

Anarchism and the Anti-Authoritarian Personality

Is there a distinct anarchist personality type? Is there a discernible one among the marginally employed?

Jim Feast

All generalizations founder on the rock of their exceptions, but can it be said that certain definable character structures emanate from one's political philosophy or position within capital's work apparatus?

It is instructive that literary praise for the recently deceased, internationally acclaimed, Chilean author, Roberto Bolano, concentrate exclusively on his depiction of mysterious authors and texts, overlooking an equally prominent, political component of his work.

Take Bolano's masterpiece, *The Savage Detectives*, where critics note the unusual structure. The book consists of interviews in a criminal investigation of two poets in which what crime they committed is never explained.

The interviews describe their itinerant lives, one or the other working as a dishwasher in Italy, a fisherman in Spain, a stringer in Liberia, or at other dead-end jobs. Bolano's political argument is simple: Any genuine creativity, juice, or vitality left at this stage of capitalism is to be found below the bottom in an international, migrant precariat, those without regular employment and no job security.

Bolano contrasts the shallow lives of middle class literary luminaries, surrounded by minions and sycophants, to the tough, comradely life of his heroes, surrounded by female bodybuilders/waitresses, homeless people sleeping on the beach, poor fisherfolk, and others in the lower depths.

There is often a special link between anarchists and this stratum of workers. It's not that anarchist workers have generally been part-timers nor that semi-proletarian workers all become anarchists.

Rather, this link is based on three claims: 1) that each category of work tends to generally attract or create employees of similar character types; 2) that, as many 19th century thinkers such as Emma Goldman claimed, there is a typical anarchist personality; and 3) there is an elective affinity between these types.

By way of analogy, let's look at the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the U.S.'s most important anarchist union during the early years of the 20th century.

The Wobblies, as they were universally called, attracted full- and part-time workers, from textile workers to bindlestiffs, miners to hobos to its ranks, hoping to integrate them all into One Big Union, as their call to class war proclaimed.

One of the organization's key tactics—for example, in the free speech fights on the West Coast, when a soapbox speaker was jailed, the call would go out and hundreds of Wobblies would hobo in to join battle—depended on workers with very loose ties to employment.

Though many Wobs who streamed into towns like San Diego and Spokane for the free speech fights in the first years of the century probably abandoned full time jobs, it was in an era when routinized work was relatively new and workers had not fully adapted to it. This type of looseness of ties is a hallmark of part-timers. Just as their tactic seemed shaped with what we now call the precariat in mind, typical psychic attitudes of part-timers seem coincident with those of the prototypical anarchist.

This parallel is made explicit in the book *The Company I Keep* by modern era Canadian anarchist, semi-proletarian and versifier, Jordan Zinovich.

Zinovich writes, "It's difficult to separate my writing from my anarchism." His career has spanned being a backwoods Canadian free lifer, a squatter in London, a member of New York's Autonomedia publishing collective, and an ambassador-at-large for the Ruigoord Cultural Free Space in Amsterdam.

In *The Company I Keep*, a book of verse, he creates a semi-proletarian persona whose attributes can be used to establish the traits of an anarchist, anti-authoritarian personality.

It could be said that the working class proper, given its standardized 9 to 5 job, tends to become numbed and alienated. The semi-proletarian, constantly shifting workplaces and tasks, is less subject to habitualized perceptions and routines. In agreement with this characterization, Zinovich stresses his hero's rawness of perception:

"Each sensation is absolutely original:
a snowflake on a bubble
trembling at the edge
of disappearance"

Many of the jobs occupied by this class, such as harvesting, fishing, lumbeijacking, and even construction work, are seasonal, tied to the rhythms of nature. While this tie does not exist, say, for today's office temp, one could say her or his employment matches another rhythm, layoffs and hirings being in tempo with the business cycle.

Zinovich, who worked for five years as a tree planter in British Columbia, harks back to this historical profile in arguing the anarchist is ecological through and through.

Cone pickers and tree planters are hired only at the proper season, and even construction workers only work when weather permits. For the semi-proletarian, such relative closeness to the earth irradiates through all their other attitudes. The characteristic also suggests why anarchists have been at the forefront of the ecological movement for a blue/green planet.

In his poem, "Birth," Zinovich contrasts the perspectives of different workers. There is the view of those living according to an industrial rhythm.

"Too many people are impatient
They crane forward
with one ear cocked to the infinite...
They ponder, but don't 'understand.'"

But the knowers, the semi-proletariat, do understand "Time's language," which "flows from far above conscious thoughts," as he puts it. A bit obscure, yes, but the poet's assumption is that the casual worker, who cobbles together a new schedule each semester or week or growing season, has a view of time as fractured, ever-shifting and polyphonous, a view of temporality fundamentally different from that of the full timer who traditionally looks to a stable life trajectory: job leading to retirement. To Zinovich, those who see time as polyphonous are comprehending its true language.

The anarchist worker is constantly in conversation, and constantly joking, each trait derivative of the lifestyle of the semi-worker. Drawing from my own experience as an office temp in publishing, the typical full-timer quickly settles in, familiarized with a particular shop's routines so the work becomes the routine which domesticates their life to the tasks at hand.

However, moving from job to job, I had to continually reorient, which meant discovering the nuance of each workplace, something that could only be accomplished by talking to everyone.

As Canadian historian, Andre Drainville, characterizes this attitude, "It is the approach of those who must think in defensive and instrumental terms, who must create their own kin groups, their networks of protection, influence and social intercourse, who invent social equivalencies and codes of reciprocity from within the confines of an established [institution]."

From the temps' perspective, the precarious nature of their employment makes it hard to take deadlines and office intrigues seriously and easy to adopt (perhaps covertly) an ironic attitude. It's not that temps are particularly slackers or malcontents—they'd hardly be called back if they adopted those attitudes—but that, one and all, the part-timers I've worked with—and there was not an anarchist among them—could not take seriously the pretensions that

their employers existed to serve customers, benefit the world or do anything but line the bosses' pockets. These were pretensions by and large swallowed by full timers.

However, the temps would never voice these attitudes on the job; they want to be called back. This, having to constantly repress one's desire to puncture pretensions, is a formula for creating irony.

Defining the anarchist personality, which is nature- and dialogue-oriented, acutely aware and possessing an out-sized funny bone, might appear more flattery than analysis. But Zinovich goes on to suggest that these attributes have down sides.

The semi-proletarian, because of their helter-skelter, ever-shifting work patterns, often live wholly in the present. Given their disenfranchisement, semi-proletarians have a less complacent view of society's ideological lattice, something at the root of their humor, but such attitudes can lead to dropping out, rather than dropping in. Or, worse to intraclass crime and violence, racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes, and envying the rulers rather than opposing them.

And, need it be said that all who profess anarchist beliefs don't always act in terms of their beliefs? By this point, it probably seems my opening distinction between part-timers and anarchists was disingenuous. If anarchists share all the personality traits of the precariat, wouldn't that suggest the two groups are one and the same? But there's another way of seeing this.

Let us assume that if the world is to survive, its current form of capitalist organization will have to be replaced by a new one, that of a green, stateless cooperative commonwealth. And, that such a society will demand new character structures.

We can speculate that ideally anarchists, no matter what their positions in society, have created personalities by drawing on the model they find in the precariat, because this is the most appropriate character for living in

Sidebar — Text of poster by Lantz Arroyo

Lucio Urtubia

Anarchist, Bank Robber, Forger

But above all, Bricklayer

Lucio Urtubia Jimenez (born 1931) is a Spanish anarchist famous for his practice of political expropriation. At times compared to Robin Hood, Urtubia carried out bank robberies and forgeries throughout the 1960s and 1970s, funneling the money to revolutionary guerilla groups. His claim to fame was the forgery of Citibank traveler's checks in 1977. This act hit the financial giant so hard, its stock price plummeted.

Though Urtubia was ultimately jailed, the phony checks were still on the streets and spread all across Europe. The charges against him were dropped in exchange for the printing plates. After only six months in prison, Lucio Urtubia was released. Aside from his brief prison sentence, he never missed a day of work as a bricklayer. He is now retired and lives in France.

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