

# A communist critique of some aspects of early CrimethInc. - Steven Johns



A critique of early CrimethInc. writings, written by one of the libcom group between 2005 and 2006 attacking its lifestylist elements and arguing for a class struggle perspective.

In the end we never put it online, as we had more pressing things to deal with and kind of forgot about it. We decided to put it up now (2011) due to a [question on our forums asking about people's critiques of CrimethInc.](#)

Initially this article was intended as a critique of CrimethInc. as a whole, however in several of the key areas at which our critique was aimed, particularly with regard to dropping out, CrimethInc. now state they have changed their views. We have therefore renamed the article to reflect the now very limited nature of our comments.[1](#)

## Introduction

*A spectre is haunting the world today: the spectre of crime think, and the underground front which heralds it.* [2](#)

Or is it?

CrimethInc. is a informally organised anarchist network in the United States. Originally an independent record label, it emerged from the American so-called “hardcore” punk scene. Since the mid-1990s it started become a proto-activist group, eventually gaining some worldwide notoriety with the publication of a best-selling book, Days of War, Nights of Love – an introduction to Crimethink (DoW, NoL). Since then they have published other books, multiple issues of a theoretical newspaper, Harbinger, several websites and even 250,000 copies of a free introduction to anarchism in magazine format, called Fighting for our Lives.

With its poetic language, high-quality graphic design, punky-DIY aesthetic and large amounts of publishing cash – presumably from the commercial success of DoW, NoL – CrimethInc. has quickly become one of the most influential anarchist groups in the US, and probably the most well-known group in the English-speaking world.

While these there are impressive feats, and have probably spread their ideas to the American public more effectively than any libertarian group has since the days of the [Industrial Workers of the World](#), are they something to be cheerful about? Have they aided the spread

of the fundamental anarchist ideas – of working class self-organisation and direct action to improve our lives and our planet?

Unfortunately, as we will explain, we believe the answer to be a resounding “no”.

## What do they believe?

[3](#)

### Ideas

The basic aims of CrimethInc. are anarchist. That is they, like we at libcom.org, want a world based on not wage labour, profit and government but on co-operation, equality and the ability to live out our dreams and desires, not waste our lives in pointless jobs.

Laudably, CrimethInc. do not waste large amounts of time discussing a post-revolutionary utopia. Unlike many on the left they do not concentrate on esoteric third world crusades, but on everyday lives and concerns, where they are based. Their denunciation of the soul-destroying work we spend the majority of our lives in the West, and their illumination of the creative and joyful possibilities of free humanity are both refreshing and inspiring.

However, the methods they put forward as ways of getting to this new world are we believe for the most part ineffective, and in the worst cases are highly counter-productive.

CrimethInc. as an organisation has some deeply flawed, and other deeply disturbing aspects as well. We will go into these instances in more detail later.

These un- or counter-productive suggestions and actions stem from a number of underlying assumptions and attitudes which beset much of the modern-day anarchist and general “activist” movement, particularly in the English-speaking world.

They claim to be the successors of the [Situationists](#), an international group of revolutionaries founded in France in the 1960s, who developed a critique of the boredom and alienation of everyday life of workers in the West, despite our relative wealth compared to previous generations. In fact CrimethInc. even state that they “go further” than the Situationists<sup>4</sup>. The accuracy of this claim is highly debatable, and we will deal with it later as well.

### What tactics do they propose?

CrimethInc.’s basic way of fighting capitalism they outline is very simple – you drop out. Give up your job, and instead live by a combination of shoplifting, squatting, scamming, and “dumpster-diving”. Dumpster diving means taking rubbish from bins, usually commercial, which in the US often have large amounts of still-useable produce in.

In their various publications they also espouse numerous other activities, such as vandalism of corporate and government property, and violence on political demonstrations. Their general writings fit into the category of individualist anarchism

These things in themselves are not technically bad. While not revolutionary in themselves, dropping out of society and living by thrift or doing graffiti can be enjoyable for some people. People should of course be free to live their lives in any way they please. What is so damaging about CrimethInc., however is not that they say that dropping out is something certain people **can** do to improve their lives, but that it is something that everyone **must** do.

Some in CrimethInc. have long denied this (although in personal conversations with individual CrimethInc. supporters it has always been obvious that they do look down on anyone who has not dropped-out) but finally with the production of the most recent issue of [Harbinger \(#5\)](#) which they were making for two-and-a-half years they have finally admitted what we suspected to be true – that dropping out is inherently revolutionary, and that any

aspects of a normal life, like a job, a house, paying rent, buying any material goods are inherently counter-revolutionary.

In their article outlining their way to a new world, Déclassé War, they say of the worker angry at capitalism:

He (sic) decries the injustices around him, but it is his labour and consumption, in concert with the labour and consumption of millions like him, that power the system... Withdrawing from it isn't just a matter of personal taste, or a hedonistic exhibition of privilege... **it's the only way to contest it.**<sup>5</sup>

So if “withdrawing” from the system is the only way to contest it, let us examine this “withdrawing” further. (Before we do it is worth bearing in mind again CrimethInc.’s origins – in the overwhelmingly-white, predominantly male punk movement in the cities and suburbs of the richest and most wasteful country on Earth.)

CrimethInc. are blaming all of the world’s population who work **anywhere**, or consume **anything** at all, for the world’s problems. These privileged white American kids are blameless, since they are no longer complicit in “the system”, but all the East Asian sweatshop workers, forced off their communal land and into factories are at fault. As is the mother who pays for a roof over their head to keep her children from the cold and rain, as is the Aids patient who pays for treatment, as is the call centre worker trying to pay his way through university...

What makes this worse is that CrimethInc. is the most high-profile anarchist group in the English-speaking world, and through its outreach materials is telling tens of thousands of people that this is what anarchism is: blaming anyone who is not a punk drop-out squatter who eats out of bins for being complicit in “the system.” CrimethInc.’s politics are basically individualist, lifestylist anarchism of the sort very widespread amongst anarchists in the US. Instead of proposing collective solutions, they preach individual lifestyle choices as the way towards social change.

Of course, we do not deny that we all help perpetuate capitalist social relations. Through our labour [we recreate the conditions of capital every day](#), for of course if one day we all decided not to return to work that would be the end of it. However we realise that we must all end capitalism together, when we are sufficiently organised to continue running society co-operatively. You cannot escape it by dropping out and eating out of bins. This parasitism in fact relies on capitalism still existing, and being incredibly wasteful. Everyone cannot drop out and eat from dumpsters, because with no one making stuff and putting it in dumpsters, what would we eat? It is only ever an option available for a tiny minority. And outside of the wasteful US it is very difficult to survive at all living off other people’s refuse. Outside of the West it is just impossible, full stop – you can’t get bags of Pret leftovers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

That CrimethIncers can be so blind to their privileges is shocking. Even in the US itself, only a small minority have the ability to give up work and live through squatting, theft and scavenging. For the elderly or disabled, it is utterly impossible (leaving them forever condemned to be complicit with the system), for those with children it would be very difficult – and highly irresponsible. For women, who more often have to care for children it is often not feasible, and even less so for any who are pregnant. For people who aren’t white, and already attract a hugely disproportionate amount of police attention, not to mention receive far stiffer prison sentences, living a life of petty crime is not the same enjoyable game it is for white kids. For anyone who doesn’t have the fall-back option of parental support, either financial or of a room to stay in, giving up everything is a dangerous option.

These tactics that discriminate against ethnic "minorities", women, the elderly, the disabled, the ill, those from poor or broken families are reflected in the makeup of CrimethInc., which is overwhelmingly young, male and white. This is not a problem in itself – but that they look down and cast blame on anyone who doesn't "withdraw" from the system is inexcusable. They claim that dropping out is not "a hedonistic exhibition of privilege" – but that's exactly what it is. And that they are so arrogant and patronising with it is infuriating. On the back cover of their book, *Evasion*, is the slogan: "Unemployment, poverty, homelessness – If you're not having fun you're not doing it right". For anyone without a privileged background to fall back on, who hasn't deliberately chosen that lifestyle for a short period of time that slogan is extremely insulting. (More about *Evasion*, below)

Not only do CrimethInc. have an approach relevant to such a small proportion of the world's (or the US) population, but they also attack and disseminate distorted information about other strains of anarchism – namely class struggle anarchism – which, despite any shortcomings it has, does embrace all working class people. One example is their article on patriarchy and sexism in *Rancid News* ([rmzine.co.uk](http://rmzine.co.uk)) which, with no hint of irony, untruthfully claiming that "class struggle anarchists" are sexist because they only care about class, and not gender.

## **Are there any other problems with them?**

As well as this central tenet with which we completely disagree, and think is entirely at odds with any struggle for a better world, there are a number of issues which we also have with CrimethInc. which will now address.

### **Dishonest**

CrimethInc. propaganda makes numerous claims about the nature of the organisation. In fact it even claims not to be an organisation as such:

"There is no CrimethInc.

CrimethInc. is simply you. CrimethInc. is not a membership organisation—it belongs to anyone who has the audacity to claim it, just as death belongs to anyone who can pick up a frying pan. ... [it] is not the property of some board of trustees, there is no genius to credit for it"<sup>6</sup>

While we would agree with their final statement, the rest is untrue. There are certain people who do run its websites, check its emails, and do publish zines, papers and books in CrimethInc.'s name – and most importantly, control the bank accounts.

CrimethInc. is not a formal organisation, but it reproduces all the qualities typical of groupings of individualist, post-leftist and anti-organisationalist groupings – namely the existence of informal hierarchies. There is always the [problem of informal leadership in informal groups](#). When no clear organisational structure or democratic processes, a self-selecting clique almost always ends up dominating the organisation through its occupation of certain key roles, particularly in relation to websites, contact lists and finances. They claim that anyone can declare themselves as "CrimethInc.", but they don't give access to their bank account or their website passwords to just anyone. Of course you wouldn't expect them to do so either, but then they should be honest about the nature of their organisation.

In addition to this basic dishonesty, CrimethInc. propaganda makes many other dubious claims about itself, in order to make itself look bigger, more important, and more influential than it actually is.

One example is the long lists of names of CrimethInc. "cells" which it claims are active. They may argue that this is just artistic or humorous exaggeration, but in reality it is just

organisational propaganda akin to that of Leninist groups which lie about the numbers of their members.

The CrimethInc. article on Wikipedia, which we can only assume was self-written, makes the ridiculous claim that “initially associated with the North American Anarcho-Punk scene, [it] has since expanded into nearly all areas of the current global resistance to empire.”

Their most blatant lie about their activity and international is in the aforementioned History of CrimethInc. in DoW, NoL, under “The Stockholm Action” of November 1999.

The article claims that 200 CrimethInc. operatives dressed as police officers on a police-initiated “Safe Stockholm day” where they put extra officers on the streets. The CrimethInc. operatives acted over-zealously, and when the real police worked out something was up and tried to arrest them, they tried to arrest the real police. Fighting then broke out, and the CrimethIncers slipped away, leaving hundreds of police all fighting each other with clubs, then eventually tear gas and bullets. The incident left 37 police injured, and led to the police having their funding cut.

Except it didn't. And nor are there 200 CrimethInc. operatives in Sweden - the entire story is a lie.

### **Situationist?**

CrimethInc. have very successfully appropriated rhetoric and imagery from the Situationists. The Situs wrote inspiring texts, and played an important role in the [French insurrection and mass strike of 1968](#). Their vision of a “world of pleasures,” where people live “without dead time” was and still is aspiring to many, and their ideas spread widely into public consciousness and culture, helping inspire punk among other things.

CrimethInc. have used the inspirational vision of free, joyous lives from the Situationists, but stripped them of the politics necessary to achieve them. At the very core of the Situs' politics was the concept of the class struggle between employees and employers. So we are left with a pretty shell of subverted (détourned) cartoons and images and prose about “breaking free” with nothing inside.

In fact, CrimethInc. do not just ignore the matter of class, but present it in a completely false light. Their section on the “bourgeoisie” in DoW, NoL in fact (mis-)defines the term as meaning basically all people who are part of mainstream culture and society.

Their Situationist pretensions are all the more jarring when you see the actual Situationists' views on individualist anarchists like CrimethInc., which were utterly dismissive.<sup>7</sup> See, for example, SI member [Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle](#):

The strength and the weakness of the real anarchist struggle resides in its viewing the goal of proletarian revolution as immediately present (**the pretensions of anarchism in its individualist variants have always been laughable**) [8](#)

### **Anti-social**

Harbinger #4 states that “what you do today is itself the extent of [the] revolution”. It then lists a number of things that you “CAN” do, which are the manifestation of this revolution. Here are some extracts, followed by libcom comments:

“You can leave unmarked boxes and bags all around town, to keep the bomb squad busy and entertained” Which apart from being moronic, like many of their suggestions is liable to get some stupid naïve young kid put in prison for years, while the CrimethInc. writers just keep writing.

“YOU CAN get a fire extinguisher... for your squat easily enough from a restaurant,

dormitory, hospital or library” And fuck the ‘mindless automatons’ in said building who could be burned to death we suppose.

“YOU CAN make love by whispering fantasies, dancing together or for each other, concentrating on parts of the body or libido that often go ignored, or in any number of other wonderful ways you never see in the movies – and that can’t get you sick or pregnant” Platitudinous sex tips from anti-social activists. Thanks for that.

“YOU CAN sleep outside.” I’ll tell the woman in a sleeping bag outside my work that she’s living the revolution.

“YOU CAN keep warm in winter by lining the inside of your clothes with plastic. This will work best if you place the layer of plastic right next to your skin – although it will make you sweat a lot” – in the richest country in the world.

“YOU CAN use cloth rags or sea sponges instead of tampons or pads”

“YOU CAN fill a five gallon bucket with sawdust to serve as a toilet”

CrimethInc.’s views on personal hygiene also predictably fit the “crusty punk” anarchist stereotype. See their number one reason [“Why Capitalists Want to Sell You Deodorant”](#), from DoW, NoL:

Body smells are erotic and sexual. Capitalists don't like that because they are impotent and opposed to all manifestations of sensuality and sexuality. Sexually awakened people are potentially dangerous to capitalists and their rigid, asexual system.

While we’re sure that would come as a surprise to Hugh Hefner, the worst thing about this article is that they don’t even manage to hold these clichéd opinions in a laissez-faire way. Rather than be a matter of personal taste, they argue smelly people are actually superior to the vast majority of the population. See their reason 7:

Deodorant-users are insecure. Capitalists like insecure people. Insecure people don't start trouble. Insecure people also buy room fresheners, hair conditioners, makeup, and magazines with articles about dieting.

This again just serves as another example of their basic view of themselves as enlightened minority above the brainwashed masses.

And in addition to the obvious appeals to anti-social behaviour above, such as stealing fire extinguishers from hospitals and planting fake bombs, in the CrimethInc. afterword to Evasion the author writes of that he first came across the Evasion zine when his host at a house he was staying showed him one. “Of course I stole it” he writes...[9](#)

## **Dodgy views**

DoW, NoL has throughout it a series of essays collectively entitled “A History of CrimethInc.” One article in it, credited to [paedophile Hakim Bey \(aka Peter Lamborn Wilson\)](#) on p119 is called “Short-Lived Anarchist State in Fiume”.

The article states that Gabriele D’Annunzio (“Decadent poet, artist, musician, aesthete, womaniser, pioneer daredevil aeronautist, black magician, genius and cad”) captured the Yugoslav town of Fiume and offered it to Italy. Italy turned down his offer, and he declared independence. It was an anarchist paradise and “the party never stopped” for 18 months until Italy invaded and took the town.

In this article the deception begins at the get-go. The description of D’Annunzio leaves out the key point – that he was a fascist. He ran the first army of blackshirts, later adopted by Mussolini, a friend of his (see pic, below) and pioneered the fascist use of castor oil as a weapon of torture and murder on his opponents – mainly working class militants and revolutionaries.



*Mussolini with D'Annunzio*

He proclaimed himself the first “Duce” and ran the town with fascist terror, developing the first fully-fledged corporatist fascist government that Mussolini later extended to the whole of Italy (despite the [working class resistance](#)). When the Italian government finally invaded D’Annunzio fled. The whole incident went down in fascist folklore as the “Christmas of blood”. How CrimethInc. can glorify this as an “anarchist... party that never stopped” is beyond me.

On a related note the author of the CrimethInc.-published book *Evasion*, “Mack” throughout the text shows his hatred for most human beings, and expresses some sympathies for fascist animal rights bands such as Vegan Reich. The full extent of his views, however, are revealed in an interview with *Profane Existence* (issue #43) in which he states that all people who eat meat are “murderers”, and all those who consume dairy products are “rapists”. He then explains how he would rather be friends with a “racist” than someone who ate dairy, and stated his wish for the majority of the world’s population to “die in the most horrible pain and suffering” for having eaten dairy products or meat.

That CrimethInc. publish books by someone who wants to torture and wipe out most of the planet does not do them any favours. However, it reflects the widely-held misanthropist attitudes prevalent in much of American individualist anarchism, best typified by the anti-civilisation or primitivist anarchists, many of whom have called for mass die-offs of humans.

Furthermore, CrimethInc.'s website [crimethinc.net](http://crimethinc.net), which does not have many links, contains featured links<sup>10</sup> to ultra nationalist websites, as well as the site of aforementioned Hakim Bey which contains pro-paedophilia materials. The nationalist websites are "Up the Ra!" and "Ireland's Own" which are both cheerleading websites for murderous nationalist terrorist groups the Continuity, Real and Provisional IRAs and the INLA.

## Conclusion

This fundamental difference in strategy – personal lifestyle choices versus organising with others in a similar position at work or in the community – is the basic difference between the two sides of anarchism: the individualist anarchists and the social anarchists/libertarian communist.

To overthrow capital and the state individual solutions are useless. In a free society we will need to be able to organise the production and distribution of goods to keep alive over 6 billion people.

We cannot develop the skills and organisation necessary to undertake this by dropping out on an individual level. We must always try to act together, as a united working class. We can build our collective power in our workplaces and in our communities, defending our conditions, and trying to win improvements in our everyday lives. By organising and seeing concrete gains we can increase our confidence as a class, and eventually take over our workplaces and our land and re-organise production in our own interests, not for profit, and in harmony with the Earth.

- [1.](#) We also intended to give it a snarky title like "Days of war, nights of trust funds" but several years later, especially seeing the huge decline in CrimethInc.'s influence and the apparent improvement in their politics we no longer have any sense of antipathy toward them.
- [2.](#) Days of war, nights of love, CrimethInc.
- [3.](#) In this critique, the principal source material is CrimethInc.'s written propaganda. We have concentrated on their primary texts about their ideas (as illustrated in the introductory library) namely, their theoretical paper, Harbinger, and their introductory book, DoW, NoL. All quotations have been edited with UK English spellings.
- [4.](#) DoW, NoL
- [5.](#) My emphasis
- [6. http://www.crimethinc.com/library/english/47.html](http://www.crimethinc.com/library/english/47.html) CrimethInc. Worker Bulletin #47
- [7.](#) See also Ken Knabb's comments on CrimethInc. here <http://libcom.org/library/crimethinc-comments-ken-knabb>
- [8.](#) libcom.org emphasis
- [9.](#) A brief personal note: part of my original antipathy to CrimethInc. was boosted when I was completely broke, and a CrimethInc. tour came through the house I was staying in in Pittsburgh, and left with my MiniDisc player (this was a fair few years ago...) and an Onion compendium I had recently bought!



- [10.](#) This website is no longer online, but these "featured links" were promoted to the front page of their links section