Are survivalists and anarchists distant cousins?

Tanya Z. Solomon

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Dancing at Armageddon by Richard G. Mitchell (University of Chicago Press, 2002)

In sociologist Richard G. Mitchell's *Dancing at Armageddon* we meet Zillah, dressed in homepatched camouflage, who has come to a weekend retreat with a sheaf of photocopied fliers detailing her vision of localized radical democracy. Sound like a familiar character? Well, you'll never find Zillah at an infoshop or an anti-WTO action. She's on a different FBI list: not an "anarchist" but a "survivalist," and hence a subject for Mitchell, whose book is subtitled *Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times*.

Mitchell spent a dozen years mixing with survivalists, alternately feeling revulsion, ridicule, and admiration — and ultimately deciding that however questionable the theories of survivalists may be, their practices can tell us something of the experience of daily life in shrink-wrapped corporate society.

Mainstream media reserves the "survivalist" label for homicidal gun nuts. Those who give themselves that name say they are preparing for the chaos which will follow environmental or economic disasters, insurrection, race war, nuclear holocaust, or invasions. Mitchell argues that their behavior is more proactive than reactive, "less a retreat from… social life than an exploration of its possibilities." Noting his subjects' alienation from the intensely rationalized and institutionalized structures of contemporary life, he describes their anticipation of catastrophe as an eagerness for breakdown, for the chinks in prepackaged culture to crack wide open, allowing the little guy to regain a hand in "culture-crafting."

Mitchell brings the reader along for visits and survivalist gatherings. His prose reads more like a novel than a sociological study, slowly bringing details into focus and immersing the reader in Mitchell's own emotional experiences. At first, he is repelled by the authoritarianism and militarism he discovers at a "defense operations seminar." But after spending more time with a range of survivalists, he reconsiders their actions as a form of storytelling — albeit one whose content is questionable and occasionally extremely disturbing, as in the case of a white supremacist gathering Mitchell visits (he describes this episode in horrific detail, but maintains that although neo-nazis have gotten much media attention, most survivalists are not racists). Survivalists imagine themselves in the near future coping with the inevitable collapse of "massive, monolithic, hyper-rationalized" institutions and systems of production. They don't seek to actively bring down contemporary society, but fantasize a world in which an individual's mastery of tool and craft will once again be essential. The author notes that their talk is not of "politics," but of equipment; they want to tinker, not to win votes or power. At survivalist gatherings, hand-crafted items are shown off by their creators, and claimed to be the most effective and adaptable. Rather than buying pre-packaged, bar-coded commodities, they take great pride in their technical and aesthetic initiative. They tinker similarly with information and narrative, shaping disconnected data and hearsay into stories of how the crisis shall come and who shall be prepared to survive.

Mitchell's argument that survivalists are "storytelling" and "culture-crafting" is well-supported, but he never answers an obvious question: why are the stories they tell so utterly stupid? How does a voracious reader and clipping-saver arrive at the conclusion that the Mississippi River lies vulnerable to Mongolian attack? What drives a former congressional candidate with a Ph.D. to insist Marx was on the payroll of the Jewish Illuminati? Why is virulent racism sometimes a theme? Mitchell does a good deal of head-shaking over these notions, but never approaches one of his subjects to ask, "How the hell did you come up with that?" Perhaps the need to mingle unnoticed kept his from satisfying his curiosity — and ours.

For all their talk of impending race war and Cuban invasion, survivalists overlook one very real threat: that which Mitchell labels "Planet Microsoft," "private, apolitical, atheistic, globalized rational production, markets and commerce." The survivalists Mitchell meets are touched by its tentacles in the form of migrating jobs and such, but in their simplistic support of capitalism, they attribute their problems to the UN and other "communist" forces. Meanwhile, global capital stretches it co-optive power to include survivalism, at first as media titillation, then as merchandise for offering — not the handicrafts and barter survivalists tend to favor — but pre-packaged, bar-coded products of cheap foreign labor.

Fifth Estate readers may well ask if survivalists are our distant cousins, perhaps in a sort of right-wing funhouse mirror. One might run down a checklist

of similarities with anarchists, starting with the obvious: survivalists never trust the government. As Mitchell notes, they aren't interested in reformist politics, and rarely seek to change existing institutions, preferring instead to focus on dreams of the possibilities of a post-collapse world, including local autonomy. And their homemade clothing, herbal remedies, and Rube Goldberg guns aren't far from anti-authoritarian DIY experiments in self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, both survivalists and anarchists are the targets of marketing ploys, as Planet Microsoft spreads it recuperative wings.

The differences are just as pronounced. Despite anarchists' predilection for camouflage, they don't tend to share the survivalists' inane militarism, authoritarianism, or gun fetishism. And the survivalists visited by Mitchell seem to lack any critique of power. They envision countless scenarios of how the present order will collapse, but speak no opinions on why it should.

Mitchell's study is a thoughtful look beneath the mostly questionable, occasionally horrific surface of survivalists' analyses of the world. He examines their behavior in light of the painful limits of contemporary life, and discovers attempts to find chinks in this prepackaged culture through which its demise, and a subsequent new human usefulness, might be imagined. In the end, the reader faces a difficult question: which is more dangerous, the hateful directions in which this imagination sometimes turns, or Planet Microsoft, mowing over nazis and anti-authoritarians alike with the smooth, amoral wheels of the market?

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