

## **“Demes” and the Decline of the American Underground.**

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This last decade has been pretty unkind to the American Underground. It may not be death, but *man alive*, it is inarguably decline. Two causes immediately spring to mind: the painful rise in rents and the price of “space,” on the one hand, and on the other, the shift from subculture to hyperculture, not just in terms of cultural output but more generally as a social form. Both rent and internet were mentioned by one longtime member of that subterranean culture, Carlos Gonzales (who performs under the name [Russian Tsarlag](#)) in a [recent interview](#) with Adam Keith. One of the pullquotes lamented: “*The whole underground thing is at the lowest ebb point I’ve seen it since I started paying attention to it 15 years ago,*” and reading this, from Russian Tsarlag of all people, I knew for sure that the oasis had run dry. This wasn’t just my personal experience, or a side effect of the diffuseness of Los Angeles, where I’d lived for the better part of the decade. With the exception of a few holdouts, this was happening all over the United States, and arguably part of a transformation much larger than either the country or its underground.

What do we mean by an Underground? On the more strictly *cultural* plane, we recognize an Underground by its “negativity” (in the philosophical sense), its experimentalism, its relatively clandestine character, and its autonomy from the Way of the World. Socially though, and you could almost say politically, the American Underground was also organized by a certain *form*. This form can be understood as a network of “*demes*,” here defined as a social unit whose relations are thick, concrete, and intimate rather than abstract and anonymous. Demes must also be, to some degree, a [cathectic](#) social unit, whether through religious or charismatic principles, shared projects and purposes, or some mutual selection and affection in which members wordlessly convey to each other “*I choose you*” or “*I choose this*,” depending on the cherished object of their [cathexis](#). Contrast this with citizens of the modern State, or actors in the modern economy, or members of a global humanity, in which even the most benevolent relations are, at least in theory, axiomatically abstract.

In twenty-first century America, is there any meaningfully integrated social unit between the household and the conditions of anonymity and abstraction? Not really. You’ll find partial

mediations—some clubs, lodges, associations, unions, churches—but little that forms a whole, and rarely anything that truly coalesces into a *deme*. This is probably no accident. Demes have historically puzzled or contradicted the Way of the World. They are a threat or limitation to imperial power. As [Michael Mann](#) tells us, the early Christian church didn't pique the Romans due to doctrinal differences. Rome was always a big tent when it came to doctrine—another god, another festival. What rubbed the Romans was how the ideological power of the early church tempered into a social form of dangerous integrity.

And it wasn't just the Christians. Mann goes on to remind us that, in general “*the empire kept a tight hold on communal associations. The exchange of letters on the subject of fire brigades between Pliny and Trajan is famous... Pliny, governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, reports that a terrible fire has recently devastated the important town of Nicomedia. No fire brigade exists, and Pliny asks if he can form one. It is rather strange to our eyes that he should have to ask permission at all, and we are also surprised by his assurance that all care will be taken to regulate the fire brigade and to make sure that it only deals with fires. But Trajan's reply seems bizarre. He says that, where established, 'this sort of society has greatly disturbed the peace... Whatever name we give them, and for whatever purpose they may be founded, they will not fail to form themselves into dangerous assemblies.'* Therefore he refuses permission and advises providing fire machines that can be used by the owners of burning houses themselves. Exclusion was applied to all forms of communal association. The urban masses were deprived of all public collective life, all officially sanctioned normative community. The empire was not their society.” ([The Sources of Social Power](#), Vol 1., p. 364)

This strategy has only intensified with the modern means to enforce it. We can congregate but not in a way that might accrue or exert power. Outside of the household rarely do you see groups—especially larger ones of one, two, three hundred people—living, working, socializing, making social decisions, producing meaning, and organizing everyday life as a unit, a bloc, a crew—as a *deme*. Our social, economic, and political systems discourage it. So do many of my neighbors. Occasionally the interdictions are outright; most often it's done indirectly and almost invisibly through our architectures, zoning laws, tax regimes, educational institutions, administrative apparatuses, our lifestyles, ideologies, and habits, which may be our preferences or the internalized preferences of institutionalized power. Whichever the case, our social being, where it takes on any real power and leverage, is for the most part abstract and anonymous. We live in a world that Bataille, in his essay on “[The Psychological Structure of Fascism](#),” would

regret for its “*social homogeneity*.” Bataille’s homogeneity doesn’t just mean “sameness.” It suggests an assimilability and reification, a mania for the abstract, the [isonomic](#), the propositional, the crassly utilitarian, for equivalency and exchange—for most everything that Adorno, sharing a philosophical enemy with Bataille, would likewise scorn when he speaks against identity and “identity thinking.”

In the domain of the homogeneous, everything can be exchanged for its equivalent. Everything is encoded in terms of an abstract value. But what happens to *meaning* in such a domain? Meaning as signification still works well enough, but *meaningfulness*—largely a matter of desire or cathexis—languishes. It undergoes an entropic heat-death. A life-sap. Can you offer someone a close substitute for the person they love or desire? Or the person they hate? “*Here, this mom is just as good as your mom, maybe even better.*” Can you swap out the thing that brings them true joy or their “object of [ultimate concern](#)” for its equivalent? No, there’s something about this kind of meaningfulness, in its cathexis, that rejects all substitutes and demands *this* or *that* with a kind of willed destiny. True attachment or feeling requires a singular and heterogeneous element.

*“Depending upon the person, heterogeneous elements will provoke affective reactions of varying intensity, and it is possible to assume that the object of any affective reaction is necessarily heterogeneous (if not generally, at least with regard to the subject). There is sometimes attraction, sometimes repulsion, and in certain circumstances, any object of repulsion can become an object of attraction and vice versa.”* (p. 69)

For Bataille, homogeneity has its base in market exchange and the modern productive system. The modern State though, for all the supposed [isonomy](#) of its laws, incorporates within it elements of the heterogeneous, not least in a certain “imperative” factor that then can itself expel or suppress other competing threats of the heterogeneous: violence, obscenity, the underclasses, ecstasy, delirium, madness, the sacred, the *hypermeaningful*. The modern State then is a compromise between the interchangeability of the market and the incomparability of the sovereign. That *sweet taste* of heterogeneity, in terms of the imagined community of a nation, or in its figureheads and national rituals, is meant to tide us over, and often does until some inner tension or [anomie](#) throws the whole operation out of whack. Whenever this happens, the heterogeneous forces that were expelled or suppressed return with a vengeance, and very often in pathological forms. This partly explains the rise of fascism. Fascism revolts

against the social abstraction of the modern State and its society, but in a misguided return to an archaic political form unsuited to modern means and populations. Familiarity is demanded. Equanimity and isonomy are denounced. Affect courses again like a torrent, into love (for the leaders and emblems) and loathing (for that inner element that must be expelled or sacrificed). The social whole splits along the friend-enemy distinction, to know where to point these new political energies. But aside from that mean initial rush—from breaking loose from certain political and economic rationalities and finally having a political object to *adore* and *believe in*—the rest of its promise is impossible to fulfill, and things sour soon thereafter. Fascism is a cathexis of the worst kind under social, political and economic conditions that have made impossible cathexis of the best kind. This explanation of fascism dovetails with the Karl Polanyi's account in [\*The Great Transformation\*](#), where the triumph of “market society” has left all economic and social relations “disembedded” and dangerously gutted, mediated only through the logic of exchange rather than any other, thicker ligaments of social understanding.

What does all this have to do with the decline of the American Underground? The first thing to heed is that, in the shift from subculture to hyperculture, we observe a similar disembeddedness underway, in the oversystemization of culture rather than the overmarketization of labor. Apart from its direct cultural “products” and activities, a subculture always suggests *a form of life*. Members of a subculture are not just producers and consumers of a culture. They are equally its inhabitants, who even if they produce nothing at all, still lend an ambient energy that gathers and thickens the bonds and meanings of that culture without necessarily reifying into a product. This applies as much to the larger, legendary personalities of any “*scene*” as it does to the other characters and loveable wastoids lining its edges. They all have a critical role. The move to a hyperculture means a freer circulation of signs and meanings—a *good* thing over all, culture is made to be shared—but by doing so, loses its connections to any specific form of life, or its inhabitants. The praise-worthy gains in dissemination come with losses and dangers, not unlike with the logistical advantages of market exchange. The loss is a loss in meaningfulness, subtle at first, depressive in tone—again that slow, entropic heat death. Grander feelings crumble into what Sianne Ngai calls “minor affects.” In the absence of thicker connections and longer cycles in our undertakings, desire fritters away. And when this hits bottom, a danger arises that mimics the dangers of 20th-century fascism, in which some segment seeks out its lost cathexes in the nastiest forms possible, just to cathect to *something*. This is of course already underway online,

where it's not uncommon in circles brooding over "loneliness" and the lack of an object of love or affection, or a lack of meaning or power, that we see the vilest, most aggravated forms of reaction. Their grievances are not strictly economic or political in origin, even when they're eventually expressed in those terms.

Up until recently, the American Underground, in so far as it was culture, and thus the sector of society most concerned with meaning-making, was doing its part to mediate the gulf between the American household and the broader conditions of social abstraction and anonymity. For its inhabitants, it was a social form structured in such a way that made the best kinds of cathexes possible (at times irresistible), in clusters of demes that were connected by caravan and each supporting their own special forms of life. In its decline, many of us felt a bit exiled. We could still do many of the same things, some *more* easily technically speaking, and the horizon was no further or nearer than it had ever been. Still, something had dimmed. Perhaps the bigger loss, bigger than whatever we happened to be doing, was that the Underground didn't represent a radical alterity—some rabbit hole through which to escape from the Way of the World. It was part of the world, and one offering a competing vision that could've taken off, maybe taken *over*, were it not so unceremoniously snuffed. The general populace probably didn't have much of a taste for its trappings or cultural "products," but it deeply needed aspects of its social form: its demes, its channels of cathexis, its ability to feel power-effects within the radius of everyday life. However, conditions seem to be heading in the wrong direction, shittily enough, leaving open the window for more ghoulish forms of "heterogeneity" to appear at the sill, and sending people looking for love in all the wrong places. I don't just mean e-girls and waifus. National politics for instance inherently demands a certain level of abstraction and anonymity, yet voters swarm the booths in search of a father or mother, or a friend, "someone to have a beer with," or— kinkiest of all—an object of adoration. At the scale of the nation, or the state, or the metropolis even, love is not a political emotion nor friendship a political bond. Cathexes of these kinds can only be answered and *mobilized* within a "meaningfully integrated social unit between the household and the conditions of anonymity and abstraction," which we find lacking. The American Underground, at least as it was, shouldn't be mourned. Nostalgia is repulsive. The urgent question should instead be how we create these kinds of cathectic social forms—either in a deme or something that does the same job—under new historical and sociotechnical conditions.

