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Retrieved on January 4, 2025 from
https://inspiracy.com/black/holiday.html
Published in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #45,
Spring-Summer 1998.

theanarchistlibrary.org

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> *GRAND NATIONAL HOLIDAY AND CONGRESS OF THE PRODUCTIVE CLASSES.*
> By William Benbow. Edited and Introduced by S.A. Bushell. London: Pelagian Press. Pbk., X + 28pp., £2.50.

In 1832, the National Union of the Working Classes published this once-notorious pamphlet. The author, William Benbow, then 48, was an English artisan and lifelong agitator whose historic contribution to radical political thought was the Grand National Holiday of the Working Classes — later and better known as the General Strike. He called for a one-month universal work stoppage during which the producers would send representatives "to establish the happiness of the *immense majority* of the human race, of that far *largest portion* called the *working classes*," just as the elite assembles to secure its happiness in Parliament.

Benbow was not very specific about what the Congress would do, but he was essentially a leveler. English society

was rotten because of "too much idleness on the one hand, and too much toil on the other." Every wealthy idler "must be made [to] work in order to cure his unsoundness." But unlike the syndicalists, who later took up the call for a general strike, Benbow, though he rather romanticized workers as the repository of virtue, did not glorify work or summon the masses to prodigies of production. It was a simple matter of equal rights and responsibilities, including "equal toils" and "equal share of production." If anything, Benbow anticipated the anti-work standpoint:

Every portion must be made work, and then the work will become so light, that it will not be considered work, but wholesome exercise. Can any thing be more humane than the main object of our glorious holiday, namely, to obtain for all at the least expense to all, the largest sum of happiness for all?

In other words, no Calvinist-Marxist nonsense here about work as a calling from God (or History) or labor as the realization of the human essence: the less work, the better. There is only a hint, if even that, of his contemporary Fourier's argument for the transformation of work into productive play (it is highly unlikely Benbow had heard of Fourier by 1832). But William Morris would later produce a sophisticated synthesis of, in effect, Benbow's and Fourier's approaches to the transformation of work.

Much more original, and interesting, than his proposal for a Congress was Benbow's proposal for the Grand National Holiday. As we have seen, for Benbow the proper ends of society — purposes it failed to serve except for "the idle, dronish few" — were "ease, gaiety, pleasure and happiness." The people "have not even existed, for they have not enjoyed life": others have done the enjoying, the living, in their stead: "The people are nothing for themselves, and everything for the few." (And still are.) The Grand National Holiday was how Benbow proposed to kick off this revolution of egalitarian hedonism, but it was also something else: it *was* revolutionary egalitarian hedonism.

have said — is that it is an opportunity for *reflection*, "to get rid of our ignorant impatience, and to learn what it is we do want." To think freely, unhurriedly.

The Holiday is everything the General Strike could be and more. It's something all anti-authoritarians should be able to agree on, as they all want *at least* that much to happen to eviscerate corporate and state power. That much accomplished, the people can decide if they want to go back to work under workers' councils or federated trade-unions or never go back to work at all. Probably some people will make one choice, other people others. Maybe, after an initial phase of experimentation, some arrangement will shake out which accommodates what is living in these various systems. Anyone who genuinely desires universal freedom ought not to shrink from a real opportunity to test what form (or lack thereof) she thinks freedom would take. Why not take a Holiday and see what happens?

No need to agonize and moralize whether the ends justify the means when they are one and the same.

Benbow's Holiday hearkens back to pre-capitalist-revelry in ways lost to his syndicalist successors. He does not shrink from saying the Holiday is "a *holy* day, and ours is to be of holy days the most holy," for it "is established to establish plenty, to abolish want, to render all men equal!" He is (he insists) no innovator. "The *Sabbath* was a weekly festival" for the ancient Hebrews when they fed upon manna, in abundance, when "no servile work was done, and servants and masters knew no distinction." Then every seventh year was "the year of release," a "continued — unceasing festival; it was a season of instruction; it was a relief to poor debtors." Benbow (a Christian, although he hosted "infidel chapels" where blasphemous rituals were performed and was prosecuted for publishing pornography) clearly drew upon, and sought to reactivate deep, and deeply buried Protestant plebeian dissident tendencies which went back to the English Civil War and even earlier. His vaguely communist economic program goes back to the Diggers. His hedonism, his longing to revive "not only religious feasts, but *political* ones," and (as we know from his soft-core porn — examples of which are appended to this edition) his aspiration to sexual freedom place him squarely in the counter-cultural tradition of the Ranters.

The Holiday, that is, prefigured the permanent revolution its delegates to the extra-Parliamentary Congress were supposed to institutionalize. Indeed those on Holiday were not to wait on their delegates. Benbow suggested that working people store up enough food and money to get them through the first week of the Holiday without working. By then they should be organized enough to requisition what they need to make it through the next three weeks.

Rich liberals, he slyly suggests — the rich liberals who had just won the vote for themselves thanks to working-class agitation, then turned around to deny the vote to the same workers

— would be happy to act on their liberal reform convictions by sharing out what they have to those embarked upon so worthy a cause, "all the great reformers are to be applied to, and the people will have no longer any reason to suspect reformers' consistency. The reformers will hold out an open hand to support us during our festival… Until they are tried no one can imagine the number of great men ready to promote equal rights, equal justice, and equal laws all throughout the kingdom." On a point of detail, the Congress will assemble somewhere in the middle of England under the auspices of "some great liberal lord":

It should be a central position, and the mansion of some great liberal lord, with its out houses and appurtenances. The only difficulty of choice will be to fix upon a central one, for they are all sufficiently vast to afford lodging to the members of the Congress, their lands will afford nourishment, and their parks a beautiful place for meeting.

It may be relied upon, that the possessor of the mansion honoured by the people's choice, will make those splendid preparations for the representatives of the sovereignty of the people, that are usually made for the reception of a common sovereign.

Benbow was no theorist or seer. He held a rather simplistic sub-Enlightenment opinion that the people were enslaved by their elite-enforced ignorance (there's a lot more to it than that). Into the 1850s (when he is lost to view) he agitated mainly for universal suffrage, something which, once won a decade later, never did level the class system in Britain. In other capitalist class societies — the United States, for instance — there never existed the monarchs, aristocrats and bishops Benbow mostly (but not, to be sure, entirely) blamed for the oppression of the people. The American experience proves that exploitation is very effective (perhaps more effective) without these archaic social residues.

Dilemma. Whether it would have worked we'll never know. As Benbow's modern editor S.A. Bushell explains, there was serious opposition to Benbow's proposal even within the organization which published it, and efforts to commence the Holiday proved abortive. Although what Benbow expected of the Holiday and the Congress is rather vague, they were clearly to redress both political and economic injustice, which the Radical Whig tradition had always regarded as interrelated (this was "corruption." not a generic term of moralistic abuse but a term of art in radical libertarian ideology). Benbow's ideas lost relevance when radical and/or working-class activism diverged into discrete political and economic channels (and into more than one of each). Benbow himself seems to have devoted the rest of his life to political reform — specifically, to enlarging the electorate. Others pursued economic improvement through trade-union organization. The politically- and the economically-oriented in turn split into reformist and revolutionary currents, a distinction Benbow would not have considered meaningful, although it was soon to become crucial.

What is living in Benbow's celebrated tract? Maybe more than there ever has been between his time and ours. It is a concrete and plausible resolution to the Revolutionary's Dilemma in the form it assumed at that conjuncture and, as such, an example which makes the Dilemma vivid for us, although it assumes other forms today. But, as editor Bushell contends, the Holiday might actually be worth trying today, if the General Strike were reconceived as an unauthorized Holiday: perhaps "the old strike idea might gain in popularity if we reverted to the old description." After all, the counter-cultural revolutionaries have never had any objection to a universal work stoppage, Indeed, they are rather more into it than the syndicalists, for they see no reason why it should ever end. Productive activity, to be sure, would eventually have to resume, but work might not have to. Something Benbow said about the Holiday — something no advocate of the General Strike ever seems to

some other Left Hegelian, Benbow says: "The existence of the working man is a *negative*. He is alive to production, misery, and slavery — dead to enjoyment and happiness." In the worker there is (as Croce said there was in Marxism) something living and something dead. What was dead in the worker was what made him a worker, his work, "production," and what it entailed, misery and slavery. What was alive was whatever the worker preserved in the shrinking sphere of life apart from work. But what happened at work affected the worker on the job and off: "By saying what the people *do*, we explain what they are. By saying what they *can* and *ought* to *do*, we explain what they *can* and *ought* to *be*." Fundamentally it comes down to the possibility of self-activity (whether individual or collective or what combination of the two is an important but secondary concern).

We now know that as to means to the end, Benbow was mistaken in several respects. Universal suffrage never ushered in the Revolution — on occasion, as Proudhon put it, "Universal suffrage is the counter-revolution." As for redistributing the wealth, it has never been tried, although it's been approximated for brief periods, in small areas, during the Russian and Spanish and other modern Revolutions. But significant redistribution of wealth has taken place, in Britain, for instance, and in the Scandinavian social democracies. Benbow would doubtless be delighted that the descendants of the "liberal lords" he despised (and the conservative lords too) have been stripped of most of their wealth and reduced, in some cases, to charging admission to tourists to view their stately homes. But this has not changed the fact that, as all Britons are well aware, Britain is still a capitalist class society, if not a particularly prosperous progressive one. The working class is still, in current argot, *knackered*.

Benbow's enduring interest is not as a prophet — although, as prophets go, he compares favorably to Marx — but as formulating, for his time and place, a solution to the Revolutionary's

The Grand National Holiday is an exemplary resolution of what might be called, echoing the Prisoner's Dilemma, the Revolutionary's Dilemma. To make a social revolution, people as they now are must make a revolution out of existing materials. Revolution requires continuity. But for it to count as a social revolution, people must live in a new and qualitatively different way. Revolution requires discontinuity. Rapidly and radically, what is living in the existing order — where, to live at all, it is probably latent, disguised or deformed — has to be freed of what is dead. Miscalculating which is which is disastrous. Marx and the syndicalists, for instance, thought the what was living in capitalism was the development or the productive forces with the concomitant emergence of the first universal class, the proletariat. The Revolution therefore implied the socialization, rationalisation and intensification of industrial development, as well as the generalisation of the proletarian condition. It is by now obvious, except to a handful of sectarians, that the development of the productive forces perennially renews capitalism. And proletarianization has eliminated enclaves of working-class community and elaborately segmented the labor force to the detriment of class consciousness. Productivism and workerism proved to be ideologies of capitalism.

Benbow's resolution of the Dilemma, in contrast, in retrospect appears Revolutionary if incomplete. The Holiday tapped collective memories of cooperative accomplishment and communal festivity. It tapped individual memories of shorter hours of work, many more holidays, and relative autonomy in production. The Sabbath the workers remembered was indeed, as Benbow reminded them, a sacred time — but the sacred was by then a contested concept. For the Dissenters (heirs to the Puritans) the Sabbath was a day of abstinence from work, certainly, a day of rest, but it was also a day of prayer, public worship and abstinence from enjoyment. For most workers, rest and recreation in fellowship with one another was the essence of the sacred. Its religious character was diffuse, permeating ordi-

nary enjoyments like eating, drinking and dancing, not concentrated in specialized, discrete activities unrelated to the rest of life. For the Dissenter or the Methodist, when he was not performing explicitly and exclusively religious functions on Sunday he should not be doing anything at all. It was only partly in mockery that workers referred to their unauthorized Monday holiday as "St. Monday" — the bane of employers — when they either resumed or slept off Sunday's revels. The name also implied that this work-free day, like Sunday, was a holy day.

So far the Holiday is continuous with a still-remembered and not entirely vanished past. What then is revolutionary and discontinuous about it? Mainly this. Traditional community was a matter of custom, not conscious contrivance, and it was local, parochial. As such it was dismantled piecemeal by enclosure acts, having already been divided by class differentiation and perhaps religious disunion. It was difficult to perceive, from within, that the unique fate of a local community, which might be generations in the unfolding, was a moment in a national trend. Under these circumstances, Benbow's insistence that "ignorance is the source of all the misery of the many" is more than merely a naive relic of Enlightenment optimism. (Although it echoed another current of thought — the "Jacobinism" of Thomas Paine and the Corresponding Societies of the 1790s — which still influenced radical thinking.) It was now necessary for "the many," "the people," the "productive classes" to think of themselves on a national scale in order to act for themselves on a national scale: "When they fight for *themselves*, then they will be a people, then will they live, then will they have ease, gaiety, pleasure and happiness; but never until they do fight for *themselves*." The remedy "is simply — *unity of thought and action* —Think together, act together, and you will remove mountains — mountains of injustice, oppression, misery and want."

The Holiday recreates community on a national scale, the only scale on which it is now possible — but this means simultaneous, generalized local actions. It recovers the festive, sacral content of holy days at the same time that it consciously withdraws labor from the nonproducing classes who enjoy its fruits. It is the General Strike and a party, the longest "rave" ever, all rolled up in one, freedom as necessity, necessity as freedom. Benbow is quite insistent that the Holiday precede and, at its own pace, produce the Congress. Only in conditions of unhurried leisure and unrestrained play is it reasonable to expect the people to deliberate upon the shape of the future and choose trustworthy delegates to the Congress.

Benbow's scheme unwittingly acknowledges — and at the same time gets around — the insight, at least as old as Plato and Aristotle and very much meaningful to the English ruling class, that wage-laborers, like slaves, are unfit to vote because they lack the economic independence to vote their own minds. Today, of course, it is not a question of bosses telling workers how to vote but rather the way work preempts the time and often warps the faculties necessary for responsible citizenship. The Holiday could hardly undo the damage already done to workers by wage-labor in general and factory work in particular (to which even Adam Smith attested). But it could relieve the workers for a not negligible period of the need to work and concern for subsistence ("committees of management of the working classes" were to have requisitioned provisions sufficient to last the Holiday). The Holiday interrupted the vicious circle of self-perpetuating proletarian political incapacity orchestrated from above.

Benbow was not just a plebeian putting a proletarian spin on scraps of utilitarian doctrine as so many "Radicals" then did. He espoused the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but he had his own ideas what that entailed, and share-the-wealth and the overthrow of inherited privilege were only part of the program. Benbow appreciated that the quality of life was more than a matter of redistributing the wealth and enfranchising the workers. Sounding very much like the "Young Marx" or