

Tragedy, Sacrifice, and Radical Politics

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Politics**

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Our Deaths

Our friends will die. So will we. Our deaths are inevitable. The questions of when and how we die, however, are uncertain.

Silenus, the tutor of Dionysus, teaches us to die as soon as possible, given that we've already been born. If we accept his tutelage, immediate suicide is the best course of action.

Camus preaches the opposite: to live as long as possible, revolting against the absurdity of existence, with as many diverse experiences as possible. A Camus follower would use any means to stay alive, regardless of the quality of that life.

Between Silenus and Camus are infinite variations on how, and for how long, to live one's life. Some of these ask us to live for our instrumental value to others, or to an abstract "society". Both capitalists and some communists subscribe to this view of human-as-cog: live as long as possible, as long as you are productive (for the profit machine, for the revolution).

Others propose living on our own terms. Stirner, the broadest among them, puts no cause above his cause. If he demands adventure and rebellion for pleasure, then his life may be shorter. If he demands calmness and comfort, then an obedient long life would be the best path. Extreme sports enthusiasts fall into the former egoist class, willing to accept a short life in exchange for experiences that can be achieved only by risking death. Sallust, the Roman historian, notes a similar phenomenon among early Roman soldiers: they were warriors whose only desire was glorious battle, with little to no concern about their deaths. Abreks, Chechen outcasts and Robin Hood-like figures, viewed dying in unwinnable battles as the highest honor. Cervantes showed the dialectic of these two types of egoism, with Don Quixote pursuing an egoistic life of adventure (cloaked in delusional idealism), and Sancho Panza an egoistic life of self-preservation.

An alternative view on when and how to die is provided by Thoreau, commenting on John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry: we each have a life task, a life goal, a life's work, and if we know how to begin that life task, we will know when our life should end. Thoreau argues that, for Brown, he knew that his work, and life, would end with a final attack and attempted insurrection by enslaved Black people. Nietzsche proposes a similar idea: that one's life task consumes oneself, and like a river overflowing its banks, the free human destroys its boundaries, and ultimately itself, in pursuit of challenges to its will. He gives Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte as examples of explosive genius that could only be freed through the constant experience of challenge and resistance. Nat Turner, a religious prodigy possessed by revelatory visions of liberation from slavery, realized that his messianic mission would consume his life only at its end. Dynamite is defined, in part, by what it destroys, including itself.

Finally, we have intentional martyrs, who choose to die, because that death proves devotion to a higher cause. Jesus is the exemplar.

Sacrifice and Instrumentalism

Why do these views matter? Because risk and resulting sacrifice are not merely symptoms of seeing oneself as an instrument of a higher cause or purpose, such as duty to society, or the oppressed classes. Instead, sacrifice may be a symptom of broader capacities for life; these sacrifices are tragedies that befall those who are too large, too expansive, too daring, and too explosive for their epoch.

How are tragedy and sacrifice relevant for the radicals of our time? Because there are so many alternative views that entail what looks like sacrifice, it is a mistake to see all sacrifice as immediately conforming to an ethos of instrumentalism, of giving one's life over to a machine. Militancy does not mean viewing oneself as a cog. On the other hand, certain approaches that seem to embrace life and power, that seem to be against the death drive, are instead cultish attempts to instrumentalize: live longer so you can produce more, or contribute more to the revolution. Cults know all about this: find people who have nothing left, who are ready for death, and give them something to live for (the cult). Becoming an obedient instrument of the group becomes the purpose of the purposeless.

Take one example: mass actions that demand participation from a large number of people, initiated and coordinated by a small number of actors. We've seen over the last few years in the Stop Cop City movement that, time and time again, big mass actions tend to produce more arrests and less damage than small-group clandestine attacks. Going through the RICO charges and seeing how people got arrested is instructive: none were caught during or after a clandestine attack. Only one person, not in the RICO case, was arrested after an alleged attack in South Carolina. We know the attacks are happening, but there are almost no arrests.

My first guess at the reason for doing these mass actions when the alternative small-group clandestine attacks are so successful is that mass actions are advertisements. But as any advertiser knows, your message resonates with a specific market segment: the mass action resonates with people who are okay with others calling the shots. Given the risk and effectiveness, it is hard to see any other reason why these actions are still proposed. Why do that? Because the people organizing these actions are both too afraid to act on their own, without masses of bodies to absorb the arrests, and have a belief that more people, obedient people, is what their nascent wanna-be-military-machine needs. So these egoists instrumentalize others into being their soldiers, hoping to train troops as brave as the Romans. This is Mel Gibson's view: a life of producing, directing, and acting in one's own revolutionary war-hero action-adventure movie, with most of the risk diffused to the rest of us, the extras. Any rejection of mass action is called a defeatist, self-sacrificing militant's attitude, which could come only from someone who is afraid to embrace real power (in this case, it is the power of a hierarchical war-machine cloaked in radical dress, like spokescouncils and black bloc).

But this is a misdiagnosis. Small affinity groups doing large amounts of damage and not getting caught are much more similar to a joyous expert mountain climber than self-negating Jesus: they take risks because it is a challenge, it is a life task, and it is something that consumes them. They have good offense and good defense, and they do not throw their comrades into the hands of the cops, taking every precaution, just like a tree climber does their ABCs. Any spectacle associated with these actions recruits a specific type of person who wants to fight with careful self-generated strategy and tactics, as opposed to obedience and deference to a fearless leader.

Martyrdom and Sad Militancy

Beyond the egoist or Thoreau-Nietzschean sacrifice, I would also like to question a tendency to condemn martyrdom as sad militancy. While I am against martyr culture (people being groomed and expected to martyr themselves), and warrior culture (again, a social expectation or demand for sacrifice in battle), I'm also not a fan of destroying the passions of my friends. As Nietzsche

argued, with great genius and passion there is an explosion; the dynamite is consumed. To defuse that bomb is to transform a friend, and into what, from a valiant hero who dies one courageous death into a coward who regrets their thousands? To make Jesus or John Brown or Nat Turner not martyrs would be to strip them of their godlike character, a will that no other human possesses, an unflinching disregard for death, and a passionate devotion to cause. This would be like turning every Don Quixote into Sancho Panza.

Understanding and Experimentation

What I want is understanding, for my comrades to understand that they may not know how to produce joy in their lives, so sacrifice seems like the only option. I have seen sad militancy, one (of many) types of sacrificial militancy. Of course I am against this, because I am against serving any sacred cause that is not my own interest, like working to serve a protestant ethic, or staying in a marriage because it is the right thing to do.

What do I want to see in my friends? Experimentation. This is the essence of anarchy, in my opinion: playing with social relations, trying out ways of living both big and small. Individuals who get power from working alone, doing things that only a lone wolf can do, but also being willing to try collaboration with others. Small groups working independently or in collaboration through affinity, coming up with their own ways of coordinating. Rather than played-out spokescouncils, which are about delegation, representation, bureaucracy, and compromise, seeking affinity with complementarities, groups come together to create modes of action that are only possible with their unique individuals. I am against compromise, or the stitching together of masses of people who disagree but will go along with the organizing spokescouncil for the good of the cause. This is sad militancy, which can only come about out of ignorance of the joy of true decentralized autonomous collaboration (what Stirner called the union of egoists).

I also want to see those who organize mass actions being honest with themselves and others: that they are performing, advertising, engaging in spectacle, in the hopes of attracting a specific type of gullible person into their hierarchical quasi-military ranks, and that they know, and fully admit, that the same objectives could be achieved without, or with very little, human sacrifice.

I want martyrs to know they are loved and that there is always another path, but we will not stop them or denigrate them by calling them fools or sad militants.

And I want sad militants to know there is joy possible and that they do not have to submit to a cause that requires them to sacrifice their life out of guilt or shame.

My Strategy

My revolutionary strategy is to have a badass life. That might look crazy to some people, doing shit that might get me killed or put in prison. But does one question the rock climber who challenges their entire existence by free soloing? This person is not acting out of obligation to any cause (the cause of all rock climbers?). They are doing it because they need a challenge and resistance; they need to push their boundaries; they need the spark of life that occurs only at the edge of death; the freedom that only exists in the face of tyranny. This strategy of life is many-dimensional. It is not just militancy. It is not just striving. It is a flowing of desires as they change and adapt to circumstances. This is what I want for myself and others.

Yet, I know others are different from me, so I cannot write a prescription for them. I used to think that my way was the right way, and I would mercilessly attack what I thought was the wrong way because of the dire consequences I perceived from making the wrong decision; like preventing a child from walking traffic, no argument or action was too strong. As in Kafka's Penal Colony, I wanted to inscribe the right being on the body of the reader, for their own good. Now I just hope to share how I feel and hope that others can gain something from it, and I accept that autonomy means that sometimes there will be tragedies that seemed preventable.

A Final Principle

Yet, there is one principle that I will not sacrifice: I always make sure my comrades can handle the worst case of their actions when we act together, and if they can't, then I argue that they shouldn't do it.

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