Inertia is a Motherfucker

ISSUE TWO

i'm not cool
An Anarchist is anyone who denies the necessity and legitimacy of government; the question of his methods of attacking it is foreign to the definition..

-Benjamin Tucker, individualist anarchist
Welcome to what I didn’t realize would become a series, *Inertia Is A Motherfucker*. I wrote the first issue about hitting the road again after a sedentary year and a half. Now it’s a year later. Still back at traveling. Or really, I think a better word is “itinerant.” I just move a lot. Like, every few days to every few months.

This issue is about how completely uncool I am. It’s about how I got beat up a lot as a kid, it’s about being kind of a chickenshit anarchist. It’s about being scared of jail and it’s about how I’m from the suburbs and I didn’t discover anarchy until I was 19.

Anyhow, this personal zine, like anything that claims to be autobiographical, is a pure fabrication. Everything is so twisted by the lens of perspective that it would be dishonest to claim otherwise.

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SUBURBIA

I was in a small town on the Oregon coast. I was only going to be there for a night. I sat around in a cafe for an hour or two, then wandered off to see what the evening might hold.

Sometimes, wandering around strange places “to see what the evening might hold,” gets me into all kinds of fun adventures. It doesn’t have a perfect track record, but usually, when I feel like I’ve just got to get out, it serves me right.

But everything was closed: almost every place closed at six. I went into the corner store. The woman behind the counter had two lip piercings, dyed hair.

“Is there anything to do in this town?” I asked.

“No really,” she said.

“No punk shows on fridays or anything?”

“Nope. If there were, I would know. This town’s pretty dead. There’s the movie theatre. If want to drive a half an hour, there’s an arcade. But if you don’t want to spend any money, well, mostly we just smoke pot and drive around.”

“Sort of a ‘drink under bridges’ kind of place?” I asked.

“Yeah. And avoid cops.”

Sounded a lot like where I grew up, more than 3,000 miles away.

She let me know a decent place to park my van to sleep, which I did. I hid my headlamp under the covers and read for an hour or so, then passed out. It was probably 9pm.

Sometimes I’m jealous of my friends who got radical much younger than me. Most of the time, actually. For years I really felt like my life started when I was 19, when I discovered anarchism and dropped out of school to travel. Or if nothing else, my life started when I was 17, when I left the suburbs and went off to college in NYC.
The important thing was: my life started when I left suburbia.

I remember when I was 24 or so, I went with my mom to the mall. “You going to try to look like you don’t know me?” she asked.

“No, I’m going to make sure people know I’m with you, that I’m not trying to hang out here or something.”

I’m not embarrassed about my parents, but for some reason I was embarrassed about the suburbs.

Granted, I don’t think the suburbs should exist. In the way I’d like to see the world structured, there wouldn’t really be any place for them. Endless sprawl? Car culture? Chain stores? No thanks. But I don’t want to be embarrassed about where I come from, either.

There’s a twenty-something culture in the suburbs, and I’m completely baffled by it. It’s utterly foreign to me. I cannot, for the life of me, understand why anyone would stay in such a place. But what I’m trying to come to terms with is: it’s okay that people do. Because the suburbs aren’t actually culturally dead. Everywhere you have people, you have culture.

I didn’t discover “good” music until I was 16 or so and an older friend started feeding me Skinny Puppy, the Swans, Tom Waits. I was a goth, probably, but not in some clear, defined way that punks and goths and other subcultural types who grew up in the city knew themselves to be. I wore a grateful dead shirt, I had waist-length hair. I listened to the Doors, to Pink Floyd, to Led Zeppelin. I listened to Tool, Korn, Marilyn Manson. Nine Inch Nails. I won’t stand behind the Korn thing anymore, but when I got a hold of their first album, in ninth grade? That shit was intense. Type O Negative was as underground as I got. Green Day was what “punk” was. The first show I went to was No Doubt. I’m pretty sure I even enjoyed it.
You see where I’m going with this? I have no cred. I’m not cool. I still can’t say I’ve ever heard Flux of Pink Indians. I didn’t know there was a punk band called Fear until about a week ago when a 39-year-old friend of mine told me.

My friends back in the suburbs were smart people. Most of them, anyway. We had a crew, but we didn’t have a unified subculture. One of my friends listened to trance music and hacked, another listened to KMFDM and taught us all how to make chainmail during class. Not fitting in was about all we had in common. But we didn’t know these bullshit subcultural boundaries either: we were as excited about raves as we were about metal.

We drove around and smoked pot. We didn’t go to “shows,” we went to concerts. We ate McDonalds and played like we were intellectuals while reading books at Borders. We’d meet up at Starbucks. I’m not sure that we knew that Beavis & Butthead was parody. One year, we all drank a hell of a lot of Robotussin.

Sometimes, when I think about all of this, I feel like I’m thinking about someone else. It doesn’t sound like me, it doesn’t sound like my past. It helps that I changed my name. It helps that I only go back maybe twice a year, that I’m really only in touch with two people I knew in high school.

But I’m starting to regret being “too good” for all of that.

I find myself frustrated and angry at normal-core folks all of the time. How can anyone stand to be in a mall? They genuinely make me physically uncomfortable, now that I’ve been free of them so long. But before I was old enough to have older friends with cars, I rode my bike four miles to go hang out at one.

Last Christmas, I went to my cousin’s house. It’s a punk house in the suburbs. The funny thing is, they don’t know it’s a punk house. But they’re a bunch of strange folk,
poly/kinky/queer and friendly thereto, who live crammed into a collective house. They smoke pot and play Rock Band and write books and work jobs and care about the state of the world. I wish I could push a “okay, now be anarchists or radicals or whatever” button somewhere in them. Because if they lived in the city, they probably would be. They don’t, and they aren’t.

There was a stripper pole in the living room, which three of them used (clothed) over the course of the evening. “Are any of you dancers?” I asked. A lot of my friends are sex workers.

None of them were, and I think I might have made a faux pas in asking, though no one would say so. I probably made a lot of faux pas that night. They were just so damn close to what I’m used to, yet somehow miles away.

So here’s the idea of class. Or at least, my interpretation thereof. Anyone can try to “make it” in a capitalist pseudo-democracy like we’ve got going on. Anyone can start a business or go to law school or whatever. That’s partly true. But cultural influence and class background really do make a huge difference. Among the white upper-class American males, pretty much any schmoe can “make it.” You don’t need any special spark or whatnot. You’ve been taught your whole life that you’re going to do just fine. You may or may not need to apply yourself. And quite importantly, you’ve usually got a hefty safety net waiting for you if you slip up. Training wheels, let’s say. White yuppies get training wheels, pretty much forever. I’m going somewhere with this, hear me out.

If you’re not an American yuppie, you’ve got no training wheels. You’ve got no access to your daddy’s lawyer friends, you didn’t grow up groomed for our society’s narrow views of success. Only a handful are likely to succeed: those who are skilled and lucky.
Okay, to tie this back in: being a kid in the suburbs (or small town America) means being denied access to underground culture. Yes, suburban kids can and do make their own radical, even revolutionary cultures. But by and large, they don’t. It’s not because they’re idiots, it’s not because they’re sheep or pawns or what have you. It’s because they fucking grew up thinking that Green Day is punk. That Tool is goth.

The same as a yuppie gets to hold daddy’s hand through law school, some people get an older punk who lets them know about Crass when they’re 12.

Maybe the internet will change all this, but I don’t have my fingers crossed.

Alright, and another thing. Not everyone in the suburbs is wealthy. You got rich suburbs and you got middle-class suburbs and you got poor suburbs. Of course, everyone in America thinks that they’re middle-class, except insurrectionists.

Part of me wishes I’d been able to articulate all of this to the clerk in in that small town. But fuck, how condescending would that have been?

BULLIED

Something like five or six years ago, I was at a crusty-traveler-anarcho gathering, walking hand in hand with a lover, barefoot across a bridge over a river. I should have been in a better mood, but I’d just been going through some “lonely in a crowded room.”

I was holding my boots out to my side by the laces when someone on a bike swooped by and grabbed them.

I chased the person down, pushed them off their bike, and took my shoes back. I didn’t think about it.
He got up off his bike, balled his fists, and stepped towards me before he calmed down and returned to his bike. I sat at the edge of the bridge, looking at my shoes, looking at the water, and feeling bad for my partner who had absolutely no idea how to cheer me up. I started crying.

Hours later, I talked to my antagonist. He’d meant nothing by it, he thought it was a joke to take my shoes like that. I told him he’d triggered me, that I’d been bullied a lot as a kid. He told me he’d been a bully.

Why, in our twenties, are we just strange shadows of our eight-year-old selves?

It was probably elementary school when I first started being picked on in earnest. Kids would take my shoes or my hat or whatever it was and play keep-away. I learned early on that if I didn’t take back my stuff immediately, I would be tormented.

In fourth grade, I had my first personal bully, a kid my age named Ben. He’d wait for me after class and hit me, kick me. One day, I was cutting through his backyard on the way home from a friend’s house, and he came out, with his two fifth-grade girlfriends. They cheered him on as he strode up to me, stern look on his face, and socked me in the stomach three times.

“My mom is calling me,” I said, “I have to go.” It’s funny to me, because that’s a cliche. But fourth grade me didn’t know the cliche. It’s just what you say, when you want to leave a situation.

I think that maybe this is one of the differences between getting into fights and getting beat up: I didn’t think that Ben was my friend, but I somehow got all the signals mixed up, because I really honestly didn’t know how else to handle it besides to be friendly. Later on, some of my worst tormentors were people I did consider my friends.
Middle school was worse. The same stuff, only more so. In math class, half the room played a game of keep-away almost every day. Let’s say my name was Dan Smith. “Dan Smith’s” they would say, in a sing-song way, as they passed my notebook around the room, all while sitting at their desks.

On my birthday, I ran from class to class as everyone hit me.

A friend of mine tried to convince me that I had a secret admirer, as a joke at my expense.

Kids wearing Rage Against the Machine shirts would beat me up. I don’t know if I’ve ever forgiven the band for that.

One girl in a cool druggie clique really did have a crush on me, I think, so I started getting to sit at her table during homeroom. Her male friends, though, gave me an eraser burn that left a scar for years.

“Who did this to you?” my dad asked when he saw the back of my hand.

“It’s nothing,” I said. They were my friends. Of course I wouldn’t rat them out.

My dad steeped in impotent rage.

A kid on the bus, a year younger than me, sat next to me for awhile. Almost like friends. Then one day, he picked a fight. “We’re going to fight this afternoon. We’re going to get off at my stop and we’re going to fight.” The rumor passed through the bus, and my fate was sealed.

I got off at his stop. We “fought.” I curled up as he hit me. Everyone stood around and chanted “fight.” Eventually, I walked home crying. He stopped sitting next to me after that.

High school saved me, or at least stopped that shit from happening. My neighborhood had been bussed to a wealthier neighborhood’s middle-school outside our district, to diversify it. But for high school, we went back to our own district. 70% new people.
New friends. I dyed my hair green and made friends with girls who wore black lip-stick and boys with long hair and drug habits.

But that shit from middle school stays with me, fifteen odd years later.

I told my parents about it recently, and it caught them by surprise. How could they not have known? I wondered. But how could they have known? Besides that eraser burn, there was nothing for them to see. I hated school. I never did my homework, and I read books during class. I don’t know if getting beat up and hating school are related. Honestly, I don’t remember most of middle school. Even while I was in high school, middle school was just a blur of fists and books.

When I got beat up, it never seemed to hurt, not physically. Knocked the wind out of me a couple times, I remember that. But mostly, my mind fogged over and I stepped outside my body. I never fought back. I wasn’t even angry. I just accepted it. It was part of life.

Now? Now I’m mad as hell. Not at my own tormentors, per say, but at cultures and systems of power, at individuals who make conscious use of this disassociation to make us all victims, to get us where we fucking like it. Where at least we’re friends.

My dad was raised poor in a military family. When he finished high school, he didn’t know what to do. So he joined the marines.

He’s blacked out two weeks of boot camp, he’s got no memory of it. But near as he can tell, he was the picked on kid in his squad. Beaten half-unconscious in the night by everyone else.

Never let anyone tell you the military is about honor. Those fuckers didn’t even have the excuse of being twelve-year-olds. It happens with almost every single squad.
The Columbine shootings happened when I was in high school. Two or three of my friends wore black trench coats every day, and when they did again the next, they were suspended. I ran across my Latin teacher walking through the hallway in tears. He’d just come from the principal’s office, fighting against my friend’s suspensions. And I know with every bit of my being that he, my Latin teacher, would have been one of the teachers to die if it had happened in our school, because that man would do anything to keep us safe. A few years after I graduated, my Latin teacher was fired for sexual harassment or misconduct towards a female student. And that didn’t surprise me either.

After Columbine they took the doors off the stairwell where us misfits sat in the morning. Those months, there were probably tens of thousands of us misfits all across the country, hating the Columbine shooters for being such a bunch of shitheads that made the rest of us look like psychopaths. Is that victim-blaming? I don’t know. The school sent counselors in to our stairwell, who would approach nervously, like they’d drawn the short straw and were certain we would kill them. They’d ask us how we were doing. We didn’t shoot them, but we didn’t talk to them either.

In high school, once I had friends, there was a kid that even we picked on. Fuck, that even I’d picked on. I’d like to think that I did so the least of the bunch of us, but then, what if I was the “friend” who made it all that much worse? What if I was good cop?

I’ve seen that kid since, happy as hell, helping run a fetish goth night at a bar in the suburbs. He’d found his people. And he let me into the event for free. After all, we were friends.
Cowardice

Somewhere there’s a fine line between “discretion is the better part of valor” and cowardice. I’m not sure where it is. I’m not sure which side I’m on, sometimes.

At the Free Trade Area of the Americas [FTAA] protests in Miami, in 2002, we had a singular objective: breach the security perimeter of the meetings. We believed that if we got close enough (within a block or so), they would have to cease the meetings of world finance leaders because it was unsafe. And thusly, the FTAA wouldn’t pass for at least another year, directly saving lives and the landbase, at least for awhile.

So that was our plan, decided upon in a complex nationwide consensus structure instituted by the anarchist movement. The organizing alone was breathtaking.

But the police state that they had set up for us in Miami was probably the most complete that the US has ever seen, at least in the contemporary era. They were arresting suspected protestors for being downtown as early as a month before the protests. There were roadblocks off the highway. The perimeter fence around the meetings encompassed a huge swath of the city center. There were police helicopters overhead day and night. The police had told the local thugs to mug us, and in particular to target any of us carrying video cameras; the police told them that they would turn a blind eye to crime against us. (And this happened to a few videographers, but many more people just came up to us and told us what the cops had told them, but said that they were on our side.)

Anyhow, in this atmosphere of police repression, plans began to disintegrate. The black bloc decided to meet somewhere else they thought was “safer” (mostly, they all got arrested). The padded bloc (folks wearing lots of pads and defensive gear) was supposed to be the majority of the militants, but never manifested.

Still, our numbers half of what they easily could have been, we marched towards
the perimeter fence. My affinity group was going to use grappling hooks to tear down the perimeter fence at a select location, the closest we could conceivably get to the convention center. I was wearing rugby and motocross armor under my clothes despite the heat.

The police tricked us into marching the wrong way. I blame it on a lack of discipline: we all knew which way we needed to go, and there was only a weak police line between us and our destination. But the police opened up a different line, and a quick “consensus” meeting determined to head into this trap.

We reached the fence, but the wrong part. Even if we’d been able to make it through the fence, we’d have blocks and blocks of riot cops to somehow get through before we’d have a chance to affect the meetings. As far as I was concerned, it was over: we’d lost. No point in taking casualties if a battle cannot be won. Why fight for posterity?

But others decided to deploy the grapples. We’d come all this way, they figured.
I joined the crowd away from the baton rounds and pellet guns.
The grapples went up, and the grapplers were bludgeoned with wooden dowels and beanbags shot from grenade launchers. The police aimed for joints, to cripple.
The grapples were abandoned. The battle was lost. We left.
The day went on without us, a retreating street battle.
I should have stayed with my friends and been shot at. Not because it would have accomplished something at the time (it wouldn’t have), but because we need solidarity. Sometimes, when your friends are jumping off a bridge, they need you to do it too. Sometimes you should do things that are the right thing to do even if they’re stupid.

In the book *Black Elk Speaks*, an account of the indigenous resistance to the white man in America, one elder says (I paraphrase from memory): “it is useless to fight the white man. It is like fighting mosquitoes. If you kill one, there will be
more. But, if this council decides to go to war, I’m no coward. I will join you, and I will die with you.”

On an individual level, it is monumentally stupid to make yourself an enemy of the state, of capitalism. Of industrial destruction. I think this is why reformist activists do the work they do. Not because they believe it to be effective, but because it is safe. We all know what happened to the Black Panthers. To the American Indian Movement. (For those who don’t, the short answer is that they were killed and imprisoned.)

I don’t know if I acted out of fear at the time. I’ve seen myself in crazy scrapes so many times, and sometimes I’m terrified and sometimes I’m absolutely undaunted. I think that it has to do with agency. If there’s something I can do to make things better, to have a chance of victory, or even just a puzzle for my brain to work out, something I can try to do, I usually have no fear.

 Mostly I don’t think I was afraid in Miami because after Miami, I came to know fear.

Those arrested—hundreds of people—were treated inhumanely in jail by the guards. Women were raped. Black men were forced naked into dog cages and sprayed with cold water in air-conditioned rooms.

At the jail support protest the next day, we hadn’t yet learned any of this. I barely made it out of the jail support protest with my liberty: they swept in and arrested hundreds more simply for being in a parking lot across from the jail, protesting. Those who tried to leave (including some who’d begun to drift off before they started to arrest people) were chased through alleys and pepper-sprayed, thrown to the pavement, and arrested.

I know about one person who was raped in jail in Miami who took her life the next year as a direct result.
Miami broke my spirit for years. It also broke the anti-globalization movement in the US. But at the same time as it frightened me from militant street protest, it alienated me from everyone who wasn’t a radical. How could I begin to explain the experience I’d had in Miami (or in Sacramento, or in Portland, or anywhere else)?

I read about this with soldiers. How could they relate to people who haven’t been shot at?

**TRAUMA**

*Trauma is weird. You can* be numb to it for years, and suddenly be triggered into a ball of nervous energy for months or decades.

*This section is explicit in all sorts of ways. It might be triggering, or it might just seem crude.*

I can point, most easily, to four traumas in my life. Each one, individually, had its effects but didn’t really break me.

I was bullied as a kid. I don’t know how this affects me now. It happened for too long, and was too complex, for me to wrap my brain around.

When I was fifteen, an ex-girlfriend convinced her friends to slip me acid without my consent or knowledge. It was a nightmare. Everyone at the party was in on the joke. (Once again, my “friends.”) For a long time, the only lasting effect of this was that every time I tried to use hallucinogens, I had a bad trip. (I tried mushrooms a few times, acid again, and mescal.)

When I was nineteen and nearly blacked-out drunk, a woman tried to seduce me.
When she failed, she raped me. I make no claims that men have it worse in this culture, but it’s hard for men to understand being raped by women. I thought I’d cheated on my girlfriend. For months afterwards, I would prematurely ejaculate in most every sexual situation. Once I realized that I’d been raped, the physical problem disappeared. I also stopped having penetrative sex, except when partners would cajole (or sweetly pressure) me into it. Eventually, I started dating better people and I began to heal.

And then there’s the state. The police states I’ve seen at protests, the way I’ve been treated by cops near timber sales. Jail. I’ve only been to jail twice. Here in the US, I didn’t seem phased by it at the time. I just got through it. So they didn’t feed us for 24 hours. Fine. So they hog-tied us overnight. Fine. So they strip-searched us in crowded rooms. Fine. So they made fun of us, told us that we were going to get raped by the inmates. Whatever. I was young and tough and dauntless.

This was before Miami, mind you.

Then there was jail in The Netherlands. They weren’t much more polite to me there, but I didn’t notice: they were trying to figure out which of us were foreigners (we wouldn’t tell them), so they’d open our cells and yell things like “yeah, I fucked your mom last night!” to see if we’d flinch. I didn’t flinch, so they packed me up and sent me to foreign detention.

And to be honest, it wasn’t that bad, not really. They brought me tea. I was in a cell by myself for the night, and I think there was a blanket. Most importantly, they let me out the next day.

But that was the first time, perhaps, in the middle of a bad situation, that it got to me. I was absolutely reliant on the good will of people who have let asylum-seekers burn to death when the jail they were housed in caught fire (forcing them back into the burning building at gunpoint). I was counting on there being a “good cop.” I had no “rights,” nor any clue about the Dutch legal system.
Any one of these things alone, I tell you, would have been fine.

But Miami, drugs, rape, bullies (the state and fellow children alike)? They built up in me. I became nervous. Jumpy. I avoided cops, which meant I stayed away from most protests. When I did go, I stayed at the back, played it safe, played it useless. I jumped at loud noises. I was convinced I was being followed any time I saw a stranger at night.

Driving was the worst. Driving is all about putting your faith in the continuance of current events: right now, the road in front of you doesn’t have a big fucking rock in it. But if that changes, you’re going to hit it, you’re going to die.

One day I snapped. Everything went surreal, and I started having a bad trip. Only I wasn’t on drugs. (Years later, I can point to how I wasn’t really eating and I’d spent like a week hiding in a basement all day writing electronic music ... something my body could handle in my teens, but it turns out not my twenties.)

I went outside and walked around the block probably thirty times, until the sun came up and I finally found a way to sleep.

That was more than three years ago, and I’m finally almost better.

Every night before I went to sleep, I had to fight down panic. It was like there was a demon in my brain that came out at night that I had fight away. I obsessed over exercise and diet. I cut out all caffeine (including chocolate), alcohol, refined sugar. For months, I didn’t even eat fruit. Actually I still won’t eat fruit at night. Anything that might possibly keep me awake was suspect.

And any food that might possibly be contaminated was simply inedible to me. I stopped eating trash. I stopped eating any kind of mushrooms. For awhile, I stopped drinking out of cups that I didn’t personally wash.

I developed claustrophobia. The thought of jail was too paralyzing. I stopped
protesting more or less altogether. I left parties if I thought the police might arrive. I stopped squatting, started paying rent or just couch-surfing.

Most of my friends were supportive of me. I don’t think my partner understood it, not completely, but she trusted me and she didn’t call me crazy. A few years later, when it was still happening, I think it bothered her more, but she tried her best to be patient. I owe a lot to her and her patience.

I’ve been recovering. After a few months, I only panicked a couple times a week. After a year, I could walk past pot smoke without freaking out. Three years later, I ate a piece of chocolate birthday cake. In the morning, mind you.

About a month ago, I table-scrapped some vegan waffles. I’d spent six years of my life eating gloriously free by scavenging. Eating those waffles without too much fear (still a trace of it, though. What if they’d put acid on their waffles? Nonsensical, I know.) was one of the finest moments of my recent life.

Where now? Am I better? The trauma hasn’t really left, it probably never will completely. But I do feel better. I feel like myself again. I feel like I could go to jail for a week if I had to without freaking out about it, at least not too bad. I can eat trash again. I can get on an airplane, or go caving. I panic less and less.

So, it’s time to go out and build up some new trauma, I suppose.

**Dungeons & Dragons**

*It’s like hit points.*

Trauma is like hit point damage. I had 8 hit points, let’s say. (Cause I was a first level ranger?) I went off adventuring, and some not-so-good moments in my life
whittled them down. But I didn’t want to stop to rest to recover hp. Then, after Miami, I probably only had like 2hp left. And after jail in Rotterdam, I had 1hp.

So it was time to rest.

Hopefully I went up a level, and have like 9-16 hp now. No use in saying “well, I don’t know, adventuring sounds dangerous, we might lose some hp.” Of course we might! We’re adventurers! We might die, even. But as Tolkien said, “those without swords can still die upon them.”

So yeah, by confronting the state and capitalism (and by traveling, and by lots of other stuff, like being in relationships, or by being alive) you might get some trauma. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do it. And besides, that’s what hit points are for. So we can get whacked with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (or batons) and not die.

Solid community can help you heal at a faster rate. Haven’t found a Cure Light Wounds spell yet though. I’ll let you know.

See, I’ve either lost you or not, with all of this dungeons & dragons talk. I started playing d&d when I was in fourth grade, and it has radically shaped my world view.

But you know what? That’s okay. One reason it’s kind of okay is that d&d was hugely influenced by a writer named Michael Moorcock, a pulp fantasy author and anarchist. That chaos star that so many people have tattooed? (and that I used in the first issue of Inertia?) Invented by him. The idea that one of the core conflicts in the universe is chaos vs. law was largely developed by him and was borrowed by d&d. In first edition, there was no good and evil, just law and chaos.

The friends I played d&d with moved away in fifth and sixth grade, but I kept up reading the game books. I played the video games, but they weren’t really the same. I knew the rules to 2nd edition ad&d by heart when I was in middle school, though I didn’t play it once during that time. I got my first job at 13, and probably spent most
of my money on game books and magic cards.

I played it once or twice in high school, when I could con my friends into it. My dad played with us one time. He had a 3 intelligence (I’d min-maxed his character) and he played it well. “Hey dragon!” he yelled as they approached the sleeping end-boss of Dragon Mountain. It ate him. He and I use the saying to refer to such behavior still.

And then I didn’t play it for years.

When I was living in a squat in Amsterdam, my housemate approached me one day. “You want to play d&d?” he asked. “I’m starting a new campaign.” And then he went into detail about the world we were going to play in, the nature of the campaign, etc.

I would have thought he was joking. Proof against stereotypes, he was a muscle-bound anti-fascist skinhead who studied history, lifted weights, and fought nazis. And, it turns out, ran a great game of dungeons & dragons.

So I got back into it and brought it back to the states with me. Anywhere I live for more than a month or two, I try to start up a game. Because fuck it, who cares if it’s cool? It’s about the most fun (and time-consuming) thing I know.

One rule that I’ve stuck with that has served me well is to not run a game in which a majority of the players are cis-gendered men (cis-gendered is a term for people who are not transgendered).

Why am I rambling about d&d? Because I’ve realized that it heavily influences my worldview, even more than the science fiction I read so much of in middle school. I look at people and movements and ideas and place them on the alignment scale: where do they stand on the two axes, law vs. chaos and good vs. evil? Chaotic good, I’d shoot for. A chaotic good character is one who believes that the good of humanity (or the natural world or whatever) is best served by chaos, by decentralization, by snubbing the forces of law and authority. Robin Hood is the classic chaotic good
character. The anarchist movement personifies the alignment.

When I was a kid, I wanted to escape the mundane life and live a life of adventure. I read about magicians and thieves, young apprentices swept up in world-changing wars. About trees that fought back against loggers. About warriors who didn’t take shit, even if it so often meant their deaths.

When I dropped out of college, I found that world. I carried lockpicks, I shoplifted my dinner and fought against the tyranny of corporate globalization every chance I got. I slept somewhere new most every night. I was off to see the world and destroy empire.

So I was dismissive of escapism for awhile. Why read fantasy books when I could live life fantastically?

Eventually, I found a reason to read such books: I couldn’t keep up the adventuring, not all the time. Particularly after the trauma set in. I needed to recuperate, which involved a bit of staying still and a lot of not putting myself in harm’s way. Thus, to fight the boredom (and keep myself excited about the life I knew I would return to), I had fantasy. I had dungeons & dragons.

Yesterday I was discussing the need for a cultural front in our war against capitalist and statist relations, and we were talking about games. Almost all of the games we have these days are one person against another or one person against everyone else: chess, settlers of catan, monopoly. These are games of individualism, and not a healthy socially-conscious individualism but the war or one against all. At best, you have one team against another: basketball, baseball, soccer, and those team-based trivia competitions so that high school nerds have a sport too. These are games of nationalism. You’re rooting for your team against the other team.

And then you have the roleplaying game. Most RPGs, whether pen-or-paper or live action (I don’t LARP, but I won’t knock it: who am I to look down on geeks?) are,
I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which ‘Escape’ is now so often used. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?

–JRR Tolkien
in essence, the collective (the players) against the monolithic power structure (the gamemaster). Or are just plain collective storytelling. Some folks go with the whole “No Gods, No Dungeon Masters” approach, and I’m sympathetic, but I believe that it’s interesting, useful, and fun to have one person take on the hierarchical position of master so as to be torn down by the prowess of the collective—it’s a sort of consensual BDSM relationship. When the party in-fights, it’s destroyed.

Hell, even the stereotypical party structure, where each character has his/her/hir own goals, is important. In the real world, struggle against monolithic power doesn’t take the form of one homogenous mass against another. Our struggle is the struggle of a heterogenous collection against the concepts of homogenization. So you’ve got your ranger who hates the city, your rogue who hates the woods, and your paladin who thinks everyone should follow some arbitrary rules, and together you’ve got to go out and save the freaking world. It’s awesome.

Roleplaying is awesome. It doesn’t have to involve twenty-sided dice, but that’s the way I like it.

HIPSTERS & ANARCHISTS

Going to art school was a last minute decision. Both my parents had gotten their degrees later in life, and it was important to them that I go to school. But I knew I didn’t want the normal life. I’d done the 9-5 thing as an IT worker in a mid-sized company when I was 16, and I knew it wasn’t what I wanted. But that said, my friends who didn’t go to college (or dropped out of high school) didn’t do fuck all. They worked at gas stations, lived with their parents. They drank and smoked and were lucky if they got together a band. One of my “we didn’t know the word straight-edge” friends was shot in the face with a shotgun and killed because he lived with his drug-
dealing friends and they got robbed. It wasn’t a promising world for me there in the suburbs.

So if regular college meant a regular job and no college meant being a schmoe, I decided at the last minute to apply myself to art. It seemed better.

It wasn’t, of course, the art world is just so much capitalist bullshit as anything else. But I didn’t know that then, so I went to art school.

Socially, I thought it was going to paradise. It seemed like everyone around me was on the same page. I thought I’d found a whole school of weirdos. I made friends, but just here and there. I didn’t have a crowd or a scene. I didn’t feel like I belonged. I couldn’t figure it out; everyone seemed like the people I’d be friends with: strange clothes, strange music. They did drugs and got drunk and made weird things. Why couldn’t I make friends?

It was years later, after I’d dropped out, that someone explained what a hipster was to me. It clicked. Suddenly the music and the clothes and the coke all made sense. When the White Stripes album came out, it swept through the campus apartments as people burned copies. If you walked down the halls, you heard it coming from every fourth room of the entire building that night.

This sounds hopelessly naive to say, now, but I had no idea what a hipster was. I had no idea that anyone weird was trying to be cool. As in, cooler than other people. But in art school, that was all that mattered, at least socially.

I want to say I was rescued by the anarchists, but I wasn’t. Halfway through my second year of school, I encountered anarchism (see the first Inertia is a Motherfucker) and I finally understood my own politics. So I tried to make friends, I tried to get involved.

I succeeded, eventually, but it wasn’t easy. In retrospect, I’m amazed that people go through the complex hurdles required to be accepted by our subculture. I went
to anarchist dance parties, and hardly made more friends than the dance parties at my school.

I went to NYC Indymedia meetings. I was excited, I’d never entered this kind of space. The moment had all of the trappings of journeys into the great unknown. The person at the front of the office was unenthused, had no interest in helping me figure anything out. Finally, one woman took an interest in explaining things to me, let me sit next to her. And then the first two meetings I went to were about kicking her out.

I went to anarchist soccer.

Here’s a thing to understand about me and sports. I don’t play them. I wanted to, when I was little. I wanted to take ballet and play football. I was too nervous to do the first, and was a miserable failure at the second. I wasn’t coordinated enough. Puberty of course made everything worse, because I was large enough to hurt myself and others. I rarely played, because the people who played were those who taunted and assaulted me (can I stop saying “beat me up” and start being honest, that I was routinely assaulted?), so I didn’t develop any skill. I’d spent high school gym class sitting in the corner with two of my goth friends painting our nails.

But finally, I thought, here was anarchist soccer. I could play this. This was about egalitarianism, about it being okay to suck. And the first week, I had a really, really good time. But twice I kicked for the ball and hit someone in the ankle. She called me a patriarch, said that I was just out to hurt people. I left crying. Suddenly I was fucking eight years old again.

But while trying to get in with the anarchists was an uphill battle, it got significantly easier when I left NYC. Probably because people just assumed I already knew what I was doing, because I was a traveler (in those days, us travelers were political, goddammit-kidstoday-stayoffmyporch-whatswiththemusicandthehair), and probably just because it wasn’t NYC.
Eventually, I did get in. And what I found, by and large, wasn’t people trying to be cool, but instead trying to destroy hierarchy and remake the world along the lines of solidarity and mutual aid. Fuck yes.

After years of alienation, I felt like I belonged. Sure, there are moments that are hard, when I feel alienated, but by and large the anarchist scene/community/movement/heterogeneity has done me well.

**BULLIES, PART TWO**

Sometimes what comes out of the anarchist movement is just bullying. Bullying people perhaps because they aren’t pure enough: perhaps they espouse a worldview slightly different than others. So anarchists pull “pranks.” They mail heavy rocks with implicit threats to a hipster primitivist who isn’t anarcho enough, or pie a woman for critiquing veganism—the pie laced with hot sauce (let us not forget that pieing began as a simulated assassination, something intended to show that, if the assaulter had wanted, you would be dead. And fuck, the rock? A simulated bomb. “We know where you live. You’re only safe if we want you to be.”) In both these specific cases, I share almost no affinity with those who were pranked. But when I see the anarchist movement guffawing and the back-slapping, and watch the victims react out of fear? It’s not a prank if the other person isn’t playing.

I am not on the side of my childhood bullies. I will not be.

In both these instances, those attacked chose to call the police. This is something I consider to be incredibly bad form, and really reinforces my belief that these people weren’t my comrades in the first place. But can we not see the analogy here? Someone runs and tells the teacher that you punched them in the schoolyard. Obviously, the teacher [the cops] doesn’t give a shit. All that happened is now everyone can call
you a tattle-tale. I’m sorry, I meant snitch.

If you attack someone, and they go to the police, they are not a snitch. If the anarchists attack someone, and the assaulted party says “I don’t give a fuck about the anarchists,” after being attacked, the anarchists can’t then use that to justify the actions they had already taken. To expect someone to someone identify with you after being assaulted by you (or, “harmlessly pranked” in a way that is intended to insult and silence)? You would have to be an idiot.

In Amsterdam, the culture is anything but snuggly and hand-holding. “You Americans,” a friend of mine (Tal, now dead, a wonderful soul) told me once, “you’re all too weak.”

Years earlier, a housepunck scumfucker (do such things exist? if so, this kid is one of them) told me I wouldn’t last a minute in anarchy, or prison, because I’m too soft. That I was a useless hippy.

To the outside world? Yeah, we do need to toughen up. It’s a survival skill. But I’ve been homeless now for most of eight years. I know how to stand up for myself—and others. And I know that sometimes you need to pull a knife when someone calls you a faggot, because it’s the safest thing to do, because you can’t show weakness to your foes.

But for fucks sake! Other anarchists aren’t my foes. I don’t want to be thick-skinned. I don’t want to be constantly attacked. It was bad enough when I thought someone would jump out at me at any time. When I didn’t trust hands on my body. I don’t want to be constantly on guard.

A friend of mine tried to defend all of this horizontal hostility to me. They said that by attacking we make clear our differences, that it proves that we are not a homogenous culture of resistance but instead a vibrant and diverse crowd. Another
friend explained that it’s wonderful to be around such passionate people willing to fight over what they believe. That life without constantly needing to defend and hone one’s position would be boring and would make us weak.

And maybe that’s fine for them. But sometimes other people think that what they’re doing is funny when it actually is triggering, or at least upsetting. “It’s just a prank, it’s just a game,” you can say. But I’m not playing. I don’t consent. It’s not how I want the world to be, it’s not how I want to live. It’s not how I want people to treat me.

I was nervous about publishing this zine. Why? Because when it gets down to it, what I’m saying is “stop picking on people, it’s not funny.”

When I was in middle school, there was one kid who had it worse off than I. We rode the same bus. One time, he tried to sit in the back, which was clearly reserved for the cool kids. They picked on him. “It’s not funny” he said, pleading.

And that became a chant almost the entire bus picked up, for the rest of that year. “It’s not funny, it’s not funny, it’s not funny.” I didn’t chant it, but I didn’t do anything about it either. I was probably just glad that it wasn’t me.
thank the heavens I have nothing.
help me not to hate the ones I must destroy.
Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness

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