The Intimacies of Noise

A reply to Jesse Cohn[*]

Roger Farr

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> "One never really contests an organization of existence without contesting all of that organization's forms of language."
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> –Debord, *On the Passage of a Few Persons...*

If capital must continually decompose and then restructure standardized communication in order to maintain just enough cooperation as is needed to ensure efficient production, then the defection from this campaign in favor of creating autonomous and "unreadable" modes of communication and dissent emerges as a viable, if limited, tactic. Language and communication become critical sites of anarchist critique and experimentation.

This is the argument I've presented in some recent issues of FE. As a poet (and sometimes essayist) whose writing is informed by both linguistic and anarchist theory, as well as the history and tactics of the avant-garde, my concern is to extend, not foreshorten, our social horizon.

I am therefore very happy that Jesse Cohn has attempted to nuance my version of "anarchist poetics," and his essay gets off to a fascinating start, rereading "classical" anarchist texts in order to recover a theory of representation he feels has been overlooked. Fine stuff. After this survey, however, his thinking becomes more polemical (in the literal sense of creating two "poles" or sides to structure an argument), moving through a series of readings of anarchist culture and tactics that seems to renew the ancient quarrel between "lifestyle" and "social" anarchism."

By invoking the spectre of this debate, whether consciously or not, Jesse does a disservice to his research — research which I have found very inspiring, and which I urge people to read–because it prompts him at times to adopt a condescending tone (especially during his discussion of anarchist cultural spaces), and to make a number of hasty claims that result in a theorization of "the social" (and by extension, "social art") as mass consensus, rather than as potentiality.

As for the tone, this would be only a minor objection were it not indicative of Cohn's practice of assessing the *political* agency of (anarchist) culture with the classical *aesthetic* criteria of "harmony, melody, *brio.*" This is a mistake, I think, because it leads him to subordinate the social bonds created by counter-cultural movements like punk to universalizing criteria imposed from sources external to the movements themselves: i.e., he's invoking Kant instead of Crass. One instance of Cohn's use of this criteria is his claim that the sociability of both art and dissent should be measured by the quality of their "appeal" to a mass audience of "ordinary people," a formulation that is rooted in the Marxist/Gramscian notion of hegemony.

This understanding of what art and dissent "do," is, in my mind, irreconcilable with anarchism, because it views (anarchist) communication primarily as the transmission of reified representations (propaganda) rather than as lived experience, or "collective praxis." The performative *affect* of punk, for example–what Cohn describes as "loud," "badly amped," "shouting," and what I would call its "unreadability"–is its political "content." This is why so many hardcore bands publish their lyrics with their albums: "understanding" the "message" is not required during the performance, because *the performance is the message*. To demand that this performative unreadability take the

shape of a palatable or "appealing" representation is to strip it of its singularity; it is to demand homogeneity, not communication, which, as improvisational dance shows, can occur without standardization. The critique of "the conduit metaphor" I presented in both of my articles was an attempt to weaken the command of this model of communication.

Where I have argued that unreadability and "the strategy of concealment" help to build mutualism and intimacy among comrades, Cohn is concerned that this could lead to "insularity" and "isolation." I suppose this is a risk, one that all minority cultural formations must contend with. But I have difficulty imagining what anarchy, as a theory and as a practice, would be like without the myriad, unintelligible clamoring–the dissonant and dissenting *noise*–of its many "cliques" (or what the anarchists I know prefer to call "affinity groups" and what I sometimes call "intimacies").

These fragile and ephemeral forms of organization are integral to anarchism, and strengthening them is an important and difficult aspect of any prefigurative politics. Indeed, wasn't Bakunin, whose work Cohn cites as a precursor to his theory of representationalist "social art," booted out of the First International for defending "secret cells"? Yes, he was. And wasn't it also Bakunin who for many years published a journal called *l'Avant-Garde*, a title he chose, I believe, to refer to his contention that "the workers themselves" should move to "the forefront" of the struggle, and not out of some inclination towards elitist "vangaurdism," of which he was a virulent critic? Yes again.

Indeed, the term "avant-garde" does not mean "vanguard" or "elite," at least not in any of the literature I'm familiar with. It is better understood, as Peter Burger argues in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, as a turn against the institutionalization and commodification of artistic praxis. In this reading, avant-garde formations emerge as a tactical response to the neutralization of dissent that occurs under capitalism, where art (and its intrinsic movement against "bourgeois" society) is annexed to a sphere separate from life, before being redeployed against its producers as a kind of trophy, an ossified representation. It was in the spirit of this latter reading that I quoted Wolfi Landstreicher's deft formulation: "When I speak of poetry, I am not talking about versifying or wordsmithing. I am speaking about creating lives of passion, intensity and wonder."

This brings me to the way Cohn represents the context and the content of my articles when he's building his case for a "social art," an art that I admit sounded quite attractive, until I saw its own negativity surfacing in a series of misrepresentations and exclusions.

"Misrepresentations." Now, I'm on record as having described anarchist poetics as being rooted in a desire for "self-determination, joy, and autonomy ... a collective freedom not conceived of as 'political' in the narrow sense." And in my essay on argot, I concluded that "concealment requires that a speaker adopt a high degree of *empathy* with her interlocutors... concealment relies heavily on *collaboration* between participants." So I'm still trying to figure out how this poetics was reduced to an anecdote culled from an internet forum about an "erratic, individual eruption of desire and aggression" with racist implications. I find this analogy a bit of a stretch, to say the least!

"Exclusions." Cohn and I agree that the poetics of the unreadable might pose a threat to "broad social transformation," an expression that is not synonymous with, and may even be an antonym to, emancipation. Capitalism was a broad social transformation, as were communism, fascism, neo-liberalism, and industrialism. And yes, anarchist poetics, as I've articulated it, does indeed call for a break with existing models of communication. But this does not disqualify it from being "social." Again, if "social art" operates hegemonically, if it is a "tool" used to transmit a one-size-fits-all message "into every peasant's hut" (a horrible idea!), so that we're all speaking a "common language" with a "common voice" — a goal, which, need I point out, was part of the "broad social transformation" carried out by the European colonizers — then we may have a reached an impasse here; for I would argue that anarchist poetics becomes a threat to the integrity of "the social" only when that integrity is built upon the suppression of autonomy, joy, and diversity.

In the end, I'm left wondering what exactly constitutes "the social" for the "social anarchism" and the "social art" Cohn desires. Doesn't the sign of "the social" point, not so much to a consensus built upon ethical representations, but to a volatile network of free associations between various individuals and collectivities, a network which exists, under the negating alignments of capitalism (or, as many would have it, civilization!), primarily as *potentiality* and *possibility*?

And isn't this potentiality, even when it aspires to its most realized form–what Cohn and I call, for lack of a better term, *anarchy*–isn't this always nothing more and nothing less than a passionate encounter between an ir-

reducible multiplicity of interests and languages, a cacophonous noise and "living fire," as the surrealists called it, that eventually exceeds even the most sophisticated of representations?

What linguistic, artistic, or political composition is capable of representing this?

* A reply to The End of Communication? by Jesse Cohn, in this issue.