Contemporary Obstacles To Anarchist Thinking

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Contents

1. 3
2. 3
3. 3
4. 4

1.

There are a number of obstacles to anarchist thinking today. First, there is the separation of thinking from action such that one cannot find within thinking any form of direct action; but the worse obfuscation occurs when one cannot find any thinking within one's everyday activities. This latter gesture involves critically examining our praxes in order to discern therein an ideological framework. American anarchists should be the subject to the most scrutiny since they practice within the land of pragmatism (whose root word is 'practice') – which is, in turn, the ideological framework of contemporary Western capitalism – such that truth is derived only from its consequences, that is, from its 'cash value.' Propaganda of the deed is therefore within this context only the intensification of hegemonic propaganda, that is, ideology. The paradox is therefore that those who attempt to claim that thinking and action should be reunited are those who fundamentally refuse thinking (whereby 'thinking' implies the mental ability to engage in ideological critique). It is therefore a question of whether or not anarchism can ever find for itself a home within the American context, or indeed within the European context. No wonder most 'anarchists' (by name) are found in the West, it is also the place most welcoming of anarchists.

2.

Anarchism, fleeting or universal? The question seems to me to be an important one because it introduces a temporal dimension. Is anarchism a subjective and objective transformation akin to what Lacanian psychoanalysts refer to as 'a pass' or an 'act'? Or is anarchism today a time which extends beyond the fleeting moment? If we begin within the pragmatic orientation that we are likely to imagine the two positions as opposite ends: there are practices which open up temporary autonomous spaces – the anarchism of a single protest or a punk rock show – and there are impossible revolutionary moments that we dream about which open up a fundamentally new world. Yet, both of these positions are trapped within a framework which neglects the contemporary moment. Today's world is one of urgency and addiction. Contemporary capitalism presents us all with moments of profound crisis. The trap is to respond to these moments of intensity with urgent practical demands: mutual aid networks, solidarity campaigns, and so on. The world within which we are situated today necessitates urgent demands which can only be met with provisional solutions: a new drug, a software update, another festival, and so on. The circuit of the revolutionary subject should never find itself trapped within a movement of intensity – subjective destitution – toward a 'quick fix' which solicits a desire and then a fall back into subjective destitution. Today is a time for patience, a refusal of the response to the urgent demands of our contemporary crises.

3.

Our enemy – who is it now? So long as we remain literalists – like those fundamentalist readers of holy scripture – rather than structuralists we shall only be capable of thinking in terms of a finite series of 'places of power.' This was the discovery of the post-structuralists, notably Saul Newman in his earlier (and much more radical) book *From Bakunin to Lacan*. The situation within which we find ourselves today is not all that different from the one discussed by

Bakunin and Marx so many decades ago. Yet, our analysis has changed. We therefore ought to shift our focus from 'the state,' 'capitalism,' 'racism,' 'patriarchy,' and so on, toward one of desire, power, subjectivity, and enjoyment. We should ask ourselves how our enjoyment is implicated within vast structures of power; here, we should not be afraid to discuss enjoyment as if it were a political factor. Thus, the old expression supposedly attributed to Emma Goldman – 'if I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution' – should today read: 'if I have to dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution.' When dancing and happiness have become the cornerstone of the Western world we have only to assert once again our individual choice to no longer enjoy. It seems clear today that power today is not necessarily locatable within a finite list of 'places of power' but is rather structured according to a certain matheme, one which Lacan named as his fifth discourse: 'the capitalist discourse.' Today's capitalism is therefore almost entirely inseparable from science. Their convergence results in the proliferation of little objects of desire – what Lacan named 'lathouses' – that multiply and always prepare themselves to satisfy and excite our desires. When one of these objects loses its lustre, there is a new one waiting somewhere else.

Yet, this problem is also deeply epistemological. Even revolutionary poetry and literature has become recuperated by capitalist discourse. Today's art is reduced ever more to 'words of wisdom,' found in best selling poetry (such as Rupi Kaur's), or in the monologues on *Grey's Anatomy.* There are always little words of wisdom prepared in advance to support our desire: each poem, each episode, each epistemological piece, stands on its own can be replaced by a contradictory one at any time. This is not the loss of universal truth so much as it is the ascendancy of narcissism captured by the market. When the best selling books of poetry are words of profound affirmation rather than the dark truths of Baudelaire, we are living in a time of revolutionary decline. How to spot words of wisdom? They are always written in the following form: "sometimes … it is okay that …" In other words, it is a 'particular affirmative' logic. It is becoming evident now that policy takes on this particular affirmative logic as well, and this can be seen in the latest Citizenship Amendment Act under Prime Minister Modi in India (it affirms citizenship to selected categories/identities while implicitly not affirming it to Muslims). We can also see how the critical intervention of LGBTQ+ has become recuperated by this logic within Western nations.

4.

The alternative to capitalist discourse is authoritarianism. Yet, if we are witnessing a time of the return to symbolic potency then we are also witnessing it as a ruse of power. The authoritarian gestures discussed at length by Giorgio Agamben in the wake of COVID-19 are a consequence of the inadequacy of authority. Those new fascisms that emerged to contain and control and manage the pandemic are nonetheless demonstrably inadequate. There is today another power and it is the power I have tried to discuss over many years. It was what Georges Bataille described as the general economy, it was the power of objects we tried to describe in a special issue of Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies. There is something outside of language that we must today contend with – moreover, we must today recognize that language is better addressed as *Lalangue,* as the babbling of isolated communication. We speak and we act in a world of non-rapport, fundamentally distant from one another. COVID-19 renews the trick of the non-

rapport by presenting us with the desire to connect even more: indeed, we are perhaps even more connected than we ever have been during the time of the pandemic. Social distancing is at the heart of humanity.

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