Anarchy Is Order

Creating the New World in the Shell of the Old

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The word “anarchy” comes from the ancient Greek word “anarchos” and means “without a ruler.” While rulers, quite expectedly, claim that the end of rule will inevitably lead to a descent into chaos and turmoil, anarchists maintain that rule is unnecessary for the preservation of order. Rather than a descent into Hobbes’s war of all against all, a society without government suggests to anarchists the very possibility for creative and peaceful human relations. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon neatly summed up the anarchist position in his famous slogan: “Anarchy is Order.”

Historically, anarchists have sought to create a society without government or State, free from coercive, hierarchical and authoritarian relations, in which people associate voluntarily. Anarchists emphasize freedom from imposed authorities. They envision a society based upon autonomy, self-organization and voluntary federation which they oppose to “the State as a particular body intended to maintain a compulsory scheme of legal order” (Marshall 12). Contemporary anarchists focus much of their efforts on transforming everyday life through the development of alternative social arrangements and organizations. Thus, they are not content to wait either for elite-initiated reforms or for future “post-revolutionary” utopias. If social and individual freedoms are to be expanded the time to start is today.

In order to bring their ideas to life, anarchists create working examples. To borrow the old Wobbly phrase, they are “forming the structure of the new world in the shell of the old.” These experiments in living, popularly referred to as “DIY” (Do-It-Yourself), are the means by which contemporary anarchists withdraw their consent and begin “contracting” other relationships. DIY releases counter-forces, based upon notions of autonomy and self-organization as motivating principles, against the normative political and cultural discourses of neo-liberalism. Anarchists create autonomous spaces which are not about access but about refusal of the terms of entry (e.g. nationalism, etc).

The “Do-it-Yourself” ethos has a long and rich association with anarchism. One sees it as far back as Proudhon’s notions of People’s Banks and local currencies which have returned in the form of LETS (Local Exchange and Trade Systems). In North America, 19th Century anarchist communes, such as those of Benjamin Tucker, find echoes in the Autonomous Zones and squat communities of the present day.

In the recent past, Situationists, Kabouters, and the British punk movements have encouraged DIY activities as means to overcome alienating consumption practices and the authority and control of work. Punks turned to DIY to record and distribute music outside of the record industry.

At the forefront of contemporary DIY are the “Autonomous Zones” or more simply “A-Zones.” “Autonomous Zones” are community centres based upon anarchist principles, often providing meals, clothing and shelter for those in need. These sites, sometimes but not always squats, provide gathering places for exploring and learning about anti-authoritarian histories and traditions. Self-education is an important aspect of anarchist politics. A-Zones are important as sites of re-skilling. DIY and participatory democracy are important precisely because they encourage the processes of learning and independence necessary for self-determined communities.

A-Zones are often sites for quite diverse and complex forms of activity. The “Trumbullplex” in Detroit is an interesting example. Housed, ironically, in the abandoned home of an early-Century industrialist, the Trumbell Theatre serves as a co-operative living space, temporary shelter, food kitchen and lending library. The carriage house has been converted into a theatre site for touring anarchist and punk bands and performance troops like the “Bindlestiff Circus.”

Because of their concern with transcending cultural barriers, residents of A-Zones try to build linkages with residents of the neighbourhoods in which they were staying. The intention is to cre-

ate autonomous free zones that may be extended as resources and conditions permit. These various practices are all part of complex networks that are trans-national, trans-boundary and trans-movement. They encourage us to think about writing against the movement as movement. Movement processes involve complex networks outside of and alongside of the State (trans-national and trans-boundary).

These are the building blocks of what Howard Ehrlich refers to as the anarchist transfer culture, an approximation of the new society within the context of the old. Within it anarchists try to meet the basic demands of building sustainable communities.

> A transfer culture is that agglomeration of ideas and practices that guide people in making the trip from the society here to the society there in the future….As part of the accepted wisdom of that transfer culture we understand that we may never achieve anything that goes beyond the culture itself. It may be, in fact, that it is the very nature of anarchy that we shall always be building the new society within whatever society we find ourselves (Ehrlich 329).

In this sense, anarchist autonomous zones are liminal sites, spaces of transformation and passage. As such they are important sites of re-skilling, in which anarchists prepare themselves for the new forms of relationship necessary to break authoritarian and hierarchical structures. Participants also learn the diverse tasks and varied interpersonal skills necessary for collective work and living. This skill sharing serves to discourage the emergence of knowledge elites and to allow for the sharing of all tasks, even the least desirable, necessary for social maintenance.

For Paul Goodman, an American anarchist whose writings influenced the 1960s New Left and counterculture, anarchist futures-present serve as necessary acts of "drawing the line" against the authoritarian and oppressive forces in society. Anarchism, in Goodman's view, was never oriented only towards some glorious future; it involved also the preservation of past freedoms and previous libertarian traditions of social interaction. "A free society cannot be the substitution of a 'new order' for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life" (Goodman quoted in Marshall 598). Utopian thinking will always be important, Goodman argued, in order to open the imagination to new social possibilities, but the contemporary anarchist would also need to be a conservator of society's benevolent tendencies.

As many recent anarchist writings suggest, the potential for resistance might be found anywhere in everday life. If power is exercised everywhere, it might give rise to resistance everywhere. Present-day anarchists like to suggest that a glance across the landscape of contemporary society reveals many groupings that are anarchist in practice if not in ideology.

> Examples include the leaderless small groups developed by radical feminists, coops, clinics, learning networks, media collectives, direct action organizations; the spontaneous groupings that occur in response to disasters, strikes, revolutions and emergencies; community-controlled day-care centers; neighborhood groups; tenant and workplace organizing; and so on (Ehrlich, Ehrlich, DeLeon and Morris 18).

While these are obviously not strictly anarchist groups, they often operate to provide examples of mutual aid and non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian modes of living that carry the memory

of anarchy within them. It is within these everyday examples that anarchists glimpse the possibilities for a libertarian social order. If, as Colin Ward suggests, anarchy is a seed beneath the snow of authoritarian society, daily expressions of mutual aid are the first blooms from which a new order will grow.

In viewing the projects that emerge from contemporary anarchist movements, I would suggest that, in the words of Castells, Yazawa and Kiselyova, such projects offer "alternative visions and projects of social transformation that reject the patterns of domination, exploitation and exclusion embedded in the current forms of globalization" (22). Following Leslie Sklair I suggest that autonomist/anarchy movements exemplify a "disruption" model of social movements and resistances to capitalism (as opposed to an "organizational model" or an "integrationist model"). Through their uncompromising rhetoric and immodest strategies they resist attempts to divert their disruptive force into normal politics. Activists attempt to reject the entire context within which they can be either marginalized or assimilated; they occupy their own ground. This "autonomy" must be constantly constructed, reconstructed and defended in the face of powerful foes as events of the last four years have shown.

Autonomy movements in abandoned or impoverished inner-city areas are movements involving individuals, social groups or territories excluded or made precarious by the "new world order". This distinguishes them somewhat from institutional global social movements that seek increased participation by members who are not yet rendered irrelevant (and who thus have something with which to bargain). In any event, how does one ask a global (or national) body to grant the "subversion of the dominant paradigm" or the "liberation of desire?"

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