

Political Imagination in the Age of the Smart Phone

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In the past fifteen years the world has become a more nightmarish place than even us cynics imagined in our wildest dreams. As I sit outdoors on a sunny October day, weather once reserved for the fourth of July, I am reminded, as we all constantly are nowadays, that if we don't do something drastic fast we are screwed. Most of the old models of subversion and social organization, including those discussed in *Killing King Abacus*, were imagined in other times and places. In this case we borrowed ideas from the Italy of the 1970s and 1980s. The tendency among anarchists is to try to find an idea they can use as a badge of identity instead of using their own imagination to refashion tactics in the historical context in which they actually live. Instead of introducing *Killing King Abacus* in general, I would instead like to discuss how the world has changed in the last fifteen years and how some of the ideas discussed in the zine are still relevant today. I will also discuss some points on which my own views have changed.

Insurrectionary anarchism contains a glaringly obvious contradiction at its core: to take a life is the ultimate authoritarian act. And if the argument goes that it is unacceptable to participate in authoritarian organizations as an anarchist, because to do so would result in a new social order that is also authoritarian, then it also follows that to use violent means will produce a violent social order. Look at violence rates in any country ten years after the end of a war. Take El Salvador for instance. Of course, in this case there is the question of lingering social inequality and the lingering presence of arms among the population. But once people have been psychologically broken down by violence, victims or perpetrators, they are more likely to commit violence. Just look at violence levels among returned Iraqi vets.

The classic anarchist line is that of course we would never support a group like the FARC, because they are authoritarian. But did the FARC bomb a commercial airliner because they are authoritarian or because they engage in violent acts? If we look at the history of authoritarian revolutions and regimes, it is difficult to separate out their authoritarianism and violence; the two join forces inextricably. Of course, violence itself is not the same thing when separated from a regime. Likewise, a single hierarchical organization is not the same thing as a state. A single violent act is a small-scale *potential* building block for authoritarian organization. Violence is coercive, and coercion is the heart of the state. If we are to be so very strict about what level of

hierarchy is acceptable in organizations we participate in as anarchists, then it only follows to be equally circumspect when it comes to violence.

I am not making an argument that the only acceptable form of subversion is nonviolent. Imagine an alternate historical trajectory in which none of the revolutions of the past had ever taken place. What if the Sandinistas had left Nicaragua to Somoza? What if France still had a monarchy? If able to travel back to 1620 with a case of guns, who besides direct descendants of the Mayflower would not arm the Wampanoag at Plymouth rock?

Gandhi said that the most spiritually evolved way to approach injustice was with nonviolent resistance. He said a violent man could become nonviolent, whereas an impotent (passive) man could not. That is, at least the violent had the gumption to rise against injustice, but passive folks were hopeless. I look at it as a spectrum; nonviolent resistance should be prioritized for both practical and ethical reasons. I would substitute creative for “spiritually evolved” here. Violent tactics are often resorted to because of a lack of creativity. Can we be *creative* enough to come up with nonviolent tactics? Violence, as distinguished from sabotage, should be an absolute last resort.

Functional MRIs show that new neural pathways can be formed in the human brain. The brains of brain injury victims show that neurons rewire around a damaged area. Normal brains have been shown to change dramatically when trained. This has been shown in musicians, master meditators, yogis and others. Through meditation the brains of people with PTSD have changed their patterns, providing relief from their trauma; those who are emotionally damaged can heal to some extent. These findings blow old neuroscientific theories out of the water. This means that human beings can change in a far more profound way than was previously known. Without this capacity for change, we could not hope for a post-capitalist order. Any revolution—violent or not, must start in the minds of the people. Otherwise, the same order will reassert itself in time.

Social inequality is at an all-time high in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, the gap in wealth between whites and other groups has gotten far worse since 2007 with whites now owning thirteen times the wealth as African Americans and ten times the wealth as Latinos on average. Meanwhile, capitalism has finally shown itself to be so exploitative at its core that like a cancer it would kill its host, the planet, before relenting; a dramatic change is needed in our hearts and minds. This is a historic opportunity for profound social change.

Ursula Le Guin called anarchism, “the most idealistic of all political philosophies.” It’s not a surprise that one of our most imaginative writers has been drawn to it. Anarchism demands that you dare to dream. There is no insurrection without imagination; it is unique in each instance. What insurrectionary anarchism has to offer radicals of all persuasions is its inherent openness. The only way humanity can continue to survive is if it makes a quantum leap of the imagination. To move beyond capitalism, we need new social models and for these we need to look at history; we need to study every form of social organization that has been practiced and every Utopian model that has been dreamed up in political theory or literature. And then we need to transcend these models.

Silence, Virtual Chatter and Creativity

Smart phones and other devices have colonized daily life to the point that quiet moments to oneself are now rare. Silence is a space for reflection, a chance to figure out what you really think without having the question framed for you by someone else’s post. On top of this people are required to work more hours. Silence and idleness play a fundamental part in human creativity. Our brains are wired in such a way that the calculating conscious brain has to take a break in

order for the subconscious to kick in with creative solutions. This is why you come up with ideas in the shower, running or waking up from a dream. It turns out that the most driven of us are fast approaching a neurological limit. Harvard University wrote a letter to its freshmen asking them to take more free time. It turns out that academic results were suffering, because the students were overrunning their brains with busy work without giving the subconscious a chance to kick in and present imaginative solutions. Google has created “play areas” for workers for the same reason. If we are constantly busy and then plugged in to a din of psychic white noise during the entirety of our free time, we lose imaginary potential.

Walter Benjamin spoke of the way in which fashion mimicked natural seasons; in a death-like twisted parody novelty mimicked the actual regenerative qualities of nature. Now in order to be hip you have to keep up with a lot more than fall fashions; nature’s seasons move way too slowly. The only time that matters is *now*. As everyone is concerned with keeping current with the eternal present of their news-feed, revisionist history can easily become convincing, since yesterday is already *passee*. In 1984, Orwell described a world in which history could be revised in a day—all archives were altered to agree with the new “truth.” Now the “truth” can be altered much more quickly. If someone had a post on their feed at 10:16 AM that said “We are at war at Eurasia” and then a post at 11:45 saying, “We have always been allies with Eurasia,” some people would think they must have been confused in the first place since they’re so busy. If we look beyond the virtual instant to history we see that humanity has a remarkable capacity for change. Empires have risen and fallen many times. People have organized themselves in a myriad of ways, and most of human history and prehistory was not Capitalist or Statist. The question is not whether we can change, but whether we can change quickly enough for our species to survive.

I have been racking my brain for twenty years for a new form of political imagining that can carry us beyond this crisis and have come up with nothing, no surprise. However, I feel it is on the tip of the collective tongue. Einstein came up with the idea that became the basis of the theory of relativity while daydreaming at work; staring at the same old elevator, he suddenly saw its motion in a new light. Einstein had rigorously studied; he drew upon the history of science. In order for his “genius” to come forth, a lot of mere mortals had to do a lot of work. Are we open enough to recognize genius when it appears? Or are we stuck in the same dichotomies, asking the wrong questions? I do not know what the right questions are but I ask this of you; when they are asked, please don’t be too busy on Facebook to notice.

In *Killing King Abacus* we spoke of the destruction of common space, from destruction of old working class neighborhoods of Paris to the death of the precorporate cafe. Now common space has shrunk even further as a part of our actual lives, while virtual space has in turn been collectivized (though heavily mediated by capital). Now we have a place to discuss our ideas, as long as they can fit in 140 characters or less. Of course, social media has been an important part of rebellions worldwide, but be careful. Every paranoid fantasy we had in the nineties about the use of the Internet was mild compared to the current reality where Facebook owns more personal information than did the Stasi.

The Internet has created a white noise loud enough to block out the sound of one’s own voice. The twitterization of ideas, where ideas are simplified to post-size as no one has time to read an entire argument never mind an entire book, has caused the capacity to create coherent arguments to deteriorate. With the ability to form arguments goes the ability for independent thought.

Hannah Arendt said the Nazi war criminal Eichmann, was “unable to think” and “lacked imagination.” For example, the internalization of the language of the Nazis, where the murder of sick people became “mercy killing” and extermination became “deportation,” necessitated throwing rationality aside. He calmly planned filling the trains to Auschwitz by simply crunching numbers. The abacus asserted its dominion over life once again. Independent thought took a step down. Her characterization of Eichmann showed how the capacity to think is linked to the capacity to feel. Thus a politics that lacks feeling will ultimately lack depth of thought. (It can also have some unfortunate genocidal side-effects.)

In *Killing King Abacus* we emphasized creativity not only for its powers of political imagination. We also saw creativity as a key component of any life worth living. We didn’t want a revolution that would create a society that lacked the potential for a rich emotional life; we didn’t want a society that would bore us to death. Now if folks happen to get bored, they won’t notice since psych meds are even more over-prescribed; there is a real med called Soma, the same name as the drug used for social control in *Brave New World*, life imitating art once again. We wanted a society that would create space for the direct unmediated unmedicated experience of daily life.

Though we suffer a postmodern super alienation on the one hand, perhaps it is not the recreation of the commons alone that is required, as we once imagined. At the same time we also need to recuperate private spaces. Without privacy and silence, there is a diminished capacity for individual thought. Without individual thought, the only politics possible is the status quo, the dystopian nightmare of the continuing dominance of capital. The abacus is now too simple to calculate it, instead you need a supercomputer but the result is the same, without independent thought, daily life is reduced to the increasingly complex giga-nano logic of capital.

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