

Fighting Collective Amnesia

Recovering Our Memory and Staying Alert

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We are suffering from a collective amnesia around state repression and recent history. With the resurgence of anti-fascism in the US and growing appeal of anarchism, new people are being brought into our circles who don't necessarily understand our recent history. If we want to build a strong movement, we need to have a collective memory about where we're coming from.

We're at a moment where people are increasingly turning to anti-capitalism and realizing the pitfalls of working within the system. If you're new to this world, welcome! There's a lot you should probably know about how we got to where we are now. If you've been around Anarchyland for a while, use this text as a way to note the patterns of collective amnesia we often fall into and to help build a collective memory to sustain a long-term anarchist movement.

Collective amnesia is when we forget the stories, victories, mistakes, and debates of the recent past. It's when we allow security culture to deteriorate and put ourselves and each other at risk unnecessarily. It's when we think that the state doesn't take us seriously and when we don't take our work seriously. It's when we don't share a common understanding of where we came from as an anarchist movement. This is especially dangerous for people who are new to these movements and circles, but most of us seem to be suffering from this amnesia. This puts all of us at risk of state repression and the inaction that comes with constantly starting over with the same debates and mistakes.

In addition to the newly-radicalized people, there are always young radicals joining our movements. Activist generations tend to be very short, especially in an accelerated culture like the 21st century United States. Recent high school grads were in elementary school during the height of Occupy, and were in diapers during much of the summit-hopping era. Even though our activist generation (we are mid-late 20's) wasn't involved in the early summit-hopping era or the Green Scare, we had access to a lot of people who were, and we had access to the media they created. We knew what happened, we heard their stories, and it informed how we built our movements. Something changed though, and it seems like a lot of that knowledge hasn't been passed on. That's on us, and we want to remedy that.

Part of the problem with having collective amnesia is "you don't know what you don't know." Some people might not realize that there's a reason to know specifics about Seattle '99 or Miami '03 or may not be aware that those cities and years have any significance at all. The people who organized in those times and places put in work to make sure that their efforts were recorded and remembered. They created media and shared their stories of resistance with us, but we could be doing better at passing them on. This is encouragement for people to record their own histories (without snitching on yourself) and to pass on recent anarchist history. This is part of building a collective memory.

We're not only talking about collective amnesia as a movement-wide thing, but also in our own practices and organizations. We find ourselves forgetting the basics, particularly in the realm of security culture and repression. We let things slip in the name of not seeming paranoid because we don't want our behaviors to seem exaggerated as to not weird out or turn off newcomers, but we know better, so we need to do better.

How did this amnesia happen?

We've come up with a few theories to explain our situation locally, if not nationally.

First, we've (as authors and a general trend in Milwaukee anarchism) shifted away from insurrectionary anarchism. A few years ago we knew that our actions and rhetoric were going to catch the attention of the state and could result in serious consequences. Now that we've largely left that model behind for more "mass movement"-oriented organizing, it feels like what we're doing isn't as dangerous. Secondly, a significant number of people dedicated to the anarchist movement have moved away. The "Great Migration" of anarchists out of the midwest hit Milwaukee hard and our movement here looks very different than it did in 2010. Most of the changes have been good, but we've lost a lot of continuity. Many anarchists in Milwaukee today don't know what the movement looked like more than a half decade ago. A significant amount of collective knowledge has been lost.

Perhaps less locally, during the period when Anarchist News was our major news source, we unironically referred to "the anarchist scene." People saw it as a youth subculture rather than a political movement. They "grew out" of anarchism and took their knowledge with them when they moved on and joined "Society!" People also burned out and depoliticized. When you're doing intense work, especially when you or your friends are facing legal or other consequences, dropping out becomes appealing. Sustained resistance takes energy, and when we don't take care of comrades, we lose them.

Legal repression is another factor that takes people out of the movement. People who are incarcerated, on papers, or at risk of deportation face greater risks to continue involvement with anti-capitalist resistance. The time, energy, and/or funds just simply aren't always available.

Losing people, whether to other cities, to burnout, or to prison, means that we lose momentum. We aren't a big enough movement or community to *not* take a hit when someone leaves. Starting fresh is exhausting.

We can't keep starting over and reinventing the wheel every time people leave or enter the movement. Things like consensus, free speech, left unity, and nonviolence have been debated ad nauseam for years. While it's important to reassess things as situations change, at a certain point we need to move forward, and people with different ideas can do different work or work in different ways. We can't let ourselves get stuck in this "analysis paralysis" or we end up being all talk and no action. Of course we know that you can't pick a side when you don't know what the sides are, so we offer these thoughts and a brief history to give people somewhere to ground their debates, and to help people pick a side and move forward.

Newer people might not realize we've hashed out these conversations a million times before and that there's a culture and history behind the conclusions we've reached. It's important that people consider the different points in these ongoing debates, but ultimately moving forward depends on choosing sides and acting.

Occupy is an example of what can happen when we hash out the same debates for too long without moving forward. The broader Occupy movement stalled out, stuck in discussions about decision-making and nonviolence if they weren't forcibly removed from their camps.

Here in Milwaukee, the conundrum existed of majority voting to decide on a decision-making structure within the first few days of their existence, thus illustrating the larger debate was functionally meaningless because the question has been settled. Most people at the occupations were new to non-electoral politics and weren't familiar with nonhierarchical organizing. While some people learned about mutual aid, consensus, and direct action through the encampments, many more became frustrated or got bored and went home.

Another perpetual anarchist debate centers on the merits of working through popular channels and social movements versus trying to drop out of society and capitalism altogether. Anarchists have chosen their sides, in any which way, on this already. When people show up and want to rehash that debate, it detracts from actual organizing. We waste our time justifying positions that have already been justified with years of concrete wins or losses, because the people showing up don't realize we've had these debates and consciously made these decisions already. This goes from everything like glorifying train-hopping and dumpster-diving as revolutionary praxis to dismissing and disavowing movements because they lack formal organizational structure.

We recognize another facet of this collective amnesia that is perhaps less serious, but still worth noting. Cultural references that we might expect all US-based anarchists to know are not, in fact, common knowledge. We grew up listening to *Against Me!*, debating *Your Politics are Boring as Fuck* vs. *Your Politics are Bougie as Fuck*, voting for "Society!" in every anarchistnews poll, and writing communiques about uselessly displacing every trash can and paper box we encountered.

These in-jokes and references were collective knowledge in 2012, but they aren't anymore. There are young anarchists today who weren't alive when it came time to throw bricks through that Starbucks window and people who weren't aware of the existence of anything left of the Democratic Party when Chris Hedges called us the "Cancer of Occupy". We should consciously make certain cultural references part of our collective memory, but we also need to ensure that our memory isn't a nostalgia acting as a gatekeeper for new anti-capitalists.

Collective amnesia is exhausting and dangerous. We can fight collective amnesia by building a collective memory. We need a collective memory to adapt our struggles, lest we end up with the "immortal science" of creating endless front groups or more likely, a cliquy subculture full of informal social hierarchy. We all need to remember our recent history. We all need to remember what worked and what went wrong. We all need to remember the ones we've lost to the state. We all need to remember why we believe what we believe, and why we work the way we do. We need to collectively remember this, so that we have a collective way forward.

A lot of our experiences with building our collective anarchist memory came through individual oral histories. We met people who'd done stuff, and they told us about it. It was simple, but it wasn't necessarily intentional. Passing on our histories as knowledge is critical for sustaining long-term movements, so at the very least, we'll lay out a very brief contemporary history of anarchism in the United States.

As with any history, this will inevitably exclude some perspectives and developments. We chose these based on our own experiences and revolutionary political influences. Because we feel that each of these phases in anarchism deserves its own history and full explanation, we'll leave it to the readers to research more information on these topics they may be unfamiliar with. Our reasoning for starting our contemporary timeline when we do is as simple as the fact that they are movements which started when we were very young or that we heard the most about when coming into the anti-capitalist movement.

Memories of Resistance

1990's

-“Hacktivism” emerges as a method of social change. Though not explicitly anarchist, hacktivism and hacker ethics tend to be pro-democracy, anti-censorship, and organized in decentralized anti-authoritarian models.

-As the environmentalist movement continues, so does the growing influence of anarchism within it. Very notably, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) formed in the UK in 1992 based off of the model and strategy employed by the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) which was founded in 1976. The ELF employs tactics of property destruction and other “monkeywrenching” as methods of direct action to oppose practices that are destructive to the environment and wilderness. Earth First!, an organization started in the late 70's, begins to be more explicitly anarchist around 1990. In the year 2000, the publication “Green Anarchy” is started and develops environmentalism to specifically “anarcho-primitivist” and “anti-civilization” thought.

-The 90's, for anarchists, are also noted for the “anti”/”alter”/”counter”-globalization movement. Large scale mobilizations occurred from a variety of concerns in opposition to neoliberalism which was either carried out or manifested from free trade agreements and global institutions such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the WTO (World Trade Organization), the IMF (International Monetary Fund), and G8 (Group of Eight, later to reincarnate as G7 or G20). As Anti-Flag says, “Seattle was a riot”, when the WTO held their summit in Seattle of late 1999 and was met with massive protests.

This “Battle of Seattle” was among the first times in U.S. history a mass-scale black bloc tactic was applied and caught the attention of the larger American public. The larger tactic of “summit-hopping”, or protesting at the conventions of elites in order to shut them down (like the organizations mentioned above but also the RNC and DNC among others) is certainly not new nor a tactic specific to anarchists, but it is one which continues to this day (and is also debated among anarchists).

2000's

George W. Bush gets elected; in the immediately following years, the punk movement is furious enough in order to have Fat Mike release two volumes of Rock Against Bush compilations, and even though hardly any (if any) bands on there are specifically anarchist or communist, we all buy it anyway... Jokes aside, in addition to all that was mentioned prior, we found ourselves having to deal with two new bullshit wars as a “War on Terrorism” started by the Bush administration in the early 2000's.

-The anti-war movement forms. In response to the 9/11/2001 World Trade Center attacks, the Bush administration led the U.S. government into a war in Afghanistan, followed by another war in Iraq in March 2003 for reasons having less to do with false allegations of “Weapons of Mass Destruction” and more to do with oil money and crony-ism coupled with military contracts. Anarchists, communists, and other peace activists have consistently pushed an anti-imperialist/”troops out now” stance against these wars, and the anti-war movement as a whole continued through Bush's two terms.

-Summit protests continue as a trend. Miami 2003 will go down in history as a lesson in police crowd control. Mass mobilization occurs against the Republican National Convention (RNC) and

to lesser extent but still notable, the Democratic National Convention (DNC), and in 2008, eight people would see trial as the “RNC 8” for terrorism charges. Through these years, police tactics continue to develop into different forms of crowd control while the state exercises its expanding legal definitions of “terrorism”.

-Around 2004 we saw the beginnings of Anonymous which, inspired by the Guy Fawkes masks of the movie “V for Vendetta”, continued hacktivism originally against Scientology, but later expanding into more projects such as the group Lulzsec, the Operation AntiSec, and influence in the #Occupy movement.

-Student anti-austerity movement forms: Coming from the anti-war movement was another student movement in the U.S. The year 2006 saw the re-forming of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) on many campuses around the country as a predominantly anti-war organization (much like the original SDS formed in 1960). Though appealing to liberals and a “mass-base”, the new SDS was largely directed by communists and anarchists as an opposition to war, and then against tuition hikes, university privatization, and other austerity measures imposed under the excuse of the 2008 financial collapse.

In 2009, students in California responded to hikes in tuition and fees in the form of student strikes and hard lockdown occupations, and such tactics carried on elsewhere in the U.S. from 2009-2011. 2009 should also be noted as seeing the English release of the critical text, *The Coming Insurrection*, which played a significant role in informing the thought and practice of many anarchists involved in the student movement at this time.

2010's

Winter/Spring 2011 was of global note. Arab Spring uprisings around the Middle East and North Africa coincided locally with the Budget Repair Bill/Act 10 in Wisconsin. People in the Middle East threw off oppressive leaders, and Wisconsinites occupied our capitol building for weeks to protest a budget proposal that eliminated collective bargaining for public employee unions.

-September 17, 2011: Occupy Wall Street began. Starting in New York and spreading around the country and world, people occupied public spaces with a diverse range of complaints, chiefly money in politics, corporate greed, and rising income inequality. Encampments fizzled or were brutally cleared, but the movement brought in many new people and gave people experience with collective decision-making and direct action.

-Anti-Police Brutality/Anti-Racism: Anarchists have long been part of anti-police and anti-racist movements (we trust the readers will see the obvious link between these movements). The anarchist movement particularly responded to various events regarding police and vigilantes murdering unarmed black youth. In 2013 the Black Lives Matter movement was created in response to the racist killing of Trayvon Martin. Even though Black Lives Matter was not anarchist-lead by any means, several uprisings and insurrections around the country used that slogan to respond to racist vigilante and state violence, and anarchists and the anarchist movement as a whole saw it fit to fight on those lines. Such uprisings over police murder include Oakland 2009 (Oscar Grant), Ferguson 2014 (Mike Brown), Baltimore 2015 (Freddie Gray), and Milwaukee 2016 (Sylville Smith) among others.

-Antifascism in the US: While groups like Anti-Racist Action have a long history of directly confronting white supremacists, anti-fascism saw widespread public visibility beginning in 2016

when we started learning more about the alt-right. On January 20, 2017 Richard Spencer got punched in the face and memed, and unfortunately, the Trump election emboldened white supremacist hate crimes around the country. The left in the US increasingly accepted anti-fascist tactics such as physical confrontation, no-platforming fascists, and "we go where they go" as necessary. By August, this consciousness entered the mainstream with the murder of Heather Heyer at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA.

Memories of Repression

Along with this history of resistance, we need to remember the history of repression. Going back generations, things like the red scare and the Palmer raids are relatively well-recorded and well-known. While that sort of large-scale repression is still worth knowing about, we also need to remember more recent and localized repression and understand how it's developed in order to build a solid security culture and to brace for what may be coming.

Surveillance

A common tool of the state and capital to stop people from committing crimes before they happen is the ubiquitous use of surveillance technology. If people know they're constantly being watched, then the logic goes that people will be less likely to engage in criminal (anti-state/anti-capital) activity. Surveillance technology is of course, also used to bring criminal charges and other consequences against those engaging in revolutionary activity. This technology can include security cameras, phone tapping, monitoring public online activity, physical stalking, and more personally and intensely, the use of informants.

Electronic technology has changed a lot in the last decade, and we should continue to be cautious about discussing potentially illegal activity in the vicinity of these tools. Where we used to take our batteries out of our phones and take a walk in the woods or around the park for serious discussion, many of us with smartphones are no longer able to take the batteries out. When our phones and computers are around us, we should continue to exercise serious caution and security. We need to remember to take the old precautions, and to adapt them to newer technologies. It's also important to stay up-to-date with tech security, including encrypted messaging and VPNs, and to be aware of changing police technology, like stingrays.

Doxxing

Doxxing is another increasingly common issue for anti-capitalists. Political opponents find, compile, and publicize already-public information as well as information obtained through hacking or stalking, arrest records, and background report websites. This info can be used to harass you or your family through phone calls, emails, or physical presence. Your employer or school may be contacted and encouraged to fire or expel you. It puts people at risk of physical violence and emotional trauma. Reduce your risk of being doxxed by being mindful of your digital footprint and removing any possible public records from the internet.

Harassment

Aside from harassment coming from the ultra-right and political opponents, harassment can also come blatantly from the police, FBI, or other agents of the state. Such harassment can take the form of phone calls, online messages, or showing up to your home. This tactic of repression is used to gain information about you, your comrades, or the movement, and is also used as a form of intimidation to deter you from organizing. Unfortunately, we've seen these tactics of harassment work to intimidate or emotionally burden organizers out of the movement, so we need to remember to fortify ourselves, communicate this repression with our comrades, and stand up for each other lest more people feel harassed and threatened enough to drop out.

Protest arrests

Police arresting radicals at protests is nothing new nor uncommon. As a tool of repression, it's a basic method of crowd control and burdening a movement on a financial/legal level. As it is so basic and widespread, we should enter demonstrations with preparation and the understanding that arrests could take place. Understand, as much as possible, the risk of arrest at any given action or event.

In the event that there's any risk of arrest, be prepared. Write a legal support or a trusted comrade's phone number on your arm in permanent marker so that you can call if you're arrested. Make sure a trusted friend has a spare key, info about if/how to notify your employer or family, and that any legal documents (ie child custody and immigration) are accessible to your trusted contact. Preemptively build capacity for jail and court support.

If you are arrested, remember that you have the right to remain silent, and anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of law. Never bring anything to a demonstration you aren't prepared to be arrested with, and always carefully read through any documents you have to sign before doing so, including simple arrest inventory documents. If you are interrogated and held overnight, resist the pressure to answer any questions posed by detectives regardless of how polite and "good cop" they are acting.

Grand juries

A grand jury is a legal tool that has been used several times against anarchists as a form of repression and information gathering. People may be served subpoenas to testify at grand juries and give information to the state regardless of whether or not the person who is served committed a crime or has any information or not. Lawyers are not present while you're being questioned. Refusing to answer questions at a grand jury hearing can land you in jail for contempt.

The prosecutor may ask you questions about a crime committed, the direction of the movement, or simply if you can confirm or deny knowing individuals associated with the movement. Though you may receive jail time for staying silent, it's crucial to never give any information in order to protect our movements, our communities, and our friends. Part of keeping out of such harm's way is to never film or document criminal activity of another. If the state sees that you have information about a crime being committed, whether or not you were participating, you may be summoned to give up that information. The basic rule of "don't record" not only protects others from state repression, but it protects you as well.

Informants/Undercovers

Unfortunately, there's a history of people in the movement giving the state information for their own personal gain. As the movement gains traction and visibility, the state will increasingly employ undercover officers. These people can pass along sensitive information, disrupt organization through intentionally sowing division and distrust, and more heinously, entrapping people to plan felonies without the intention of these activities actually being carried out.

Brandon Darby is a recent, notable informant. He was active in the Common Ground collective in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In 2007, he began working as an FBI informant. His politics shifted increasingly to the right, and he infiltrated an affinity group planning actions at the 2008 Republican National Convention protests. Two people served 2-4 years in federal prison as a result of his infiltration. He has since taken his time from helping the police to working for Breitbart.

Entrapment occurs when undercover agents build relationships and trust with radicals, and push them to commit crimes for which they are pre-emptively arrested. In the case of Eric McDavid, an FBI informant named "Anna" pretended to be in a romantic relationship with him and provided information, money, and materials to build bombs. McDavid was sentenced to 20 years, of which he served 9, despite never committing any act of violence. He was only released after it was discovered that the prosecution withheld 2500 pages of evidence. More insidiously, undercover police officers in the UK have even fathered children with people they were targeting.

We can't be paranoid, but we need to be safe. Know your friends. Know their history. Be calculating in the risks you take, and who you take them with.

Raids

Raids are a key way for the state to forcibly gather evidence for prosecution. While often times we associate raids with drug busts, raids on homes and social spaces have happened enough times to radicals that we should always remember this tactic as a possibility. If police try to enter your house or social space, never let them in without a warrant, and even then, be mindful about what materials or information you are keeping in that location.

Incarceration

Incarceration is a possible result of any of the above repression tactics. It's an easy way for the state to physically and forcibly remove people from their communities. Incarceration is virtually always political; if everyone who committed any crime was actually punished to the fullest extent, we wouldn't see prisons so disproportionately filled with people of color. Incarceration is used as a political tool to target specific communities. We are at risk because we don't recognize the legitimacy of the legal system or the state. We should be mindful of this risk when we organize. Regardless of the precautions we take, there's always a risk of getting caught or being framed. We need to be ready to support people behind bars.

Physical violence

Sometimes, part of repression is getting the shit kicked out of you. Protest policing (and policing in general) can be extremely violent. Beatings, shootings, tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bul-

lets, bean bag rounds, flashbangs, LRADs, sexual assault, invasive searches, dehydration, hunger, withholding medical care, refusing bathroom access, handcuff injuries, rough rides, using horses/dogs as weapons, using vehicles as weapons, etc... When possible, we need to anticipate police violence and prepare accordingly.

Government seeks to hold a monopoly on violence. Sometimes this extends to the realm of politically-motivated assassination. While not explicitly anarchists, three activists from Ferguson have been found dead in suspicious circumstances since the insurrection. One is controversially being called suicide, but the other two were found with gunshot wounds to the head in burning cars. Apart from the sketchy murders of rebels against the racist police state in our contemporary climate, there's also a history of the state using blatant legal tactics to murder organizers via witch-hunts and death sentences dating much further back than the infamous Haymarket 1886 incident.

In addition to state violence, anti-fascists are also at an increased risk of violence from the far right. In 2015, five people were shot by white supremacists while occupying the Fourth Precinct Police Station in Minneapolis in protest of the police killing of Jamar Clark. On January 20, 2017 Joshua Dukes, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World and the General Defense Committee of the IWW was shot by a right-wing extremist while protesting a Milo Yiannopoulos speech in Seattle. In August 2017 Heather Heyer was murdered in Charlottesville while protesting the Unite the Right rally.

Our movement's worries and considerations of serious violence ebb and flow through the years and decades, and at the time of writing this, we feel we should take stronger consideration regarding the level of violence we face. The goal in mentioning such atrocities against revolutionaries isn't to make ourselves paranoid nor afraid, but to illustrate concrete examples of the ways the state and its supporters will attempt to defeat us.

Recuperation

We've gone through the ways the state uses blatant tactics of oppression to achieve their political ends, but we'd also like to mention recuperation as a method the state and capital use to diminish our movements. "Recuperation" in this sense refers to radical or potentially revolutionary movements becoming commodified, watered down, or absorbed into the systems and institutions we're fighting against. A strong and noteworthy example of this is what happened with the Wisconsin Uprising. The uprising went from wildcat strikes, occupations, and a call for a statewide general strike to Democrats and liberals turning the uprising to electoral politics, and eventually sucking all the revolutionary momentum out of it while pouring energy into a failed recall election.

In other cases, recuperation can look like activists and organizers trying to work within the system and ending up running for local office or becoming part of the non-profit industrial complex.

Continuation

As our movement accelerates, it's crucial that we remember where our politics come from. As we welcome new people, we need to rebuild this collective memory, so that we can effectively

face down current and future repression while building a movement that adapts to technological and social changes.

Ten years ago, we never thought we'd be seeing anti-fascists openly shot at in the streets, but we also never thought that this many people would be with us. Repression is serious as fuck, but we can push through, like we always have, as long as we remember where we're coming from and maintain the vision of where we're going. Because our broad anti-authoritarian movement is an amorphous collective, it's easier than not for amnesia to set in, but with keeping good culture and being conscious of this fact, trying to remember, re-learn, and teach our history is an obstacle that we can overcome.

The state will try to crush us, capital will try to subsume us, but when we feel personal attachment to our collective history and when we enable others to feel attached to the history, then no threat, door knock, or beating can separate us from ourselves and from the movement for freedom and equality.

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