

Other Worlds

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late 2000's?

I see the current unsustainability of the US anarchist movement, and its exclusivity to the younger generation, as directly connected to our general inability to talk about our struggle with our families. I know people who are not afraid to go head to head with riot police or give their hearts to a struggle they don't expect to win, who simply give up when it comes to communicating their ideas, or even expressing honestly *who they are* to their families. Family time for many is an odious obligation in which they must place themselves in a box wholly alien to them, silently accept the unfair interpretations others place on them just to avoid an argument. Getting back to the real world that we create with our friends is always a relief. And this fragmentation/evasion is in turn directly connected to our general inability to communicate our struggles to people who stand outside them.

For years I have been working on my relations with my family, not to convert them but to win their support and understanding, so that I can be *me* around them. This work has won me allies that have helped me survive the repression and despair that accompany the struggle against the state and capitalism. How much stronger would we anarchists be if we always had our parents and grandparents there with us, instead of fighting against us?

I'm luckier than many people in the understanding and sympathy I get from my parents, although this good fortune is also the result of my choice to fight for it going as far back as I can remember. There may be a measure of truth in the proposition that parents only go conservative in their old age if their children let them. The alienation between the generations that marks the capitalist family deprives us of a balance that might otherwise serve to radicalize the elderly and ground the youth. In healthy, horizontal societies, the different generations can learn from each other, but the nuclear family is structured to prevent this (similar to how, in military and other academies, the different age grades are strictly segregated to prevent them from building collective knowledge that would challenge the control and one-way education of the instructors).

If we can't overcome the alienation in our own families, what can we accomplish? I recognize that there are many families that are far too fucked to allow this kind of work, although I don't think I'm speaking from a position of naiveté as dysfunction and abuse are no strangers in my own family. The task of creating chosen families is important work. But for many of us, we can learn how to pursue this revolution in the families we are born into.

I spent years slowly accustoming my extended family to my radical ideas and actions, and repairing the constructive damage I caused in my late teen years by relentlessly calling out family

members on what I saw as their hypocrisy. I don't think I am giving myself too much credit to believe certain political developments in my family at large were provoked by my own actions and personal growth. After this many years of work and growing together (I'm now in my mid-20s), I felt ready to send them the following email, after a particularly intense experience in the streets, which left me feeling perturbed because I assumed I could not share it with them.

I want to share it with the wider anarchist community, with a few parts edited for purposes of anonymity, in the hopes it would inform or inspire similar efforts and provoke thought on the problem many of us face in communicating our struggle to the family. One of the guiding propositions of this letter is that most people do not believe things on the basis of information, therefore the act of researching and arguing has a strictly limited use in the anarchist project. Convincing people to be anarchists, or active anti-authoritarians of whatever stripe, is rarely one of these uses, because people do not commit themselves to a fight on the basis of information or opinions. All the information necessary to prove our basic premises is available, and these days even easy to come by, but most people do not do this research because they do not want the fundamental alienation, the chasm between what they want and what they live, to be any more exposed than it already is. As social beings, people attach more importance to Stories than to Information. The state succeeds in part because it is able to present itself as the Protagonist, thus people sympathize with the interests of the state above their own interests. In a way, this is a mass Stockholm Syndrome, sympathizing with our captors.

For this reason, it becomes necessary to work harder to protagonize ourselves and communicate our struggles to those around us. Rebellions succeed where there is a culture of rebellion, and creating this culture despite the constant poison of pervasive commodity relationships is a vital task for the revolution. The number of people who have an anarchist family member is several times greater than the number of anarchists, of course, and we have a greater chance of receiving the attention and changing the culture of our relatives than the people in the street, who generally hurry by without looking at our wheatpasted posters or protest signs. Because subjective experiences, when presented as such, are much harder for family members or people with some other affective tie to dismiss, I rooted this letter to my family in my personal experience.

I hope others find it useful...

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Today I don't want to talk about politics. I want to talk about other worlds.

One of the problems I have with democracy is that it forces everyone to accept a single, objective world. But there are many worlds, and to a certain extent it is our choice in which one we live. Certain privileges—being white, being male, being well-to-do, being a citizen, offer one more choice in worlds, but in the end I think we are the only ones to determine in which world we live.

It's difficult living in a different world from people you love, and even more difficult when your world has no room for existence, cannot even be admitted as valid, in their world. I don't want to invalidate any of your worlds. I'm learning to speak about my world, rather than hiding it, even though hiding it makes it much easier to get along with people in the Real World. Many other people who live in my world and face this dissonance with their family simply give up on trying to be understood. Visiting the folks becomes an insufferable duty, sitting through constant judgment and pigeonholing, questions spoken and unspoken "when will he find a career?" "when will he get married?" Relatively speaking, I'm very lucky with my family, and I can thank all of you that I can even begin to write this.

Recently the government tried to lock me up, and lots of you aided the solidarity action or sent me words of love and support, and I appreciated it immensely. Lots of friends came to the courthouse to be there for us, people who have supported me throughout this period, who have made survival possible and helped me turn survival into life, people who didn't even know me when I was arrested. No one is alone, and when we can fully realize this proposition we are strong enough for anything. But pain as well as strength flows through networks of affinity, and I worry about the effects of my life on those who love me and support me but do not share my world. I know that when I am threatened with prison time, it hurts some of you more than it hurts me (perhaps to others it's simply bizarre or curious, depending on the psychological distance), and I wonder, with nothing in your worlds, I presume, to explain my actions, does your support come with a limited patience, an expectation that in exchange one day I'll stop getting into trouble?

But in my world the trouble never stops. This is because one of the natural laws, a thermodynamic principle, even, of my world is that an injury to one is an injury to all. One of the democratic laws of the Real World is that "my freedom ends where that of another begins." To me, this is antithesis. Western civilization has never understood what freedom is, in fact it is pathologically afraid of freedom, and to me this is evident in its history of slavery, conquest, and political rights. My freedom does not exist individually; it is something I create with others. And I do not end where another begins. My self is not confined to the biological limits of my physical body. I understand that this type of individual exists in other worlds, and it is the Platonic ideal of the Real World, but in my world the idea of truly separate individuals is insane and naive. In my world, the human immune system is collective property, as we all go sharing germs and antibodies and the sickness of one affects all. In my world the trees are a part of my respiratory system as much as my lungs are part of the forest. I don't know how people in the Real World breathe, but in my world, someone who destroys a forest is killing all the surrounding communities, and if someone is trying to kill you, you have every reason to stop them by any means necessary.

Because living is a choice in my world, my happiness is also a necessity that I should fight for if I need to, and my happiness is largely built up through relationships with other people. Anything that affects one of them affects me. As long as I have friends who are locked up in cages, I will not be free, because the only thing keeping me from getting my friends out of those cages is the fact that there are guards with guns. So in effect those guns are pointed at me and my friends. In the last analysis, this is the only thing in the way of my happiness, my clean air, my freedom. In other words, the people who live in my world are fighting a war for their freedom, whereas in the Real World, there is no war happening here, only far away on television. In other words, according to the Real World, we're crazy (hence the reticence to talk about our world with "normal people").

Why is it this way? Objectively speaking, there are as many guns in our world as in the other worlds, although I think people in my world are much better informed about cops and private security and thus more conscious of these guns in an objective sense. But people in other worlds see police every day. If they benefit from white privilege and class privilege, they probably do not feel that these guns are pointed at them unless they have chosen to live in another world. And they probably do not have any friends in prison. Why not? The populations targeted by the prison system are segregated from our own (depending on your choice of worlds maybe I'm one of the few people you know who have been imprisoned; but in certain black neighborhoods of New York more than one out of every 2 men younger than 30 has been kidnapped by the prison system).

But why doesn't the realization that prison chooses people rather than vice versa (a realization that is objectively undeniable) not make more people choose to overcome that segregation? I don't know. Psychological labels demonizing "criminals" play a part, even though we all know damn well that our own communities and even families are so full of people who have killed, raped, beaten, stolen, and broken tax laws that even without personal experience on the inside no one can truly believe that folks in prison are all that different from folks on the outside.

I think the reason is that people are scared. Many friends in prison told me that so many people they knew just lost touch with them while they were on the inside. It's a tremendous responsibility caring about someone in prison because you want to free them and realizing that you cannot free them shows you that you are not free yourself. It's hard enough if they're just in there. It's harder if they're fighting to retain their dignity, to organize with other prisoners, to challenge the racism and abuse of the guards. In the case of this guy R, the guards strapped him with a stun-belt provided to them by their suit-and-tie-wearing friends in the state capitol (including people y'all have voted for) and electrocuted him until he pissed blood.

In my world there exists the collective knowledge that prisons have always been places of torture and murder and there has always been a struggle to tear down every last prison. Someone who lacks this knowledge, who lives in another world more like the Real World in which "mal-treatment" or "unfortunate incidents" like this are simply "isolated cases," could not make sense of the fact that their friend has been electrocuted until he pissed blood, because they themselves are nothing but an isolated case whose personal experiences are not granted any legitimacy. So it's better only to have friends and loved ones who inhabit the same world as you, because the psychological dissonance of having friends in other worlds, given the emphasis of the Real World on a false objectivity, is too much to bear. We also have our own sheltering lies that would get shaken out of the tree in such a strong wind, so we stay where it's safe. No friends in prison, no friends in Palestine, no friends from the lower class (excepting employees we pretend are our friends and their paid smiles can only confirm this illusion). Don't find out what happens in the mines, in the poultry factories, in the animal testing laboratories, in the child protective services, in the refugee camps; it's better not to know.

The well fed people who see us going through the trash for our food (there are more of us every day as the welfare rolls and unemployment lines grow longer) – how I yearn to destroy their homes, their jobs, their cars, so they could also understand what it is like to live in a world in which there is plenty for everyone but They would rather throw it away than share it with you. Those people already live in that world, in fact, but they don't yet know it. Or maybe they do, and they clutch their little parcel all the tighter, loath to share it, telling themselves "it doesn't work that way." But we just smirk because we know better, and we know we are already richer than they will ever be.

The people who were watching the other night as the police beat us, I wanted to reach out with my eyes and grab one of them, trade places with her, not to escape the police, but to make her experience what I experience, and see if she'd ever be able to explain it to her friends and family. When you're in a crowd being beaten by the cops, if it's your first time you begin to understand certain things about your society maybe you could never see before. The first is the existence of the crowd. The people around you are more a part of you than your co-workers, your co-commuters, the co-spectators at a sports game or movie have ever been. All the other limited ways your society permits you to share space with other people are empty and disempowering

next to this crowd. It is familiar only to people who have been in combat, in a natural disaster, in a riot.

The crowd has created itself; it was not mandated into existence by the appropriate decision-making authority. A self-created being (whether a crowd or an individual person) is sovereign. It experiences the kind of freedom that you make with your own two hands, rather than the kind someone permits you. This crowd gives itself permission to take over the streets. The sidewalks are too small for crowds, no coincidence, and the streets suit us. At a certain moment, the police attack. People in the Real World will ask why, insist on some justification. The bystander who I whisked in to take my spot will now understand that this is a stupid question. The police, it becomes evident, are a rival gang, automatically at odds with any self-creating crowd. Attacked by the police enough times, our new friend will understand that the police attack when they decide to. Sometimes there is a provocation normal people will understand, other times no. But their attack has nothing to do with responding to lawbreaking. It is evident that the entire crowd is their enemy.

But it is also evident that the crowd is a single organism. If it were just a collection of individuals, they would run and trample each other when the police charged. But they believe in something that does not exist in the Real World, call it solidarity, and they hold together, responding as one. If you happen to be on the outside you must become the shell of the organism, because you are closest to the police and their clubs. You can see in their faces that the police hate you, that they enjoy beating you. It is undeniable to anyone who has been there. Have you ever seen old documentary footage from European countries in the 60s, of police who had never ever had to beat someone with a truncheon, suppressing their first protest? It's almost heart-breaking. In the beginning, they give orders to disperse, they walk back and forth confused when the protestors don't obey, they push and pull but to no avail... They start to give little love taps with their batons. As the orders keep coming down from on high they hit more and more, increasingly unsettled. They'll give one person—no, not a person, a dissident—a good thwack, and then turn away and walk somewhere else, inefficient and distressed. But within an hour they are breaking heads with hatred plain on their faces. They hate the dissidents for forcing them to kill this innocence in themselves (if only they had obeyed, the violence would be unnecessary!), but as cops (same goes with any other type of functionary), they are too stupid to see that they have betrayed themselves, they already gave up their humanity when they signed up to a post where following orders was mandatory.

So, the cops are hitting you, and you must become hard. Your body will not betray you, just try to take the club on the arm or the thigh, away from the joint. You have enough adrenaline that you will not feel it. Tomorrow you may not be able to walk but today you will be able to fight hard and run fast. If they get you on the head and you fall, a hundred hands will reach out from inside the crowd and pull you up. Someone else, just a claw of this organism, will strike back, knock a pig over, and more hands will reach forward and pull that person back to safety, no one will be arrested. If the police do arrest anyone, that person will be charged for whatever injuries any of the cops may have suffered. Several cops will come forward to testify that they saw it happen. All the police know and all the people in the crowd know that this is just a game, part of a war that masquerades as a civil inquiry, that the judge and everyone else must pretend to believe in. The legal charge is never a response to crime. It is always a form of counterattack.

If the police manage to break the crowd, the organism splits into its hundred cells, and each one will know what it is like to be hunted. The Real World will temporarily be interrupted as

shoppers and diners and tourists see other human beings being chased and each one will be given the brief choice—gawk or help shelter them. Now you're on the run. Now you understand that the layout of your city, what seemed like a convenient grid of streets, is a military formation, specially made for trapping crowds. In the Real World this sounds like conspiracy theory because we are trained to sneer at anything that hints of consistency or dialectic, but unfortunately the police and city planners are not too stupid to have studied history, and in our world we certainly remember how many times we nearly took this city over and burned their fortresses down, and how they rebuilt to give themselves the advantage next time. We remember when the dumpsters were easily rolled into the streets and set on fire, and how they replaced all the city's dumpsters, in the midst of a budget crisis no less, for new ones that could not be rolled. We remember these streets when there were no security cameras, how they talked about terrorism to justify the cameras but the people they put in jail with them were some of us, just as we knew it would be.

Our new friend has good instincts, she doesn't go down the block that gets sealed off, instead she hides for a while in a group of wealthy diners, come out of their restaurant to watch the spectacle. She watches vans of riot police tear around the streets, chasing people, pigs leaping out and beating people down. It hurts her personally—minutes ago they shared the same organism. But she can't let her rage show, not yet. Face of bored curiosity. Blend in. After a few minutes she goes the other way. She hears the helicopter in the sky and knows they are looking for her and all her new friends. No one else even notices the helicopter. They think they do not know what it is like to be spied on from the sky, even though it happens to them almost every day. But they pretend they have nothing to hide, no life that isn't skin deep. Ha! We know what suppressed desires they bury deep down. They buy movies about people who live like us. They cheat on spouses to feel a fraction of the newness and risk and passion we make for ourselves every day.

All the fugitive cells are off running, trying to get someplace safe. The police perimeter extends ten blocks in any direction, vans and cars racing around, two helicopters passing overhead. The more experienced ones know not to escape on the metro. They remember what happened a few weeks ago, or earlier, the guy who went down and came up at his stop to find a snatch squad waiting for him. There are cameras in the metro. They make normal people feel safe, but we know they are pointed at us. But we have brought extra clothes, in a dark corner or a McDonalds bathroom or on a park bench people are peeling off outer layers and changing their appearance, enough to slip out of the net. And if we didn't before, now we know what it is like to live in a democracy and be hunted. In the Warsaw ghetto, the hunted could count on help from the majority of bystanders. In a democracy, you just get funny looks.

I'm tempted to say that the only people who truly understand democracy are cops and criminals, but like I said I don't want to invalidate other worlds. The politician making back room deals, jockeying along formal and informal networks of power, and appeasing constituencies with varying degrees of influence, is the only one to understand democracy from a certain perspective; and the first-time voter, full of excitement, solemnity, or hope, is privy to another unique vantage on democracy. What bugs me is that this latter person has no idea that no matter how she votes, someone's friend is still going to be in a prison cell pissing blood.

The things I'm talking about are not exceptional. In my world they occur all the time. This particular protest happened. It was a solidarity march for the struggle taking place in Greece right now. There, at the beginning of December, police shot and killed a 15-year-old in an anarchist neighborhood. Thanks to cultural differences (the Greeks liberated themselves from a dictatorship 30 years ago, which is something the Americans haven't done in 250 years) the Greeks have

not yet conceded police the right to kill whenever they want, like police are allowed to do in the US and most other countries. They also understand that the police are not a random collection of individuals but an institution created by and serving the powerful. They recognize that it is never rich investors getting killed by police, only immigrants and radicals. So, they responded appropriately, not circulating a petition asking for this one cop to be fired, but by attacking police stations and banks, and taking over TV and radio stations to reclaim the power to explain themselves. Hundreds of thousands of people have been participating, students, workers, older generations, pouring out onto the streets. When the cops filled the air with tear gas, they set fires to counteract the gas. If media in other countries covered this at all, it was without context, without understanding, only disjointed images of fires woven into a prefabricated moralistic tale of Chaos. And around the world, people have been attacking Greek consulates and banks, maybe in your city too. Because in our world, an injury to one is an injury to all, and the authorities who want our obedience are not about to stop killing us, imprisoning us, and torturing us.

Around the same time cops in Greece killed that kid, cops in the US, Georgia I think, shot another black boy to death. Folks in his neighborhood did the honorable thing and rioted, but as far as I read there weren't any other ripples in the whole country. Why not? People don't seem to believe police should have a right to kill people, because they lie to themselves and insist that police don't have that right, they create a make believe world for themselves in which if someone, anyone, commits a murder, he is punished. I don't think anyone actually lives in the Real World—it's too pathologically twisted and dishonest a place and it would require so much psychological fragmentation and displacement I think it would drive anyone insane. What I really want to know is, what is the relationship of everyone else's world to the Real World, and how do other people negotiate the inevitable contradictions? How do other people explain how every day prisoners are being tortured and cops are killing people, and why is this so underreported? What do people see as their own role in this daily disaster? How can I build bridges between my world and the worlds of other people who care, who are sincere, who are trying, but who see the problems from another perspective?

Thanks for reading my thoughts. I look forward to hearing your own.

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