

Being For Against

Tabatha Static

2003

I had seen the skinny man with the beard before. The last time was at an anti-war rally in Duluth, I think. He had been collecting signatures for a petition to legalize hemp, or to urge the UN into investigating voter fraud in Florida in 2000, or some such thing. He didn't have his clipboard this time. He had on a faded-out "Wellstone for Senate" t-shirt which must have been a few years old since Wellstone had been conveniently killed in a strange small plane crash three weeks before the 2002 congressional elections. But this guy didn't look like he was wearing the t-shirt ironically.

He looked over the material that I had for sale on the book table and made a sarcastic face. "OK, I get it. Now I know what you're against. But what are you for?" he asked me.

Lots of us have been asked this question lots of times before, right? This time I didn't give the long explanation about love, solidarity, mutual aid and radical direct democratic participation. Instead, I heard myself saying to the guy: "I'm for being against."

At the time, I thought that I was channeling that famous scene from the old '50s biker movie "The Wild One." It's when a young, campy Marlon Brando is at a bar and a woman looks him over and asks him "What are you rebelling against?" and he answers her question with the question: "Wha' d'ya got?" But now that I think about it, my comeback to the snippy liberal at my book-table was really about something else.

It is always a good idea to know exactly why we challenge, why we refuse, why we resist. And it is important to be able to offer alternative plans. But there are some times when it should be enough to be for being against, to reject for rejection's sake because of an allergy to unanimous approval.

I understand the feelings that made the man with the beard ask me that question, but to ask that question in that way shows a sad mistake in his thinking about the whole problem. It was sad that he was unable to imagine that anything positive would be left over after subtracting out civilization, governments, nationalities, sexism, religion, capitalism, racism and war from life. If he could imagine those things on his own, then he never would have had to ask me what I was for. Our languages and our imaginations are so narrow that now when I cross out something with "anti-" few can picture what else there is.

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The old moral question of whether one "thinks first of oneself or of others" falls apart when we come to think only of ourselves and for this reason negate the otherness of others.

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In a self-managed society, the prevention of communal squalor, of social malpractice in general depends, not on nobody being an authority but on everybody being an authority where her own needs and desires, her own self-interests, are concerned.

Self-discipline, as directly opposed to authoritarian discipline [is] the coherent use of my life for myself, according to my own immanent standards and to ends of my own, is in itself already a pleasure for me.

We are on the verge of liberation only when it can be said of each of us that s/he has become so rebellious, so irrepressible, and so unruly that s/he cannot be mastered by anything less than perself. Compassion doesn't need to be coerced out of us; it comes naturally. We feel others suffering, as well as their joy, because we are open to feeling our own.

—*For Ourselves* 1974

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