A Handful of Objections

A Response to a Proposal for Desertion

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Contents

is based on generalizations and abstractions. At the best of times, a theory can provide us with tools to find a more conscious relation with what is surrounding us. Mostly though, theory produces crude categories that are imposed on complex beings and dynamic realities; reductions that are counter-productive to understanding. Moreover, a theory that is not understood as having its limitations and shortcomings (and thus, as being a peculiar way of seeing), but instead as forming a complete picture produces its own mystifications and idealizations. This is not a postmodernist stance. The values and ideas I hold, are true. For myself. And I'm willing to act upon them. But I don't hold them as universally true for other people embedded in situations I don't fully grasp and don't have influence over. Even so, I do want to communicate with others (through conversations or stories), to understand my motives better, to deepen (or alter) my critique and to sustain my empathy. As I said before, anarchist critique criticizes authoritarian relations wherever it encounters them. The most important of these encounters are part of my own experiences, the least important happen in theoretical abstractions and history teachings.

Several points I didn't go into, some because of lack of (head)space and some because I don't know where to start. There's mention in the text of "world-soul" and "self-conscious animality". These are concepts I don't have a reference point for, and neither does the theory provide me one.

As always it is the points one doesn't agree with that trigger the most articulated response. Several parts of the text I did enjoy (partly recognizable here in some of the vocabulary I have taken on from Bellamy's text). If there weren't any I wouldn't make the effort of writing this text. So I would recommend people to get hold of a copy of Backwoods and read it for themselves.

This is a jotted-down reflection of some thoughts triggered by the reading of An Invitation to Desertion by Bellamy Fitzpatrick; the first article in the first issue of *Backwoods* (A journal of anarchy and wortcunning, Spring 2018). In order to develop my own objections and rejections of the theory (named as such by the author), I will break it down in circumscribed parts. This partly corresponds with the sequence from the original text, partly it is my own imposition on it since the author wanders off from time to time. Deconstructing the theory to digestible bits, is something I do at my own risk (of missing the point, and consequently being off mark with my critique) and it is neglecting the text as a creative work (since all the literary qualities are thus dispensed of). But it is also a necessity to make way for my own trail of thoughts to develop.

The parts this theory consists of are; (1) a framing of this society as "civilization" (an outcome of its historical process and a continuation/deepening of it), (2) the shortcomings of the critiques against it (the reformist as well as the revolutionary ones – left, right and anarchist) and (3) a proposal for its negation (or its bypassing?). This seems an improbable feat to accomplish in one article and indeed the text is rather condensed and at times feels like a compilation of arguments instead of an argumentation (a mould I have, admittedly, not been able to escape from…).

1.

When Bellamy describes the current situation as "largely decided for us, overdetermined by existing social norms that we can influence only minutely, allowing us only a little room to maneuver in decisions about how we want to live and what values we want to pursue", I feel it as quite accurate since it's close to my own experiences. It is interesting though to see which statements about society apparently call for a reference (academic in lots of cases) and which not. I'm not against listening to what people who have

chosen to study a specific field are thinking. But these quantifying and categorizing exercises are not my first way of understanding to go to, and they shouldn't have to be. Are we not witnesses to the destruction and pollution of our surroundings? Is there a need for statistics to talk about the current crisis? Do we want to reproduce definitions and categories used by specialists? For example: depression. What do medical professionals understand as depression? Is there a default state of happiness? How can it be compared over time; did we always reflect on ourselves with the same criteria? Isn't more measuring, measuring more? From the moment a medical diagnosis (with which kind of criteria?) and treatment (effective or not, and to what end?) has been created, the numbers will increase. So, if 17% of Americans are afflicted by depression; what does that mean? If you describe to me how you feel and how you understand others around you are feeling, I will probably be able to recognize that (wholly or partly, in myself or in my friends). That is more meaningful to me than how many times a box was ticked in a survey. I'm not saying we should only talk in truisms, but while the conclusions of scientific research are supposed to be just accepted, talking out of personal experiences makes a conversation possible.

But maybe that's not enough for someone who wants to talk about "civilization". The rejection of the simile of life offered by this society and the exploration of yourself and your relations, will lead one (better sooner than later) to make an attempt at understanding the obstacles on the way (the authority of one over the other; would be – in short – an anarchist response). There's a difference between this effort to analyse the social system (and its crises) and the apparent need to go back hundreds of years to a point in time and designate it as the nexus of the problem. Necessarily there is no first-hand experience of before or during this moment of transformation that can be or has been communicated, only contemporary interpretations and extrapolations based on few elements. In what way can we understand the qualitative difference in relations from before and after? And why do we care so much? Do we think

At one point Bellamy argues that in opposition to most forms of sabotage and attack, "desertion does harm the ruling order by depriving it of the resource on which it totally depends: the daily submission of slaves". Society might depend on submission, that doesn't lead it to depend on my submission. Then maybe does BF propose a generalized desertion as a sort of boycott of civilization? Does victory over civilization look like a strategic retreat? He contradicts such a position further on; "it is a modern, utilitarian moral calculus that measures the value of a course of action in terms of its expected quantitative consequences".

What Bellamy forgets to mention is; where are the wild places? No places in Europe (and presumably also in the US) are outside of this society. Places that we could appropriate are more likely the ones that have been pushed to the margins of society (instead of overlooked – by property rights? by pollution? by capitalist profit-seeking? by land use rules?) and these can be found in urban environments as well as in the countryside. This probably implies developing to some extent new knowledge and skills. Being in the margins also implies that society didn't disappear and might impose itself sooner or later in full force. Refusing to be instruments of this recuperation will certainly include offensive practices.

I do think we should attempt to create the conditions for self-realization. This can mean looking for less hostile surroundings (what defines as hostile depends greatly on the project and on the individual). But I don't think our projects will take shape totally outside of the existing social relations. And while the concept of desertion may be based on the illusion that there is a safe place to escape to, I don't want to reject all of the practices it contains.

Endnotes.

I concede this is a theory we are presented with. But more than being a "whole way of seeing" (as Bellamy defines it); a theory

imagine himself the staunch social critic" – and the deserter – incremental but still partial – the anti-civ cadre?

The concept of " desertion" doesn't bring us closer to self-realization, because it is based on an illusion. That " attentat" (no idea why Bellamy has a preference for that word instead of " attack"; to me it smells of the People and/or Revolution mythos) is something hypothetical, that it " may well be necessary and appropriate to resist more confrontationally at certain junctures". M ay? At certain junctures? Why not now? Let me clarify myself. Insurrectionary moments have a value to me, but they are not my telos. The projects I want to engage in – the instruments of my self-realization – have two guidelines; direct action (acting without mediation) and self-organization (having an understanding of our differences and acting together with respect towards them). If for anarchists direct action also includes to attack, this is because given the existing social relations wanting self-realization means conflict. This conflict can express itself in different forms and mostly we'll be reactive towards it. But to be able to negate the repression/self-alienation spectrum, we'll have to choose ourselves a moment and place to act. Thus, to go on the offensive. Not making conflict an integral part of our projects, can lead us to being unarmed when repression and/or self-alienation become an existential threat to our projects (and arguably then it's already too late). Unarmed as well on a level of critical thinking; being able to recognize where one is complicit, as on the level of action; how to stop retreating. How can we not accommodate and compromise when repressive relations are imposed upon us if we didn't create the conditions for another response? On a side note here; making conflict part and parcel of our projects goes a long way in avoiding sterile discussion with those for whom anarchy is just a pose or an opinion and opens up possibilities to meet people who have started to act without mediation and on their own terms (again, there's no expectation to discover latent anarchists, only a potentially enriching encounter).

we can recreate the before? Probably not, but why then construct this spectre that transgresses my faculties to grasp reality? Isn't Civilization another disguise of Empire, or Capitalism? Hovering over our heads, always there but impossible to grasp in everyday relations (on a theoretical level maybe yes, with the help of some specialists), let alone defeat. There's a lot to learn from history, but I become a bit wary when history teaches us.

Summarized it goes something like this; civilization means cities, cities mean agriculture. Or the other way around. That's the material side of it. The psychic side is reification and the voluntary submission to authority. I would suggest that some of the (problematic because alienating) characteristics ascribed to civilization may also be found – for example – in historical accounts of groups of people accumulating wealth through plundering or people living in clusters of villages that together make up a self-sustaining territory. Were they not capable of reification? Also, in most civilizations a significant amount of people living inside its physical boundaries were nevertheless outside of its economy and not particularly influenced by its reifications. That some social systems get labelled civilization and others not and thus the first deserve more of our ire seems unwarranted from a position of critique of authority. Further on BF argues that "the anti-civilization critique goes far beyond that on offer by the Left, the Right, or the majority of the anarchists." I would argue that the anti-civilization critique is only a more comprehensive version of an anti-capitalist, anti-fascist etc. critique since it criticizes a specific crystallization of authoritarian relations. Anarchist critique however criticizes authoritarian relations wherever it encounters them.

2.

I have never used the adjective insurrectionary for me or the projects I was taking part in. Anarchist suffices. So it can be fairly true what Bellamy says about the majority of insurrectionary kinds (self-defined as such or labelled by BF), that they are just promising Revolution 2.0 (decentralised and with users' participation) or Revolution Zero – Without (Authoritarian) Additives. But it is far removed from the reasons I feel an attraction to insurrectionary moments.

Instead of the first baby steps of a coming revolution, insurrection means a rupture. It is when normality is not normal any more and other possibilities open up. Already now we are refusing to submit, finding loopholes – alone or with friends. But we bump into limits of overcoming alienation and repression. An insurrectionary moment is a qualitative leap, a negation of existing social relations on a whole other level. From there ugly things can happen, beautiful things also. What has changed is our power to make things happen. Surely repression (in old or new forms) will try gathering force to hit everyone back in submission. And will surely succeed since death always has the last word. History says so too. In the end, life is self-defeating. But to start from there must be a misunderstanding, because insurrection is exactly the refusal of history and the affirmation of life.

There are those invested in the politics of insurrection, working in the tradition of the authoritarian Blanqui. An Eric Hazan and his Factory (producing theory for the aspiring intellectuals) have measures to implement, the (not so) Invisible Committee has the strategy (tested before and failed) and its (not so) Imaginary Party has the cadre (wannabe politicians) and the infrastructure (thanks to wealthy lefty benefactors). Cynical people willing to manipulate others to realize their authoritarian projects. Nothing new there. It's up to persons with anarchist sensitivities to recognize these intentions and subvert them (if they care enough). Admittedly, a lot

ciety and the protest movements) turned their backs to the cities to have their own experiments with face-to-face communities and self-sufficiency. History books don't have to tell us much about these (not so spectacular) moments, but the people that were/are part of them still can. From their accounts it transpires that it is not that evident to desert self-alienation and repression, nor to create autarky. Which territories can we inhabit? Given the relations of power, probably not the most hospitable ones. Are these places not always precarious? Threats from infrastructural projects, bureaucratic rules and regulations, hostile neighbours, are real. H ow to avoid a relative and self-chosen isolation becoming inescapable and suffocating? How free is free association when there are no other places to go to? Even with all good intentions, relations can turn sour. Until which point should the project be defended in spite of the persons involved, or vice versa? A current publication like *Nunatak* (Revue d'histoires, cultures et luttes des montagnes) talks about issues of living in the mountains and the conflicts with society it comes with (leisure industry, infrastructural projects, food and health regulations, etc.). These questions raised might not be enough reasons to abandon desertion, but – at least – to be less affirmative about all the blessings to be expected.

What does it mean that "desertion will not and cannot be quick or total, but it can nonetheless meaningfully be incremental and partial, pushing toward ever-greater withdrawal"? Where is the line between partial desertion and – for example – just being a part of local, artisan economy? Isn't it conceivable that a part of the so-called "creative classes" forced out of the city centres by the so-called "gentrification" they were once part of, turn to "pockets of happiness" as a kind of alternative, more satisfying suburbia? Or is it that, since to a certain extent there is still a need for money (to pay the rent for example), it is just convenient that a small amount of time is dedicated to a well-paying, skilled job done over the internet? Who draws the line between the reformer – "who might

would set off all the alarm bells (besides, I would say that a lot of people are stuck into destructive relations because they fear to be alone in a world where it is extremely difficult to make true friends). But that is in this world. And BF is talking about another world, one where "a true union of individualities could grow" while "it would be possible to know everyone's story, to count on another, and to be united in a common purpose". Bellamy insists that "such a group would not be a suppression of individuality through stifling and incessant collectivism". I guess I'm not so easily convinced by (certain specialists of) anthropology, neurobiology and ethnography that such a thing exists, could exist or existed. And although Bellamy also acknowledges "human conflict and suffering", he directly brushes it aside as "misfortune" (dealt with through a culture based on "the combination of loving and shaming that comes from sustained intimacy"). Ironically, the reproaches from Bellamy directed at insurrectionaries, could also be applied to desertionaries. Do you expect people to be latent anarchists, just waiting to be in a context of small face-to-face groups with a sense of belonging and purpose to start behaving with respect to each other? Surely desertionism must be "afflicted with the most poisonous sort of magical thinking and optimism about human beings". And, indeed, there are some who already have created a "collective mythos" on the same theme, namely the Commune (see 'our friends' from the Committee and Party). And they are quite honest about the suppression of individuality (according to them a modern invention and thus, to be abandoned) and the patriarchal character of a family and a tribe ("less preferably" as labels than "a band society", according to BF).

While the full weight of history is thrown against the false critiques of civilization, the proposal of desertion is presented to us as something completely novel (otherwise it might have to be discarded with the rest as futile or complicit?). Are there no past experiences to learn from? We don't need to go too far back in time, since at least the end of the 60s lots of drop-outs (from so-

of the radical milieu got seduced by their mystifications. If it's still needed one can take a look at *To Our Customers* (although the English version lacks the playful and scathing tone from the French one) criticizing the political theory and rhetoric of the Committee and *The Movement is Dead, Long Live. . .Reform!* (A Critique of "Composition" and its Elites, from the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes) criticizing the political practices of the Party members and their allies. So I'll leave the remark of Bellamy about "the cadre of insurrectionaries" in their corner.

To attack authority you don't need to be an anarchist (unconsciously or consciously). You just need to be able to situate the source of your misery. Lucidity and irony are more helpful at that than anarchist theory. All of us are alienated to some extent and contribute ourselves to that alienation in some measure. Some might be content with the toys they are given and the mirages of material comfort they see appearing before them. Others experience daily the emptiness of what society has to offer them. Probably more shift between these positions on a regular basis. Anarchists don't have models that people can follow to overcome alienation, only experiences that give a taste of something different. Neither do I hope others to be latent anarchists (whatever that means), but I cannot stop myself from recognizing myself in others when they struggle with their contradictions (isn't that the empathy Bellamy was looking for?). More so when they express their unrest through acts of rebellion against their repression and self-alienation.

Acts of rebellion come in multiple shapes and forms. A lot can be said about them. Rioting can be one of them. A lot can be said about it. How it can be used as a symbolical threat to social peace by a reformist group to gain more negotiation leverage. How it is necessary for people to understand the risks they are taking and to avoid unnecessary ones (what is an unnecessary risk is up to the persons involved to define). How repression against rioters is framed to legitimize or delegitimize their ideas (martyrs for the

first, mindless criminals for the second). Etcetera. It would be a bit too easy to present these as conclusions already reached and not discussions to have inside specific settings. Like in other situations I would like people to be consciously active in it (which can also mean to not take part). Intentions are diverse and outcomes are not so clear-cut as BF presents them (is it about material damage vs arrests?). I can share my critical thoughts with others but it's not up to me to decide for others if it is all worth it (what I could consider foremost as a potentially self-destructive act might be primarily self-realizing for someone else, that doesn't mean that I'm a coward and neither the other to aspire to be a martyr).

Victimization is not the privilege of rioting. Neither does repression need an insurrection to humiliate and stamp out people. Insurrection wouldn't be the original "deeply traumatic experience" for those who desire to be mere followers. Authoritarian society has its own catastrophes which legitimize the existence of its leaders. Trauma and powerlessness are bound together. There is something quite contradictory in insisting on a bleak image of civilization with its all-encompassing repression and self-alienation, and the impossibility of the majority of "slaves" to be something other than slaves; and on the other hand, to warn against acts of rebellion because they might provoke or not be able to overcome repression and self-alienation. A theory tends to come up with logical explanations for every phenomenon it encounters, and becomes deterministic on the way (it is what it is, it was what it was and it couldn't have become something else). So eventually everything can only be futile against or complicit with domination. But then who is this Bellamy Fitzpatrick that he against all odds is ready "to rise to the terrifying responsibility of freedom"? Why is he not one of those who "have bee born and bred as slaves" and thus "are far more likely to feel comfortable becoming a new kind of slave"? What is his secret and why doesn't it belong to the possibilities of others, namely "people" aka "slaves", to do the same?

It seems that it is the frustration and disappointment stemming from the ineffectiveness of reform and revolution to defeat civilization, that leads BF to reject them. But is there even such a thing as a definitive victory over repression and alienation? I have this nagging idea that the desire to dominate others and the desire to submit oneself are intrinsically human. The social system we're living in promotes – or rather imposes – these desires over all others. So for those who have the desire to self-realization, it is necessary to create situations where these are pushed back. What can be such a situation?

3.

The proposal of Bellamy (and Backwoods) is desertion, meaning "moving toward the abandonment of civilization, both materially and psychically". This leads further to autarky; "the knowledge and practice of providing one's subsistence […] for and by oneself in an unalienated relationship with one's habitat and in voluntary cooperation with others with whom one freely associates". The outcome of desertion and autarky is reinhabitation; "it is, in the most profound sense, being somewhere", "a sense of place requires a sense of belonging". "To truly flourish as organisms in communion with our habitats, we must live in a way that nourishes the human psyche: in small, sustained, face-to-face, autarkic communities of kinship."

The picture presented here is a bit too harmonious for my taste. Those that grew up in a small village (or a close-knit community inside a city) know that "face-to-face" relationships come with their own vicious feuds and relentless norms. And for those who managed to leave these suffocating places, a statement like "our culture of late modernity, where one can disappear into anonymity and find a new social group at the first sign of conflict or disappointment, is the grotesque antithesis of healthful human relations"