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Raising the Curtain: Anarchist Economics, Resistance, and Culture

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Abstract

Many accounts of anarchist economics argue for a specific visionary position, at times leaving aside the question of how to get to that future society. Anarchists who write about methods of achieving a new world free of domination often reduce struggles to instrumental and (classically) revolutionary practices of confrontation and class struggle. This article argues that in addition to class struggle, anarchists should fight for a post-capitalist future in the terrain of ideology and culture. Further, a truly holistic anarchist economics must account for resistance strategies to capitalism, not only through instrumental methods of struggle, but also through these interventions into culture and ideology.

People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth. -- Raoul Vaneigem

No discussion of economics from the perspective of those of us who actively resist capitalism would be complete without a discussion of ideology and culture. After all, ideology and culture have a special place in maintaining, as well as transforming, the status quo. This certainly wasn't lost on revolutionaries and militants of times past. But despite this history and wealth of theory, contemporary radicals often still relegate the problem of culture to secondary importance—a close second to transforming the structures of society.

Part of this is because so many still rely on economistic Marxist models for how society works. Marx (1977: preface), for his part, believed that the economic system of a given society was a major force for producing the culture, politics, and even consciousness of the whole of society¹:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life.

Marx believed that revolution came when the development of the forces of production began to conflict with the ways that property relations played out in society. Thus, according to Marx, as capitalism developed in the world and we became increasingly able to provide for everyone, that material fact would come into conflict with living in a world split between the wealthy few and the working many. This would lead to working people questioning the logic of living under capitalism, recognizing their own interests, and would be followed by a revolutionary rupture that would bring about socialism. This is, perhaps, a mechanical and over-simplified caricature, but a paragraph could hardly do Marx justice, as volumes upon volumes have been dedicated to interpreting his work, often times coming to wildly different conclusions.

While the revolution in Russia provided many Marxists with hope that this revolutionary rupture had finally begun to occur, it was not followed by international socialist revolution. Further, the Bolsheviks, who seized state power after the revolution, immediately set about to dismantling the democratic and self-managed character of the new institutions the revolution had ushered in, nurturing those organs that they controlled and disassembling those that they did not (for an interesting and short overview, see Wetzel 2008). This led to a reconsideration of the mechanical Marxist model, especially in the mid 1900s, taking a close look at ideology and culture. After all, where was this promised revolutionary rupture? Why hadn't workers recognized their collective interests and overthrown capitalism? The answer, for many radicals, could be found by looking at the cultural sphere.

How Ideology Rules Us

Perhaps some of the most interesting work on culture and ideology have come out of these Marxist attempts to explain, ironically enough, why Marxism didn't live up to its own promised socialist revolution. Radicals turned their attention to culture as they attempted to explain how false consciousness had embedded itself so deeply in the working class. Rather than material interest being the guiding principle of working class politics, many workers not only accepted society's institutional arrangements, they also were some of its most vocal supporters (a situation not much different from today in many contexts). Anarchists can learn a lot from what Marxists got right in these explanatory attempts.

Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, for example, seems particularly salient for contemporary anarchists. According to Gramsci, workers didn't end up fighting Marx's predicted revolution

because they had internalized the values of the ruling class. That is, capitalism, culturally, had become hegemonic—or naturalized. People began to see capitalism as a naturally occurring, common-sense method for organizing society and, therefore, were unable to even imagine the possibilities for alternatives to organizing society into owners and workers, masters and slaves.

Feminists and queers have put this concept to use to describe how we've come to view things like gender and sexual identity as well. Rather than seeing gender and sexuality as fluid, ambiguous, or at times off the map, we tend to view them as essential, rigid categories that occur naturally. This leads to essentialist understandings of what it means to be a "man", a "woman", "gay", "straight", etc. It also invisibilizes the lives of anyone who doesn't fit neatly into our dominant categories for gender or sexuality. Hegemonic ideas about gender also inform the ways that men come to dominate women. Interpersonally, this often leads to men dominating discussions, relegating women to secretarial tasks, people ignoring the contributions of women, etc. It also leads to institutionalized sexism and patriarchy being embedded in our society's governing structures.

Particularly for anarchists, but also for *anyone* opposed to all hierarchical social relations, we need not stop at applying Gramsci's analysis to class. We can benefit by borrowing from the above feminist and queer thinking as well. Likewise, we can demonstrate how naturalized and hegemonic our assumptions have become surrounding race and white supremacy; the ways that we devalue and destroy eco-systems and our natural environment; and how we've come to see the entire non-human world as a resource for our use, devoid of value outside of human benefit. And anarchists can also offer our own unique criticisms of common-sense notions surrounding the state.

Indeed, part of the task of a contemporary anarchist economics should be to develop a distinctly *anarchist* criticism of the dominant ideology as well—not just in terms of critiquing capitalist property relations, but also the hegemonic ideas surrounding state authority that make people automatically assume that THE way to address the excess, exploitation, and poverty inherent in capitalism is to find the right hierarchical and state-based "solution" to it. Most people can't even imagine an economy that isn't controlled by either capitalists or the state (or, most often, some combination of the two) and the prominence of issues like nationalized healthcare, welfare, and the like effectively limit the conversation to this sloppy either/or scenario.

These hegemonic beliefs about the state are partially imposed in social life through ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1971)—especially through formal education within the context of a hierarchical (and sick) society (see e.g. Armaline and Armaline 2012). From early on, we are pounded with the idea that the state is our savior, that "doing politics" means voting for a representative to make decisions for us rather than acting on our own behalf, and that the opposite of centralized state authority (anarchism) is chaos. One can even see echoes of the acceptance of this governing ideology (and explanation of what "anarchism" is) in portions of the anarchist milieu, as some anarchists criticize organizations and institutions *as such* rather than how they operate within the framework of our existing social relations. But anarchists have never opposed organization as such. Rather, our disagreements are over organizational form, purpose, and duration.

Anarchists can also learn a lot from what some of these Marxist attempts at explaining the constraining effects of ideology and culture got wrong. Perhaps one of the best examples is contained in Horkheimer and Adorno's (1994) critique of the culture industry. To Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry under capitalism produces cultural goods for popular consumption in much the same way factories assemble standardized parts. Mass cultural goods are routinized, predictable, and formulaic. Worse still, they serve as distractions, as people become passive consumers of "easy" cultural products rather than learning to appreciate "difficult" high culture--which is much more likely to critique the status quo. However, "high" culture, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is reserved to the elite classes, thus containing any real threat to capitalism.

This theory is littered with problematic assumptions, many of which likely stemmed from the fact that Adorno had little confidence that ordinary, working people could be agents of revolutionary change. For one, this analysis paints working people with an overly homogenous brush, as if all people take the same "reading" from popular cultural forms. In fact, the working class is diverse and among such a diverse population people take away many different meanings as they go through the process of decoding (Hall 1980) art, music, etc.—some of which are at odds with the intended message of a given piece. Secondly, this suggests that workers are the stupid dupes of capitalist cultural products, lacking the ability to critically analyze society and alter it. This can lead to a disregard for attempts at altering society altogether. After all, what is the use of anarchism if people don't have the potential to act in their interests to alter society? This would mean that radical change is not possible—and the historical record speaks differently.

Finally, this analysis of the culture industry swallows the elitist notion that we can place hierarchical value on cultural products and that, in fact, what the upper class enjoys is that which is most "difficult", sophisticated, and good. These markers of distinction between aesthetic preferences have historically been used as methods of distinguishing "proper" upper-class taste cultures from those of the common rabble (see e.g. Bourdieu 1984, Gans 1999, Levine 1988). Suggesting that the cultural forms preferred by working people can be judged as less "sophisticated" than those preferred by the ruling class accepts the class elitism that created those taste hierarchies in the first place.

This is by no means an exhaustive review of the literature surrounding the problem of culture and ideology and their relationship to resistance to capitalism (such a review is beyond the scope of a single journal article). However, the theoretical developments outlined in this modest section, I think, can inform anarchist practice in undermining capitalism and the state. Further, they illustrate how ideology is implicated in the maintenance of the status quo—how ideology rules us.

Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" shows us how hierarchical values come to be seen as the natural, unquestionable, common-sense values of everyone. These values get dispersed throughout social life through ideological state apparatuses, especially in formal schooling. It can be pointed out that these hegemonic notions about the superiority of the ruling class inform even the theories of radicals at times, subconsciously swallowing the belief that the wealthy are more "cultured" than the rest of us. We can also demonstrate how the ideology of statehood has

become so embedded in social life that even questioning the logic of the state can lead to serious repercussions—the least of which is not being taken seriously. Anyone who has critiqued patriotism in centers of state-chauvinism and loyalty knows well that the consequences for not expressing the expected enthusiasm for being ruled can easily lead to outright violence.

These naturalized assumptions about a kind, benevolent, democratic, and participatory state (that is necessary for human social organization!) are particularly difficult to overcome—precisely because this anti-logic pervades so much radical thinking, and is endemic to liberal and conservative thought. Our notions around the necessity of statehood have become so completely hegemonic that even erstwhile "radical" individuals and organizations now help campaign for reformist parties like the Green Party in the USA, as if electing a kinder and gentler ruler somehow represents a break with the existing society. And many radicals still cling to the idea that we require a vanguard Party to use the state in order to force a better society on us from above, as if the state is some big, coercive comic book hero ready to swoop in and save us from our rulers.

So what does this mean for bringing about social transformation?

I think it shows that the economic sphere is closely connected to every other sphere of life. Therefore, "anarchist economics", like all of social life, is not given to easy reduction. This also means that the cultural work that we do matters. When feminists began saying that the "personal is political", they had a good point (and still do). What follows, then, are some theoretical and strategic suggestions given the problems of ideology and culture outlined above.

Some Suggestions for Intervention

The German sociologist, Max Weber (2002), quite eloquently showed in his famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the power that culture has. Because of the ascetic nature of Calvinism, people would work hard and save their money rather than spend it frivolously. The resulting capital accumulation helped lay the basis for investment in nascent industries that led to the rise of capitalism. This illustrates clearly that the divide between "structure" and "culture" is problematic, as they mutually effect, and constitute, one another (rather than the vulgar Marxist idea that the economic base has a determining effect on the culture of a given society).

If we accept that we can rid ourselves of the mechanical economism of vulgar Marxism, it seems to me that the first thing we can do, particularly as anarchists, is to discard this notion of there being an unbridgeable chasm between two "camps" within anarchism—lifestylists and social anarchists. When Bookchin (1995) wrote his polemic *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, he used the term "lifestylist" to denote such a wide range of people within anarchism that it's unclear what exactly he meant by the term (other than that it was reserved for people he had disagreements with). However, I hear it most often used by anarchists contemporarily to insult people who find value in (and politicize!) attempting to embody their politics in their daily lives.

The problem with this should be obvious. If the culture(s) that we create and participate in have an effect on society's structures, then part of strategizing for achieving a stateless socialism

should take this into account. Further, as anarchists—opposed to all forms of domination—is stateless socialism really "enough"? What good is a stateless socialism, for example, if women are still subordinated to men under such a system? How does stateless socialism guarantee an end to rigid gender roles and essentialist and heavily policed categories for "sexual identity"? How does stateless socialism itself "solve" racism? Perhaps more to the point, what good is a stateless socialism if we continue polluting our environment to the point of extinction (as we are already doing to many species)?

Anarchists could learn a lot from feminists (and vice versa), but one thing clearly sticks out here in the context of this discussion. As the anarchist women's organization, *Mujeres Libres*, noted decades ago, "power has its own logic and will not be abolished through attention to economic relations alone" (Ackelsberg 2005: 37). The personal is, indeed, the political. Things like men treating women with dignity and respect, riding bicycles instead of driving cars, confronting internalized racism, creating and maintaining community gardens, etc. are not going to bring on "the revolution" (another larger conversation could be had by exactly what's meant by that particular formulation). However, they do move us closer to lifeways that are sustainable while addressing hierarchies that would not automatically be resolved under stateless socialism. These can be part and parcel of what Bookchin (1969), ironically enough, referred to as "revolutionary lifestyles" in his earlier work.

Beyond the individual actions mentioned above, collective activities like Food Not Bombs, "really really free markets", setting up infoshops and social centers can all challenge the prevailing notion that people will not labor without some monetary gain. They also demonstrate on a small scale that we can organize among ourselves and don't require state directives to act collectively (however limited these instances may be). This kind of "propaganda by the deed", as Uri Gordon (2012) refers to some of these interventions, is useful in creating empowering cultures in which we get to experience non-hierarchical organization within our bodies and share that experience with others.

I want to be perfectly clear here about what I'm suggesting. I am not suggesting that these activities can replace work in social movements; or that they can replace actively attacking capital and the state; or that alone they could bring about the radical transformations anarchists want to bring about. What I am suggesting is that we refuse a reductionist view that THE way to bring about social change is through some revolutionary upsurge that in a single event magically fixes problems that a change in social structures alone obviously cannot fix by itself. Likewise, a recognition of the value of all of these kinds of activities would go far in extinguishing some of the debilitating sectarianism that arises from a belief in discrete "camps" of anarchists, "unbridgeable chasms" and the like.

Furthermore, this move away from reductionism of all kinds brings us closer to having a much more nuanced understanding of radical social change. The need for radicals to prove the supposed "primacy" of one particular form of hierarchy over all others is quickly becoming passé. Contemporarily, radicals are much more likely to use an intersectional (see, e.g. Hooks 1984, Hill Collins 1990, Boellstorff 2007, Cole 2008) approach to social analysis and change, as advanced by black feminists and womanists. The idea that some struggles are secondary, to be dealt with "on the morrow of the revolution" is, thankfully, taking a backseat to real solidarity in

analysis and action (Ackelsberg 2005: 38). Current social movement work is moving towards alliance politics, with disparate groups of people working together, regardless of ideological differences, to end *all* forms of domination. This reflects a pragmatic ecumenicism rather than a demand for everyone to have The Correct Line on every issue (for an excellent example of this see Best and Nocella 2006).

I also think we can state with confidence that, clearly, popular education should continue to be put to use by anarchists who have the inclination and capacity in the here and now—both to combat hegemonic ideas about our relations of ruling, but also to provide alternatives to ideological state apparatuses, especially as expressed through formal schools. I've written about the tensions of being an anarchist in the university before, both as a student (Armaline and Shannon 2009) and as an instructor (Shannon 2009). In short, I recognize the troubles that go along with working within the system of formal education for anti-authoritarians and the problems of trying to co-create free spaces in institutions that were built to function as ideological cages, though I am not prepared to abandon formal schools completely to the apostles of the status quo.

But clearly, we could also put energy into setting up alternatives to state-run schools, as anarchists have been noted for doing in the past. Community spaces like infoshops can be used as sites for popular education. Anarchists can work to establish free schools and counter educational institutions in order to build non-hierarchical forms for spreading ideas that counter those put forward by society's masters. And we can support existing efforts embodied in our counter-institutions and the many informal spaces set up for radical discussion and debate that are not confined to formal academic institutionsⁱⁱ. Although, without overthrowing the existing social order, these counter-institutions will remain niches for radical thought, they can at least provide a small counter to ideological state apparatuses. At their best, they can provide spaces for helping empower people and connecting education to participation in social movements in the process of attempting to radicalize them.

Finally, if we're going to be willing to move beyond economism and class reductionism (something anarchists are known for), we can recognize the value in reinventing our daily lives and the role this plays in revolutionary politics (again, something anarchists have a history of attempting). We can also dispose of the idea that there can be only one revolutionary subjectivity (most typically "working class").

For this, we might learn from radical queers, for whom this has become a political project in and of itself. Smashing capitalism includes smashing many of the subjectivities that have been created within its history. Some of us do not fit neatly into pre-made markers of identity. Others move around fluidly between gender and sexual practices. Still others prefer ambiguity. Part of the project of bringing about social transformation must also "include a radical reorganization of sexuality"—one that doesn't force people into supposedly stable identities as a result of their sexual and/or gender practices, then create hierarchies of value out of those identities (Heckert 2004: 101). While I am not suggesting a queer standard by which people's sexual or gender practices are judged (a project that would, by definition, be very "unqueer"), I *am* suggesting that we support the efforts of people who invent new subjectivities, identities, and ambiguities as well

as those who refuse identification altogether. After all, some oppressions are so completely bound up in discourse that structural changes could never fully address them.

Further, as long as *any* of these hierarchies exist, it invites the re-emergence of all the others. None of us are free while others are oppressed and the project of bringing about a libertarian socialist society is completely bound up with the project of destroying all other forms of structured inequality, coercion, and control.

...Raising the Curtain

I remember one friend describing the process of education as having the curtains raised in her house. She described her life as living in a house that she perceived as the be-all end-all of existence. She knew the house very well and was acquainted with its contents intimately. She never got to see what was outside, spending all day everyday confined within its walls. She never had any reason to believe that anything else existed. And because she never saw what was outside of it, there was little reason to even think about what she might find outside the windows if she looked. Having access to new information was like someone coming into her house and raising the curtains. She explained that now she felt like she could see how many of the things she'd always taken for granted—and how those things, indeed *everything*, should be questioned. Such is the nature of ideology, which serves as a way of containing instead of critical reflection and questioning.

Her story, and others like it, not only illustrate that sometimes, in some contexts, it's enough to simply point out the irony of living in a world where one can see the Statue of "Liberty" from behind the walls of Riker's Island Prison. It also demonstrates that sharing ideas can be a process that breaks down the divide between the giver and receiver of knowledge—that we can learn from each other if we care to listen.

It reminds me that one of the things that we could do to intervene in the stifling and greedy culture encouraged by capitalism is simply to listen to one another. Too often, our politics are framed as denunciations of what we see as our ideological "opponents". We argue to win rather than communicate to grow. And who would want to join in such a divided and sectarian movement? How many people would be comfortable throwing their lot in with a bunch of smug contrarians?

I've tried to make the case here that when we look at anarchist economics and resistance to capitalism, we should not relegate the cultural to secondary importance—nor should we see the "cultural" and "structural" as distinct spheres of life. Part of this process should be "raising the curtain" and challenging orthodoxy. Another part should be creating a reflexive practice that tries to build egalitarian cultural forms in the here and now. Again, it bears repeating, this is not a call to abandon social movements or to stop attacking the institutional arrangements that rule over us (and were created without our consent). It is a call to build a holistic politics that refuses to ignore the role of daily life *and* collective action in bringing about change. It's my belief that such a holistic view gives us the best chance of transforming the totality of social relations. And, as an anarchist, I believe we should accept nothing less.

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Notes

ⁱ Some have even suggested that Marx thought the economy *determined* the rest of social life.

ⁱⁱ For some examples of attempts at creating radical counter-institutions, see <http://www.transformativestudies.org/>; <http://www.zmag.org/>; <http://www.globalcommonsfoundation.org/>; <http://www.anarchist-studies.org/>; <http://www.naasn.org/>; <http://imaginenoborders.org/>