

Escapism

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2005

“Is the enemy strong? One avoids him.”
– Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People’s War, People’s Army*

Sun Tzu, Von Clausewitz, and Napoleon all agree. When the battle’s over and one has lost and they have triumphed again, one must run away—especially if one hopes to fight another day. Napoleon points out that a good tactical retreat is not a rout and shambles but an orderly withdrawal toward sources of logistical reinforcement, complete with rear-guard guerrilla and political action.

A sufi once mentioned to me that mystics are accused of “escapism”—but when there’s a tiger chasing you, he said, doesn’t escapism make perfect sense? To evade repression by vanishing—to wriggle out from encirclement and siege—to fade into the underbrush or maquis (whether natural or social)—to “drop out” (as Generalissimo T. Leary put it) and head for the hills and no-go zones (whether actual or metaphorical): wouldn’t this constitute the best strategem we can hope for under present circumstances?

In fact, given “the will to power as disappearance,” wouldn’t a successful escape provide good cause to congratulate ourselves on a touch of strategic brilliance?—almost turning a defeat into victory? Escapism as a political/military movement recognizes amongst its great precursors Houdini and the Count of Monte Cristo.

In my fictional mini-utopia (published in the last issue of *Fifth Estate*), “Pastoral Letter from Sion County,” I explored tactics for dropping out clandestinely through benign crime and social camouflage, on the scale of a small rural political unit infiltrated by pot-growing anarchists and neo-luddites. A number of readers have asked if such a place really exists. Unfortunately the answer is “well, sort of,” since the piece was inspired by some real-life examples—but not really, since none of them have achieved the de facto independence of “Sion County.” Sorry—no tickets to Erewhon.

In the course of my research, I wrote to activist/historian Kirkpatrick Sale (who certainly qualifies for the title “Gen. Ludd”) to ask if he knew of any secular luddite communities anywhere in the world. His sad answer was “no.” But he did turn me on to some interesting sources.

The first was a book. I’m embarrassed to say I’d never even heard of it: *The Breakdown of Nations* (1957) by Leopold Kohr. The simple and beautifully-argued thesis of this work is that Small is Beautiful. (Actually I think this slogan was coined by Kohr’s better-known disciple,

EF Schumacher.) The English *Fourth World Journal*, which carries on Kohr's work, summarizes the message as "For Small Nations–Small Communities–Small Farms–Small Industries–Small Fisheries–and the Inalienable Sovereignty of the Human Spirit."

When Kohr wrote *Breakdown*, world power was divided between two enormous political units, the USA and USSR. When he asked himself whether he expected his idea would ever be realized in history, he answered himself with a whole chapter consisting of a single word: "No." The notion of secession seemed very dim in the 1950s. But Kohr himself never gave up revolutionary hope and in fact ended his career working for the independence of Wales from the UK. In those days who could've predicted the breakdown of the USSR?–or the UK, for that matter?

Kohr's book seems quite relevant now, and certainly it deserves to be brought back in print–along with another neglected masterpiece on "minarchy" and mutualism, Proudhon's Federalism. Secessionism has always appealed to some anarchists, not as the end of the revolution but at least as its beginning. (The end, as in Kropotkin and G Landauer, would be regional anarcho-federations of autonomous entities.) Lysander Spooner liked to shock people by saying he supported both Abolition and Secession. The American Philosophical or Individualist Anarchist school has always defended a universal right of secession: small state from big state, region from small state, town from region, neighborhood from town, family from neighborhood–and children from family. Naturally this right also includes that of voluntary association, as in Stirner's "union of egoists."

I learned a second interesting thing from Kirkpatrick Sale: secessionism is "in the air" these days; movements are springing up here and there, partly inspired by the demise of the USSR, more recently by the Pure Capitalist Imperialism of the USA, which has become too disgusting to ignore. Zapatista-style armed uprisings seem utterly futile in the face of US military and police power–but secession may offer a political and non-violent option: a kind of legal Escapism.

The Internet is abuzz with these ideas and movements, including break-away proposals from Maine (the "Second Maine Militia" headed up by novelist Caroline Chute); New Hampshire (the "Project" launched by capital-L Libertarians to persuade 20,000 freedom-lovers to migrate to that state); the Republic of Texas (a politically-dubious but amusing group; I once met their "Ambassador to the Court of St. James" in Dublin, after he'd been thrown out of his London "Embassy" for non-payment of rent); Alaska; North Carolina; etc. etc.

Secession has appeal across a wide spectrum of political tastes: decentralists, greens, bioregionalists, "buddhist economists," socialists, libertarian marxists, anti-globalists, Libertarians, libertarians, separatists, "Third" and "Fourth" world nationalist movements, tribal rights militants, neo-luddites, true federalists, true conservatives (i.e., conservationists and isolationists), anarchists–even a few disgusted Democrats–can all find something to admire in this loose philosophy.

Kirkpatrick invited me to a conference on secession in Middlebury, Vermont, co-sponsored by Fourth World and the Second Vermont Republic (SVR), a secession movement pushing for Vermont independence. RadCon 2 ("second radical consultation"; the first was held in England in 2001) asked its delegates, "After the Fall of the US Empire, Then What?" The event was scheduled for the weekend after the national election in November, on the premise that Bush would "win." Delegates expressed the belief that four more years (minimum) of imperial war, insane deficit spending, predatory capitalism, and general immiseration will result in conditions propitious for secession. They intend to get ready by organizing now.

The mood of RadCon 2 was upbeat and hopeful. A good deal of discussion was devoted to the question of the constitutionality of secession. SVR founders Thomas Naylor and Don Livingston argue for its legality; their reasons are fascinating but naturally of little interest to anarchists. I presented the old Lysander Spooner argument that the Constitution itself should be considered illegal, based as it is on a false definition of the social contract. The Constitution represents a counter-revolutionary coup d'état by plutocratic anti-democratic forces. Our last "legitimate" governing document was the Articles of Confederation (based in part on the Iroquois Confederation), which made a serious attempt to organize for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Agrarian and democratic forces in the American Revolution detested the Constitution and correctly identified it as a conspiracy of wealth and power. The so-called "Anti-Federalists" (who were actually the true federalists, not Alex Hamilton and his gang of bankers and landlords) resisted to the point of violence. New York, Virginia, and Rhode Island actually reserved the right to secede when they finally joined the "union." Vermont, which had seceded not only from the British Empire but also from New York, retained its independence from 1777 to 1791. Ethan Allen (like Sam Adams, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Gov. George Clinton of New York, Tom Paine) was one of the original "unterrified Jeffersonians" (unlike Jefferson himself!), but unfortunately Allen died before he could lead the Anti-Federalist resistance. It's nice to imagine a rebirth of his Green Mountain Rangers (the true non-sexist name of the so-called "GM Boys") in the maquis of modern Vermont...

Anarchism in North America has never developed sustainable success despite significant rhetoric and periodic moments of tactical promise. Beyond small and scattered anarchist liberated zones, isolated actions in radical labor unions, a waning co-op movement, a youth movement with multiple styles but limited substance, and no effective anti-global movement or even anti-war movement...nothing's really moving. Thousands of websites pass as "organization" and big protest marches are now considered ends in themselves. "Symbolic discourse" is confused with "praxis." Some anarchists have embraced "nihilism," the belief that nothing can be done except hope for the end of Civilization. No strategic alliances are allowed to sully the purity of our intransigent positions; in fact, most of us spend most of our time denouncing each other.

Anarchists often complain about the lack of "non-whites" at various of our events, etc. Purist anarchism seems to offer little to people facing immediate oppressions of poverty and racism. Why should anarchists who claim to be "post-ideological" find it so difficult to cut slack for other people's definitions of freedom?

In fact many radical Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans are intensely interested in separatism—which need not imply racism. We should remember it's the US government that defines "race" according to genetic heritage, whereas Native Americans, for example, formerly defined themselves by way of life not blood. The Iroquois Constitution has a whole section devoted to adoption, both of tribes and individuals. This wide-spread practice resulted in "Black Indians" and "White Indians" (including at least one Iranian friend of mine, adopted into the Native American Church).

Can anarchism re-invigorate itself by making strategic alliances with separatist and secessionist movements? Or—if this question seems too parochial—does secessionism stand any chance of success?—or victory?

Well, how about anarchist revolution? How're its chances of success these days?—Or how about the downfall of Civilization?

Secessionism of the Second-Vermont-Republic variety is based on Kohr-type thinking, basically decentralist, non-authoritarian, roughly “socialist” (although they prefer the term “commons”), green and sustainable, not to mention anti-imperialist and anti-war. If anarchists in the Northeast bioregion were considering strategic alliances, the SVR might seem a good choice. Just now they’re on a roll—maybe.

Certainly, anti-statists can make valid critiques of varying aspects of the currently configured secessionist project. Like any radical endeavor, we should only participate with our eyes open and intellects engaged, hoping to enhance the revolutionary tenor of groups grappling with intentionally unraveling mass culture. If nothing has happened in four years to further the cause, then obviously I’ll have to reconsider. Meanwhile, however, I hope at least for a virtuous form of Escapism, a spark for the imagination, maybe even...a cause.

— December, 2004

For further reading, the author suggests:

The Second Republic, Journal of Vermont Independence, POB 1516, Montpelier, VT 05601

Thomas Naylor, *The Vermont Manifesto*, published by Xlibris, 1-800-795-4274

Naylor on Vermont, George Bush and Secession, from *The Vermont Cynic*: www.vermontcynic.com

Vermont Independence Day Petition: www.vermontindependenceday.org

New Hampshire Free State Project, 74 Shirley Hill Rd., Goffstown, NH 03045, 1-888-532-4604

Fourth World Journal, ed. John Papworth. POB 2410, Swindon, England SN5 4XN

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