

# The Decline and Fall

## Personal Reflections on Post-Left Anarchism, Occupy, and the Future of the Left

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Derick Varn of Symptomatic Commentary has an interesting and brief post that asks the question “what happened to post-left anarchism?” It’s an interesting thing to pose – post-left anarchism (from henceforth “PLA”) emerged during the 1990s as a loose tendency that sampled bits of Situationism, the individualist anarchism of Max Stirner, and post-structuralist theory to argue that mainstream left movements were incapable of generating revolutionary change. In the void of this possibility, it turned to various heretical strains of thought: primitivism, the refusal of work, immediatism, the critique of civilization, and the “insurrectionary anarchist” approach that emerged in the pages of *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*.

It’s not my intent to provide a categorical history of PLA, but to briefly look at it in relation to other recent leftist tendencies, as well to indulge in reflections of my own political education. My introduction to political leftism emerged from one the many blips on the PLA – the writings of CrimethInc, and more specifically, their schizophrenic tome *Days of War, Nights of Love*. I can’t pinpoint the exact time and place that I picked up the book, but sometime after September 11th yet long before the financial crisis I spent a lot of time in a place that we had affectionately dubbed “the Commune.” It was one those moments that can only happen when you’ve fled your first year of college and gotten a terrible job in a rich area of town, when you begin experimenting with the parameters that had been set on your life up that point. We weren’t political in any traditional sense, yet it is not hard to see the Commune as the classic exploit of young people reacting negatively to the society around them. Instead of reading Marx we smoked copious amounts of pot and imbibed a little too much alcohol. Our *Das Capital* was the futurism-by-way-of-the-past soundscape of Can’s Tago Mago, the nihilism of the Velvet Underground and Nico, the beautiful naiveté of Jefferson Airplane, and a constant train of blues. We watched endless Jean-Luc Godard films and completely missed the point. Instead of going out to the world we turned guitars inward to their amplifiers and lost ourselves to swarming feedback.

It was also in this time that I first encountered Communism, this time in its insulated, state-centric form. Several girls who came around the Commune were professed Communists, having attended rallies in Cuba. They also came from money, and at the time I found their beliefs to be silly. But the Bush administration and the War on Terror hung over us like a smog, and some of us were angry. We just didn’t have the words to articulate it. I came across *Days of War, Nights*

of Love around this time, its language of dropping out and committing an act of exodus in the face of the world speaking something to me. I hated school and despised work. Acts of creation lent more poetry to everyday life than the things we were expected to do. “If you liked school,” they wrote, “you’ll love work. The cruel, absurd abuses of power, the self-satisfied authority that teachers and principals lorded over you, the intimidation and ridicule of your classmates don’t end at graduation. Those things are present in the adult world, only more so.”<sup>1</sup>

Around this time a manager at the restaurant I worked at also gave me Robert Anton Wilson’s *The Illuminatus Trilogy*, which set off an online research into the strange: from *Illuminatus* to Discordianism, from Discordianism to the Church of the SubGenius, from the Church to Hakim Bey. Bey’s writings immediately resonated with resonated with *Days of War, Nights of Love* (looking through the book now, the influence of Bey on CrimethInc is clear), and the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone gelled with our adventures in the Commune.

In 1987 Semiotext(e) released *Semiotext(e) USA*, a puzzling work forms a cartography of what would become this weird zone swung midway between PLA and the zany mail-art spawned countercultures that seemed to give an articulated form to what had earlier only been our wordless feelings. Thumbing through the pages gives insight into these unique happenings. There’s Black Bob’s essay on refusing to work. Here’s a detoured comic of a woman staring longingly into space and musing on the possibility of a “revolution without revolutionaries.” Tucked into a flap on the back page are censored pornographic images. It is clear how and why the energies that drove the compilation of *Semiotext(e) USA* came about: it was the time of Reagan and Thatcher, when family values and right-wing Christianity, personified in the Moral Majority, came to provide an ideological underpinning the new advances of neoliberalism, with its glorification of work, hatred of organized labor, and obliteration of the thought of alternatives to the present. To reject work, family values, popular kitsch aesthetics and the sense of competitive non-community that neoliberalism extolls is to generate the possibility of alternatives. The Soviet’s organized Communist state was collapsing from external pressure and internal contradiction. The only way out, it seemed, was by turning one’s back to civilization itself.

Maybe that is while PLA rose to such prominence in the 90s. The 1980s subculture of the strange found numerous expressions, some in the form of culture – the slack ethos of Nirvana, for instance. Cool culture was to reject the thriftiness of the parent generation and the mad-dash of capitalist excesses of the 80’s finance culture. Some took this rejection to extremes: the strong anti-civilizational principles of anarcho-primitivism, really found a foothold; like other elements of PLA, primitivism drew many of its ideas from the orbit of the Situationist International, emerged from the 60s counterculture, and gesticulated across the 1970s in the margins of crumbling leftist discourse. Other PLA tendencies eschewed primitivism while also maintaining certain points of connection: Bob Black, for example, spoke of utilizing technology to eliminate the need for the labor and wage paradigm’s stranglehold on people’s time and energies. Wolfi Landstreicher (a.k.a Feral Faun), on the other hand, attacked primitivism in a language that recalled Situationist Raoul Vaneigem’s condemnation of the notion of *sacrifice*:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CrimethInc *Days of War, Nights of Love: Crimethink for Beginners* CrimethInc Free Press, 2001, pg. 31

<sup>2</sup> “For Georges Bataille, the sacred persists as a problem for the modern world, which has excommunicated itself from this other realm of totality, to which it no longer knows how to offer itself. The desire for immediacy with the totality persists, however, and other means have to be found to xenocommunicate toward it. For Raoul Vaneigem, it’s a question of discovering what kinds of gift could be freely given that might break with the whole logic of sacrifice. ‘The urge to play is incompatible with self sacrifice,’ but once the rules of the game become the rites of a ritual, it becomes

*let's destroy civilization, this network of domination, but not in the name of any model, of an ascetic morality of sacrifice or of a mystical disintegration into a supposedly unalienated oneness with Nature, but rather because the reappropriation of our lives, the collective re-creation of ourselves as uncontrollable and unique individuals is the destruction of civilization — of this ten thousand year old network of domination that has spread itself over the globe — and the initiation of a marvelous and frightening journey into the unknown that is freedom.*<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the 90s, the various PLA tendencies began to feed into the “movement of movements”, the alter-globalization movement that, following the Zapatista struggle against neoliberalism, emerged around the world. A key factor here was the Reclaim the Street (RTS) mode of direct action, initiated first in the early 90s by Earth First members in England. As it picked up traction the RTS congealed around rave cultures and Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone theories. Instead of blocking the streets the RTS’s construction of situations became spaces of tactical frivolity, where the classic left-wing notions of resistance became suffused with the carnivalesque. By June of ’99 this had become the global Carnival Against Capitalism, timed to coincide with the G8 Summit in Cologne.

This event quickly became the catalyst for a succession of international street parties, the most famous of which (in America, at least), was the 1999 ‘Battle of Seattle’ protests against the World Trade Organization summit. The story of that event is impossible to tell without acknowledging the PLA influence: much of the anarchist contingencies that formed the black bloc that day emerged from Eugene, Oregon’s anarchist scene, a hotbed of PLA thought – primitivism, in particular. The networks of leftist direct action organizations that participated that day are particularly reflective of this: the intertwining structures of the Direct Action Network, the Ruckus Society, and the Rainforest Action Network all held deep ties to this anarchist community and emerged – as did the Reclaim the Streets – from the area’s Earth First contingencies.

On a broader, more transnational level, the coalescence of these various actions into the alter-globalization movement drew deeper from Italian Autonomist and post-Autonomist theory than it did PLA. Like the alter-globalizationists, the Autonomists utilized carnivalesque tactics to break the monotony and rigidity of standardized left-wing statecraft. Like the post-Autonomists they gained traction through the networks of squats, social centers, and tactical media groups. While a rigorous cartography of these trajectories is far beyond this space here, we can pause to reflect on the direct lineages that run through each. We can trace the evolution of the Autonomia, for example, into the Europe squats and social center movements, for example, where tactical media networks like the Decoder Collective, Adilkno, and the Tute Bianche were first incubated. By the time alter-globalization was well underway, groups like the Tute Bianche were participating in the global street actions and traveling to Chiapas to work hand in hand with the Zapatistas.

It is worth reflecting that despite their many divergences, the Autonomist tendencies and the PLA tendencies exhibit numerous points of overlap as well. One touch-point would be the

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an offering in exchange for something else. Vaneigem extends the Marxist critique of mediation from the secular to the spiritual economy.” See McKenzie Wark “Furious Media: A Queer History of Heresy” in Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Meditation* The University of Chicago Press, 2014, pg. 168

<sup>3</sup> Wolfi Landstreicher “The Network of Domination” <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/wolfi-landstreicher-the-network-of-domination>

mutual debt to post-structuralist theory; references to Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault pepper the writings of both strains of thought. Both advanced a militantly left-wing position that eschewed formalized movement-build and called into question the role of the state, the vanguard, and even the proletariat as aspects of a revolutionary program. Both engaged – to varying degrees – with movements and struggles that were often shunted aside by Marxist politics. Yet where they most strongly differ is also correlated to these points – despite its carnivalesque trappings and explosions of tactical surrealism, Autonomism still operated in a Marxist lineage, emphasizing the shifting nature of the modes of production and the way this alters class composition and with it the articulations of a revolutionary path. PLA sidesteps this with a critique of ideology that eschews any semblance of Marxism. In any respects, the various PLA tendencies – particularly those in the vein of Hakim Bey – articulate a sort of Autonomism sans Marxism despite the deep Marxist heritage it exhibits in its DNA. Regardless, as the 2000s roared on and the full powers of the sovereign state emerged through the War on Terror, much of the alter-globalization movement began to wane, and with it many of the PLA discourses that it had subsumed.

In 2011 I found myself in New York City during the Occupy movement, having arrived right when the police had evicted those inhabiting Zuccotti Park. By this point our little Commune had become little more than a memory, and I had learned (to certain degrees) to speak the language of politics. I traded CrimethInc for Marx, *T.A.Z.* for *One Dimensional Man*, Godard for *The Society of the Spectacle*. David Harvey and William Robinson mostly took the place of pot and parties. Yet in the thick of Occupy much of it came flooding back: stoned drummers spoke of Temporary Autonomous Zones and New School occupiers talked CrimethInc. One could walk through the park and hear a debate between someone advocating financial regulation and minimum wage increases and someone protesting work itself, literally quoting Bob Black verbatim. It was clear that Occupy owed something to PLA, but it certainly owed much to the alter-globalization movement. The happenings in Zuccotti Park brought to mind instantly the notions of the politicized carnivalesque and tactical frivolity that had been used by the Carnivals Against Capitalism,<sup>4</sup> while the trademark hand signals used in the general assemblies had been innovated earlier by the Direct Action Network. The movement's initial 'organizer' – David Graeber<sup>5</sup> – had, in fact, himself been affiliated with the Direct Action Network, while his 2002 *New Left Review* essay "The New Anarchists" – a survey of the alter-globalizationists – could easily be describing the dissenting agencies of 2011:

*However you choose to trace their origins, these new tactics are perfectly in accord with the general anarchistic inspiration of the movement, which is less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it. The critical thing, though, is that all this is only possible in a general atmosphere of peace. In fact, it seems to me that these are the ultimate stakes of struggle at the moment: one that may well determine the*

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<sup>4</sup> For an interesting analysis for the constellation of the alter-globalization movement, the carnivalesque, and Occupy see Claire Tancons "Occupy Wall Street: Carnival Against Capital? Carnivalesque as Protest Sensibility" *e-Flux* No 30, December 2011 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/occupy-wall-street-carnival-against-capital-carnivalesque-as-protest-sensibility/>. Also of interest is Gavin Grindon "Carnival against capital: a comparison of Bakhtin, Vaneigem, and Bey" [https://www.academia.edu/234514/Carnival\\_Against\\_Capital\\_A\\_Comparison\\_of\\_Bakhtin\\_Vaneigem\\_and\\_Bey](https://www.academia.edu/234514/Carnival_Against_Capital_A_Comparison_of_Bakhtin_Vaneigem_and_Bey)

<sup>5</sup> Drake Bennett "David Graeber: the Anti-Leader of Occupy Wall Street" *Bloomberg Business Week* October 26th, 2011

*overall direction of the twenty-first century... Over the past decade, activists in North America have been putting enormous creative energy into reinventing their groups' own internal processes, to create viable models of what functioning direct democracy could actually look like. In this we've drawn particularly, as I've noted, on examples from outside the Western tradition, which almost invariably rely on some process of consensus finding, rather than majority vote. The result is a rich and growing panoply of organizational instruments—spokescouncils, affinity groups, facilitation tools, break-outs, fishbowls, blocking concerns, vibe-watchers and so on—all aimed at creating forms of democratic process that allow initiatives to rise from below and attain maximum effective solidarity, without stifling dissenting voices, creating leadership positions or compelling anyone to do anything which they have not freely agreed to do.<sup>6</sup>*

There are plenty of reasons that Occupy failed, from the repressive hand of the police to the inability to keep the momentum up following the eviction from the park to internal class-oriented strife. In North America the passing of 2011 seemed to close the door on mass militancy, at least until the #BlackLivesMatter and #ShutItDown protests swept across the nation. The movement between the two allows us a space of reflection, to look at why we failed then and how to better equipment present-day theory and praxis. The first is that from the time of alter-globalization to Occupy there was an inability to articulate the level of violence that the neoliberal system deploys in order to support itself. True, we knew that expansion of capital required wars that regulate the relationship between the core and the periphery, and that uneven plateaus of development meant that affluence in one region means the denigration of democratic processes, protection, and a means to a sustainable livelihood in others. Yet we found ourselves focusing on the generation of positive affect and the programs of soft power and persuasion that sustain this generation. To put it in the language of post-structuralism, the passage to the Control Society meant that the traces of the Disciplinary Society are no more, and we mistook the force of networks for the image of the rhizome. By focusing on the emergence of flexible creative classes and the hegemony of finance capital, we didn't look long enough at the fact that America is divided along racial lines, offloading 'surplus populations' into internal peripheral zones that are regulated by an incredibly violent disciplinary order. Where PLA is concerned, debate focused on whether or not 'lifestylism' detracted from social anarchism, sidestepping the issue the relationship between the environments and infrastructures as the container for everyday life, regardless of what it looked like. In short, we took a misstep by seeing the world for the way it wanted to presented, not for what it truly is. The only solution is, then, to take the spirit of past revolts while learning from its failures and, hopefully, crafting ways to correct them.

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<sup>6</sup> David Graeber "The New Anarchists" *New Left Review* No. 13, January-February 2002 <http://newleftreview.org/II/13/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists>

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