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Aragorn!
To Dance With The Devil
2007

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To Dance With The Devil

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the world on our own terms. The fight is more important than the outcome.

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exists on an enormous scale, the scale of 300 million, 1 million, or even a hundred thousand, it is not possible to believe that it will not form a monopoly on violence, an ideological system that preaches freedom while practicing constraint, and an economic system that alienates for the purpose of expediency. Perhaps anarchism is the recognition that a society worth living in should be of a scale within which one can actually have some kind of direct impact.

There is nothing that can be done to reclaim capitalism. Not only has it been the ideological foundation for the extraction of resources and the economic basis of human suffering for centuries, but the term remains a meaningless abstraction. At the same time there is the false opposition of anarchist anti-capitalists; pretending to stand outside capitalism the same way they would stand in protest outside chain stores or a gathering of world leaders reflects the weakness of individualistic action. This isn't improved by the anti-capitalism of left communist traditions whose meek declarations of total opposition are only slightly less individuated than the practices of boycott and self-flagellation.

In this essay there has been no definition of anarchism itself other than to acknowledge the inadequate definitions that have preceded us. In addition, the positive anarchist principles[9] are an inadequate beginning to an anarchism of today; they are the elegant principles of another time. If anarchism is to face the challenging times ahead it must become the mongrel beast born of the disparate parts of its stately and negative origins. It must become capable of recognizing the complicated relationship between living in the world and against the world, and instead of erring in the direction of liberalism or asceticism. Anarchism must never become a contract between anarchists and a society that doesn't exist, and it should never be a settled question. Anarchism is conflict without compromise, without rulers, and with the choice to engage with

[9] Solidarity, Mutual Aid, and Direct Action

sile strength over less. One desires a connection to the land that they live on that is greater than what a contract, bank, or surveyor can provide. One desires relationships that don't fall easily under the categories of friend, lover, or family. One desires escapes from even the most pleasant situation one finds oneself in. The simplistic solutions of against approaches to these problems are brittle; they crack at the slightest change in orientation from their strength. Critique weakens tensility rather than strengthening it.

The coordination of capitalism with the political apparatus, religion, and cultural expectations regarding relationships makes it seem natural. These relationships developed over time, largely by force, and are worth studying. What is the relationship between the people who go to the same market on Tuesday, the same church on Sunday, and attend the same concerts on Friday nights? Compare this to a group that meets once a year under a flag of truce and spends the rest of the year in open hostility. The anarchist project would be to engage with these examples not because they are worth emulation but because they demonstrate principles of tensile strength.

Tensility can be seen as the relationship between frequency, intensity, variety, and duration of encounters. In the first example we see relationships with relatively high frequency and variety, with low intensity (with occasional high intensity around music) that happens over a long period of time, probably years. In these relationships, even without knowing each other's names, we have a closeness that is not about class composition, shared alienation, or the political project of the total transformation of society. In the second example there is far less closeness with low frequency and variety but high intensity that happens over a long duration. The difference of tensility between these two examples results not from the participant's connection to a shared struggle or idea but from variety, frequency, and manageability.

If there isn't a simple for to the anarchist against, then perhaps the problem is one of scale rather than goals. As long as society

We would like our relationship with capitalism to be simple; we are against it. But behind the simplicity of taking a firm stance is the tragedy of the anarchist archetype. A fixed stance against capitalism, hierarchy, god, the state, oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia (and more); demonstrating curiosity only to find new things to say "no" to. If anarchism[1] is going to continue being interesting, relevant, or challenging into this century, then our reactionary pose has to be confronted.

Let's establish terms. Let us enclose our understanding of capitalism within an anarchist framework rather than a dictionary definition or being enclosed within it ourselves.

Up till now anarchists have defined themselves along the lines of "people who are against all systems of authority" with the systems listed (usually in about this order) being the state, capitalism, the church, civilization, patriarchy, racism, homophobia, etc. This negative definition follows Hegel's "critique of everything that was hitherto held to be the objective truth,"[2] placing anarchists in the role of being socially conscious solipsists, watching the world they refuse to participate in.

Why, then, doesn't anarchism define itself as the idea of being for such values as freedom and equality? Freedom and equality, much like all the terms anarchists are against, are open-ended words that demand further engagement before anyone has any idea what they mean. Does freedom mean the same thing that the US

[1] The term used throughout this article is anarchism. While I generally support the idea of there being a distinction drawn between a system called anarchism and the desire for something called anarchy, with one being critiqued as an ideology and the other as something else, I also believe that it is a waste of time to confuse the terms with the distinction. In addition, the amount of attention placed on the difference between the two terms has created an anarchyism, an ideology of terms. As a consequence the critique of ideology has become a parody of itself.

[2] Marcuse, Herbert; Reason & Revolution. Part II, The Rise of Social Theory www.marxists.org

says it is for and that it institutes as a personal right?[3] Does equality mean the same thing that Communists mean when they refer to it? The taint of the varied uses of these terms has meant that modern anarchists minimize their use of them.

The negative definition of anarchism is not subject to the same scrutiny. Is this because there has never been, nor will there ever be, a regime ruled by the tyranny of being against? Is it perhaps because anarchists do not see their own complicity in the things that they are against (as demonstrated, for example, by their participation in the political process of petition and ballot[4])? Anarchists are a part of the very system they are against. The line between the constituent parts of that whole and the unified whole is left, by and large, unexamined.

For this, the activist imagination[5] is largely to blame in recent times. Anarchists draw as much, if not more, on the perception that the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the Sixties were effective models of political and social change. As a result they draw inspiration from the so-called influential militants rather than the spontaneous actions of people, from the meeting and the protest rather than the riot or work slowdown, from the politics rather than the humans. This practice turns the negative definition of anarchism on its head as a positive and reactionary view of social change.

[3] Which isn't actually true. The Declaration of Independence only refers to free states; the Bill of Rights refers to the freedom of speech, the press, assembly, petition, and arms.

[4] Even to the extent of participating in the elections of politicians (mayor of Arcata, Gonzalez in SF) and petitions (which is what protests are) to the state.

[5] The activist first and foremost believes in her/his own role in cause-and-effect. Their imagination leads them to believe, "If we activists do X, then the government/company/agency/group/person will do Y. And if Y (or any compromised version of Y) happens, then we are responsible and should take our bows and issue our press releases."

culture. This myth is powerful: powerful enough to keep people in misery playing the lottery, powerful enough for people to put themselves in cargo containers to be shipped across the ocean, and powerful enough for people no longer to see capitalism as something to struggle against. Conscious class struggle in the US is a non-starter either strategically or ideologically, Marxist (even marxist-with-a-black-flag) rhetoric to the contrary.

Whether defined by anarchists, Marxists, political philosophers, or economists, the assumptions in defining capitalism frame the ability to think outside, against, and in relation to it. Since anarchists have assumed that they are somehow outside of capitalism, that it is something outside of their experience, their daily lives, and their principles, they have not had a coherent way to engage the liberal notions of individual rights, the economic view of society, or the positive perception that capitalist social relations have had on a preponderance of people.

Under the pale blue moon

Tensile strength is the amount of force required to pull something apart. Most of us test tensility every day and, like many properties, we do not need to measure it to understand its effects. A romantic relationship ends because of a series of small inconsiderations. Workers grumble about an asshole manager but nothing happens besides the complaining. A radical returns to her family home for the holidays even after she has declared her rejection of normative values and relationships. Tensility has a variety of axes: economic, emotional, cultural.

If we were to be generous in approaching an answer to the question of why the current economic system works so well (emotionally, ideologically, materially) for so many people, it would not be because people are naturally inclined towards shopping, petroleum, or property-rights but because they prefer greater ten-

life, liberty, and even property the individual is actually allowed to have.

Anarchists would do well to recognize liberal capitalism's reliance on the social building blocks of principles (rights), negotiation (the social contract), and checks-and-balances (voting). Capitalism-as-exchange ends up being invisible in this definition of capitalism, and that is what makes this definition such an effective way to defend intellectually the relationship one has to capitalism. Unchecked domination, inherited power, and the irrationality of believing in the state's desire to defend an individual's rights are invisible here. Who could be against rights, the ability of individuals to enter into contracts with each other and the state, and our ability to keep the state in check? This is the way people can understand themselves within a functioning social order where their own invisibility within it is far less important than the obviousness of defending every aspect of it. Sometimes if it seems believable then it is believed.

Finally, capitalism is defined in the US as the current economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned, and profits are gained in a free market. Used in this way, we accept capitalism's ahistorical nature (always existing, outside of context, space, or time) and the existence of a free market. This is another economic understanding that differs from the Marxist one; it has a different mythological framework, one where capitalism-itself is the sun, rather than the exploitation of labor.

In this view, capitalism never sets and each of us if free to sell ourselves as labor and buy cheap products shipped from around the world. Truly free. The sun was placed there before the US was founded and since then nothing else has happened; everything here has grown under its light. The freedom we have as consumers is the same as the freedom we have as investors. The connections these ideas have to reality wither in comparison to their rhetorical and propagandistic social power within US

We must learn the moves

To the extent that an anarchist definition of capitalism deviates from the Marxist one, it does so along the lines of being emotional and value-laden.

> For the capitalist and the property owner it [property] mean[s] power and the right, guaranteed by the State, to live without working, the power and the right to live by exploiting the work of someone else, those who are forced to sell their productive power to the lucky owner of both[6]

or

> Capitalist… economies make human interactions into commodities: policing, medical care, education, even sexual relations become services that are bought and sold.[7]

This follows the habit of otherworldliness; defining a system that each of us partakes in as separate and outside of ourselves and our activity. While They exploit, force, and commodify, we do something else entirely. Organize resistance, plant community gardens, group bike rides, or protesting them, something outside of their recognition.

The useful thing about the negative anarchist definition of capitalism is that it is not ambivalent, describing capitalism as some post-modern creature that we can pretend to have a relationship of power with, as the culmination of history, or something that could be taken or left.

[6] Cutler, Robert M. (ed.); From Out of the Dustbin: Bakunin's Basic Writings 1869–1871 (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).

[7] CrimethInc.; Fighting For Our Lives: an anarchist primer

A distinct element of the anarchist understanding of capitalism is that it uses the same language of personal responsibility (although in this case, that of others) that is used to determine one's own behavior. The way you challenge the commodification of human life is to change your relationship with commodities personally; by consuming less, consuming more strategically, or consuming on "your terms." Capitalism is understood less as a social phenomenon than as a violation of the anarchist principle of means and ends being inseparable.

The Marxist definition of capitalism, by contrast, is not subjective. Capitalism is the mode of production that extracts the greatest possible amount of surplus value by the class of private owners, and that consequently exploits labor power (aka the proletariat). This definition is about value, class, power, and production. Those who hold to this economic orientation further claim that through a scientific evaluation of economics, particularly the labor theory of value, the problems with capitalism can be dissected and deeply understood. Furthermore the solutions provided as socialism, or more radically as communism, arguably have been analyzed through this scientific process rather than a subjective one.

This definition leaves out most human understandings of what living capitalism is. Capitalism is not living on credit, paying rent, dealing with bureaucrats, not having the time to spend with friends and loved ones, but is the exploitation of one's labor power by the productive forces, thereby creating class tension. The struggle to understand oneself in capitalism (by this definition) is the class struggle, a conflict which, when resolved, is the only hope for the oppressed class.

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class; if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along

with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.[8]

For anarchists the useful characteristic of this definition is to understand the objective, in this case economic, gaze. It is often said that if you want to read a mainstream perspective that takes Marx seriously you need to read the Wall Street Journal. They may rarely mention his name but economic tension, class conflict, is managed by the readers of the Journal while the rest of society obsesses about the plight of celebrities and reality show outcomes. At the same time that this objective calculation of our situation is useful, it is also a mechanism by which our powerlessness to bring about any change in the situation is rationalized and perpetuated. For every laughable Communist denunciation of anarchist optimism is an anarchist demand for class war by the children of the rich. Rhetoric aside, the only real class war is of the owners against all.

Classic Liberals define capitalism as the social system based on the principle of inalienable individual rights, including life, liberty, and property. This definition is the most common ideological understanding by Americans. It accepts the notion of a society comprised of a balanced relationship between individuals and the ruling order, ie the state. A place where self-governing rational individuals respect each others' rights, the state is checked by the process, and keeps out of the way of the citizenry. This Lockean notion underscores a kind of theoretical logical consistency that sits well for many defenders of the current economic system by placing our role as rational actors on a stage of somewhat human scale. The disconnect between this idea (with its ethnocentric notions of property, rationality, and the individual) and the reality of the state's monopoly on violence, determines exactly how much

[8] Marx & Engels; The Communist Manifesto