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Review: War on Misery #s 1–2

CrimethInc.

April 21, 2007

“Mindless violence is getting up each day and being complacent. Self-destructive behavior is worshipping routine for its security and praying to the market for happiness or adventure.”

After the presidential inauguration of 2005, nationwide mass mobilizations died down in the United States. Everyone from anarchists to liberals had rightly given up the idea that the Iraq war could be stopped by symbolic mass actions—smashing windows is no less symbolic than a candlelight vigil, unless you come back to smash them again the following week—and without the anti-globalization movement or the election circus to focus on, there wasn't much left to mobilize people on a national scale besides the standard fare of ecological crises, labor struggles, disaster relief, and defendant support. Activists had to make good on all the rhetoric that had been thrown around about the shortcomings of summit-hopping by finally taking the time to focus on their local communities. In some areas, this has resulted in a lot of great community-based organizing—the recent proliferation of Really Really Free Markets brings to mind the spread of Food Not Bombs

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Retrieved on 8th November 2020 from crimethinc.com

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over a decade ago. While the relative quiet on the national scale gives the impression that anarchism is going through a minor recession, we won't find out whether or not this is true until the next wave of mass actions—which we predict for 2008—shows what anarchists have been brewing in their communities.

This emphasis on local activity isn't limited to the organizers of social programs like the aforementioned 'Free Markets—it also extends to insurrectionists such as the publishers of this 'zine. Of course, they never call themselves “insurrectionists” here—we can only infer that perspective from their focus on autonomous acts of anonymous revolt against property and authority. The local emphasis comes through in that the 'zine focuses on activity of a wide range of cultural stripes in one small area, rather than activity of one cultural persuasion across a wide geographical area. The misery referenced in the title doubles as the state, Missouri, from which this publication hails; it is both an emotional space and a physical place—and, as the Dylan quote on the cover of the first issue proclaims, “there must be some kinda way outta here.”

The content is made up of reprints from police reports of vandalism, anti-corporate robbery, and similar criminal activity, supplemented by more thoroughly fleshed out stories of strikes and arsons. This format is an exciting innovation in that it offers an equation for a 'zine that basically writes itself: all the editors have to do is watch the police blotter, copy out everything they like, and add their own commentary. The second issue also includes reports of workplace accidents and a guide to obtaining food stamps as thorough as anything in *Recipes for Disaster*.

This format is interesting in the way it implies the editors' political perspectives and sense of who their allies are without these ever having to be stated explicitly. This enables them to avoid sub-cultural jargon while still emphasizing radical solutions, and with any luck that will make this 'zine intelligible to a wider circle of readers than your average anarchist publication is.

Of course, finding common cause with others of unknown political commitments insofar as they take subversive action is always a tightrope act. On the one hand, it starts from something concrete that spans the superficial differences of language; on the other hand, it risks being unable to move from that starting place towards any more concrete forms of cooperation or solidarity. Your average would-be revolutionary editorial collective seeks to impose an action plan on others on the basis of assumed ideological similarities; this editorial collective instead risks projecting ideological similarities on others on the basis of their actions.

The Situationists used the Watts riots to argue that their ideas were “already in everyone’s heads”; that was a stretch at best, and at worst a way to claim the right to speak for those who could only speak on their own behalf through action. The leap of faith here is that by simply covering actions and literally re-presenting them to the communities that generated them, the editors hope not only to encourage more of them but also help to hone the strategy behind them.

Looking over these two issues, I don’t think they’re publishing this just for the radical cachet; it appears they sincerely aspire to promote insurrection. Given that, I can’t help but question whether this is the most effective format for the broad readership they presumably desire. Photocopied ’zines are common currency in some subcultural circles, but entirely invisible in others. I wonder if this would be more effective in certain communities as a pirate radio show, or set to music on spools of free CDRs outside gas stations.

All these concerns aside, *War on Misery* is an inspiring, entertaining read. At the very least, it can serve to keep self-identifying anti-authoritarians abreast of manifestations of unrest among the general public, the better to motivate and coordinate their own efforts. When one is trying to build up the morale to act, it always helps to know others are out there throwing down and often getting away with it.

The real payoff of focusing on local projects is that this can produce instantly reproducible models ready to be applied everywhere else. Inspired by *War on Misery*, we are, in fact, starting our own local publication to cover acts of social resistance in our own fair state. If every medium-sized town can have its own Really Really Free Market—a potential that is far from realized, but which is almost within reach and would do a lot for the anarchist movement—then every state could get its own War on. All that remains is to come up with forty-nine more puns for capitalist oppression.

Diction Quibble: At one point the editors use “fight-back” as a noun, the sort of mutilation of the language I associate with authoritarian socialists. Please, please don’t let this catch on. “Fight back” is much better as a verb, as something we *do*.