

Instead of a Primer

on isms, schisms, & anarchisms

Pono Bonobo

What is anarchism? This question continues to crop up as anarchists debate amongst themselves as how to accurately express their perspectives to non-anarchist activists in the antiwar and global justice movements.

Subsequently, a new wave of anarchist primers has appeared in the Summer editions of North American anti-authoritarian periodicals such as *Green Anarchy* and *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*. Also, anarchist web sites often include glossaries, FAQs, mission statements, constitutions, manifestos, and talking points to explain anarchist principles to the uninitiated. Thus, we are challenged to recognize and celebrate anarchist diversity while seeking the meaningful collaborations needed to influence lasting change on the other.

In documents and articles that strive to define an anarchist philosophy and practice, there is much with which to agree, while other points pose philosophical, ideological, and tactical problems. A temptation exists to assign ourselves to self-contained camps, guarded by binary either-or absolutes that ring like King George W: "You're either with us or with the authoritarians."

These discussions and their expressions-in collectives and in the streets-are often contradictory, tentative, complex, mixed, muddy. As much as we aspire to act on our principles, fully living the critique in this society is next to impossible. It's much easier to invoke the Situationist notion of "demanding the impossible" than to create successful insurrections or live out one's vision of a cooperative world.

At a regional anarchist gathering in Madison, Wisconsin in the mid-1990s, I took note of (but skipped) a workshop entitled "Lifestylism or Class War: Which Way for the Anarchist 'Movement'?" Then, like many others, I read with distaste Murray Bookchin's 1996 tirade *Social Anarchism vs. Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* and the various responses to it. While the tension between an orthodox leftist anarchism and an eclectic visionary anarchism provided an amusing preoccupation in the pre-Seattle, pre-9/11 politics of the mid-1990s, I expected the argument to wither away as we committed ourselves to more pressing and pertinent concerns.

Sadly, the lifestyle anarchism vs. real anarchism arguments have not dried up. There's been a recent rejuvenation of righteous, judgmental jibes against white, middle-class, hip cultural activism within anarchism. As cookie-cutter condemnation goes, these voluntarily homeless, traveler, shoplifter prophets who pen the poetics of train hopping, dumpster diving, scandalous sex, and other hedonistic and hopeful trajectories are merely spoiled rich kids for whom revolutionary activism is nothing more than trifling amusement, a punk rock version of spring break at Daytona Beach, or the anarchist alternative to "going on tour" to see Grateful Dead rip-off bands. Cultural magicians in the miseraballst junkyard.

What is occurring today with Crimethinkers and communards, eco-warriors and free-food scavengers, ravers and graffiti artists, squatters and train-hoppers reflects the notion of class suicide made popular in the 1960s by the Black Power movement. This concept, fashioned by middle-class African Americans, suggested that young revolutionaries of middle-class descent could be genuine class-traitors and form bonds of solidarity (not trendy slumming or pseudo-moralistic charity) with the poor. Many who got political in the late '80s and early '90s began with a wholesale rejection of "middle-class values" concerning family, hierarchy, patriarchy, monogamy, work

ethics and with an embrace of the “cultural revolution” represented by punk rock, plagiarism, queer nations, sex-positive feminism, the mail art/zine scene, and earth-centered spirituality. Recognizing the mistake some New Agers make by simply ripping off a shallow interpretation of Native American ideals, many contemporary cultural magicians have in fact invented their own rituals and rebellions indigenous to their context-specific rejection of the miserabilist, ethically vapid junkyard of North American late capitalism.

Since those designated as lifestyle anarchists would never embrace that tag, these debates all too often become one-way arguments, with the true class warriors engaging in a kind of more-anarchist-than-thou judgmental fundamentalism. To those anarchist writers who think they have it all figured out, I say this: “If your revolutionary strategy is so perfect and coherent, why do we still live in a world subdued by militarism, industrialism, and authoritarianism? Because the rest of us independent thinkers refuse to follow your foolproof plan?” I’m sure the police agents required to read our polemics are quite pleased to see us fighting amongst ourselves. My favorite is the formula rant that, within the finely nuanced, ideological confine of the writer, delineates “real” anarchists, lifestyle anarchists, armchair anarchists, and so on. This reminds me of the fundamentalist Protestants who do not believe Catholics to be “true” Christians or the Trotskyist organizations that ridicule other Trotskyist organizations for not being “true” Trotskyists.

Doesn’t an anarchism that is less restrictive and draws upon diverse, visionary, poetic examples of historical and contemporary fighters for anarchism, make more sense than petty squabbles about who is or isn’t a real anarchist? When I think of visionary anarchism (as opposed to tactical or ideological anarchism), I think of people like Emma Goldman, Charles Fourier, Leo Tolstoy, Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Julian Beck, Judith Malina, Kenneth Rexroth, Herbert Marcuse, Norman Brown, Allen Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima, Marco Vassi, Raoul Vaneigem, Theodore Roszak, Ed Abbey, Ursula LeGuin, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Andre Gorz, Hakim Bey, Penelope Rosemont, Utah Phillips, Carol Queen, Starhawk, and groups like the San Francisco Diggers, Wobblies, Catholic Workers, Chicago Surrealists, Post-situationists For Ourselves, CrimethInc, Earth First!, Food Not Bombs, Art and Revolution, Critical Mass, and Reclaim the Streets.

Of course, some people on this list might be characterized by others as “lifestylist.” I doubt if a single one of these people or projects would self-define as simply “cultural” or “hip,” but all of them, for me, share a spark of dynamic creativity unavailable in the stunningly stern pragmatism of much militant anarcho-organizationalism. However, this joyful fire often gets doused by the ocean of anti-organic ideologies. We need not look beyond the dominant society to find constitutional bureaucracies that preach our political salvation through seriousness and self-sacrifice. From fellow travelers on the path to transform the world, I expect ecstatic aspirations and an appetite for adventure, not just the magic pill of mechanical ideologies.

Any of us remotely familiar with the history of rebellion in the last 50 years or the writings of *Baffler* editor and frequent *Nation* contributor Tom Frank knows that the “culturally hip” version of activism without grounding in political analysis and direct action is ripe to be co-opted by the corporate culture and sold back to us in ads for off-road vehicles that read like ELF communiqués. (In particular, see Frank’s book *The Conquest of Cool*.) We know that “the personal as political” as a revolutionary imperative can quickly devolve into the “personal as profitable” as a reactionary inclination. We know that the left wing of corporate culture absorbed the beauty and spontaneity of the 1960s counter-culture to create the postmodern marketplace that finally brought us such wonders as MTV and Microsoft. But this does not mean that the visionary seed of cultural rebellion should never be planted again in more fertile anti-capitalist soil.

For brief moments in the 1970s, the debilitated logic that forever relegated the urban politico and rural hippie into irreconcilable camps imploded. Serious thinkers published rants defending the more political side of hip culture. In “Youth Culture: An Anarcho-Communist View” (1970), the aforementioned Murray Bookchin, today a staunch anti-lifestylist, criticized the orthodox Marxist line on the hip, and actually wrote, “In its demands for tribalism, free sexuality, community, mutual aid, ecstatic experience, and a balanced ecology, the Youth Culture prefigures, however inchoately, a joyous communist and classless society, freed of the trammels of hierarchy and domination, a society that would transcend the historic splits between town and country, individual and society, mind and body. Drawing from early rock-and-roll music, from the beat movement, the civil rights struggles, the peace movement, and even from the naturalism of neo-Taoist and neo-Buddhist cults (however unsavory this may be to the ‘Left’), the

Youth Culture has pieced together a life-style that is aimed at the internal system of domination that hierarchical society so viciously uses to bring the individual into partnership with his/her own enslavement.”

Many people at the time understood that no single path—neither that of the frivolous hippies nor the orthodox revolutionists—could—totally transform culture. For a brief period, people chose to be both culturally hip and politically defiant by taking pages from the Situationists and the Yippies, and writing a different script that questioned every aspect of daily life to finally realize, as people like Vaneigem do so eloquently, the intrinsic intimacy between pleasure and revolt.

Clearly, the contemporary nostalgia-driven marketplace has kept the image of rebellion alive without any of its radical content. Yet to imagine a “60s revolution”—no matter how politically righteous, without Phil Ochs, free food, MC5, long hair, LSD, drag queens fighting cops at Stonewall, vegetarianism, creative pranks, and so on—is hardly to imagine at all. Likewise, for me to imagine the resurgence of anarchist politics since the late 1980s without its cultural component—found in Chumbawamba, infoshops, Crass, pirate radio, squats and bolos, riot grrrls, the Layabouts, MDC, mudpeople, radical faeries, Casey Neill, tree-sits and forest encampments, guerilla dance parties, polyamory, temporary autonomous zones, permaculture and so much more, would suck all the joy out of the last two decades of dissent. Today, hip may be more about hip-hop than hippie or more about going out to the Rave than back to the land, but it still offers in its least commodified forms—a glimpse of the new society gloriously giving birth to itself amid the toxic rubble of the old.

In response to all the primers and programs permeating our milieu, here are a few talking points of my own. I hope the reader will not mistake my confidence in these suggestions for a strict ideology; all of these are intended as invitations for more debate and discussion:

On (middle) Class War(riots)

Throughout the last few hundred years, many notable and noble radicals have come from the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the middle class as well as from the working class. When people reject privilege and take up common cause with insurrectionary movements, this should inspire solidarity not suspicion. The moralistic and guilt-ridden, “I’m-more-oppressed-than-you” arguments in radical publications come off as blindly biased.

I cringe when I read articles like Joe Levasseur’s “Middle Class Dominance and the Negation of Class Struggle” (see *Clamor*, March/April 2002). Levasseur charges that the anarchist movement is hurt by “an abundance of middle class ideas and thought patterns which completely undermine real class struggle.” However, he’s a bit fuzzy to provide thoughtful, concrete examples of these “middle-class ideas” other than through making reactionary assumptions about pacifists and members of the CrimethInc Workers Collective.

He is convinced that these “middle-class dominators” include people guilty of such treacherous sins as writing “New Age,” visionary, poetic parables about the potential of dreaming the new world into being. Now, CrimethInc’s neo-Situationist, Hakim Bey-inspired manifestos may not be your cup of tea, but they hardly seem guilty of dominating anyone with their quasi-religious defense of the outlaw life. Levasseur is equally weak in terms of defining real class struggle; his example of authentic action is window-breaking in Seattle. Lots of anarchists have defended spontaneous (or planned) vandalism as tactic without elevating it to the status of real class struggle.

Levasseur is clear about who should dominate the anarchist movement instead of the middle class: the “lowered and oppressed classes in society” get his vote. He further elucidates that he refers here to “everyone within a lower income bracket who did not choose to be in their current situation.” (Should I start by bringing a copy of my latest tax return to the big demo, so the real working class comrades can check my credentials?) Even though the majority of Americans were either born middle class, currently consider themselves middle class, or want to work 60 hours each week to become middle class, Levasseur provides no remedy for those of this class who support a revolution to overturn capitalism, war, environmental destruction, and the state.

Our nakedness is our weapon...

From Berkeley's topless march where women demand the right to go bare-breasted under the summer sun to San Francisco's mudpeople parade to countless clothing optional collectives across the continent, nudity as political statement has a varied and voluptuous history. However, this past June, when activists boldly strutted their bare asses in front of a GAP store in Calgary to protest the sale of clothes made in sweatshops, this was seen as a mere spectacle, characterized as "the poverty of protest porn."

In his "The Anti-G8 Protests in Calgary: Some Contributions to a Critique of the Anti-Globalization Movement" (which has been circulated widely on anarchist websites) Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC) spokesperson Tom Keefer moralistically derided the tactics of creative confrontation at global justice convergences and suggested as an alternative something that sounded like re-education training for those of us who still think the revolution should be fun.

Protesters might consider taking a hefty dose of "revolutionary discipline" from the comrades in NEFAC so their tactics don't turn into "an irrelevant fashion statement or an apolitical and unplanned clash with the forces of authority." Clearly, having a study group of the NEFAC constitution in the streets of Calgary would have done more to foment revolutionary change than a bunch of hippies going wild!

In his position-paper, Keefer charges, "'anti-capitalism' became a strategy of producing 'shocking' and symbolic spectacles—'protest-porn'—which had the effect of neither shutting down the corporate center of Calgary, nor of reaching out to un-politicized workers and linking up to their struggles or concerns. Some of these actions included a 'die-in' in a park, getting naked in front of the Gap, having a group of people take off their clothes and cover themselves in mud and grunt as they cavorted through the streets, and the playing of two 5-minute games of 'anarchist' soccer on a downtown intersection following the snake march protest. 'Actions' like this serve only to draw a line between the radical 'anti-capitalists' and ordinary working people who while exploited by capitalism, can see pretty clearly that a movement made up of naked, grunting, mud covered middle-class 'earth people' has little to concretely offer them in overcoming the oppressive conditions of their lives."

Perhaps Keefer has a point, but it seems to me that ordinary working people quite enjoy spectacles and rarely allow a politically correct ideology to deter their enjoyment of everything from sporting events to rock concerts. Clearly, anarchists did not create the spectacle-and-sound-byte culture in which we live, and the dominant spectacle breeds passive, disempowered consumers.

Nonetheless, our counter-spectacles can at times be quite powerful at diverting the gaze of ordinary people from the talking heads to our living resistance. Should we be so firmly scolded for using highly visual tactics to communicate our visions, especially when these tactics can provide a galvanizing and inspiring spirit for our movement? Sure, it would be great to have had nudity and to have shut down Calgary or the meetings in Kananaskis, but the prevalence of so-called protest porn cannot be blamed for the convergence's lack of effectiveness in stopping the G8 summit.

I wonder if Keefer and those who share his perspective would have taken their anti-nudity arguments to Africa a few weeks later when hundreds of half-naked women in Nigeria challenged the oil giant ChevronTexaco. Unarmed female protesters boldly claimed "Our nakedness is our weapon" to confront the contrast between the oil company's extreme wealth and the workers' extreme poverty.

According to news reports, "Public nudity by adult women, widely considered a taboo in Nigeria, is viewed as a way of shaming others into action."

The protest encampments that lasted as long as ten days successfully put a dent in Chevron's ability to make production quotas and the company finally caved in to meet demonstrators' demands for justice around issues such as jobs, school, and drinkable water.

The North American anarchist prudes fuel most of their condemnations of creative tactics on the notion that nudity and the like are middle-class fetishes that will alienate ordinary working people. This contention, based more on the prude's perception than on any measurable reality, has been used to marginalize queers, women, and other sex radicals in revolutionary movements for decades.

Even worse, some activists blindly tolerate blatant homophobia, sexism, and machismo because they believe these values have currency among the working class, and besides, we can deal with such effeminate, minor con-

cerns “after the revolution.” For any queer who has been bashed or for any woman who has been raped, harassed, or had a male radical make judgment of her reproductive choices, these are not minor issues.

Furthermore, groups like the naked women of Nigeria disprove the paternalistic thesis that “the oppressed people in the developing world” are not concerned with creative means of nonviolent revolt.

Granted, the context of the Nigerian protest is different than Calgary. Still, if a million people had showed up, we might not be having this discussion. I cannot imagine too many protesters sitting at home thinking, “Well, I really wanted to go smash up global capitalism this week, but I heard that a bunch of naked hippies would be there, so I decided to stay home.” Throughout history, seemingly reckless and visionary acts have sparked lasting change and seemingly rigid critics have come along to judge those acts in retrospect.

You cannot use the master’s tools ...

The late African-American radical lesbian poet Audre Lorde is well-known for her maxim “You cannot use the master’s tools to destroy the master’s house.” Throughout the history of the modern anarchist movement, debates about the ethics and efficiency of strategies and tactics have dealt with the classic tensions between means and ends. For the most part, anarchists believe that their process within collectives and their acts for revolution should be consistent with their principles. This tension is particularly charged on the question of violence vs. nonviolence.

Despite what one might read in *Anarchy*, *Green Anarchy*, or a dozen other anti-authoritarian magazines, there’s a vast and varied pacifist tradition within anarchism. For some, anarchism and pacifism are in fact synonyms based on the idea that if government equals violence, no government means no violence. In most anarchist visions of a cooperative society, the new world would be free from the institutionalized violence of the state that has come so close to destroying the earth and its peoples.

While many argue about the ethics of armed self-defense and the need for more militant confrontations with the State as part of our struggle, most anarchists would agree that the organized killing of other humans is not part of the anarchist vision. At the core, any act of violence against another human has an authoritarian component; it is the definition of power over.

However, in a recent primer entitled, “Instead of a Meeting: by someone too irritated to sit through another one” (*Anarchy* #53, Summer 2002), Lawrence Jarach asserts, “Our tactics must be in keeping with our principles. But it is important to remember that tactics are not the same thing as principles. Non-violence is not an anarchist principle; it is a tactic. Depending on the situation, we decide when it’s convenient-or-not-to adhere to nonviolent guidelines. At times we may decide that it makes more sense to fight back with force. Morality plays no part in deciding upon which tactics to use in a given situation; it only matters what is compatible with our strategy and principles.”

To say that nonviolence is not an anti-authoritarian principle is indefensible. To understand the nature of the marriage between authority and violence historically is to see that violence always has an authoritarian component, and thus nonviolence, especially mass resistance and noncooperation with the state (not the passive-ism that is a weak substitute for radical pacifism) should always have an inherently anarchist or anti-authoritarian quality.

However, the extensive “Anarchist FAQ” at Infoshop.org provides a much more balanced discussion of the tension between violence and nonviolence. At one point, the thoughtful piece explains: “Thus, the attraction of pacifism to anarchists is clear. Violence is authoritarian and coercive, and so its use does contradict anarchist principles. That is why anarchists would agree with Malatesta when he argues that [w]e are on principle opposed to violence and for this reason wish that the social struggle should be conducted as humanely as possible.”

“Most, if not all, anarchists who are not strict pacifists agree with pacifist-anarchists when they argue that violence can often be counterproductive, alienating people and giving the state an excuse to repress both the anarchist movement and popular movements for social change. All anarchists support non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, which often provide better roads to radical change.”

Still, Ward Churchill’s non-anarchist book *Pacifism as Pathology* has become a classic among street-fighting anarchists. Many anarchists completely buy Churchill’s fallacious thesis that a commitment to nonviolent social struggle comes from middle-class roots, and even worse, that activists who advocate nonviolence as anything more than

tactic are suffering from a form of social-mental illness. In the ritual pacifist bashing that preoccupies the chain-rattling hyper-militancy of anarchist writers, it's quite common to recycle Churchill's flawed and over-simplified arguments without question.

It's important to defend nonviolence but avoid the moralizing, cop-loving bullshit that gave pacifists a really bad name in Seattle as some activists defended the sanctity of Starbucks' windows and even tried to violently prevent property destruction in the name of nonviolence. Before anarchists unequivocally accept the premises of Ward Churchill and others on this question, I encourage them to at least look at the explicitly anarchist defenses of philosophical and tactical nonviolence expressed in the works of people like Leo Tolstoy and Julian Beck.

Thankfully, in many actions, the "diversity of tactics" line has actually created gestures of remarkable solidarity between the militants and the pacifists. At the A 16 actions in Washington DC in 2000, the anarchist black blocs made it a priority to defend the pacifists from being attacked by the cops.

While I do not want the "final word" concerning the question of violence or nonviolence within anarchism, my sympathies clearly lie with the anarcho-pacifists. For starters, I'd like to see more within our milieu refrain from hastily branding all pacifists as "middle class moralists" and grapple with the logic behind the assertion that nonviolence is in fact an anarchist principle.

We're not going to disappear

I am an anarchist who believes a nonviolent revolution needs to sweep this continent. I will never apologize for resisting empire and advocating a society of voluntary cooperation freed from the greed and malice of the militaristic Enronistas and WorldCommunistas.

People frequently challenge anarchists to explain exactly how to arrive at an anti-authoritarian world; it's as if to propose a new society requires us to detail every contingency and respond to every counter-argument. As much as a solid game plan would help any world-changing adventure, most anti-authoritarian activists are not strategists and politicians with a foolproof battle plan. Anarchism's appeal is in its eclectic, elusive, and slippery nature: not a system but an attractive decoupage of desires; not a template but a tempting poetry of suggestions; not a unified Movement but the collective moves of autonomous collectives.

But then what to do? Embrace the unpredictable, the spontaneous, the humble-and realize that radical social change in the 21st Century is unlikely to follow a neatly-packaged trajectory. Our legacy is part of a deep and varied anti-tradition that thwarts the totality without totalizing truisms. That is, just as we consider the totality and refuse to get lost in reform of the component parts, our responses should be contextual and specific, not sweeping and programmatic.

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