

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Beyond Character and Morality

Towards Transparent Communications and Coherent
Organization

Jay Amrod and Lev Chernyi

Jay Amrod and Lev Chernyi
Beyond Character and Morality
Towards Transparent Communications and Coherent
Organization
1996

from *Reinventing Anarchy, Again* edited by Howard J. Ehrlich

theanarchistlibrary.org

1996

1

To create a revolutionary organization, it is not sufficient mechanically to link up a number of people with revolutionary pretensions. The creation of such an organization must involve the conscious project of aggressively destroying all barriers to communication, thought, and action both from within and from outside the organization. It involves the conscious elaboration of a theory and practice adequate to its task. And it involves a commitment to change which never questions the need for self-change. You can't change the world if you expect to remain unchanged.

2

The first step in the destruction of all barriers to communication, thought, and action is logically the identification of these barriers. When we examine our situation closely we inevitably find that these obstacles can all be subsumed under the general label of 'capital,' understood as the coherent totality of all the aspects that together make it up. It is only logical that what restrains all our attempts to destroy capitalist society is in the end only capital itself.

3

For our theoretical and practical purposes we will focus our attention on that moment or aspect of capital that Wilhelm Reich called 'character.' Character is 'capital' as it appears to us within the individual. It is the totality of all the internalized or habitual incapacities and limitations of action within the individual. It is not an aggregate sum of arbitrary limitations, but a coherent structure of incapacities and limitations which, as an organized whole, serves its function within the framework of capitalist society. Char-

acter must never be viewed as a thing in itself, detached from any other social reality. It only exists as one moment of the totality of capital. To act on any other perception of character is to miss the whole point.

4

Recall your childhood. In doing so you will recall the formation of your character structure, the formation of the pattern taken by your defeat at the hands of (and your submission to) the logic of capital as it was presented to you by your family, your peers, your church or temple, the media, and your school. You can see the same process going on every day if you observe the lives of the children around you. They are learning the logic of capital the hard way, just as we all did. Each time a child is born her/his capacity for self-regulation is systematically attacked by the people who are closest to him/her. It usually begins with rigid feeding times, which are not only a convenience to mothers and hospitals, but serve the added function of introducing the child early in the game to the 'reality principle' ('You'll eat on schedule, not when you're hungry'), otherwise known as the logic of character and capital. For most newborn males there is the added trauma of circumcision which serves him notice as to the kind of care to expect from his parents. In quick succession the child is exposed to more and more types of conditioning when s/he is least able to understand and fight it. Often children who cannot yet walk are 'potty-trained.' Any touching of the genitals is quickly punished by most conscientious parents, and children are taught always to wear clothes ('It's not nice for people to see you naked'). Parents impose rigid sleeping schedules on children, who know well enough when they are tired and when they want to get up. And in general, children are allowed to investigate their environment and exercise their powers only within the

thought as fixed ideas which dominate me. Neither character nor ideology could exist without the other. They are both parts of one unitary phenomenon. All ideology is revealed as the impotence of my thought, and all character is revealed as the impotence of my activity.

10

A particularly insidious form of ideology is the pervasive moralism which has always plagued the libertarian revolutionary movement. It destroys possibilities for transparent communication and coherent collective activity. To limit one's behavior according to the proscriptions of a morality (to seek the 'good' or the 'right') is to repress one's own will to satisfaction in favor of some ideal. Since we cannot possibly do anything else but seek our own satisfaction, alienation results, with one part of ourselves subduing the rest— one more instance of character. Wherever morality exists, communication is replaced by manipulation. Instead of speaking to me, a moralist tries to manipulate me by speaking to my internalizations of capital, my character, hoping that his brand of ideology may give him a hold on my thought and behavior. 'The projections of my subjectivity, nurtured by guilt, stick out of my head like so many handles offered to any manipulator, any ideologue, who wants to get a hold of me, and whose trade skill is the ability to perceive such handles' (*The Right to Be Greedy*). The only really transparent, and thus revolutionary, communication is that which takes place when our selves and our desires are out in the open, when no morals, ideals, or constraints cloud the air. We will be amoralists, or we will be manipulators and manipulated. The only coherent organization is that in which we unite as individuals who are conscious of our desires, unwilling to give an inch to mystification and constraint, and unafraid to act freely in our own interests.

limits allowed by their captors— whether their captors be parents, schools, etc.

5

The one basic message that is always received with each conditioning is that the child isn't in control; someone else is. Children react to this in the only way they can, they adapt themselves to the situation through a trial-and-error process. The first time a child is slapped for what s/he thought was a natural act, there is a look of astonishment and wonder. After being punished more than a few more times for the mysteriously simple act, the child learns to avoid it when in the presence of the seemingly irrational aggressor. The child eventually acquires a deference to figures of authority (arbitrary power) within the family. This is eventually generalized to a 'respect' for and deference to all authority as the child is exposed to ever-wider spheres of perception and action. One thing that needs to be made clear is that few people consciously condition children. The pervasive conditioning that takes place is usually a result of a whole organization of forces working through the parents and others. These forces include those of the economy, the parents of the parents, social mores, etc. Capital must continually reproduce itself or it will cease to exist.

6

We live in a society without natural scarcity. Our natural desires are often temporarily frustrated by the natural world. This usually has no lasting effect on our lives, though, since we eventually learn what we did wrong, or the natural circumstances change such that we are then able to fulfill our wish. Unfortunately, we also live in a society dominated by capital, which is to say that we live in a society dominated by chronic, socially enforced (artificial)

scarcities. These scarcities result in chronic frustrations of certain desires. And when important natural desires are chronically frustrated, not just denied, but also often punished, we are soon forced to collaborate with this denial. In order to avoid the punishment that we will receive for trying to satisfy this need, we learn to suppress it as soon as it begins to intrude upon our awareness. We use some of the energy that would otherwise have been used to fulfill our desire to suppress it in order to satisfy our secondary desire to avoid punishment. Once this self-repression exists for any prolonged period, it becomes a habit, an unconscious habitual attitude of our character structure. Our awareness of the original situation of chronic frustration is repressed because it is too painful to maintain. We learn that our desire is 'irrational,' 'bad,' 'unhealthy,' etc. We internalize the logic of capital as character traits, and they become 'natural' for us and the original desires become 'irrational' desires. Even when there is no longer a threat of punishment for acting within the logic of the original desire, we continue to suppress it automatically. We have learned to cripple ourselves and *like it*.

7

Throughout the first years of our lives we were forced not just to internalize a few aspects of capital, but to build up a structure of internalizations. As our capacity for coherent natural self-regulation was systematically broken down, a new system of self-regulation took its place, a coherent system, incorporating all the aspects of self-repression. We participated in capital's ongoing project of colonization by colonizing ourselves, by continually working at the construction of a unitary character-structure (character armor), a unitary defense against all the drives, feelings, and desires which we learned were dangerous to express. In the place of our original transparent relations to our world, we created a structure of

barriers to our self-expression which hides us from ourselves and others.

8

The ramifications of character can be found in all aspects of our behavior because character is a unitary deformation of the entire structure of our existence. It produces a deterioration of our capacity to live freely and fully by destroying the structural basis of free life. Character is not a mental phenomenon. It is a structural phenomenon of our entire existence. It exists as: inhibitions, chronic muscular tensions, guilt, perceptual blocks, creative blocks, psychosomatic or psycho-genetic diseases (in many of the cases of 'illnesses' as diverse as chronic insomnia, arthritis, obsessive-compulsive neuroses, chronic headaches, chronic anxiety, etc.). It exists as: respect for authority, dogmatism, mysticism, sexism, communications blocks, insecurity, racism, fear of freedom, role-playing, belief in 'God,' etc., ad nauseum. In each individual these character traits take on a coherent structure which defines that person's character.

Just as character is a limitation and deformation of the free human *activity* in general in the service of capital, so ideology is the limitation and deformation of *thought* in the service of capital. Ideology is always the acceptance of the logic of capital at some level. It is the form taken by alienation in the realm of thought.

9

With ideologies, I justify my complicity with capital, I justify my self-repression (my submission, my guilt, my sacrifice, my suffering, my boredom, etc.— in other words, my character). On the other hand, my character structure, by existing as fixed, conditioned behavior, naturally tends to express its existence in