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# Anarchism in Iceland

Is True Friendship Possible Under Capitalism

Heathcote Ruthven

2013

One month after the 2008 crash I first went to Iceland. Entertained that my pound was worth three times what it was worth the week before, I thought I would feel like a hyper-inflation tourist, like Auden in Weimar Berlin, or something else equally dubious and poetic. But it was nothing like that, the gin and tonics went from £15 to £5, and my week there was one of pastries and tuna sandwiches. Five years on, after starting an Anthropology degree, I found myself wandering snowy Reykjavik on New Years Eve without a place to crash – thank you Silja and Tumi for picking me up! I interviewed a few dozen people I met in bars, and the odd journalist or politician here and there. I interviewed with little discipline or method, chatting informally and filling notepads. This paper, rushed together for Ethnographic Encounters, is firstly a call to arms; attempting to convince anthropologists that Iceland is a worthwhile topic of study, and suggest some approaches. I hope it to be an accurate portrayal of events, but is merely what I took from discussions with Icelandic friends. I must ask forgiveness for the disorganisation of this paper, it was written on my birthday in a foreign city with no library to hand and

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little time. If you would like more information on the sources, please email [heathcoteruthven@gmail.com](mailto:heathcoteruthven@gmail.com).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for reasons not worth going into, Iceland underwent a neoliberal revolution -- extreme growth followed by extreme crashes. The caricature of this history has been a nation of fishermen turning into a nation of bankers. There is some economic truth in that, but little demographic. The specifics are quite complex and many words have been wasted on them, but in brief: Between 2003 and 2007, the peak of the boom, the value of the Icelandic stock market multiplied nine times. Aluminium giant Alcoa built a dam in the highlands that produced enough energy to power a city of 1 million people, however in a country of 320,000, all the profits all went abroad. Quite suddenly in 2008, the banks found they were six times Iceland's GDP in debt, and the kroner crashed. The IMF offered a bank bailout loan, to help Iceland repay the money Icelandic banks owe Britain and Holland. This meant that Icelandic citizen would have to repay them 100 Euros a month for fifteen years, at 5.5% interest. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, the president said, 'We were told that if we refused the international community's conditions, we would become the Cuba of the North. But if we had accepted, we would have become the Haiti of the North.' In a 2010 referendum, 93% voted against repaying the private banks' debt. The IMF immediately froze its loan, the kroner lost two thirds of value against the Euro and Iceland's credit rating went from AAA+ to BBB--.

The ethnographic library on Iceland since the crash is baron, the field vast. Much of the English language bibliography is superficial, high speculative and grossly biased. Half of the books are 'inside accounts' by bankers, the others are by financial journalists. For the past five years each European news outlet has rebuilt Iceland in its own kitsch image: British Icelanders are silly cod-loving criminals; German Icelanders Wagnerian pagans, and the Spanish beatified anarchist saints (I'm told the ambassador to Iceland's voicemail is flooded with requests to

‘join the commune’). These manifold legends are not entirely a bad thing – they are, at least, inspired. The extremity of the Iceland situation is producing disparate utopian visions in a place well suited to materialising them. Anthropologist David Graeber said to the Reykjavik major Jon Gnarr: ‘If there’s anywhere that’s going to be able to go over to a genuinely free society in our lifetime, Iceland is likely to be it. Plus you seem to be in a position to do it non-violently which is just wonderful.’ However, as yet there has been no ethnographic study, no comparative ethnology, nor any sociological research into these actors points of view.

One of the more noted post-crash utopian examples is the rise of the Best Party. In the 2010 Reykjavik city elections a group of self described anarcho-surrealist musicians, writers and comedians called ‘The Best Party’ won 34.7% of the vote. The new mayor Jon Gnarr cites his main influences as Bakunin, Kropotkin and the British punk band Crass. They were elected on a platform of free towels in swimming pools, a drug free parliament by 2020 and the abolition of all debt. They state themselves as anti-boredom: Boredom as an ideological function by the state to keep people disinterested; boredom as poverty. Their egalitarianism is the irreverent kind taken from punk: Jon posted ‘I was raised by CRASS. I will have the CRASS logo on my tombstone. CRASS saved my life and gave it meaning. If it wasn’t for CRASS I would not be who I am. There is no authority but yourself! Take it from me, I’m the mayor :)’

As The Best Party define themselves as such, I’ll offer a few definitions of anarchism, and how it can be seen by social scientists. The word -- ‘no leaders’ -- in essence implies a distaste for authority, more specifically, against arbitrary authority. It is a politics of anti-politics, looking to dislodge frameworks of power from the state framework. It holds that equality is meaningless and self-contradictory unless people can determine it for themselves. Most usefully for social scientists, this position can be seen as a practice rather than a theory. It is a prefigura-

tive gesture, direct action, both getting in the way of power and displaying the kind of life one would like to lead. It, essentially, is not Liberalism. Unlike Liberalism, it holds that democracy cannot be truly conceived of within the state, or within wage labour, or within the illusory institution of private property. Authority, for 'anti-authoritarians', should be self-destructive authority, say, that of a teacher; if they do their job correctly then their authority is no longer justified.

It is still not entirely clear how vague ideological positions can be applied to practical situations. In 'Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value' (2001) David Graeber presents one solution with a Mauss/Marx dichotomy. On the one hand there is Marx who brilliantly critiques Capitalism, revealing its inherent logics of exploitation and alienation, but avoids sustained speculation as to what his utopia would actually look. Mauss, on the other is less interested in logic of the market but in 'trying to understand – and create – something that might stand outside of it.' Mauss' main concerns were the big social changes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century -- the rise of individualism and the market as the main medium of human relations. His cross-cultural perspective illustrated that fundamental concepts such as 'personhood' were culturally specific. Mauss' idea of communism was less interested in titles than in principles of access and distribution. Even without private property, you can still have land which is not democratically run. Communism for Mauss was 'an open ended agreement in which each party commits itself to maintaining the life of the other.' A system of total reciprocities. In any situation where economics becomes further and further removed from lived experience people start questioning the language of concepts such as growth, inflation or work -- economic anthropology provides alternative examples. Both as a methodological approach to help situate the wild economics of Iceland, and a source for Maussian insights into institutions and markets more generally, Iceland is low hanging fruit for communist thinkers today.

der and global Capitalism are the key debates in Iceland today. Where they will go is uncertain, but how they are recorded will shape the possibilities of the future. As Europe crumbles, we should look to the edges for insight. We should head the mayor when he says: 'I think Iceland has all potential to become some sort of a creative technological, anarcho--socialist country to be frank...I wish all the good and clever people in the world would move to Iceland and make this a reality.'

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Before, and indeed at the start of, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland was the equivalent of a third world country. They've never had an industrial revolution, from 1380 to 1944 they were a heavily taxed Danish colony, kept isolated from the world. Private property was a minor institution in comparison to the rest of Europe. There were communes, groupings of 20 or so farms, in which every resident had a duty to pay poor relief. A large proportion of the population was constantly at the edge of subsistence; Death was common and oft reflected upon. Housing was scarce, often made of turf. As late as 1930 30% of houses were made of turf, whereas in 1950 only 3% were. Desire for Independence was near universal, but conflicted. The peasant majority were torn between desire for change and love of tradition. The sagas were read out loud by children throughout the working day and so, amazingly, the peasantry in Iceland was almost uniformly literate. Many kept detailed diaries, some of which can be seen in Magnússon's social history of Iceland 'Wasteland With Words'. Surely, any search for European culture apart from Christianity, apart from Enlightenment values and apart from Capitalism should start with these diaries?

Whenever institutions like Capital, Work or Property arise they tend to be naturalised. If modes of life other than our own can be salvaged, it's important to try look at Capitalism's pre-history – wherever that may be. Sylvia Federici's 'Caliban and the Witch' (2004) or Michael Taussig's 'The Devil and Commodity Fetishism' (1980) are two examples of this research. Taussig's shows that as the peasantry in South America became proletarianised, the image of the devil (hitherto a minor myth) took on great importance: 'these peasants represent as vividly unnatural, even as evil, practices that most of us in commodity-based societies have come to accept as natural in the everyday workings of our economy, and therefore of the world in general'. The devil contract can be seen as 'an indictment of an economic system which forces men to barter their souls for the destructive powers of commodities'. Radical questions

can be posed, for example, 'is there a structure of connections between the redeeming power of the antichrist and the analytic power of Marxism?'. In Iceland, historically and today, the Sagas are the prism to critique the follies of contemporary society.

Fedirichi's 'Caliban and the Witch' analytical framework is both illuminating and illuminated by Iceland. It asks similar questions to Taussig's work, but from Fedirichi's unique perspectives: Whilst researching the attack of women's bodies during the rise of industrial Capitalism (via the Witch hunts<sup>1</sup>) she moved to Africa to start teaching. She found comparable processes of primitive accumulation, greatly sped up – 'which means that the privation of land and other communal resources, mass impoverishment, plunder and the sowing of divisions in once-cohesive communities are again on the world agenda.' Iceland can likewise be seen example of this contemporary breed of primitive accumulation – it's an ex-colony, full of cheap energy resources, that a small cadre are profitably exploiting, whilst bankrupt the nation, by selling it cheaply to America.<sup>2</sup> Fedirichi was also an activist in the International Wages For Housework Campaign. She saw the success of the movement what that is unmasked 'not only the amount of work that unwaged houseworkers do for capital but, with that, the social power that this work potentially confers on them'. Iceland gave her an example of this power 'the power of refusal – in October 1975, when women in Iceland went on strike and everything in Reykjavik and other parts of

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<sup>1</sup> There is not space to discuss role of women in Scandinavian history now, but it is worth noting that Scandinavia is often blamed for the Scottish Witch hunts, as it was supposedly King James VI's Danish wife who infected him with such nefarious ideas...

<sup>2</sup> Bjork, in her introduction to Andri Snaer Magnasson's majestic 'Dreamlands', states "Iceland's politicians seem to want to catch up as quickly as possible and do what Western Europe did in 300 years to its nature in the space of five...I have a feeling this is an universal problem that our generation will find solutions to."

the country where the strike took place came to a halt.' Since 1975 there have been waves of women's' general strikes. They involved about three quarters of Icelandic women refusing to do their work; feeding Iceland's children, cleaning, shopping -- bringing the country to a halt. In 1975 women only got 66% of a man's wage, women started to pay only 66% of everything they bought, daring police to arrest them. This is direct action. Iceland shows feminised strikes in practice, and they achieved great successes. In 1981, only 3 out of 60 MPs were women, but by 1987 the newly formed radical feminist Woman's List party got over 10% of the. Iceland had the first female head of state – who, with no experience in government, ran on a feminist, pacifist and 'cultural nationalist' platform, and led the country from 1980 till 1996. They had the first openly gay head of state, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, who in 2010 banned any means of employers profiting from employees' nudity.'

This is a decisive time in Icelandic history, both wonderful and awful, and it needs to be understood in the context of the histories of Scandinavia, but also developments in global Capital. In 2008 there were seven weeks of the largest protests the country has seen. Tear gas was used on Icelandic citizens for the first time since anti--NATO protests of 1949. The Independence party, which had been in power for 18 years, lost a third of their vote in the 2009 elections. In the recent elections, 15 parties ran for office, 11 of them for the first time. Though the Independence Party's vote only increased by 3%, weirdly the agrarian Progressive party did very well at the polls. They formed a coalition with the Independence party, and now the government is boring and evil again. However, Scandinavia has the most electoral volatility of any region in Europe, and parliament is by no means the end of power. Anyway, Reykjavik city council is still run by anarchists, and newly formed Pirate Party got 5 seats – whose leader Birgitta Jónsdóttir was an early driving force in Wikileaks, and at the forefront of debates about intellectual property. This, environmentalism, gen-