

Against Self-Sufficiency

the Gift

Sever

Summer 2017

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The Blank Slate

Going toe to toe with the forces of law and order... grappling with the exhausting necessity of destroying civilization... hungering for something more as the diet of riots and insurrections proves to be a shrinking buffet of diminishing returns... sooner or later, all of us pose ourselves the question of opening up a wild space where we can be nourished through a healthy relationship with the earth, creating a community that might serve as some kind of anti-civilization.

Maybe we reach this point after years of bruising our knuckles banging on a brick wall. Maybe we come to a strategic analysis of the shortcomings of the big social revolts around us. Maybe when we make our first conscious acts of rebellion, we take one look at what's called "struggle," based as it is on protests, acts of propaganda, and illegal confrontation, and decide it's not for us. Or maybe the attempt to create some kind of community or build a material self-sufficiency is the first step in our radicalization, to be followed later by acts of confrontation and sabotage.

Those of us who do not come from colonized communities—or more precisely the "rootless ones" who were colonized so long ago and so completely we no longer have any living memory of it—often admire the struggles of indigenous people. From our outsider's perspective, which is generally exoticizing and maybe just as frequently annoying, it seems that indigenous communities fighting to regain their lands and their autonomous existence have something that we lack. Ground to stand on, a certain relationship with the world, perhaps.

It's very possible that I'm wrong, but what is certain, in any case, is that we rootless ones feel this absence, and it defines much of what we do. Not only do we suffer the predilection for abstraction that is widespread in Western culture, we also have the material and the historical need *to start from scratch* if we aim to rupture with the festering civilization that created us.

The Blank Slate is an old and perilous myth in our culture. It is the God born of a Word, the freedom that means being unencumbered by relations with the world, the mathematical equality from which good things supposedly arise.

The suffering caused by the Blank Slate can be seen in Year Zero revolutions,¹ in utopias founded on stolen land, in perfect ideas imposed at gunpoint.

The Community

One of the most common methods people from the West put into practice as a way to break with capitalism and create a new world is the formation of free communities. The Anabaptists took this path to escape religious domination and break the stranglehold of a desiccating feudalism and a nascent capitalism. The early socialists did it with their utopian communes. Jewish anticapitalists did it with the kibbutzim. The hippies did it with the Back-to-the-Land movement. A variety of groups, from MOVE to the Autonomes, did it with urban communes. Anticapitalists are doing it today in manifestations as diverse as squatted villages in the Pyrenees and the Alps, or Tarnac in France. And there is also the steady stream of radical retirement in the countryside.

Such a longstanding, multifaceted tradition of struggle cannot be lightly dismissed, whatever criticisms we might have. The failure, so far, of all these many attempts to "leave capitalism

¹ Year Zero revolutions are those that pretend a symbolic rupture with the prior order by imposing a new calendar, among other methods for severing their relationship with the past. Examples include the French Revolution, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, and Christianity.

behind” or serve as a springboard for attacks on the infrastructure of domination or plant a seed for a new world or whatever their specific pretensions were, is mirrored by nothing less than the failure of all the other methods we have tried out to liberate ourselves. Failure is our common heritage, so ubiquitous that it hardly constitutes a big deal or a mark against us. Understanding the relationship between what we do and our failures: therein lies the gem.

The varied attempts to create liberated communities cannot all be measured with the same ruler, but one repeated failing that crops up pervasively in our present context is worth mentioning. Nowadays, most people who have grown up with Western cultural values don't even know what a community is. It is not a subculture or a scene (see: “activist community” or “community accountability process”). Nor is it a real estate zone or municipal power structure (see: “gated community” or “community leaders”).

If you will not starve to death without the other people that make up the group, it is not a community. If you don't know even a tenth of them since the day either you or they were born, it is not a community. If you can pack up and join another such group as easily as changing jobs or transferring to a different university, if the move does not change all the terms with which you might understand who you are in this world, it is not a community.

A community cannot be created in a single generation, and it cannot be created by an affinity group. In fact, you are not supposed to have affinity with most of the other people in your community. If you do not have neighbors that you despise, it is not a healthy community. In fact, it is the very existence of human bonds stronger than affinity or personal preference that make a community. And such bonds will mean there will always be people who prefer to live at the margins of the community. Whether the community allows this is what distinguishes the anti-authoritarian one from the authoritarian one.

A group of anarchists or socialists or hippies who go off into the mountains to live together will end up hating one another. It is the very presence of disagreeable neighbors that teach us to appreciate the people we have affinity with. An “anarchist community” is an odious proposition.

Circled Wagons

Today, the rural community as an anticapitalist project is often motivated by the search for self-sufficiency. People who hate this civilization want to recover their power to feed themselves, to heal themselves, to relearn the skills necessary for sustaining life. A worthy proposition, on the face of it.

Self-sufficiency might take on individualistic or isolationist tones, as when a single tiny community tries to meet its own needs, or it might constitute a more collective project, as when a network of communities try to meet their needs together. It may contain the absurd belief that we can get rid of capitalism by creating an alternative to it, turning our backs on it, or it may be a modest attempt to live better and more deliberately as we participate in multifaceted struggles against civilization. In any case, the very construct of the idea will tend to push us in a direction that, even if it does not represent a fiasco, at the least constitutes a missed opportunity.

Every course of action we take comes back to us as representation, when we talk about it and reflect on it. This representation often exists as a visual metaphor that in turn suggests a strategy.

Self-sufficiency is a circling of the wagons. We imagine it as a breaking off of relationships, the end of a dependency, the bearing of our own weight, the closing of a circle. Some of these

visual metaphors and the strategies they encourage are benign, an average mix of advantages and disadvantages. Others feed directly into a pioneer machismo. But in both cases, they have too much in common with a puritan idea of productivity and independence, and with the myth of the Blank Slate.

A “community” based on self-sufficiency might get “walled in together,” true to the original meaning of the term (see: *munis*). Etymology is not deterministic, since meaning is alive: contextual, fluctuating, and resourceful. In this case, community's etymology can come to us as a gift, a warning of what might come to pass if we are not careful.

We never bear our own weight, and to speak truthfully, we never feed ourselves. It is the earth that feeds us and bears us up. Everything we have that makes life possible is the result of a gift.

The Gift

What we truly need in this war against civilization, this war for our lives, is not to break off relationships but to create more abundant relationships. We do not need communities with pretensions of self-sufficiency, living off the product of their own labor, hacking their means of subsistence out of the womb of an inert and passive earth with the sweat of their own brow. We need communities that ridicule the very ideas of labor and property by reviving reciprocity, cultivating the gift, and opening our eyes to the worldview that these practices create.

The earth gives us the gifts we need to survive, if we go looking for them, and we can give back to the earth, with our waste, with our love, and when we die with our very bodies. Wanting to live reciprocally is an admirable purpose, and a project that can give us strength in our struggles. In order to cultivate these gifts, we will have to relearn many traditional skills that capitalism has stolen from us. In this regard, the practice of the gift seems equal to the practice of self-sufficiency. But instead of a miserly self-nourishment calculated to close off dependencies, we can foster a rich web of interdependency through an active generosity that erodes capitalist scarcity and alienation.

When you have a garden, you have abundance. The same is true if you have a skill that enables you to perform acts of art and creation. The moment you start to sell this abundance, or to limit it in order to divert energy to meet all your other needs within a closed circle, scarcity is born.

Instead of a closed circle, the gift is a subversive invitation to abandon capitalism and the worldview it inculcates. This is true whether the gift is a basket of tomatoes from your garden, mushrooms or calendula you have gathered, a day spent measuring and cutting doorframes for a neighbor's new house, or an afternoon taking care of a friend's children. Reciprocating gives us pleasure, and through the open circle of the gift we form an expansive web of complicities and relationships through which we can nourish and support ourselves. Rather than fleeing the cities, going back to the land in a mutiny destined to self-isolation and failure, the practice of the gift allows us to return to capitalism's terrain—and all the people held captive there—with forms of abundance and sharing that encourage further struggle.

Finally, the fundamental idea of reciprocity and bounty is incompatible with the exploitation of nature, whereas projects animated by self-sufficiency often give rise to pioneering and productivist attitudes.

In the city, in the country, and in the mountains, wild nature and struggle against civilization are ever present possibilities. In those inevitable moments when we seek some respite, when we

try to nourish ourselves as a form of struggle, and when we attempt to find a niche that could allow us to form a healthy part of a web of living things, the way we understand our goal and the vision it fits into will have a great effect on what we reap.

The sharing of gifts seems like a simple gesture, but in truth it is a rebellious practice and a kind of relationship with the world that, if followed to its conclusions, will spell the abolition of property, the throwing down of walls and fences, the destruction of every law, and the liberation of every slave. All it requires is the boundless daring, desire, and generosity to break with the isolation, the insecurity, the misery, the loneliness, the addiction, and the fear that constitute our culture.

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The Underhill Distro zine version of this text contains numerous errors: this is the original text as published in Black Seed 3.

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