

Wasted, Indeed

Anarchy and Alcohol

CrimethInc.

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Excerpt from CrimethInc.

This is a painfully truncated version of a significantly longer text, which includes a thorough consideration of alcohol's roles throughout the history of civilization, as well as several important disclaimers. The full version, in all its glory, can be obtained from the CrimethInc. chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous at 2695 Rangewood Drive, Atlanta, GA 30345 U.S.A. (cyberspace cadets: www.crimethinc.com)

Ecstasy vs. Intoxication: For a World of Enchantment, or Anarchaholism

Excerpted from Guy Debord's famous work, "Insobriety and the Spectacle"

Sloshed, smashed, trashed, loaded, wrecked, wasted, blasted, plastered, tanked, flicked up, bombed. Everyone's heard of the arctic people with one hundred words for snow; we have one hundred words for drunk. We perpetuate our own culture of defeat.

Hold it right there—I can see the sneer on your face: Are these anarchists so uptight that they would even denounce the only fun aspect of anarchism—the beer after the riots, the liquor in the pub where all that pie-in-the-sky theory is bandied about? What do they do for fun, anyway—cast aspersions on the little fun we do have? Don't we get to relax and have a good time in any part of our lives?

Do not misunderstand us: we are not arguing against indulgence, but for it. Ambrose Bierce defined an ascetic as "a weak person who succumbs to the temptation of denying himself pleasure," and we concur. As Chuck Baudelaire wrote, You must always be high. Everything depends on this. So we are not against drunkenness, but rather against drink! For those who embrace drink as a route to drunkenness thus cheat themselves of a total life of enchantment. Drink, like caffeine or sugar in the body, only plays a role in life that life itself can provide otherwise. The woman who never drinks coffee does not require it in the morning when she awakens: her body produces energy and focus on its own, as thousands of generations of evolution have prepared it to do. If she drinks coffee regularly, soon her body lets the coffee take over that role, and she becomes dependent upon it. Thus does alcohol artificially provide for temporary moments of relaxation and release while impoverishing life of all that is genuinely restful and liberating.

If some sober people in this society do not seem as reckless and free as their boozier counterparts, that is a mere accident of culture, mere circumstantial evidence. Those puritans exist all the same in the world drained of all magic and genius by the alcoholism of their fellows (and the capitalism, hierarchy, and misery it helps maintain)—the only difference is that they are so self-abnegating as to refuse even the false magic, the genie of the bottle. But other "sober" folk, whose orientation living might better be described as enchanted or ecstatic, are plentiful, if you look hard enough. For these individuals—for us—life is a constant celebration, one which needs no augmentation and from which we need no respite.

Alcohol, like Prozac and all the other mind-control medications that are making big bucks for Big Brother these days, substitutes symptomatic treatment for cure. It takes away the pain of a dull, drab existence for a few hours at best, then returns it twofold. It not only replaces positive actions which would address the root causes of our despondency—it prevents them, as more energy becomes focused on achieving and recovering from the drunken state. Like the tourism of the worker, drink is a pressure valve that releases tension while maintaining the system that creates it.

In this push-button culture, we've become used to conceiving of ourselves as simple machines to be operated: add the appropriate chemical to the equation to get the desired result. In our search for health, happiness, meaning in life, we run from one panacea to the next—viagra, vitamin C, vodka—instead of approaching our lives holistically and addressing our problems at their social and economic roots. This product-oriented mindset is the foundation of our alienated consumer society: without consuming products, we can't live! We try to buy relaxation, community, self-confidence—now even ecstasy comes in a pill!

We want ecstasy as a way of life, not a liver-poisoning alcohol holiday from it. "Life sucks—get drunk" is the essence of the argument that enters our ears from our masters' tongues and then passes out of our own slurring mouths, perpetuating whatever incidental and unnecessary truths it may refer to—but we're not falling for it any longer! Against inebriation—and for drunkenness! Burn every liquor store, and replace them with playgrounds! For a Lucid Bacchanalia, an Ecstatic Sobriety!

Spurious Rebellion

Practically every child in mainstream Western society grows up with alcohol as the forbidden fruit their parents or peers indulge in but deny to them. This prohibition only makes drinking that much more fascinating to young people, and when they get the opportunity, most immediately assert their independence by doing exactly as they've been told not to: ironically, they rebel by following the example set for them. This hypocritical pattern is standard for child-rearing in this society, and works to replicate a number of destructive behaviors that otherwise would be aggressively refused by new generations. The fact that the bogus morality of many drinking parents is mirrored in the sanctimonious practice of religious groups helps to create a false dichotomy between puritanical self-denial and life-loving, freewheeling drinkers—with "friends" like Baptist ministers, we teetotalers wonder, who needs enemies?

These partisans of Rebellious Drunkenness and advocates of Responsible Abstinence are loyal adversaries. The former need the latter to make their dismal rituals look like fun; the latter need the former to make their rigid austerity seem like common sense. An "ecstatic sobriety" which combats the dreariness of one and the blariness of the other—false pleasure and false discretion alike—is analogous to the anarchism that confronts both the false freedom offered by capitalism and the false community offered by communism.

Alcohol and Sex in the Rape Culture

Let's lay it on the table: almost all of us are coming from a place where our sexuality is or was occupied territory. We've been raped, abused, assaulted, shamed, silenced, confused, constructed, programmed. We're badasses, and we're taking it all back, reclaiming ourselves; but for most of us, that's a slow, complex, not yet concluded process.

This doesn't mean we can't have good, safe, supportive sex right now, in the middle of that healing—but it does make having that sex a little more complicated. To be certain we're not perpetuating or helping to perpetuate negative patterns in a lover's life, we have to be able to communicate clearly and honestly before things get hot and heavy—and while they are, and after. Few forces interfere with this communication like alcohol does. In this culture of denial, we are encouraged to use it as a social lubricant to help us slip past our inhibitions; all too often, this simply means ignoring our own fears and scars, and not asking about others'. If it is dangerous, as well as beautiful, for us to share sex with each other sober, how much more dangerous must it be to do so drunk, reckless, and incoherent?

Speaking of sex, it's worth noting the supporting role alcohol has played in patriarchal gender dynamics. For example—in how many nuclear families has alcoholism helped to maintain an unequal distribution of power and pressure? (All the writers of this tract can call to mind more than one such case among their relatives alone.) The man's drunken self-destruction, engendered as it may be by the horrors of surviving under capitalism, imposes even more of a burden on the woman, who must still somehow hold the family together—often in the face of his violence. And on the subject of dynamics...

The Tyranny of Apathy

It's said that when the renowned anarchist Oscar Wilde first heard the old slogan if it is humiliating to be ruled, how much more humiliating it is to choose one's rulers, he responded: "If it's humiliating to choose one's masters, how much more humiliating to be one's own master!" He intended this as a critique of hierarchies within the self as well as the democratic state, of course—but, sadly, his quip could be applied literally to the way some of our attempts at creating anarchist environments pan out in practice. This is especially true when they're carried out by drunk people.

In certain circles, especially the ones in which the word "anarchy" itself is more in fashion than any of its various meanings, freedom is conceived of in negative terms: "don't tell me what to do!" In practice, this often means nothing more than an assertion of the individual's right to be lazy, selfish, unaccountable for his actions or lack thereof. In such contexts, when a group agrees upon a project it often ends up being a small, responsible minority that has to do all the work to make it happen. These conscientious few often look like the autocratic ones—when, invisibly, it is the apathy and hostility of their comrades that forces them to adopt this role. Being drunk and disorderly all the time is coercive—it compels others to clean up after you, to think clearly when you won't, to absorb the stress generated by your behavior when you are too fucked up for dialogue. These dynamics go two ways, of course—those who take all responsibility on their shoulders perpetuate a pattern in which everyone else takes none—but everyone is responsible for their own part in such patterns, and for transcending it.

Think of the power we could have if all the energy and effort in the world—or maybe even just your energy and effort?—that goes into drinking were put into resisting, building, creating... Try adding up all the money anarchists in your community have spent on corporate libations, and picture how much musical equipment or bail money or food (-not-bombs... or, fuck it, bombs!) it could have paid for—instead of funding their war against all of us. Better: imagine living in a world where cokehead presidents die of overdoses while radical musicians and rebels live the chaos into ripe old age!

Sobriety and Solidarity

Like any lifestyle choice, be it vagabondage or union membership, abstention from alcohol can sometimes be mistaken as an end rather than a means.

Above all, it is critical that our own choices not be a pretext for us to deem ourselves superior to those who make different decisions. The only strategy for sharing good ideas that succeeds unfailingly (and that goes for hotheaded, alienating tracts like this one as well!) is the power of example—if you put "ecstatic sobriety" into action in your life and it works, those who sincerely want similar things will join in. Passing judgment on others for decisions that affect only themselves is absolutely noxious to any anarchist—not to mention it makes them less likely to experiment with the options you offer.

And so—the question of solidarity and community with anarchists and others who do use alcohol and drugs. We propose that these are of utmost importance.

Especially in the case of those who are struggling to free themselves of unwanted addictions, such solidarity is paramount: Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, is just one more instance of a quasi-religious organization filling a social need that should already be provided for by anarchist community self-organizing. As in every case, we anarchists must ask ourselves: do we take our positions simply to feel superior to the unwashed (er, washed) masses—or

because we sincerely want to propagate accessible alternatives? Besides, most of us who are not substance-addicted can thank our privileges and good fortune for this; this gives us all the more responsibility to be good allies to those who have not had such privileges or luck—on whatever terms they set. Let tolerance, humility, accessibility, and sensitivity be the qualities we nurture in ourselves, not self-righteousness or pride. No separatist sobriety!

Revolution

So anyway—what are we going to do if we don't go to bars, hang out at parties, sit on the steps or in front of the television with our forty ounce bottles? Anything else!

The social impact of our society's fixation on alcohol is at least as important as its mental, medical, economic, and emotional effects. Drinking standardizes our social lives, occupying some of the eight waking hours a day that aren't already colonized by work. It locates us spatially—living rooms, cocktail lounges, railroad tracks—and contextually—in ritualized, predictable behaviors—in ways more explicit systems of control never could. Often when one of us does manage to escape the role of worker/consumer, drinking is there, stubborn holdover from our colonized leisure time, to fill up the promising space that opens. Free from these routines, we could discover other ways to spend time and energy and seek pleasure, ways that could prove dangerous to the system of alienation itself.

Drink can incidentally be part of positive and challenging social interactions, of course—the problem is that its central role in current socializing and socialization misrepresents it as the prerequisite for such intercourse. This obscures the fact that we can create such interactions at will with nothing more than our own creativity, honesty, and daring. Indeed, without these, nothing of value is possible—have you ever been to a bad party?—and with them, no alcohol is necessary. When one or two persons cease to drink, it just seems senseless, like they are ejecting themselves from the company (or at least customs) of their fellow human beings for nothing. But a community of such people can develop a radical culture of sober adventure and engagement, one that could eventually offer exciting opportunities for drink-free activity and merriment for all. Yesterday's geeks and loners could be the pioneers of tomorrow's new world: "lucid bacchanalism" is a new horizon, a new possibility for transgression and transformation that could provide fertile soil for revolts yet unimaginable. Like any revolutionary lifestyle option, this one offers an immediate taste of another world while helping create a context for actions that hasten its universal realization.

No war but the class war—no cocktail but the molotov cocktail! Let us brew nothing but trouble!

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