

The Periodic Autonomous Zone

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I would guess that the old life way of transhumancy always proved both enjoyable and practical, at least in small scale economies. Twice a year you get up and move, travel, change your life and even your diet — a taste of nomadic freedom. But always the same two places. One place is typically more heimlich than the other — the village, the hearth; while the other place is typically wilder than the first, and this one might be called the place of Desire, of Summer. In the tales of Finn Mac Cumal and his Fenian band we nearly always meet them at this wilder end of the spectrum, the greenwood, the landscape of the hunt which reaches “back” in time to a more golden pre-agricultural age, and also “aslant” in time — to Tir nan Og, the Land of Summer, realm of the Tuatha de Danaan, who are both the Dead and the Fairies.

We forget that the Fenians spent only half the year free in the forests. They were like transhumants — they owed the other half of the year to work (military service) for the King. In this respect they resembled the Irish peasants, who until recently practiced pastoral transhumancy. Traces may survive even now. Irish folklore certainly preserves the image of this Summertime freedom; “Nature” always seems somehow interlaced and even confused with “Culture” in Irish tradition (as in the zoomorphic capitals of the Book of Kells), in ways which have often impressed the foreign observer as uniquely Irish. Elizabethan colonists compared native Irish with native American Indians: — both were perceived as “wild” — and both received the same treatment from the English. Transhumancy gives a people the chance to remain in touch with Nature in its “merrie” aspect (as Morton of Merrymount would have phrased it), even if that people’s economic life is virtually defined by agriculture, peonage, and drudgery. This explains the “radical” aspect of poaching, from Robin Hood to the Black Laws, and also the universal human romanticization of hunting. This romanticism begins already even in hunter/gatherer societies, where the prestige (and fun) of the hunt provides far less food for the tribe than the (comparative) drudgery of gathering — and the romanticism continues to this day. I think of my two late uncles, who cultivated the country romance of the hunt like characters out of Turgenev’s Sketchbook. I find it impossible to despise this romanticism, which appears to me so clearly as the last remnant of Paleolithic freedom in a world given over to the gridwork of the plow — and the highway.

In effect Romanticism itself can be said to revolve (if not resolve) around this tension in the Nature/Culture spectrum. The transhumant must be a sort of practical romantic, an “ambulatory schizophrenic” who functions as a personality, “split” between the magnetic poles, and ambulating back and forth according to the weather.

Winter / Summer
village / mountain or forest
work / play

agriculture / festival
pastoralism/hunt
fireside (axes of “bothy” (the hut of greenery)
narrative the year) adventure
reverie / desire
etc.

When agriculture reproduces itself, through a process of further rationalization and abstraction, and creates industrial culture, then the split widens beyond breaching. The transhumants lose the basic structure of their economy through enclosure of village commons and loss of “forest rights” or traditional grazing lands. Pure nomads, who provide (as Ibn Khaldun recognized) a necessary dialectic tension in traditional (agricultural) societies, become “redundant” in the Industrial regime — but they do not disappear. The Tinkers and Travelers still roam around Ireland as in the 18th and 19th centuries (and perhaps even in prehistory). But the transhumants are simply doomed. The liminal space they once occupied, in between settlement and nomadry, in between Culture and Nature, has simply been erased.

The psychic space of transhumancy however cannot be so easily disappeared. No sooner does it vanish from the map but it re-appears in Romanticism — in the new-found appreciation for landscape and even wilderness, in “Nature worship” and Naturphilosophie, in tours of the Alps, in the Parks movement, in picnics, in nudist camps, in the Summer cottage, even in the Summer vacation. Nowadays “reformers” want children to attend school year round, and they criticize the summer vacation of two or three months as an inefficient remnant of an agricultural economy. But from the (romantic) viewpoint of children, summer is sacred to freedom — a temporary (but periodic) autonomous zone. Children are diehard transhumants.

To a certain extent — and from a certain point of view — we now inhabit a “post-industrial” world; and it has been noted that precisely to the extent that this is so, “nomadism” has reappeared. This has its good aspects (as in Deluze and Guattari) and its bad aspects — as for instance in tourism. But what has become of transhumancy in this new context? What situations might we elucidate by seeking out its traces?

A very clear trace or remnant of psychic transhumancy expressed itself in the 1920’s — 1950’s in America as the summer camp movement. A great many of these camps were inspired by various progressive and radical tendencies — naturism, communism and anarchism, Reicheanism and other psychological schools, oriental mysticism, spiritualism — a plethora of “marginal” forces. The utopian rural commune like Brook Farm was diluted into a low-cost summer vacation for cranks. During the same period countless thousands of “vacation communities” were created, with cabins only a bit less primitive than those of the camps. My family owns one in a decaying lakeside resort-town in Upstate New York, where all the streets are named after Indians, forests, wild animals. These humble communities represent the “individualist” or entrepreneurial version of the summer camp’s communalism; but even now some vestiges of seasonal communitarian

spirit survive in them. As for the camps, eventually the majority began to cater to children, those natural citizens of summer. As the price of sheer hedonistic idleness went up and up, soon only the children of the well-to-do could afford camp — and then not even them. One by one the camps began to close, a slow decline over the 70's, 80's, and 90's. Desperate measures are still attempted (“Marxist Computer Slim-down Camp”; neo-pagan gatherings and holistic seminars, etc.) — but by now the Summer Camp almost seems like an anachronism.

Now the Summer Camp may be an extremely watered-down version of the utopia of transhumancy — much less the utopia of utopia! — but I would argue that it is worth defending, or rather, worth re-organizing. If the old economics failed to support it, perhaps a new economics can be envisioned and realized. In fact such a tendency has already appeared. As old Summer Camps go bankrupt and come on the market, a few are acquired by groups who try to preserve them as camps (with perhaps some year-round residents), either as private or semi-private summer “communes”. Some of these neo-camps will simply serve as vacation retreats for the groups who acquire them; but others will need extra funding, and will thus be drawn into experiments in subsistence gardening, craft work, conference-organizing, cultural events, or some other semi-public function. In this latter case we can speak of a neo-transhumancy, since the camp will serve not simply as a space of “leisure” but also as a space of “work” for the primary participants. Summer “work” appears to the transhumant as a kind of “play” by comparison with village labor. Pastoralism leaves time for some arcadian pleasures unknown to full-time agriculture or industry; and the hunt is pure sport. (Play is the point of the hunt; “game” is a bonus.) In somewhat the same way the neo-summer camp will have to “work” to get by, but its labor will be “self-managed” and “self-owned” to a greater extent than Winter’s wages, and it will be work of a “festal” nature — “recreation”, hopefully in the original sense of the word — or even “creation”. (Artists and craftsfolk make good citizens of Summer.)

If the economy determined the downfall of the old summer camp movement, the state played a role as well: — regulations, restrictions, precautions, insurance requirements, codes, etc., helped raise the real cost of running a camp above the level of feasibility. One might almost begin to suspect that “the State” somehow felt the camp movement as some vague sort of threat. For one thing, camps escape the daily gaze of control, and are removed from the flow of commodities and information. Then too, camps are suspiciously communal, focuses of possible resistance to the alienation and atomization of consumerism and “modern democracy.” Camps have an erotic subversiveness to them, as every ex-Summer-camper will testify, a wildness and laxness of super-ego, an air of Misrule, of Midsummer Night’s dreams, skinny-dipping, the crush, the languor of July. The camp cannot be reconciled to the ideal of the industrial production of leisure (“holiday package”) and the reproduction and simulation of summer as a theme park, the vacation process, the systematic “emptying-out” of all difference, all authentic desire.

Inasmuch as the State distrusts the camp, the neo-camp will (to that extent) need to cultivate certain forms of invisibility or social camouflage. One possible disguise for the neo-camp however would be to assume the precise guise of an old-fashioned half-bankrupt summer camp. After all, the Summer camp is not illegal, and if your group can meet the insurance requirements, why not fit yourselves into an already-existing archetype? Provided you’re not running a kids’ camp, or an openly-proclaimed Anarcho-Nudist retreat, you might be able to pass yourselves off as just another bunch of harmless make-believe Indians with a month’s vacation to waste.

My defense of the summer (neo-)camp is based on two simple premises: — one, a month or two of relative freedom is better than absolutely none; two, it’s affordable. I’m assuming that

your group is not made up of “nomads” or full-time freedom fighters, but of people who need to work for a living or are stuck in a city or ‘burb most of the year — potential transhumants. You want something more than a summer vacation — you want a summer community. Splashing in a humble Adirondack lake is more pleasurable to you than Disney World — provided you can do it with the people you like. Sharing the costs makes it possible, but also makes it an adventure in communicativeness and mutual enhancement. Making the place pay for itself or even turn a little off-the-books profit would transform your group into true neo-transhumants, with two economic focuses in your lives. Even if you seek legal status (as a tax-exempt educational center religious retreat, or Summer camp) your proprietorship affords you a certain degree of privacy which — if used discreetly — can exceed all legal bounds in terms of sex, nudity, drugs, or pagan excess. As long as you don’t frighten the horses or challenge local interests, you’re simply another bunch of “Summer people”, and as such expected to be a bit weird.

Of all the versions of the TAZ imagined so far, this “periodic” or seasonal zone is most open to criticism as a social palliative or an “Anarchist Club Med.” It’s saved from mere selfishness however by the necessary fact of its self-organization. Your group must create the zone — you can’t buy it pre-packaged from some tourist agency. The summer camp can’t be the social “Revolution”, true enough. I suppose it could be called a training-camp for the Uprising, but this sounds too earnest and pretentious. I would prefer simply to point to the desperation felt by many for just a taste of autonomy, in the context of a valid romanticism of Nature. Not everyone can be a neo-nomad — but why not at least a neo-transhuman? What if the uprising doesn’t come? Are we never to regain the land of summer even for a month? Never vanish from the grid even for a moment? The summer camp is not the war, not even a strategy — but it is a tactic. And unmediated pleasure, after all, is still its own excuse.

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