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Brandon Darby Is Our Fault

William Gillis

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Let's talk about Brandon Darby.

Brandon Darby was an activist rockstar who took over one of the most visible projects in the anarchist milieu. Brandon Darby was flipped by the cops. And, as of Monday, it's safe to say that Brandon Darby ended up putting two people behind bars.

No sense in dressing it up. Beyond even the jail time, in the realm of perception—both public and internal—this was a great loss for us. For a million reasons we shouldn't be in the condition where we have activist rockstars, and we shouldn't be in the condition where our rank and file are ignorant and shallow enough to crack. But we are.

Brandon Darby's inclusion within the Anarchist milieu was always extremely problematic and indicative of a widespread and longstanding crisis point in the movement. Because:

1. Darby exhibited prominent indications of power psychoses in his day-to-day actions.
2. Darby's political and ethical stances were logically ungrounded.

It's clear that Darby was never an altogether great person, but at the end of the day it is we who are responsible for

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the clusterfuck that he's become. Blaming or hatemongering Darby is as useless as blaming or hatemongering an inanimate object or a liberal.

Darby was not someone who turned away from the light, Darby was one of the great many within our ranks who have never actually seen it.

I'm not particularly happy about using the revelation of an informant in our ranks to open an internal tirade on the state of the movement, but feel obliged given the sort of language that's been bouncing around the scene since.

Whenever something momentous happens in our little world everyone struggles to use it as proof or justification of their existing opinions. And yes, we should have practiced better security culture, we should have at least addressed — in some way — Darby's powergaming. But what's unique about Brandon Darby's case compared to the usual planted informants and undercovers we deal with is that while those approaches would have helped limit the damage, neither of them would have stopped it outright. Brandon Darby was already among our ranks, already embedded in circles of trust when he jumped ship.

Amid all the bellowing about building a threatening gangster-like culture of "stitches for snitches" and more cogent — if still unfortunate — calls for retreat behind walls of personal trust, every single voice I've heard has spoken with unison on the futility of addressing the problem itself. "There will always be Brandon Darbys" begin a million forum posts and zine features.

No.

No, *there don't have to be*. And the very fact that so many people believe this an occasion unpreventable, points to a profound crisis developing in our movement.

Brandon Darby and his still hidden brethren are the consequence of a culture that has abandoned intellectual vigilance and left us poorly inoculated against the sort of laughably

shoddy logic that blindsided Darby and motivated him to seek out collaboration with the state.

Remember that *we're right*. Reason is our home court. We not in any danger of *losing* an argument on ethics. The very idea is preposterous. We've nothing to fear from deeper examination of any issue; it can only make us quicker and more agile.

There's never any danger in challenging our own ideas because it's our boundless vigilance in our search that differentiates us from the statist. For us there is nothing to be lost and much to be gained in adopting as instinct the habit of questioning our own thoughts and delving deeper.

And yet not only has this become the exception rather than the rule, but we've arguably reached the point where little in our ranks is so despised and frequently spoken against than the practice of thinking things through. We are not a movement of those damnably outdated geeky anarcho-syndicalists, after all, with their endless prattling on about unsexy things like *theory*. No, the anarchists of *today*, *we're* all about getting things done. Theory insofar only as it directly relates to practice. Obviously it's alright to talk about touchy-feely matters of personal perspective — that's just a matter of not oppressing one another and tearing ourselves apart in the process of getting shit done — but constantly exploring our own logic? active philosophical analysis? valuing consistency, coherency and general rootedness? ...talk about your irrelevant circle-jerks.

We've created a situation where vague, nebulous emotional motivations are valorized while vigilant examination is frowned upon. Where a prideful or meritocratic focus on 'getting things done' has trumped actual engagement.

Not only does this create ticking timebombs like Darby, it actively recruits them.

A large swath of the anarchist movement has been set up as an ancillary to liberalism. Folks move from liberal activism, to getting particularly outraged about a given injustice or two (old growth logging, working class exploitation, border

enforcement, queer assimilation, thuggish police... etc), which drives them into social circles that sloganistically champion their wider set of preexisting political opinions in a more militant fashion. At one point their grievances against their own government pile up to the point where they stop seeing the state as a tool, ally or arena. There's a little "oh, hey" moment when they realize they no longer support the state, figure they must finally be "anarchists" like everyone around them, and then that's that.

The problem with this transformation is that it's governed by nebulous emotional and social trends. New arguments are seized upon when offered because they seem like an upping of the anti, a deepening of their existing political identity and a strengthening of their resolve. The extremity of the reasoning (and associated action) they encounter is audacious and exhilarating, and to top it all off it makes sense. But the context in which they pick up and adopt these arguments is one of passive integration rather than aggressive engagement.

Folks become entrenched in a social position and engaged in actions that constantly reinforce their emotional commitment, but remain poorly immunized with habits of direct logic and analysis.

Emotional loyalty can deflect the occasional apparent empirical counter-example, and they can shut out particularly successful critiques for a while, but in the long term these at the very least create an unhealthy tension, and at worst prescribe an inevitable break.

Since his proud declaration of proactive complicity in the state's prosecution of certain activists Darby has presented a variety of justifications for his actions. Although excluded from the activist community and demonized by the broader anarchist movement, Darby has nevertheless worked quite diligently to make his reasoning heard. It's an interesting situation because even if his intentions are less than noble, Darby must still assume his arguments are potent.

But we can build a better one.

I'm not saying that we'll covert every undercover cop assigned to eat our tofu scramble into double agents (although this *has* happened). Or that opportunistic psychopathic douchebags will suddenly stop gravitating towards showy activist projects. What I am saying is that if we start holding each other intellectually accountable in our everyday lives we can make their job a hell of a lot harder. And maybe, just maybe, we will no longer have to deal with people ditching the movement and betraying us all for really stupid reasons that they somehow think are profound.

ing mental explorations that don't immediately lead to actionable proscriptions is suicidal. It's our responsibility to create and maintain a culture of thinking things through. One where discourse on every topic is not only acceptable, but standard fare. Where challenging ourselves intellectually is not derided as masturbation, but as the critical component of our war on power.

Being disinclined to take action is not some passive character trait, but an argument, however cloaked and subconscious, that can and should be openly challenged. Rather than drawing lines and selecting as comrades those that happen to be correctly motivated, we should unceasingly endeavor to create them. And yet our movement is wrapped up in retreat. Progressive insularity and disengagement only broken by mild spurts of semi-inspirational actions. Propaganda through the deed has become an excuse to be 1) incredibly bad at propaganda and 2) incredibly bad at deed.

And you know what? Let me tell you, after a decade's close experience with them, Cops and Informants aren't the ones who don't do anything. They're the ones who can't give you a good reason as to *why* they're doing it. They revert to emotional appeals and make nebulous statements, but bristle with discomfort and finally hostility when a conversation turns to their rationales. Because emotion is easy to fake while even the most psychopathic of state actors has to justify their own actions to themselves.

That realm of logic is, by necessity, a no-go zone. It must remain their safe space. Something they can depend on, unfettered by serious doubts.

How shallow, how meaningless must have been Brandon Darby's original interpretation of Anarchism that he could carve out a secret mental space in response with ideas as brittle and preposterous as the ones above?

That's our crime. We let that happen. In the culture we created it became inevitable.

And that's exactly the problem. Because every justification he's made to in the public press has been laughably stupid:

1. You can *get more done* by working with the government.

Well yes. But contrary to some myths, 'getting shit done' is not the endall of our activism. We're not anarchists because in today's context an antagonistic position toward political power is particularly effective at getting community centers built or aid distributed or old growth forests protected.

We're called anarchists because we believe the State to be evil. Because we believe power is immoral.

We're anarchists not because we want to reduce the amount of mercury injected into puppies, but because we want to abolish the motherfucking state. We're anarchists because our goal is to abolish all power relations. Everything else is a means to that end. Not vice versa.

Anarchism isn't hardcore-activist-scene trappings. It isn't a "way of doing things"; a tool or commodity on the market that might help you obtain your random political desires. Anarchy IS the desire.

We want something that a centralized power structure by its very nature can't give us: Liberty.

Of course working with the Government will get a homeless shelter built faster than working in open defiance of its zoning restrictions. And sometimes that's needed. But sometimes it's faster to simply occupy an abandoned building.

And sometimes, when you do fight and you help people organize something for themselves outside of the coercive control of the state, it invigorates and inspires them to take the next step in their own lives. Something that working with the government can't do.

2. Disrupting political conventions *suppresses the free speech of politicians.*

So does punching a censor in the jaw.

As with anything, context matters and means are not *exactly* the same thing as ends.

Political democracy suppresses free speech by allowing, even encouraging people to vote on what others are allowed to say. Our government has always outlawed the transmission of information that might seriously threaten its continued existence. Simply explaining our ideals is treason punishable with the death penalty — and would be if they ever thought our plans viable. So if you truly value free speech then it stands to reason that disrupting the political process is its best defense.

Because at the end of the day political conventions are not cafe discussions or roadside protests. The discussion is that of generals and goons meeting to gloat and showcase their plans to suppress all of us.

By their advocates' own admission, completely nonviolent forms of resistance only work in a medium where the information regarding such acts can be transmitted and received. But just how might anyone fight back against those actively using physical force to suppress free speech without disrupting theirs the tiniest bit through our resistance?

Sure, if it was somehow constitutionally, fundamentally impossible for politicians to enact or enforce laws based on say Intellectual Property, Decency, Confidentiality, Libel, Association, Movement, Counterfeiting, Treason, etc... *then* it might be said that government wasn't inherently suppressing free speech.

Just basing all of its actions off its capacity to murder and imprison us... oh wait.

3. People should openly accept *responsibility* for their own actions.

Let's examine a case study: Should the French Maquis, after an action against the occupying Germans, reveal their identity and stand out in town square to take the "consequences"?

I mean What. The. Fuck.

The idea that acquiescing to a government's revenge is "taking responsibility for one's actions" is utterly disgusting.

And insulting — just insulting — in its flagrant lack of thought.

Yeah, honesty and openness are critical components of any free and just society. But this isn't one. Hiding our faces is a utilitarian decision, and a tricky one to be sure, but we don't live in a free marketplace of ideas and reputations. Again, voicing our beliefs as anarchists is legally classified as Treason. We can be fucking executed for printing a zine.

There are, of course, valid concerns to be had when it comes to unilaterally deciding to up the ante in a situation of collective confrontation. That's an issue of consent, and also of broader strategy. Everyone agrees that bringing a stack of pre-made molotovs to the RNC was sketchy. St. Paul is not Thessaloniki. But obviously there were plenty of ways to stop Crowder and McKay that didn't involve proactively seeking to aid one of the most violent, hierarchical and repressive organizations in the world, the state.

Darby's decision was abhorrent. It was also really fucking stupid. That he hasn't even batted an eyelid, making the above points sincerely, again and again, to anyone who would listen, signals more than anything else that we need to shape up the way that we as a movement, as a culture, approach reason and logic.

Moreover it directly challenges what many people have already taken away as the lesson. We are not going to solve the problem of informants, traitors and cops by drawing lines, falling back on limited circles of trust and clamming up. Being able to shut people and ideas out is not the definition of winning, it's the definition of retreat.

For god's sake, enough of this inane "brute action over inquisitive analysis" fratboy bullshit. We need to grow up. Being able to rattle off a laundry list of invective builds energy but offers no restorative focus in the face of complexities. Depreciat-