at all exhort to break ranks, but rather to reconfigure one’s affects within them.

As their foreword title suggests, in “Joyful Militancy”, “Willing to be Troubled” takes precedence over willing to be trouble. “Joyful Militancy” is written in the language of group therapy session enthusiasts, and of self-admitted repentant white folks. It’s written in the poetically melancholic tone one would expect from some other edition off AK Press, like Cindy Milstein’s “Rebellious Mourning”. Except that since its subject matter is ostensibly joy, it feels out of place here.

Their notion of “troubled joy” that they implicitly allude to in such roundabout ways, comes off sounding somewhat like a ruined orgasm (but not in a kinky way), cut short by thoughts of white guilt and internalized Christianity roaming the back of its head. This truncated notion of joy, though carefully detailed as to be all-inclusive, is felt as if manicured to trim off any palpable trace of lust, wrath, or any of the remaining “deadly sins”. Though they reproduce criticism of a Catholic moralism that warns against excesses, one comes off with the impression that if ever playing “fuck, marry, kill” they would only ever choose “marry”, under the Church no less, lest anyone think they are of ill repute.

Perhaps they should have titled the book “Sad Militancy” since it deals mainly with that, as a problem. Not daring so much to propose -much less embody- a concrete way out of that impasse, while also seemingly still being held hostage by its affects. One wonders how they thought they could ever overcome “rigid radicalism”, while paralyzed by the rigor mortis of academia that was so palpable to me during my inter-course with this text.

I scorn the future to suffer and **enjoy** my good and my bad in the present. I despise humanity because it is not my humanity. I hate tyrants and I detest slaves. I don’t want and I don’t grant solidarity, because I am convinced that it is a new chain, and because I believe with Ibsen that the one who is most alone is the strongest one. This is my Nihilism. Life, for me, is nothing but a heroic poem of **joy** and perversity written with the bleeding hands of sorrow and pain or a tragic dream of art and beauty!”
[Unnecessary emphasis in bold added.]

I don’t share this extensive quote in order to delineate the definitive boundaries of “true joy”, but to point to a sense of joy not embodied by “Joyful Militancy”; joy as negation, particularly to emphasize joy as the negation of tedium. Tedium, not sadness or anger, is the opposite of joy. Tedium is the blandness and sameness that is repugnant and repulsive, not the highs and lows of life. Tedium is lifelessness. Becoming life affirming is openly rebelling against boredom and impositions. When either self-imposed bitterness, or a forced polite superficial niceness, becomes an inescapable sameness, it becomes tedious, life becomes unappealing.

Of course being personally vigilant for oppressive authoritarian dispositions, aspirations, or behaviors, does not have to devolve into policing. Aggressiveness, combativeness and hostility does not have to devolve into militarism. Yet it often does, and this is the problem and the big challenge. [Self-]Organizing groups in a way that they can police themselves against problematic behavior (militantism), or in a way to sustain attacks in a long campaign so that war is being waged instead of wild attack (militarism), is the problem and not the solution. Performative smugness is as bad as performative humility, or forced material support like “solidarity”, or “mutual aid” where it’s

There is no rest for my rebel spirit except in war, just as there is no greater happiness for my vagabond, negating mind than the uninhibited affirmation of my capacity to life and to **rejoice**. My every defeat serves me only as symphonic prelude to a new victory. [...]

The more intensely I felt **joy**, the more deeply I understood sorrow. You can't suppress the one without suppressing the other. [...]

The revolt of the free one against sorrow is only the intimate, passionate desire for a more intense and greater **joy**. But the greatest **joy** can only show itself to him in the mirror of the deepest sorrow, merging with it later in a vast barbaric embrace. And from this vast and fruitful embrace the higher smile of the strong one springs, as, in the midst of conflict, he sing the most thundering hymn to life.

A hymn woven from contempt and scorn, from will and might. A hymn that vibrates and throbs in the light of the sun as it shines on tombs, a hymn that revives the nothing and fills it with sound. [...]

But only the one who knows and practices the iconoclastic fury of destruction can possess the **joy** born of freedom, of that unique freedom fertilized by sorrow. [...]

I reject society for the triumph of the I. I reject the stability of every rule, every custom, every morality, for the affirmation of every willful instinct, all free emotionality, every passion and every fantasy. I mock at every duty and every right so I can sing free will.

Spinoza, Negri, and the Invisible Committee

This Holy Trinity serves as subtext to their pious pilgrimage through variegated movements and milieus, and as undercurrent for their political narrative. Previously, with the intention of acting as a bridge inside the revolutionary movement, the Invisible Committee avoided in the most absolute way dealing with the classic points of friction and contrast – written off as ideological and identitarian disputes – buttering up both sides, holding together militant sacrifice and extremist thrills. They cheerfully drew from all sources, with an acrobatics that allowed them to be appreciated by many palates. They treated the anarchist movement as a good reservoir of unskilled labor, clasping the most accomodating to itself with a caress and getting rid of everyone else. Snatching the rudder of the extreme left, on the one hand. Digesting the most soluble anarchism and spitting out the harshest anarchism, on the other hand.

In 2017, “Joyful Militancy” writes off “...some of the debates that, to us, have become sedimented and stale.” If by sedimented and stale, they mean settled on “agree to disagree”, they make the shady decision of not making explicit on which side of the many disagreements they stand on. Or do they really evade choosing sides? Who is the intended audience for “Joyful Militancy”? Among the enemies of this world, who are the ones “Joyful Militancy” intends to attack?

While the Invisible Committee – that umbilical chord that links the young French intellectuals to the old Italian intellectual – treats Toni Negri as their rival that obsesses their thoughts, the authors of “Joyful Militancy” go even further, by attempting to reconcile them. They accomplish this by glossing over any contradictions by way of caveats, making sure to

spit out the word “Empire”³ every two sentences, while simultaneously also brandishing their inheritance from the Invisible Committee. Where the I.C. only manages to digest the most soluble anarchism, the authors of “Joyful Militancy” give it the good old college try to make a smooth and palatable mash out of some of the more hostile strains.

In this way, they give continuation to their predecessors’ obsession of bringing about the end of incompatibility, and hostility between individuals. Once and for all, revolutionaries have to learn to stand with reformists, reformists have to learn to stand with revolutionaries. In their book, they treat with respect other anti-authoritarian movement’s authority figures, and other authoritarian milieus. They don’t agree or disagree, but recognizes them all as very different, yet equally valid. They’re “holding the ambivalence” so goddamned hard, it hurts.

The human being is everything he wants to be, except anyone. Bureaucracy needs people to resemble each other. Anxious to write: ‘Distinguishing marks: none’, the bureaucrat persuades his victim not only that there is nothing in himself that distinguishes him, but above all that he must not distinguish himself. It is the same conviction that the bureaucrats of insurrection would like to inculcate in their friends-customers-joyful militants. “We are nothing and so can you”, like Jasper Bernes, an editor of “Commune” magazine, wrote.

Both Negri and the I.C. abhor the individual above all else. Negri salivates over the commons, while the I.C. drools over the commune. In 2000 Negri wrote that anarchism competes in “powerlessness” with the most reactionary capitalism, then in 2014 the I.C. wrote that nihilist anarchists are only among the “powerless”. Finally in 2017, in a stroke of genius, the authors

³ “Empire” is a buzzword that has clout in certain circles. They say “Empire” to mean an ephemeral all-encompassing entity that can only be attacked by exorcising its bad airs from oneself.

“I call myself a nihilist because I know that nihilism means *negation*.”

Negation of every society, of every cult, of every rule and of every religion. But I don’t yearn for Nirvana, any more than I long for Schopenhauer’s desperate and powerless pessimism, which is a worse thing than the violent renunciation of life itself. Mine is an enthusiastic and dionysian pessimism, like a flame that sets my vital exuberance ablaze, that mocks at any theoretical, scientific or moral prison.

And if I call myself an individualist anarchist, an iconoclast and a nihilist, it is precisely because I believe that in these adjectives there is the highest and most complete expression of my willful and reckless individuality that, like an overflowing river, wants to expand, impetuously sweeping away dikes and hedges, until it crashes into a granite boulder, shattering and breaking up in its turn. I do not renounce life. I exalt and sing it. [...]

Life — for me — is neither good nor bad, neither a theory nor an idea. Life is a reality, and the reality of life is war. For one who is a born warrior, life is a fountain of **joy**, for others it is only a fountain of humiliation and sorrow. I no longer demand care-free **joy** from life. It couldn’t give it to me, and I would no longer know what to do with it now that my adolescence is past...

Instead I demand that it give me the perverse **joy** of battle that gives me the sorrowful spasms of defeat and the voluptuous thrills of victory.

Defeated in the mud or victorious in the sun, **I sing life and I love it!**

Joy as anti-tedium

To reduce these problems to a complete and final analysis would be to miss the point. The best thing would be an informal discussion capable of bringing about the subtle magic of wordplay.

It is a real contradiction to talk of joy seriously.

—Alfredo Bonanno

This quote is also included in “Joyful Militancy”. An important thing to acknowledge, and they really make a point in their book to *acknowledge all the important things*. The irony of this quote is lost on them. There’s not a glint of jest or wordplay in their litany of a text. They quote it’s a contradiction to speak of joy seriously, yet manage to produce a dull and repetitive book steeped in all of the seriousness and rigidity of academic, organizer, and activist *work*.

In “Armed Joy”, *work ethic* is opposed with an *anti-work aesthetic*. The point of this jargon is to advocate for a form of sincere hedonism, opposed to self-sacrifice or martyrdom. Tedium is what is to be avoided at all cost. The “armed” part in “armed joy” in this text is not a mere exaltation of armed conflict as being an enjoyable activity, on the contrary, the author warns against specialization and solidification into the role of soldiers. The “armed” part points to a defense of a free joyful/playful way of life, from a regime of imposed work, of servitude; and to attack this regime, with aims to destroy it.

The authors of “Joyful Militancy” understand joy is neither just happiness, nor sadness. But in their depiction, the highs of happiness and lows of sorrow cancel each other out to produce monotonous drone of mellow melancholy. Instead, I’d like to insist on joy as the playful rebellion against boredom.

Another not so anonymous nihilist once said about joy (allow me to quote extensively and capriciously):

of “Joyful Militancy” attempt to gloss over the open hostility between anarchists and the previous interlocutors. The “appel” never falls far from the tree. This hatred of individualist, and nihilist anarchists runs through its roots, and is synthesized into its fruit, their text. No wonder its authors claim to be nourished by anarchism, yet “do not situate [them]selves as to be particular types of anarchists”. They are nicer to anarchists than the I.C.; but is this more that just a mere correction of their tactical mistake, or an opportunistic requirement to get a grant from their newfound friends at the Institute of Anarchist Studies?

At this point, you might be asking yourselves: How does Spinoza figure into all of this? Well, the authors of “Joyful Militancy” tell us, that if we’re to believe the part-time etymologist of the Invisible Committee, friendship and freedom used to mean the same thing. But then came along Thomas Hobbes, and ruined it for everyone by inventing individualism and toxic masculinity. Ever since, freedom and friendship were ruined...But there’s hope! A philosopher named Spinoza wrote about how everything is intertwined and has to do with affect! And finally, here’s we find the unfortunate basis for Joyful Militancy’s affected and entangled prose.

They continue by explaining how Spinoza’s philosophy is the kryptonite of moralism. “Yet the Spinozan lineage is not about everyone doing whatever they please, according to isolated interests and preferences. On the contrary, recognizing our interconnectedness means becoming capable of *more* fidelity to our web of relations and our situations, not less. This fidelity is not moral; it is *ethical*”, they say. Then they proceed to attempt to establish the semantic distinction between ethics and morality. They posit that consulting the colloquial use and common understanding of the words, as well as consulting their meanings in dictionaries, is of no use towards that purpose. Fortunately, we can cut through this confusion by deferring to the authority of Deleuze’s straightforward and clear

prose on the subject! One could consider this to be a rule of thumb so simple and effective as to call it a life-hack!

Leaving sarcasm aside for a moment, let's take a brief break from their lapse into the labyrinthine realm of double-think, where they repudiate morality while laying claim to it. I did a quick google search in order to learn what could there be in the distinction between morality and ethics that made it so important to them to eschew the former, in favor of the latter. What happens next, will shock you!

While ethics are considered to come from an external source, like society or divine authority, for example, morals are considered to come from an individual or internal source. In terms of flexibility, ethics are dependent on others for definition. They tend to be consistent within a certain context, but can vary between contexts, while morals are usually consistent, although can change if an individual's beliefs change.

Upon reading this, it becomes evident how ethics can provide a more appealing theoretical grounding for academics trying to philosophize about mass movements, in a way that provides useful rhetoric and poetic license to organizers and activists. Ethics provides a way to steer movements from without, and is flexible enough to accommodate for the opportunist waverings of these petty politicians. They only mention a critique of liberal morality in order to safeguard it against its would be attackers, and to clap-back at them for their excesses. Ironic, considering how they reproduce a critique of christian morality, and offer a brief explanation of the concept of *ressentiment*. They seem to be very educated about it, but fail to understand it.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and all roads lead to Rome. Their theory is a suitable cobblestone to continue paving the way for liberal occupations⁴, from communard-situ chic grocer comrades from the Tarnac in France, to their group

⁴ "Occupations" meant in its full polysemic gamut.

scarcer within it. It's funny how this book is fundamentally functioning as a dreary funeral for sad militancy, funded by the I.A.S.

There is only one kind of "joyful militancy", the kind that gets high off power, with the delights of sadism and masochism, as actual hierarchies and unhealthy relations of subjection, domination-submission, governing-governed, self-organizing, not as playful kinks. The bulge of this joy that they are trying to hide is visible in the form of the conspicuous absence of delving into discussing the diverse world of pleasures in depth.

"Joyful Militancy" points to a problem that plagues the organizers and the organized of invisible committees, multitudes, and assemblies alike. They seek to purge their militancy of tedium, and misery, from their communes. They do a decent enough job of lambasting militancy in some parts, under the guise of "sad militancy"/ "rigid radicalism". Yet the way towards unbridled joy is not *only* get rid of the "sad militant" or "rigid radical" inside your head -that cop that polices your affects, as well as well as your thoughts and actions-, but to evade the jurisdiction of communes and destroy the regime of its militants.

Militancy and their milieus are stifling because the require you fall in line, get with the program, the platform, the slogan, the marching pace, the routines, schedules, the deadlines... Militancy cannot be other than boring. Boredom cannot be anything other than a dull and unbearable pain inflicted on others. Other readers of the book, that are also commentators on a podcast, also complained that they found the book repetitive, and attributed that to being an intentional rhetorical device...but why is this repetitiveness so dreadful?

second, to the problematic nature of their modus operandi. Being an organizer is hard thankless work (that often no one asked for). This tediousness is cause of great misery, leading to exhaustion or “burnout”.

Obviously the solution is to end the source of misery, the organizing. Misery for both the organizers and the organized, the governing and the governed, the representatives and the represented. In other words, to end militancy altogether. Instead, they want to save militancy from itself, in place of liberating themselves from the misery that’s militancy. They intend to make work joyful, instead of opposing joy to work; to make politics joyful, instead of opposing freedom, to politics.

That being said I don’t believe, that in the case of the authors of “Joyful Militancy”, their use of doublethink is solely attributed to mischievous political calculations or duplicitous intentions. It’s in great part due to the bad habit of rigidified academic style and norms. The habitus of academia can do much worse than “missing the forest for the trees”; it can “explain the joke”, therefore ruining it, while not “getting it”. Humor⁵ is one of many great joys, all of which are absent in “Joyful Militancy”.

The curse of greyface haunts this book. There’s an overabundance of bad “self-help” on rotting moldy paperbacks and SEO optimized, heavily back-linked blogs with numbered list articles. Even then, better pointers towards joy may be found in the first page of google search results, than in this book. The digital version of “Joyful Militancy” allows for a quick word search, and when looking for “fun”, one finds instead many instances of “fundamentally”, a few of “functioning”, one of “function”, one of “functionary”, one of “funny”, one of “funeral”, one of “fundraiser” and one of “funded”. There is not a single instance of the word “fun” in this book, and what it signifies, is even

⁵ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/baedan-musings-on-nothingness>

therapy enthusiast fans in U.S.A. It tries to gather input from the managers of different “movements”; from self-appointed tribe leaders, to self-appointed community organizers, even all the way to the roster of NGO’s and state agencies.

In a later section they tell us with a straight face that we should be more like children. I concur, but it seems these kids are no fun. All they want to do is read Spinoza, and dead frenchmen like Deleuze, Foucault, Julien Coupat, and yawning away. I was being generous when I called them kids, they seem more like teachers telling their children to play nice, and not to misbehave. Meanwhile, I want to play with fire, and I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.

Militancy as tedium

In their section titled “Joy is not happiness” they begin by saying: “With all this in mind, we want to pull happiness and joy apart, in hopes of further clarifying what we mean by joyful militancy.” Then they proceed to suck out all the happiness and pleasure from any notion of joy, in order to elaborate their vague malformed conception of “joyful militancy”. You can’t say they didn’t warn you. You also can’t say that what follows next isn’t nuanced as fuck. You see, happiness can be good, but it can also be bad, the same goes for all other affects, like sadness and anger, etc. But: *How can you tell when it’s which?* Easy: It’s *good* when *Spinoza*, **bad** when it’s **Empire**.

While I can agree that joy is “...an intensification of life itself [...] a process of coming alive...”, I cannot agree that since “..happiness is used as a numbing anesthetic that induces dependence, joy is the growth of people’s capacity to do and feel new things, in ways that can break this dependence.”, that therefore “...joy is a palpable sense of collective power...” “...[b]ubbling up in the cracks of Empire...”.

Distinctions between pleasure, happiness, and joy (and more) can be made. But I find it insidious that after decrying sadness as a numbing thing, that they be so suspicious and deprecating of happiness and pleasure. Joy is found in repetitive carnal desires, in quenching them by feeding them. Living has its intrinsic pleasures and pains; hunger and eating, lust and orgasms. All of these pleasures are intrinsic to joy. To say that joy should not be that, for being a mere banal numbing anesthetic, and that instead “joy is a palpable sense of collective power” seems like pure ideology. A blatant attempt to try to shift the locus of these strong, moving affects, and libidinal impulses intrinsic to each living being, to a vague amalgamation of militants within a mass of movements. An ineffective attempt to give vitality to the lifeless wasteland of drudgery that is militancy.

The authors of “Joyful Militancy” then go on to say:

“Joy arises not from the pursuit of a distant goal, but through struggle in one’s own situation. It often erupts through the capacity to say no, to refuse, or to attack the debilitating form of life offered up by Empire. It might come through a riot or a barricade. Or it might come about by refusing Empire’s offers of insipid happiness, or through the capacity to be present with grief. Ultimately it is up to people to figure this out for themselves by composing gestures, histories, relationships, feelings, textures, world events, neighborhoods, ancestors, languages, tools, and bodies in a way that enables something new, deepening a crack in Empire. This is at odds with the stiff, macho militancy that attempts to control change from above. It cannot be a kind of more-radical-than-you stance that occupies a fixed position or argues for a single way forward.”

This I’ll also concede to them; they don’t seem to stand above higher than the stepladder of the organizer, the soapbox of the activist, or the podium of the academic. They cannot possibly be accused of occupying a fixed position -in fact, they’re nowhere to be found- or of arguing for a single way forward. I acknowledge their merits, and recognize them as maximum exponents of the oft underrated political virtue of being wishy-washy.

I consider it imprecise to call them “opportunist” as a term of abuse, since making the best of circumstances is by itself admirable. What is almost universally detested of politicians, that is often inadequately termed “opportunism”, is just as often more adequately called “demagoguery”. It’s their smarmy and duplicitous use of rhetoric that adds public insults to the injuries caused by their covert affairs. Yet they wish to maintain good public relations with those they ostensibly represent. Political convenience in opposition of clarity serves as a veil of slippery indeterminacy to safeguard them from attacks. Avoiding being pinned down, avoiding naming those they critique, avoiding naming their enemies, using instead vague en vogue abstractions.

A seemingly comparatively more innocuous variety of lesser politician -community organizers, teachers, social workers- are in charge of organizing and managing the civil participation of their “communities” which is channeled into the official and extra-official institutions. This can be achieved through advocacy, pedagogy (of the oppressed, or otherwise), activism, etc. Given the lesser scale of their petty authoritarian ambitions, per their given job descriptions or self-assigned roles, their rhetoric appears less treacherous.

Still, the truth remains; community organizers are petty politicians. This is not to say they are mean people, they can be quite nice. They also need to be quite nice in order to be effective in their work. To say they are petty politicians is to first point to the scale of their authoritarian ambitions, and