

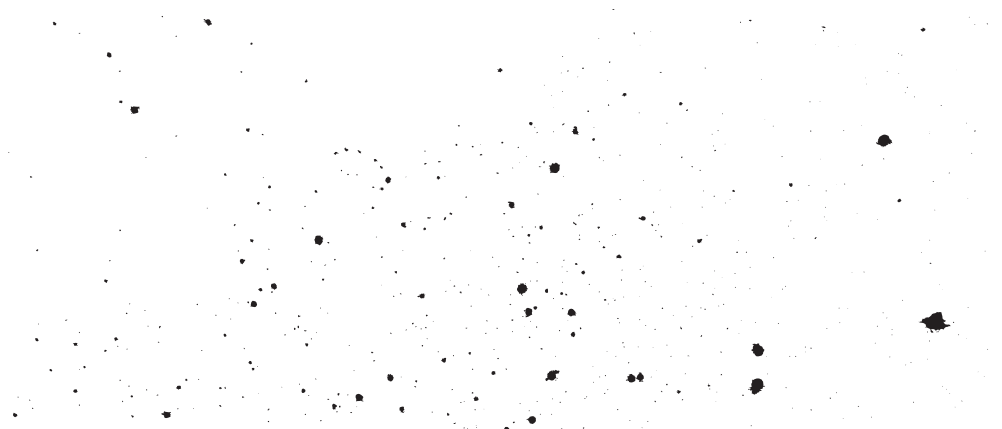
# SPREADING DISORDER

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*two essays by A. G. Schwarz*

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OPAQUE EDITIONS



the small tastes of the commune we are building — a random conversation, a flyer someone is actually interested to read, the passing around of a stolen meal, collaboration in a community garden, the giving of gifts.

The anarchists must simultaneously be those who are blamed for acts of startling indecency, of inappropriate extremism in all the right causes (“they burned four police cars at our peaceful march!”) and those who are around town cooking and sharing free communal meals, holding street parties, projecting pirated movies on the sides of buildings, running libraries and bicycle repair shops, and appearing at protests (“oh look, it’s those lovely anarchists again!”).

We will be safest from the right hand of repression and the left hand of recuperation when everyone is thoroughly confused as to whether we are frightening or loveable.

“Spirit of December Spread ‘Round The World” originally published in *We Are An Image From The Future: The Greek Revolt of December 2008* (AK Press, 2010)

“Signals of Disorder: Sowing Anarchy in the Metropolis” originally published at *anarchistnews.org* (2010)

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chopped up into disconnected eccentricities of lifestyle. People in the neighborhood must know that the graffiti and broken windows are the doing of “the anarchists” or some other group that has a public existence, because signals of disorder that can be isolated as phenomena of urban white noise can be legitimately and popularly policed with techniques reserved for inanimate objects and aesthetic aberrations; they would rub us off the streets with the same chemical rigor as they clean graffiti off the walls.

Signals of disorder are contagious. They attract people who also want to be able to touch and alter their world rather than just passing through it. They are easy to replicate and at times, generally beyond our control or prediction, they spread far beyond our circles. They allow us, and anyone else, to reassert ourselves in public space, to reverse commercialization, to make neighborhoods that belong to us, to create the ground on which society will be reborn.

In a neighborhood where the walls are covered with anarchist posters, beautiful radical graffiti stands alongside all the usual tags, advertisements never stay up for long, the windows of luxury cars, banks, and gentrifying apartments or restaurants are never safe, and people hang out drinking and talking on the street corners and in the parks, our ideas will be seriously discussed outside our own narrow circles, and the state would need a major counterinsurgency operation to have just the hope of uprooting us.

Whenever we can break their little laws with impunity, we show that the State is weak. When advertising is defaced and public space is liberated, we show that capitalism is not absolute.

But at the same time, we cannot make the mistake of exaggerating the importance of the attack, of signals of disorder. At times it may be necessary to be a gang, but if we are ever only a gang, if at any point only our antisocial side is visible, we are vulnerable to total repression. There is a lot of rage circulating, without an adequate outlet, which we resonate with through our attacks. But there is equally a lot of love that is even more lacking in possibilities for true expression. People desire the community and solidarity that capitalism deprives them of, and our way out of this labyrinth of isolation is to go looking for the others and meet them where they're at. To encounter people, in our search for accomplices.

Except in the magical space of the riot, we cannot safely find spontaneous accomplices for the attack. But in the stultifying oppression of everyday, we can find accomplices to share in the little gestures of defiance,

## **THE SPIRIT OF DECEMBER SPREAD ‘ROUND THE WORLD**

I HAVE HEARD MANY ANARCHISTS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES ASK, “Why weren’t the Greek insurrections generalised to other countries, and what could we have done to make them spread?” Most often, the question was not asked in a constructive way but posed to suggest that the local movement was worthless because the insurrection was not generalising. I have to say that this question strikes me as ignorant. A vital fact that anarchists must come to terms with and work their way around is that insurrections usually do not jump national borders. In the early years of the 20th century there was arguably more common consciousness among the lower classes of Europe that mitigated national divisions. Nonetheless, the much more extreme situation in Russia, which passed from insurrection to revolution, did little more than encourage pre-existing movements in other countries. It did not spread. The same is true in 1968. A rebellion here certainly encouraged a rebellion there but things always kicked off in response to local situations. The insurrection in Greece came from years of experience preparing society and anti-authoritarians themselves to fight back with everything they had, and that experience obviously cannot follow the photos of the riots as they race across the Internet.

Formed in part by the summit-hopping of the anti-globalisation movement, many anarchists forget that we live in a reality very different from most people. We are friends with anarchists in other countries or we at least know that when something happens the anarchists in other countries will stand in solidarity with us. In other words, we have emotional ties. I won't minimise the importance of theory but I will put it in its place: most people do not risk their lives in struggle on the basis of theory but on the basis of empathy love, courage, and rage. When an anarchist in Spain hears they have shot an anarchist in Greece and the comrades there are rioting, the insurrection has already come to her heart: she feels rage and a desire to join in the fight; an empathy and even a love for the living comrades who are pushing that fight forward in spite of the repression; and on the basis of these feelings and with the support of comrades in her own town she will find the courage to act. But everyone else in Spain, though they might hear about the assassination on the television, though they may think badly of the Greek police and even sympathise with the rioters, they will not understand how it applies to them. Because solidarity is based on affective bonds.

The nation is not only a trap created by the compulsory education of the State and the cultural institutions of capitalists to divide and conquer the lower classes, although it is that, too. In the absence of State and Capital the nation is a fictive community united by a common language, culture, and history; it is a context in which common experiences can take place and it is therefore also an affective universe. In other words as the world is not homogenous and there are many languages and cultures, there will also be nations (as distinct from nation-states, which is something else entirely). This is why insurrections are sparked off by local events, rather than spreading between nations: because it is much easier for people to identify emotionally with someone whom they see as belonging to their larger community. The high school students who started burning dumpsters in Patras did not personally know Alexis, but they saw him as "one of us." High school students in Italy are unlikely to make that connection because they live in a different cultural context and the death of a Greek high school student, even if it reaches them emotionally on some level, does not have the significance of constituting an attack on them. The common experience of the oppressiveness of high school or the oppressiveness of the police does not overcome these cultural differences.

Western anarchists, on the other hand, make up a common cultural group and in some senses we even speak the same language. We are something like a nation in diaspora, so repression against one of our communities in another country will make sense to us and will affect

adapted for the social democracies of Europe.

Among the technocrats, Broken Windows is controversial, because it easily blurs causation with correlation: just because broken windows and other signals of disorder often accompany higher crime rates does not mean they are the cause of crime. Occasionally, you'll hear a whimper that without proper sensitivity training, Broken Windows policing encourages harassment of minorities.

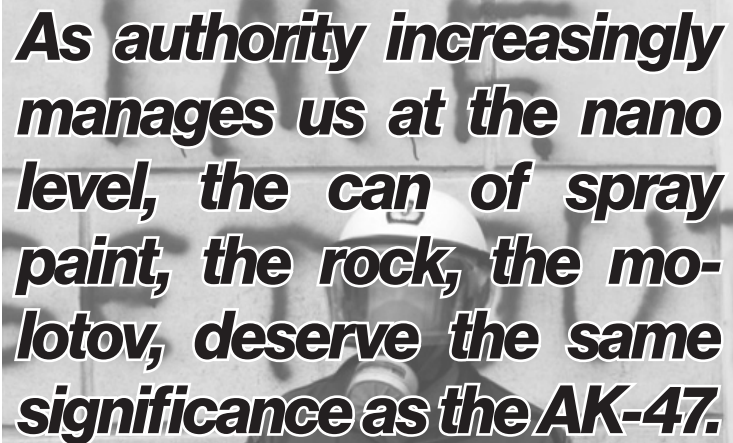
All this misses the point: the State is not interested in reducing crime, the State is interested in increasing social control, and Broken Windows policing is a critical expansion of its arsenal. Giuliani's reign of "zero tolerance" didn't just go after fare-dodgers, graffiti writers, and the squeegee men. Under his stewardship, the NYPD became the first ever police department in the history of the world to log more arrests than reported crimes. Entire neighborhoods became depopulated of certain demographics as young black men were shipped to the prisons upstate. A policing that targets the petty details of every day life, that criminalizes our minor strategies to cope with the impossibilities of life under capitalism, is part and parcel of an expansion of police power as a whole.

Why does the city government in San Francisco want to criminalize sitting or lying in the streets? Why did the city government in Barcelona ban playing music in the streets without a license? Why did the government of the UK prohibit a detailed list of "anti-social behaviors"?

Because the goal of the State is total social control. Because the trajectory of capitalism is towards the total commercialization of public space. Every time we identify another invasion of State and capitalism into the minutiae of daily life, every time we confront that invasion, we are potentially fighting for revolution. As Authority increasingly manages us at the nano level, the can of spraypaint, the rock, the molotov, deserve the same significance as the AK-47.

Spreading signals of disorder accomplishes a number of things. It increases our tactical strength, as we hone a practice of vandalism, property destruction, public occupation, and rowdiness.

It interrupts the narrative of social peace, and creates the indisputable fact of people opposed to the present system and fighting against it. It means the reason for this fight, the anarchist critiques, have to be taken more seriously because they already exist in the streets. In this way, the attacks create the struggle as a fact in a way that would otherwise only be possible in times of greater social upheaval and movement. To have this effect, the signals of disorder need to explicitly link themselves to a recognizable social practice, one that would otherwise be ignored or



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Thus, the sensible behavior is not to reason with the masses, to share the facts that will disprove the foundations of capitalism, facts they already have at their fingertips, and it is not to act appropriately, to put on a smiley face, and expect our popularity to increase incrementally. The sensible thing to do is to attack Authority whenever we can.

Attacking is not distinct from communicating the reasons for our attacks, or building the means to survive, because we survive in order to attack, and we attack in order to live, and we communicate because communicating attacks the isolation, and isolation makes living impossible.

Why do signals of disorder constitute attacks on capitalism and the State? After all, the police are basically the punching bag, the shock absorbers, for the State, and one of the limitations of the insurrection in Greece was that anarchists focused too much on police, rather than on the State in all its manifestations. And what about smashing insured bank windows? Creating a signal of disorder could even involve mere spraypainting, or hanging out on street corners. Isn't this just the ritualization of aimless and impotent rebellion, as the naysayers are so quick to say?

Turns out, the devil is in the details.

In a way, the idea of signals of disorder is an inversion of the Broken Windows Theory of policing. Wilson and Kelling's article, "Broken Windows," first advanced the policing theory of the same name in 1982, but it wasn't until Kelling was hired by the NYC Transit Authority later in the decade that this flagship of minute social control was launched. When Rudolph Giuliani was elected mayor of New York in 1993, Broken Windows policing took on city-wide dimensions, and it soon spread to the rest of the country. By the early '00s, Broken Windows was being

us emotionally. But we would be wrong to assume that other people are like us in this regard.

And we may even be overestimating the limits of our own solidarity. When immigrants in Omonia rioted in June 2009 after a cop ripped up a Koran in a racist police raid, shockingly few anarchists took part. The tearing of a Koran was interpreted by many immigrants as an attack on their identity their difference, and thus their very survival. Greek anarchists seemed to interpret it as a religious squabble, much the same way that Italian high school students might fail to understand what the killing of a Greek kid has to do with them.

After nation or culture, a second factor seems to be proximity but I think it is actually a matter of signals. The immigrant neighbourhood in Athens below Omonia is full of people who are not culturally integrated into Greek society people from many different nations, whose experience of life does not resonate within the national context. In other words they are excluded. Yet they became participants in the December rioting on a massive scale, especially on Monday when the riots kicked off right in their neighbourhood. Looking at it from a map, it seems that the insurrection spread geographically. Yet there are many culturally distinct groups that might not join an insurrection even if it is occurring right next to them. The Broken Windows theory of policing used by the authorities may propose a better explanation. Acts of disorder (such as broken windows) provide a signal to the people that authority is weak and further acts of disorder will be tolerated. The State itself implicitly recognises that authority is a provocation and by showing weakness it invites counter-attack; thus everyone carries within them the seed of insurrection.

The massive rioting on Monday provided a clear signal that everyone with a vendetta against State and Capital (and this includes a majority of the population, potentially anybody from whatever class who has not sold themselves out so completely) is free to take revenge. This idea of the importance of signals of disorder explains why people in different cultural groups with no physical proximity to the rioting, for example the Roma community outside Athens who attacked a police station with rifles, also took part in the insurrection if they had any personal cause to hate the authorities, because the signals of local disorder are also spread via the media. And this is one reason why people living under other governments, no matter how much they personally were affected by the killing of an anarchist youth, did not riot with abandon. The signals of disorder were absent, because other governments were not directly weakened by the situation in Greece.

# **SIGNALS OF DISORDER: SOWING ANARCHY IN THE METROPOLIS**

A substance that lies behind both of these factors is the emotional, the subjective. The masculinised, depersonalised, and bureaucratic politics of the Left have long succeeded in removing emotional concerns from our concept of revolution, but you cannot have a liberating revolution while ignoring the emotional half of human existence. All you can have are square-jawed calls for sacrifice issued by a manipulative leadership and a convenient confusion between freedom that exists on paper and freedom that exists in the heart. It is only through the recognition of this subjective, personal, and emotional revolution that people can fight for themselves and recognise the constant attempts to recuperate the struggle through appeals to a false common good. This is not to say that struggle must be individualistic, but that only individuals who are free to feel their needs and desires can participate in a liberated collective capable of overthrowing authority and creating free communities.

Many of the things that happen in Greece could technically be carried out by anarchists in other countries - we have the numbers, the materials, and the proficiency - except that we are afraid. A striking feature of the insurrection and the anarchist movement in Greece is the centrality of courage.

But courage is largely a social phenomenon. There are always some people who have a little more of it, who are able to make the first strike, even if no one is behind them, but these people will never be a majority nor should they be (how terrible the world would be with so many impetuous jackasses running about!) In general, humans being social animals, courage is fostered firstly by peer group support, and secondly by broader community sympathy. If you have enough comrades to act with you, or if you are an anonymous member of a like-minded crowd, you can perform superhuman acts you never would otherwise. And if you are in a group of fifty anarchists facing a hundred well-equipped riot police, you are much more likely to kick things off if you know that all the bystanders are cheering for you, then if you think they would disapprove of your actions or tell the police which street you ran down after it's all over. The mood on the streets provides another vital signal that directly affects the morale of the police and the morale of the comrades. Take the same fifty anarchists and the same hundred cops, and put them on different streets with different moods, even if no bystanders actively intervene in the situation, and you end up with entirely different outcomes.

But courage is also a matter of practice. The first time you do something is always the scariest. And if you only do an illegal action after meticulous planning - not that planning isn't necessary in many scenarios - you will not learn how to act spontaneously how to react to the immediate

IN AN ARTICLE IN THE RECENT BOOK, *We Are an Image from the Future: the Greek Revolt of December 2008*, I briefly made a point that a friend convinced me needs to be elaborated. The idea is that of "signals of disorder," and their importance in spreading rebellion.

As far as Greece is concerned, the argument is that by carrying out attacks — primarily smashings and molotov attacks against banks and police stations, which constitute the most obvious symbols of capitalist exploitation and State violence for Greek society — insurrectionary anarchists created signals of disorder that acted as subversive seeds. Even though most people did not agree with these attacks at the time, they lodged in their consciousness, and at a moment of social rupture, people adopted these forms as their own tools, to express their rage when all the traditionally valid forms of political activity were inadequate.

An interesting feature of these signals is that they will be met with fear and disapproval by the same people who may later participate in creating them. This is no surprise. In the news polls of democracy, the majority always cast their vote against the mob. In the day to day of normality, people have to betray themselves to survive. They have to follow those they disbelieve, and support what they cannot abide. From the safety of their couch they cheer for Bonny and Clyde, and on the roadside they say "Thank you, officer" to the policeman who writes them a speeding ticket. This well managed schizophrenia is the rational response to life under capitalism. The fact that our means of survival make living impossible necessitates a permanent cognitive dissonance.





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situation, which is a crucial skill for anarchists to have. The December revolts were not planned, they were not prepared by some assembly or vanguard party but they were prepared for. The insurrection would never have flowered at that moment if the Greek anarchists had not readied themselves to react, and they did this by developing proactive affinity groups united by trust, common politics, and practical experience together; and by carrying out dangerous actions with varying levels of preparation, from spontaneous (reacting in the heat of the moment) to minimal (deciding to do something in just a few hours or the next day and just going and doing it) to meticulous (with intensive planning). This capacity among hundreds or even thousands of anarchists was built up in the years before December, and it allowed them to react immediately upon Alexis's death and define the character of the revolt in all the days to come. If they had needed to hold a meeting first, a long debate, do reconnaissance, weigh other options, and have the first counter-attacks ready a week later, Alexis's murder never would have been avenged.

Additionally; because in the previous months and years Greek society was accustomed to seeing occasional attacks on police stations and banks carried out by anarchists, this form had entered the social consciousness and was ready and available for all the tens of thousands of high school students, immigrants, and others who needed some tool, some expression to their rage. If all they had seen in their worlds were peaceful protests in response to the aggressions and insults of State and capitalism, that is probably all they would have organised in response to the murder.

There would have been a few scuffles with police to vent the worst of the rage, and the rest would have to be buried inside them, weighing them down even more and stealing more of their dignity; preparing them for adulthood, for integration, for retirement.

Now it should be clear how the spirit of December can spread internationally. The insurrection of the comrades in Greece can animate us and rejuvenate our hope. It can invite us to study their situation and identify what made it possible, so we can go on building the foundations in our own corners of the world. We can also use it as an opportunity to increase the internationalism of those around us, by holding protests and memorials so our neighbours can consider the possibility that what the police do in Greece is important to us too. But it is counter-revolutionary to pull out our hair, as so many comrades have done, to lash out and insult our local movements for not being able to spread the insurrection, for misinterpreting the geographical limits of the insurrection as evidence of weakness or laziness in other parts. December is an opportunity to rejoice, to boost our morale. How terrible that some hotheads blogging endlessly on the Internet have used it as an opportunity to drain us of even more self-confidence. The opposite is needed.

The December insurrection arose from very specific local circumstances, and it was allowed to arise because people believed it could, within an anarchist movement that did not and does not consider itself special. The insurrection will arise where we are, and we can help it along in a number of ways.

- By understanding that insurrections are not controllable, and they do not follow ideological lines. They are an opportunity for all the oppressed and exploited to fight back in their own ways, but that in this light, many different people can meet one another, if they are willing.
- By understanding that insurrections usually do not topple governments, but if people do not base their hopes exclusively on the simple act of rioting, they will see that after people are physically exhausted and the fighting in the street stops, if the movement chooses to it can build off those experiences, lay deeper foundations, use the change in the social balance of power to open autonomous spaces and build the beginnings of an anarchist world, and move closer to stronger insurrections and to revolution.
- By organising attacks against authority and developing a capacity for spontaneous reaction, so that anarchists prepare themselves for insurrection and make it more likely that an event blooms into an insurrection, and so that society itself is prepared to accept the reality of struggle and

counter-attack.

- By starting now to find whatever communal and anti-authoritarian traditions exist within our society and expanding on them to counteract the effects of capitalism on culture and to create a popular culture that supports violent resistance, distrusts authority and cherishes communal values.
- By intervening now in ongoing social conflicts, working respectfully with other non-institutional actors in these conflicts even if they are not anti-capitalists, and forcefully opening spaces or employing methods that transform the logic of the struggle from the mediating loop of conservatism vs. reform into one of authority vs. people.
- By building infrastructure and vital capacities (skills, habits, traditions) that reflect and cultivate the world that we want, not as alternatives but as beachheads, so that when we are able to force the police off the streets we will have something creative to move forward with, and so that in the meantime we can give substance to our dreams in a way that sustains hope and sustains us in our struggle, which is hard and long and cannot be fought just for pie in the sky.

These are some of the ways that we can be ready to seize the event and help it expand to its natural shape, a swelling rage and creative collectivity that knows no boundaries and denies logics of control, an explosion that will start to burn away the old world and leave us open ground for the planting of the new one that we carry with us, if only we are courageous enough to seize the opportunity with both hands.