

AN IMMEDIATIST POTLATCH AND THE TONG

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all mediation & even representation—to be “*present*,” to give
“*presents*.”

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dropped only in the event of some final snowdown with the Babylon of Mediation...

Prepare for the Tong Wars!

Suggested Further Reading: An Invitation to Desertion and Symbiogenetic Desire by Bellamy Fitzpatrick, Possom Living by Dolly Freed, Evasion by Mack Evasion, Manual for a worldwide manuke revolt by Matsumoto Hajime, Tangpingist Manifesto, The Abolition of Work by Bob Black

I know of several societies organized along these lines already, but I'm certainly not going to blow their secrecy by discussing them in print. There are *some* people who do not need fifteen second on the Evening News to validate their existence. Of course, the marginal press & radio (probably the only media in which this sermonette will appear) are practically invisible anyway—certainly still quite opaque to the gaze of Control. Nevertheless, there's the principle of the thing: secrets should be respected. Not everyone needs to know everything! What the 20th century lacks most—& needs most—is *tact*. We wish to replace democratic epistemology with “dada epistemology” (Feyerabend). Either you're on the bus or you're not on the bus.

Some will call this an elitist attitude, but it is not—at least not in the C. Wright Mills sense of the word: that is, a small group which exercises power over non-insiders for its own aggrandizement. Immediatism does not concern itself with power-relations;—It desires neither to be ruled nor to rule. The contemporary Tong therefore finds no pleasure in the degeneration of institutions into conspiracies. It wants power for its own purposes of mutuality. It is a free association of individuals who have chosen each other as subjects to the group's generosity, its “expansiveness” (to use a *sufi* term). If this amounts to some kind of “elitism,” then so be it.

If Immediatism begins with groups of friends trying not just to overcome isolation but also to enhance each other's lives, soon it will want to take a more complex shape:—nuclei of mutually-self-chosen allies, working (playing) to occupy more & more time & space outside all mediated structure & control. Then it will want to become a horizontal network of such autonomous groups—then, a “tendency”—then, a “movement”—then, a kinetic web of “temporary autonomous zones.” At last it will strive to become the kernel of a new society, giving birth to itself within the corrupt shell of the old. For all these purposes the secret society promises to provide a useful framework of protective clandestinity—a cloak of invisibility that will have to be

These essays are from the book *Immediatism* by Hakim Bey available for free on theanarchistlibrary.org

An Immediatist Potlatch

i.

Any number can play but the number must be predetermined. Six to 25 seems about right.

ii.

The basic structure is a banquet or picnic. Each player must bring a dish or bottle, etc., of sufficient quantity that everyone gets at least a serving. Dishes can be prepared or finished on the spot, but nothing should be bought ready-made (except wine & beer, although these could ideally be home-made). The more elaborate the dishes the better. Attempt to be *memorable*. The menu need not be left to surprise (although this is an option)—some groups may want to coordinate the banquets so as to avoid duplications or clashes. Perhaps the banquet could have a theme & each player could be responsible for a given course (appetizer, soup, fish, vegetables, meat, salad, dessert, ices, cheeses, etc.). Suggested themes: Fourier's Gastrosophy—Surrealism—Native American—Black & Red (all food black or red in honor of anarchy)—etc.

iii.

The banquet should be carried out with a certain degree of formality: toasts, for example. Maybe “dress for dinner” in some way? (Imagine for example that the banquet theme were “Surrealism”; the concept “dress for dinner” takes on a certain meaning). Live music at the banquet would be fine, providing some of the players were content to perform for the others as their “gift,” & eat later. (Recorded music is not appropriate.)

iv.

The main purpose of the potlatch is of course gift-giving. Every player should arrive with one or more gifts & leave with one or more *different* gifts. This could be accomplished in a number of ways: (a) Each player brings one gift & passes it to the person seated next to them at table (or some similar arrangement); (b) Everyone brings a gift for *every* other guest. The choice may depend on the number of players, with (a) better for larger groups & (b) for smaller gatherings. If the choice is (b), you may want to decide beforehand whether the gifts should be the same or different. For example, if I am playing with five other people, do I bring (say) five hand-painted neckties, or five totally different gifts? And will the gifts be given specifically to certain individuals (in which case they might be crafted to suit the recipient's personality), or will they be distributed by lot?

v.

The gifts must be made by the players, not ready-made. This is vital. Premanufactured elements can go into the making of the gifts, but each gift must be an individual work of art in its own right. If for instance I bring five handpainted neckties, I must paint each one myself, either with the same or with different designs, although I may be allowed to buy ready-made ties to work on.

vi.

Gifts need not be physical objects. One player's gift might be live music during dinner, another's might be a performance. However, it should be recalled that in the Amerindian potlatches the gifts were supposed to be superb & even ruinous for the givers. In my opinion physical objects are best, & they should be *as good as possible*—not necessarily costly to make, but really impressive. Traditional potlatches involved prestige-winning. Players should feel a competitive spirit of giving, a determination to make gifts of real splendor or value. Groups may wish to set rules beforehand about this

secrecy means (a) avoiding publicity & (b) vetting possible members, the "secret society" can scarcely be accused of violating anarchist principles. In fact, such societies have a long & honorable history in the antiauthoritarian movement, from Proudhon's dream of re-animating the Holy Vehm as a kind of "People's Justice," to Bakunin's various schemes, to Durutti's "Wanderers." We ought not to allow marxist historians to convince us that such expedients are "primitive" & have therefore been left behind by "History." The absoluteness of "History" is at best a dubious proposition. We are not interested in a return to the primitive, but in a return OF the primitive, inasmuch as the primitive is the "repressed."

In the old days secret societies would appear in times & spaces forbidden by the State, i.e. where & when people are *kept apart* by law. In our times people are usually not kept apart by law but by mediation & alienation (see Part 1, "Immediatism"). Secrecy therefore becomes an avoidance of mediation, while conviviality changes from a secondary to a primary purpose of the "secret society." Simply to meet together face-to-face is already an action against the forces which oppress us by isolation, by loneliness, by the trance of media.

In a society which enforces a schizoid split between Work & Leisure, we have all experienced the trivialization of our "free time," time which is organized neither as work nor as leisure. ("Vacation" once meant "empty" time—now it signifies time which is organized & filled by the industry of leisure.) The "secret" purpose of conviviality in the secret society then becomes the self-structuring & auto-valorization of free time. Most parties are devoted only to loud music & too much booze, not because we enjoy them but because the Empire of Work has imbued us with the feeling that empty time is wasted time. The idea of throwing a party to, say, make a quilt or sing madrigals together, seems hopelessly outdated. But the modern Tong will find it both necessary & enjoyable to seize back free time from the commodity world & devote it to shared creation, to *play*.

insurrectionary action, uncontrolled “leisure” & unmonitored conviviality, etc.

In response to “P.M.”’s critique I have not abandoned but rather modified my concept of what a modern Tong might be. The intensely hierarchical structure of the traditional tong would obviously not work, although some of the forms could be saved & used in the same way titles & honors are used in our “free religions” (or “weird” religions, “joke” religions, anarcho-neo-pagan cults, etc.). Non-hierarchic organization appeals to us, but so too does ritual, incense, the delightful bombast of occult orders—“Tong Aesthetics” you might call it—so why shouldn’t we have our cake & eat it too?—(especially if it’s Moroccan *majoun* or *baba au absinthe*—something a bit *forbidden!*). Among other things, the Tong should be a work of art.

The strict traditional rule of secrecy also needs modification. Nowadays anything which evades the idiot gaze of publicity is already *virtually* secret. Most modern people seem unable to believe in the reality of something they never see on television—therefore to escape being televisualized is already to be quasi-invisible. Moreover, that which is seen through the mediation of the media becomes somehow unreal, & loses its power (I won’t bother to defend this thesis but simply refer the reader to a train of thought which leads from Nietzsche to Benjamin to Bataille to Barthes to Foucault to Baudrillard). By contrast, perhaps that which is *unseen* retains its reality, its rootedness in everyday life & therefore in the possibility of the marvelous.

So the modern Tong cannot be elitist—but there’s no reason it can’t be *choosy*. Many non-authoritarian organizations have foundered on the dubious principle of open membership, which frequently leads to a preponderance of assholes, yahoos, spoilers, whining neurotics, & police agents. If a Tong is organized around a special interest (especially an illegal or risky or marginal interest) it certainly has the right to compose itself according to the “affinity group” principle. If

—some may wish to insist on physical objects, in which case music or performance would simply become extra acts of generosity, but *hors de potlatch*, so to speak.

vii.

Our potlatch is non-traditional, however, in that theoretically all players *win*—everyone gives & receives equally. There’s no denying however that a dull or stingy player will lose prestige, while an imaginative and/or generous player will gain “face.” In a really successful potlatch each player will be equally generous, so that all players will be equally pleased. The uncertainty of outcome adds a zest of randomness to the event.

viii.

The host, who supplies the place, will of course be put to extra trouble & expense, so that an ideal potlatch would be part of a series in which each player takes a turn as host. In this case another competition for prestige would transpire in the course of the series:—who will provide the most memorable hospitality? Some groups may want to set rules limiting the host’s duties, while others may wish to leave hosts free to knock themselves out; however, in the latter case, there should really be a complete series of events, so that no one need feel cheated, or superior, in relation to the other players. But in some areas & for some groups the entire series may simply not be feasible. In New York for example not everyone has enough room to host even a small party. In this case the hosts will inevitably win some extra prestige. And why not?

ix.

Gifts should not be “useful.” They should appeal to the senses. Some groups may prefer works of art, others might like home-made preserves & relishes, or gold frankincense & myrrh, or even sexual acts. Some ground rules should be agreed on. No mediation should be involved in the gift—no videotapes, tape recordings, printed

material, etc. All gifts should be present at the potlatch “ceremony”—i.e. no tickets to other events, no promises, no postponements. Remember that the purpose of the game, as well as its basic rule, is to avoid all mediation & even representation—to be “*present*,” to give “*presents*.”

The Tong

The mandarins draw their power from the law;
the people from the secret societies.

(Chinese saying)

Last winter I read a book on the Chinese Tongs (*Primitive Revolutionaries of China: A Study of Secret Societies in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Fei-Ling Davis; Honolulu, 1971-77):—maybe the first ever written by someone who *wasn't* a British Secret Service agent!—(in fact, she was a Chinese socialist who died young—this was her only book)—& for the first time I realized why I've always been attracted to the Tong: not just for the romanticism, the elegant decadent chinoiserie decor, as it were—but also for the form, the structure, the very essence of the thing.

Some time later in an excellent interview with William Burroughs in *Homocore* magazine I discovered that he too has become fascinated with Tongs & suggests the form as a perfect mode of organization for queers, particularly in this present era of shiteel moralism & hysteria. I'd agree, & extend the recommendation to *all* marginal groups, especially ones whose jouissance involves illegalism (potheads, sex heretics, insurrectionists) or extreme eccentricity (nudists, pagans, post-avant-garde artists, etc., etc.).

A Tong can perhaps be defined as a mutual benefit society for people with a common interest which is illegal or dangerously marginal—

hence, the necessary *secrecy*. Many Chinese Tongs revolved around smuggling & tax-evasion, or clandestine self-control of certain trades (in opposition to State control), or insurrectionary political or religious aims (overthrow of the Manchus for example—several tongs collaborated with the Anarchists in the 1911 Revolution).

A common purpose of the tongs was to collect & invest membership dues & initiation fees in insurance funds for the indigent, unemployed, widows & orphans of deceased members, funeral expenses, etc. In an era like ours when the poor are caught between the cancerous Scylla of the insurance industry & the fast-evaporating Charybdis of welfare & public health services, this purpose of the Secret Society might well regain its appeal. (Masonic lodges were organized on this basis, as were the early & illegal trade unions & “chivalric orders” for laborers & artisans.) Another universal purpose for such societies was of course conviviality, especially banqueting—but even this apparently innocuous pastime can acquire insurrectionary implications. In the various French revolutions, for example, dining clubs frequently took on the role of radical organizations when all other forms of public meeting were banned.

Recently I talked about tongs with “P.M.,” author of *bolo'bolo* (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series). I argued that secret societies are once again a valid possibility for groups seeking autonomy & individual realization. He disagreed, but not (as I expected) because of the “elitist” connotations of secrecy. He felt that such organizational forms work best for already-close-knit groups with strong economic, ethnic/regional, or religious ties—conditions which do not exist (or exist only embryonically) in today's marginal scene. He proposed instead the establishment of multi-purpose neighborhood centers, with expenses to be shared by various special-interest groups & small-entrepreneurial concerns (craftspeople, coffeehouses, performance spaces, etc.). Such large centers would require official status (State recognition), but would obviously become foci for all sorts of non-official activity—black markets, temporary organization for “protest” or