

Mutual Acquiescence or Mutual Aid?

Ron Sakolsky

November 18, 2012

Most of us have made a compact, saying “Let us make a convention. Let us agree to call what we are feeling not ‘pain’ but ‘neutral,’ not ‘dull unease’ but ‘well enough,’ not ‘restless dissatisfaction intermitted by blowing up,’ but average ‘hanging around.’ Our consensus is that how we live is tolerable. If I ask, ‘How are you?’ you must say, ‘Pretty good.’ And if I do not remind you, you must not remind me. To all this we swear.”¹

—Paul Goodman

The hugger-mugger totality wants nothing and does nothing. They are entangled with one another, do not move, prisoners; they abandon themselves to opaque pressures but they themselves are the power that lies upon them and binds them, mind and limb.²

—Robert Walser

What I will refer to here as “mutual acquiescence” is the social adhesive that cements the bricks of alienation and oppression which structure our daily lives into a wall of domination. It is a major obstacle to the practice of what anarchists refer to as “mutual aid” in that the latter is concerned with providing the cooperative means for vaulting that wall. While cooperation can take many forms, for Peter Kropotkin, who developed the evolutionary theory of mutual aid³ in relation to human behavior, its quintessence in the political realm is anarchy. With that in mind, I will take the liberty here of referring to the concept of mutual aid only in the anarchist sense, and will consider those cooperative human relationships associated with welfare state capitalism and state socialism as being built upon forms of mutual acquiescence because of their implicit or explicit statist assumptions which run counter to anarchy.

Even in its least cooperative and most authoritarian forms, mutual acquiescence cannot simply be equated with unmediated mass conformity to societal norms. The hierarchical power of rulers

¹ Paul Goodman. *The Empire City*. New York, Vintage Books, 1942/1977, p. 456.

² Robert Walser. “*The Street*” in *The Walk*. New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1919/1992, p. 124.

³ Peter Kropotkin. *Mutual Aid*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1902/1955.

and ruling ideas are reinforced by the interpersonal collaboration of the ruled in their own servility. Such collaboration is composed of the paralyzing intermediary social relationships that are the scaffolding of conformist assimilation to the ideological authority of society and state. What makes mutual acquiescence so insidious is that it is a form of social control that is rooted in the everyday psychological and social relationships of consent that compose the lived experience of domination. Accordingly, an analysis of how mutual acquiescence prevents and immobilizes individual and collective forms of direct action allows for a more nuanced model of domination and resistance than can be afforded by merely referencing the devastating effects of conformity imposed from above.

Beyond the compliant nature of the behaviors themselves, mutual acquiescence does have an institutional context. The mutual dimension of such institutional forms of domination is intrinsically linked to the existence of the state and is mirrored by the economy. According to the Tiqqun collective, “The more societies constitute themselves in states, the more their subjects embody the economy. They monitor themselves and each other; they control their emotions, their movements, their inclinations and believe that they can expect the same self-control from others. They link up, put themselves in chains and chain themselves to each other, countering any type of excess.”⁴ Such collusive relationships of self-enslavement in which we relinquish our potential power as individuals and collectivities are at the core of mutual acquiescence.

Like the relationships of empowered solidarity that animate mutual aid, disempowering relationships of mutual acquiescence are complex. Taken together in practice, both compose an individual’s ensemble of social relationships. Moreover, they are differentiated and impacted by social constructions of class, ethnicity, race, and gender. As an example, a family that one is born into can be characterized by relationships of mutual acquiescence, but these can crisscross with a primary or secondary affiliation which one has with an anarchist affinity group in such a way that the relationships of one may modify or detract from the other. Alternatively, family ethnicity and political affinity can reinforce one another as was the case with the German, Jewish and Italian anarchist groups that flourished in the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, even in the latter historical case, the egalitarian relationships of mutual aid still might have possibly been undermined by the hierarchical practices associated with patriarchal domination or reinforced by the lack of them. Just as the individual balance between relationships based upon mutual acquiescence and those associated with mutual aid can shift and is not necessarily fixed over the course of one’s lifetime, anarchism itself is always in the process of becoming.

If the relationships that constitute and perpetuate the state are the negation of mutual aid in the anarchist sense of that term, then the theoretical concept of mutual acquiescence might be the missing link in understanding how Landauer’s conditional notion of the state and Kropotkin’s theory of mutual aid ultimately fit together.

Emphasizing this sense of fluidity, Gustav Landauer conceived of not only anarchy, but the state as a living organism. By postulating that the state is based upon lived social relationships, he explained how it might be deposed. It is in this sense that he found common ground with

⁴ Tiqqun. *Introduction to Civil War*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010, p. 85.

anarchists like Max Stirner in conceptualizing the state as a “spook.” In Landauer’s words, “People do not live in the state. The state lives in the people.”⁵

For Landauer then, both the state and capital exist as relations between people. As he puts it, “The state is a social relationship, a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships, i.e. by people relating to one another differently.”⁶ Kropotkin’s concept of mutual aid is just such a way of “relating to one another differently.” Using the latter’s terminology, Landauer envisioned the antidote to the “passivity,” “compliance” and “indifference” that he decried as being found in the development of “a spirit of mutual aid.”⁷

He further elaborated on this spirit elsewhere as being characterized by “peoples uniting in freedom.”⁸ Such an invigorating spirit of reciprocity and collective transformation through mutual aid can be contrasted with Kropotkin’s depiction of the debilitating “spirit of voluntary servitude that is cleverly cultivated in the minds of the young in order to perpetuate the subjection of the individual to the State.”⁹ Saul Newman traces the theory of voluntary servitude back to the sixteenth century formulations of Etienne de la Boetie in order to explain the ways in which an internalized desire for self-domination can thwart the creation of the kind of radical subjectivity that is at the heart of the post-anarchist project.¹⁰ Yet Newman fails to mention Kropotkin’s use of the term voluntary servitude and misses an opportunity here to link the concept to the classical anarchist tradition through the influence of both Boetie and Kropotkin on Landauer. Reincorporating voluntary servitude into anarchist theory, while at the same time bypassing Kropotkin’s thinking on the subject, obscures the way in which voluntary servitude informs, and is informed by, the theory of mutual aid. I prefer to use my original formulation of the term “mutual acquiescence” precisely because of its linguistic relationship to the living concept of mutual aid.¹¹

Relationships that exemplify mutual acquiescence inhibit our ability to construct other relationships that might displace those upon which the state is built. If the relationships that constitute and perpetuate the state are the negation of mutual aid in the anarchist sense of that term, then the theoretical concept of mutual acquiescence might be the missing link in understanding how Landauer’s conditional notion of the state and Kropotkin’s theory of mutual aid ultimately fit together. With this conjunction in mind, it becomes clear that we cannot simply eliminate the state from above, but need to replace those relationships of mutual acquiescence that pre-

⁵ Gustav Landauer. “*Tucker’s Revelation*” in *Revolution and Other Writings*, edited by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010, p. 249.

⁶ Gustav Landauer. “*Weak Statesmen, Weaker People*” in *Revolution and Other Writings*, edited by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland, CA, PM Press, 2010, p. 214.

⁷ Gustav Landauer. “*The Abolition of War By The Self Determination of the People: Questions to the German Workers*” in *Revolution and Other Writings*, edited by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland: PM Press, p. 227.

⁸ Gustav Landauer. “*The Socialist Way*,” in *Revolution and Other Writings*, edited by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland: PM Press, p. 195.

⁹ Peter Kropotkin. *The State: Its Historic Role*. London: Freedom Press, 1898/1987, p. 55.

¹⁰ Saul Newman. “Voluntary Servitude Reconsidered: Radical Politics and the Problem of Self-Domination,” in *Post-Anarchism Today* 1.2010, pp. 31–49. Interestingly, though Newman does, at one point, use the term “active acquiescence” (which he has elsewhere referred to as “willful acquiescence”) in passing with reference to the micropolitics of submission, he never pursues its theoretical implications in relation to the mutuality of that acquiescence. While I find Newman’s work both informative and complementary to my own in many ways, rather than use the unwieldy post-anarchist term “voluntary inservitude” which he has coined as a radical counterpoint to the concept of voluntary servitude, I will here refer instead to the already existing, widely used and more expansive term, mutual aid, in that capacity.

¹¹ Ron Sakolsky, “Why Misery Loves Company,” in *Swift Winds*. Portland, Oregon: Eberhardt Press, 2009, p. 25. This article originally appeared in *Green Anarchy* (Summer/Fall 2006).

vent our disengagement from it with ones involving mutual aid. As James Horrox has pointed out, “Landauer’s analysis of state power anticipated the central premise of Foucault’s governmentality thesis... his notion of capitalism and the state as sets of relations between subjects (discourse) rather than as ‘things’ that can be smashed (structures).”¹² In this Foucauldian sense, it is the authoritarian discourse between disciplined subjects which constitutes the process of mutual acquiescence that must be challenged.

Surrealist Penelope Rosemont has insisted in her seminal piece on Landauer that discourses of control can be overturned by the poetic language of desire that always takes unexpected paths in revolutionary situations. Such poetic discourses, inspired by what Landauer referred to as the “vagabondage of the imagination” appear in emancipatory moments with the “swiftness of dreams” in which everything seems possible. It was just such a mythopoetics of resistance capable of confronting routinely docile relationships of obedience and inspiring social outbreaks of surrealism that intrigued both Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse and continues to animate what Stephen Shukaitis refers to as “surrealism’s attempt to realize the power of the imagination in everyday life.”¹³ As Rosemont further elaborates, “Landauer sought a total revolution—a leap beyond conventional limits not only in politics and economics, but also in culture, in the individual’s emotions, in the life of the mind.”¹⁴

Landauer’s vision of what he called “structural renewal” was not predicated only on the dramatic circumstances of the revolutionary uprising. He prized the way in which the anarchist dream of liberty and community could manifest itself at the societal level in the construction of dynamic new cultural alternatives founded upon what we would today call horizontality and autonomy, and, at the personal level, in the formation of individual relationships of reciprocity based upon a desire for experiencing the more expansive reality of anarchy denied to us by relationships of mutual acquiescence. While mutual acquiescence blocks the flow of mutual aid, relationships of mutual aid can in turn act as a catalytic agent in the dismantling of the conditioned social relationships of mutual acquiescence. Yet, while his legacy as a theorist is often identified with the creation of such prefigurative beachheads of social revolution, Landauer understood that the shedding of the constraints of mutual acquiescence can likewise occur in the heat of insurgency.

Surrealist Penelope Rosemont has insisted in her seminal piece on Landauer that discourses of control can be overturned by the poetic language of desire that always takes unexpected paths in revolutionary situations. Such poetic discourses, inspired by what Landauer referred to as the “vagabondage of the imagination” appear in emancipatory moments with the “swiftness of dreams”...

As he has expressed it, “The first step in the struggle of the oppressed and suffering classes, as well as in the awakening of the rebellious spirit is always insurgency, outrage, a wild and raging sensation. If this is strong enough, realizations and action are directly connected to it; both

¹² James Horrox, “Reinventing Resistance: Constructive Activism in Gustav Landauer’s Social Philosophy” in Nathan Jun and Shane Wahl. *New Perspectives on Anarchism*. New York: Lexington Books, 2009, p. 199.

¹³ Stephen Shukaitis. *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy and Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2009, p. 20.

¹⁴ Penelope Rosemont, “Gustav Landauer,” *Free Spirits: Annals of the Insurgent Imagination*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982, p. 175.

actions of destruction and actions of creation.”¹⁵ Though Landauer opposed propaganda of the deed when it came to political assassinations, he understood that the insurrectionary upheaval of social war and the blossoming of the insurgent imagination went hand in hand. David Graeber, an active participant in both the global justice and Occupy Wall Street movements, has added direct action to the prefigurative lexicon. “In its essence direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free. One does not solicit the state. One does not even necessarily make a grand gesture of defiance. Insofar as one is capable, one proceeds as if the state does not exist.”¹⁶ More specifically, as AK Thompson has elaborated in relation to the enabling essence of “becoming” implicit in the black bloc tactic, “Rioting—despite being an essentially reactionary form of activity—allows its participants to concretely prefigure the society they want to create. This is so because the riot yields political subjects that are able to produce the world, subjects that—through the process of transformation the riot entails—are forced to confront the unwritten future within them.”¹⁷ In any event, whatever tactical differences in terms of violence and non-violence, or overt street protest as compared to the infrapolitics of everyday resistance, may be present in a given situation, the transformative power of anarchist direct action is rooted in an intrinsic withdrawal of consent from the underlying hierarchical assumptions of the dominant reality.

The question remains as to why certain individuals choose mutual acquiescence over mutual aid. For many people, there is a cold comfort contained in mutual acquiescence precisely because it is experienced as a familiar, even tolerable, social relationship, the social acceptability of which is keyed to an underlying desire for alignment with the parameters of what is considered to be legitimate protest in terms of the dominant political ideology. This ideology is in turn reiterated ad nauseam by the mass media in spectacular form, and enforced by a nagging fear of state repression. In a political climate characterized by widespread feelings of powerlessness, mutual acquiescence is rooted in the social denial of our ability to mount radical opposition. Therefore, in an estranged way, it allows us to experience psychological relief in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, and this is not only true for those who do not involve themselves in resistance, but even for many who actively engage in protest.

As an example of the latter, a mutual acquiescence dynamic can be gleaned from the widely circulated left-liberal explanation for the police force’s failure to restrain those using the black bloc tactic at the 2010 Toronto G20 summit. This explanation attributed the largely unimpeded black bloc property destruction spree not to the ability of direct actionists to outmaneuver the police, but, instead to police agents provocateur who allowed or even provoked the bloc to run amok in order to discredit the protest and justify the billion dollar security budget for the event. In order to provide a counterpoint to such a misleading explanation of the events in Toronto, the Vancouver Media Co-op published a firsthand critique in which the analysis of events seems congruent with the concept of mutual acquiescence. According to Zig Zag, “Liberal reformists do not believe that the state can be fought through militancy... when militants carry out an effective attack, especially against such a massive security operation, it shatters the defeatist premise upon which reformism is based. The liberal response to such attacks is that they must

¹⁵ Gustav Landauer. “The Socialist Way” in *Revolution and Other Writings*, edited by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland: PM Press, 2010, p. 191.

¹⁶ David Graeber. *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland: AK Press, 2009, p. 203.

¹⁷ AK Thompson. *Black Bloc, White Riot*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, p. 27.

be part of a 'greater conspiracy.'¹⁸ Putting that analysis in the context of global civil war, rather than a convoluted understanding of the image of flaming cop cars in Toronto being construed as evidence of the omnipotence of the police, we might instead recognize it as what A.G. Schwarz has termed, with reference to the Greek insurrection of December 2008, a "signal of disorder."¹⁹ In this more empowering analysis, such intentionally unsettling gestures of "performative violence" as the burning of a cop car can break the spell of authority and have a ripple effect in spreading revolt because they fuel the notion that "anything is possible."²⁰

In contrast, the aforementioned conspiratorial explanation of events in Toronto by the liberal left can be seen as evidence that mutual acquiescence is so deeply inculcated in authoritarian society that not even protesters are immune from its mental fetters, especially if they are demanding reforms from the global corporate state rather than seeking its dissolution. Not only did some Toronto G20 protest leaders among the social democrats simply dismiss the results of such black bloc militancy in conspiratorial terms, but, in hindsight, they even went so far as to publicly suggest that the police should have preemptively arrested the bloc before the march had even begun so as to separate the good demonstrators from those bad apples who, strangely to those practicing liberal democratic protocol, were willing to directly challenge the state's control of the streets and yet made no demands of it. As A.G. Schwarz has noted, "It is oxymoronic to make demands of something you wish to destroy completely, because the request for change transfers agency from you to that thing that receives your demands, and the very act of communication grants it continued life. Our attacks aim to destroy authority, to open up spaces in order to recreate life, and to communicate with society."²¹ While such insurrectionary tactics need not be privileged above all other approaches to direct action, they can be seen as part of the larger puzzle of building a culture of resistance. In eschewing the lifelessness of mutual acquiescence, one can become receptive to the capacity for radical festivity associated with mutual aid, whether it takes the form of the creation of autonomous zones, squats, supermarket expropriations, pirate radio, TV station takeovers or torched cop cars. Both tactical and principled differences might still occur among anarchist strategists in relation to each of the above arenas of direct action, but they are less subject to assumptions of mutual acquiescence that can paralyze such action by playing upon our fears.

Beginning with Occupy Wall Street on September 17, 2011, the spread of the occupy movement throughout North America has both challenged mutual acquiescence in some ways and demonstrated the limits of liberalism in others. Many in the occupy movement have explained their involvement as an "awakening." That metaphor is not just about personal revelation regarding the inequities of society, but refers to an awakening to the combined power of self-determination, mutual aid, spontaneity, and solidarity that gushes forth when the bonds of mutual acquiescence are broken. Naturally, anarchists within and without the occupy movement have been critical of the liberal reformist discourse of many of the participants with its emphasis on corporate greed

¹⁸ Zig Zag. "Countering Conspiracy Theories on Police Response to Black Bloc," *Balaclava!* (July 16–31, 2010), p. 2.

¹⁹ A.G. Schwarz. "The Spirit of December Spread Round the World," in *We Are An Image From The Future: The Greek Revolt of December 2008*, ed by A.G. Schwarz, Tasos Sagris and Void Network. Oakland: AK Press, 2010, p. 221.

²⁰ Panagoitis Papadimitropoulos. "You Talk About Material Damages, We Speak About Human Life: Perceptions of Violence," in *We Are An Image From The Future: The Greek Revolt of December 2008*, ed by A.G. Schwarz, Tasos Sagris and Void Network. Oakland: AK Press, 2010, p. 71.

²¹ A.G. Schwarz. "The Logic of Not Demanding," in *We Are An Image From The Future: The Greek Revolt of December 2008*, ed. by A.G. Schwarz, Tasos Sagris and Void Network. Oakland: AK Press, 2010, p. 193.

rather than outright opposition to capitalism, and such highly questionable occupy movement tropes as patriotism, citizen rights, celebrity endorsements, the populist fetishizing of democracy, the dogmatic use of the term non-violence at the expense of a diversity of tactics, and the simplistic idea that those people that are cops are part of the 99% without a corresponding recognition that when in uniform their job is to serve the interests of the 1%. Yet the occupy movement has also opened up fluid spaces of possibility that had previously been locked down. In this regard, it has acted as an umbrella site for specific forms of anarchist intervention, practical experiments in counterpower, a vehicle for the radical imagination to take flight, and a compass pointing in the direction of limitless horizons.

When thousands of rebellious people storm Times Square, the Brooklyn Bridge and Foley Square in New York City who never would have dreamed of doing so just a few months earlier, or when Occupy Oakland refers to itself as the Oakland Commune, shuts down the ports and mounts a successful general strike, the foundations of mutual acquiescence have been shaken, and we find ourselves in a potentially anarchist moment. As of this writing, the wheel is still in spin and the future trajectory of the movement remains unpredictable. Will the occupations become less like spectacles of symbolic dissent and more literally transgressive in relation to the institution of private property as has been the case with the squatted buildings that have sprung up in the wake of occupation camp evictions from more public spaces? Will permitted occupations increasingly give way to unpermitted ones? Will the momentum shift from asserting civil rights and liberties to practicing civil disobedience? Will civil disobedience morph into uncivil and willful forms of disobedience? Will the occupied spaces increasingly become bases of operations for an ever-widening and interweaving array of oppositional tactics by rebellious individuals and uncontrollable groups? Will the tired politics of the liberal left co-opt a vital heterogeneous movement that steadfastly and uncompromisingly has refused to make demands of the powers that be but rather has sought to satisfy their needs without intermediaries by means of direct action? Will the consensus decision-making process of open assembly be one that emphasizes empowering forms of participatory coordination among autonomous affinity groups and individuals rather than resorting to massified forms of managerial pseudo-governance?

Beyond all these specific questions, the overriding question is whether the occupy movement will ultimately become a safety-valve or a launching pad. From the start, it has been both, and many anarchists involved in the movement have gravitated to those groups of individuals that show an affinity for direct action. Accordingly, on October 8, 2011, the Occupy Wall Street Direct Action Working Group stated in a call to action which was livestreamed from Washington Square Park, "The future of this movement lies in our commitment to create the world we want to live in: a world where people are not commodities; where attaching value to our natural environment doesn't lead to its destruction; a world without hierarchy and oppression; a world of mutual aid and solidarity; a world of self-determination and direct democracy within our communities; a world where foreclosures, empty buildings, abandoned schools and parks are occupied by the people. Start in your own community and occupy your own spaces. Occupy everything!" While not calling for anarchy per se, the above statement can be read not only as a call to action, but a refusal of the somnambulance of mutual acquiescence and its replacement with a lively vision of social change that contains the seeds of anarchy.

However, despite such growing resistance, mutual acquiescence has not disappeared. Even as we witness Arctic ice caps melting, offshore oil wells exploding, species disappearing at an alarming rate, ramped up state terrorism, a widening net of surveillance, and an economy that

is crumbling all around us; mutual acquiescence allays our uneasiness. Laurance Labadie once conceptualized this capitulation process as being partly rooted in “gregariousness” itself. As he explained, “People can suffer almost anything as long as they see that the other fellow is suffering the same ills.”²² Alone-together in the welcoming arms of mutual acquiescence, we accept that we are disempowered to do anything meaningful about our rapidly deteriorating situation. In fact, we no longer even see it as a problem to be overcome, but a plight that must be endured or adapted to by self-managing our own despair. In order to more fully accomplish the feat of denying our own agency, we must assure ourselves and one another that resistance is futile or even crazy. We are not only surrounded by, but seek out, relationships that do not question these authoritarian assumptions. Increasingly, we become accustomed to reluctantly accepting, unenthusiastically adjusting to, or even longing for the coming apocalypse rather than being inspired by the possibilities of a “coming insurrection”²³ or desiring a “communion of revolt.”²⁴

In historical conjunction with the occupation movement’s attempt to pose a challenge to such miserabilism by embracing a liberatory response to the debilitating effects of mutual acquiescence, the book *Desert*²⁵ emphasizes another alternative, “active disillusionment.” Faced with the reality of environmental devastation and the perceived improbability of global revolution as a corrective, those who favor a strategy of active disillusionment eschew both what they consider to be the naivete of false hope and the cynicism of inactive despair. Such a strategy instead posits that the abandonment of evangelical utopian illusion need not be disabling. To be disillusioned with the possibilities for full-on anarchist revolution does not preclude mutual aid and/or anarchist resistance based on a “non-servile humility” that seeks to outwit the state even if it cannot abolish it. This is a strategy that indigenous peoples have long employed in their struggles against the domestication of industrial civilization. Accordingly, *Desert* places Landauer’s notion of “behaving differently” in an anti-colonial context. It says, “In many places we are ‘behaving differently’ by spreading love and cooperation AND resisting and/or avoiding those who would be our masters.”²⁶ This approach is what James C. Scott has called in a non-Western situation, “the art of not being governed.”²⁷

Within relationships of mutual acquiescence, however, those cooperative acts of creation, occupation, desertion, refusal and insurrection, which each in their own way can undermine the ruling order of capitalist and statist assumptions, are forestalled, abandoned, ridiculed or pejoratively labeled as terrorism. Instead of the construction of relationships that resonate with what the author PM refers to as a process of “substruction,”²⁸ in which subversion and construction

²² Laurance Labadie, “On Competition” in *Enemies of Society: An Anthology of Individualist and Egoist Thought* (Ardent Press, San Francisco, 2011) p. 249. The underpinnings of Labadie’s point of view, which are similar to those of many other authors featured in this seminal volume, are based on the assumption that communitarian forms of mutual aid do not necessarily lead to individual emancipation. Rather, from this perspective, their actual practice involves the inherent danger of creating an even more insidious form of servitude based upon a herd mentality that crushes individuality in the name of mutuality, even when their practitioners intend or claim to respect individual freedom as an anarchist principle.

²³ The Invisible Committee. *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.

²⁴ Anonymous. “Taking Communion at the End of History” in *Politics is not a Banana: The Journal of Vulgar Discourse*. Institute for Experimental Freedom, 2009, p. 70.

²⁵ Anonymous. *Desert*. St. Kilda: Stac an Armin Press, 2011, p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 68.

²⁷ James C. Scott. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

²⁸ PM. *Bolo Bolo*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995, pp. 58–60.

go hand in hand, mutual acquiescence is characterized by social relationships that demand varying degrees and kinds of acceptance and submission. Rather than experiencing the individual and collective uplift of affinity and solidarity in the anarchist sense, under the sway of mutual acquiescence we are urged to escape social isolation by forging the mental handcuffs of our own impotence. Though these manacles might be tricked-out with all the latest in seductive gadgetry, they may enslave us all the more because they can produce a technophobic torpor which can blind many of us to intriguing possibilities for direct action, sabotage and revolt.

In contrast to such passivity, a motley crew of anonymous hacktivists, Wikileaks and Ludites engage in various anti-authoritarian forms of resistance and preemptive attack which seek to challenge the commonsensical social underpinnings of webbed docility and complacency that are among the hegemonic links in the ideological chain of mutual acquiescence. Perhaps Guy Fawkes is the internet joker in the stacked deck of the capitalist state that incites the players to cash in their chips and occupy the bank. His image has successfully been used in Occupy Wall Street propaganda to rally the troops, but the real test of such culture jamming strategies continues to be what those gathered together under the occupy banner actually do to foment a global uprising.

Rather than thinking of the state as a “thing” to be seized in a vanguardist sense in order to counter ideological domination from above, as in the formulations of Marxist cultural hegemony theorist Antonio Gramsci, anarchists do not seek to replace one form of hegemony with another.²⁹ Instead, we challenge the social processes that constitute mutual acquiescence by practicing direct action from the bottom-up. In so doing, we oppose the passive acceptance of consensus reality with both open and covert forms of solidarity and rebellion that are based upon our individual predilections and shared affinities, and these direct actions can in turn release the inherent power of mutual aid in its most anarchic sense. While the above analysis is not meant to deny the existence of ideological hegemony (no need to throw the Gramscian baby out with the bathwater), it is based on the anti-authoritarian assumption that such hegemony takes many diverse forms beyond orthodox Marxist notions of class and culture as base and superstructure respectively. Further, it maintains that the only way in which dominant ideas can be undermined is from below.

Yet, as history has shown, the destruction of the alienated relationships upon which the state is built remains complicated by the fact that mutual acquiescence has a continuing appeal. When faced with the varied uncertainties and dislocations of life on the sinking ship of capitalism, mutual acquiescence offers those with queasy stomachs a “tough love” seasickness remedy that normalizes “survival of the fittest” competition as a lifeboat strategy, while dismissing the cooperativeness of mutual aid as unrealistic. The resulting prescription of competition for scarce resources in the face of calamity is combined with an emphasis on only those specific options for action that will not seriously rock the authoritarian boat any further, much less sink it. Moreover, the human impulse toward mutual aid is further suffocated by those in the debraining industry who professionally proselytize on behalf of an apolitical positivist psychology. The latter’s emphasis on blaming ourselves for our own alienation and oppression is then reinforced by our everyday relationships of mutual acquiescence in which we are constantly encouraged to “be re-

²⁹ Richard Day. *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*. Toronto: Between The Lines, 2005.

alistic,” get with the program, stop whining, pop an anti-depressant if necessary, and, for godsake, appear upbeat.

Today, a touchy-feely New (W)age form of positive thinking has joined forces with the callous Social Darwinist philosophy of rugged individualism. Both urge us to survive by prioritizing the competitive elements within our human nature repertoire. For example, by seeking to become an entrepreneur, one can attempt to secure a first class waterproof compartment in turbulent seas, hoping to keep the sharks at bay for a while by feeding the less privileged to them, or at least by giving one’s tacit consent to that sacrificial slaughter. If such a macabre scenario seems a bit too distasteful, we are encouraged to stop being so negative and accept this impoverished version of social reality as a given. The underlying assumption is that we are powerless to save them anyway and that the leaks will eventually be patched up enough so that those who are “naturally selected” can sail out of troubled waters before it becomes too late.

As the successful entrepreneurs and their professional cohorts in business and government watch the gruesome show from their watertight bunkers, they lament the “negative attitude,” “bad karma” or lack of initiative on the part of those who are shark bait since, after all, anyone could obtain a dry berth if only they would pull themselves up by their own flipperstraps. Such a sink or swim ultimatum is socially lubricated by relationships of mutual acquiescence which encourage us to adopt this dog-eat-dog mentality by bathing its harshness in the soft glow of positivity or the dazzling promise of fifteen minutes of fame on the Survivor show. We acquiesce by seeking a privileged status and blaming those, including ourselves, who are drowning for being weighed down by their own “bad attitudes” or “karmic debt.” On the other hand, mutual aid relies on autonomous self-determination and radical forms of solidarity to overthrow the entire system of privilege that has proved so perilous to our individual and collective safety in the first place.

In order to maintain legitimacy, the current incarnation of the democratic capitalist state links its strategies of integration not to the lockstep conformity of the faceless masses, but with miserabilist versions of “individualism.” The desire for individuality morphs into a contemporary version of success in which the old Horatio Alger mythology of upward mobility is replaced by the spectacular celebrityhood of YouTube, or the “God Wants You To Be Rich” prosperity gospel preached by televangelistic “pastorpreneurs,” motivational speakers, life coaches, and corporate trainers. Given the underlying assumption of equality in a democratic context, those who are deemed “failures” can only blame themselves because of their lack of fortitude, intelligence or imagination. They have not learned “The Secret” of creating their own reality.³⁰ This feeding frenzy of victim-blaming is in turn socially enforced by relationships of mutual acquiescence. Accordingly, those labeled failures are considered to be the enemies of their own “happiness” as defined by the kind of commodified success that is measured in consumer goods and fleeting fantasies of celebrity status that simultaneously define the good life and confine our imaginal lives.

The problem then is not the sharks in the water, since they are only doing what comes naturally to their species, but the kind of predatory society in which some privileged humans are encouraged to throw those who are more vulnerable overboard and hide their eyes or watch the

³⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich. *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2009. An interesting debunking of the cult of positive thinking, though her conclusions are ultimately reformist.

sport as if there was no other choice. As a result, whether we find ourselves drowning in dangerous waters, or endlessly treading water in the doldrums of alienation, mutual acquiescence reinforces the social acceptance of a very circumscribed set of options. In reactionary fashion, such paltry alternatives are restricted to either the threatened “stick” of drowning or the promise of the socially acceptable lifejacket of competitive survival as a “carrot” (i.e. the stick by other means). In either case, we are expected to psychologically buy into the rules of the game in such a way that if we are winners, it is at the expense of those who might otherwise be seen as comrades, and if we are losers, we are set adrift in a sea of fear and uncertainty.

However, as Rebecca Solnit meticulously documents in her moving book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, time and again, when faced with the breakdown of the social order as a result of natural disasters (like earthquakes) or technological collapse (as is the case with “blackouts”); a contradiction appears. On the one hand, there are always some well documented incidents of selfish opportunism, but the less publicized of these involve the aggressive military response of elites who panic about the disruption of the social order which grants them their legitimacy. In the latter case, the public is viewed as an unruly mob to be either controlled by force or else made physically and psychologically dependent on the institutionalized charity delivered by corporate benevolence or the welfare state. On the other hand, however, in the vast majority of instances, a scenario of solidarity emerges that she characterizes as a “disaster utopia” that combines psychological liberation, social engagement and community-mindedness. In the latter case, forms of self-organization are created amidst disaster that involve heroism, purposefulness, compassion, generosity and the unleashing of desire, transcendence, possibility and agency.

There is more to the disaster picture than the immobilizing despair experienced by the outside observer witnessing the media spectacle of victimization. When mutual aid is set in motion; exhilaration, or even elation, can be experienced at a visceral level in disaster situations, along with the transcendent realization that it is the alienation of “normal” life that is the real disaster. In this moment of intensity, disaster can take on the radical liminality of a temporary autonomous zone, carnival or revolution. As Solnit explains, “It’s anarchic, a joy that the ordinary arrangements have fallen to pieces—but anarchic in that the ordinary arrangements structure and contain our lives and minds; when they cease to do so, we are free to improvise, discover, change, evolve.”³¹ And this kind of collective evolution is based upon mutual aid rather than being reduced to an individualized version of survival of the fittest.

In such extraordinary situations, it is my contention that what has been referred to here as mutual acquiescence is temporarily suspended, and in its place spontaneously arise those latent and suppressed cooperative aspects of human nature which culminate in acts of mutual aid that often go beyond mere survival. In such disastrous times, we witness and experience collaborative forms of direct action springing up from the ruins and can participate in the fabrication of a more vibrant society. These disaster utopias are not aberrations of human nature. Rather, they are affirmations of what is most anarchic about it. As she concludes, “In finding a deep connection with one another, people also found a sense of power, the power to do without the government, to replace its functions, and to resist it in many ways.”³² It is in this sense that mutual aid may be considered to truly be a “recipe for disaster” in the most affirmative CrimethInc sense of that

³¹ Rebecca Solnit. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. New York: Viking/Penguin, 2009, p. 117.

³² *Ibid*, p. 144.

term.³³ Similarly, beyond “disaster utopias,” those engaging in direct action by using the black bloc tactic create the kind of situational catastrophe that locates both the unleashing of a radical subjectivity and the unrestricted flow of mutual aid in the flames of insurrection.³⁴

When social calamity or upheaval strikes, we are not alone. We encounter others in a similar situation who may either seek to survive at our expense or else join together to build relationships based upon cooperation which suddenly seem possible when the walls of mutual acquiescence come tumbling down. However, though the anarchist trace is never completely absent from them, not all cooperative relationships create anarchy in practice. The proclivity for mutual aid, which Kropotkin illuminated as being an aspect of human nature that is essential to the survival of the human species, can instead be channeled into the mutual acquiescence of reformism, where it is systematically degraded and stripped of its anarchist potential. In appealing to those who cringe at the conservative survival of the fittest strategy but who find the anarchy of mutual aid to be a bit too frightening or “unrealistic,” mutual acquiescence offers the liberal alternative of reform. Instead of battling for survival against one’s peers in Hobbesian fashion or (perish the thought) collectively engaging in autonomous direct action, the reformist version of mutual acquiescence urges us to put our faith in requesting/demanding legalistic remedies from the state or participating in the electoral politics charade by rallying around such Obamaesque advertising slogans as “change you can trust.” Radical change is considered (if it is considered at all) to be impossible anyway, and we are instead directed to take a seat on the bandwagon of spectacular dissent. Since both spectacular society and mutual acquiescence are based upon social relations between people that are rooted in passivity, when taken in tandem, they can reinforce one another in undermining the formation of relations of mutual aid, even among dissenters.

Why then is the spectacle itself so alluring? Perhaps it is because, as Giorgio Agamben has posited, it is based upon the expropriation of the human desire for community. “This is why (precisely because what is being expropriated is the very possibility of a common good) the violence of the spectacle is so destructive; but for the same reason the spectacle retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it.”³⁵ All too typically, however, such a quest to detourn the spectacle, and in so doing unleash the communitarian aspects captured by it, is channeled into the safety-valve relationships of mutual acquiescence that characterize reformism. By engaging with the democratic spectacle of reform rather than adopting an ungovernable strategy of “inoperativeness” in order to sabotage or dismantle the apparatuses of power, liberals accept acquiescent roles by becoming “concerned citizens,” by writing a letter of protest to a government official or corporate CEO, by electing, or applauding the appointment of, a new charismatic leader to follow down the garden path of “green capitalism,” by confining their political zeal to petitioning the powers-that-be for redress of their grievances, or immersing themselves in evermore technologically-mediated forms of communication which can easily lend themselves to appropriation by the market and surveillance by the state.

³³ CrimethInc Workers Collective. *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*. Olympia, WA: CrimethInc. Far East, 2004 (www.crimethinc.com).

³⁴ AK Thompson. *Black Bloc, White Riot*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, pp. 122, 148.

³⁵ Giorgio Agamben. *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 79 and *What Is An Apparatus?* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 2–24. Whether it is possible to effectively engage in resistance within what Situationists refer to as “the spectacle” without having those efforts recuperated, or rebranded in reformist terms, is a question at the heart of two recent thought-provoking books. See Stephen Duncombe. *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. New York: New Press, 2007 and Brian Holmes. *Unleashing The Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2008.

In terms of such technological mediation, Annie Le Brun has written a devastating critique of the paving over of the convulsive power of what surrealists term the Marvelous by what she considers to be the deadening virtuality of the networked society. In her recent polemic, *The Reality Overload: The Modern World's Assault on the Imaginal Realm*, she states, "Even as it launches ambush after ambush upon the unreality of our desires, there is nothing 'virtual' about this reality. In fact it is overflowing, a reality overload, coming to besiege us at the very depths of our being."³⁶ In essence, she contends that we are faced with "a reality that has almost succeeded in making us confuse the virtual and the imaginary."³⁷ Even those who would not go as far as she does in totally dismissing any radical potential that might be available within the virtual realm might still find it instructive to question the relationship between virtuality and mutual acquiescence.

How many of us are imprisoned in the closed logic of a computer rationality in which appearances are not merely displayed on the screen as simulations of experience, but have become the experience itself? To what extent have we lost our bearings in what is predominantly a cyberspace sea of ersatz realizations of our most radical desires? To what degree has the desire for empowered solidarity upon which mutual aid is built been debased and co-opted by the fan club mentality of the ubiquitous social networking sites that so often act as contemporary vehicles for a mutual acquiescence in which your identity is a form of property that can be assessed by calculating the number of your Facebook "friends."

While not specifically referencing surrealism or Le Brun's book, Franco "Bifo" Berardi uses similar language in tracing contemporary forms of alienation to an "overdose of reality" and an infocratic regime whose power is built upon the creation of an "overloaded" cognitive space in which attention itself is under siege. Going beyond a reliance on the Freudian concept of psychological repression in investigating the cause of alienation, he explains our current malaise as being related to the forms of "over-communication" that characterize the psychologically dis-aggregating milieu of digital connectivity. Within the context of the Infosphere, he explores the schizophrenia-inducing environment of intense velocity, over-inclusivity and excessive visibility that characterize semicapitalism. These are the flows that can engender panic and encourage dependence on those institutions of authority that offer to provide shelter from the storm. Even in the activist milieu, the ultimate irony is that though the internet may be strategically used with mutual aid in mind, the result may still be a perpetuation of mutual acquiescence because of the way in which more human-scale forms of communication are overwhelmed by digital hyper-simulation.³⁸

Another aspect of the psychological basis of mutual acquiescence is related to the nature of personal identity in the democratic capitalist state. Here, the ownership of property is one of the defining factors in a "successful" or "unsuccessful" personal identity. In any authoritarian society, even one that chooses to call itself "democratic," law and order is policed not just by cops, but by an undercurrent of intertwined relationships of mutual acquiescence that in effect govern daily life. Some of these relationships are codified into law in a way that reveals the ghost within the

³⁶ Annie Le Brun. *The Reality Overload: The Modern World's Assault on the Imaginal Realm*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2000/2008, p. 4. Though little known within the North American anarchist milieu, this book by surrealist defender of the "ecology of the imagination," Annie Le Brun, is rich in anarchist references and allusions.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

³⁸ Franco "Bifo" Berardi. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, pp 106-183.

machine. When I first formulated a rudimentary version of the term “mutual acquiescence” as an anarchist conceptual tool, I had no idea that these two words already had a particular legal meaning in American jurisprudence. I have since discovered that in relation to property law, mutual acquiescence means “an agreement indicating acceptance of a condition by both parties involved or a lack of objection signifying permission” [all italics mine].³⁹ Extracting the essence of that legal language for our purposes here, and placing it in the non-legalistic context of mutual acquiescence that we have been exploring so far, it becomes evident that similar relationships of “acceptance,” “lack of objection” and “permission” can be addressed.

If the relationships that constitute and perpetuate the state are the negation of mutual aid in the anarchist sense of that term, then the theoretical concept of mutual acquiescence might be the missing link in understanding how Landauer’s conditional notion of the state and Kropotkin’s theory of mutual aid ultimately fit together.

If such mutually acquiescent relationships are considered “conditional” in not only the legal sense, but in Landauer’s sense of being constitutive of the state, then the subversive nature of mutual aid becomes clear. In terms of property, rather than feuding over “acceptance” or “lack of objection” or “permission” in relation to the specifics of property lines, as is the case with the legalistic form of mutual acquiescence recognized by the courts; anarchists question, and seek to directly undermine, private (or state) property as a societal institution. In doing so, we envision not the preservation of social stasis but the emancipatory possibilities of social rupture in relation to the idea of property and the myriad manifestations of enclosure by which it manifests itself in our lives. The anarchist practice of mutual aid allows us to simultaneously challenge the inevitability of a particular social reality and embrace those anti-authoritarian desires that mutual acquiescence urges us to dismiss as contrary to our own self-interest or to deny as unattainable. By rejecting mutual acquiescence and relating to one another differently in the spirit of mutual aid, we open the door to possibility.

Notes:

³⁹ “Mutual Acquiescence Law and Legal Definition,” US Legal, Inc. <http://uslegal.com/> Aug 21, 2010.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Ron Sakolsky
Mutual Acquiescence or Mutual Aid?
November 18, 2012

Modern Slavery: The Libertarian Critique of Civilization, Issue #1
Scanned from print version of Modern Slavery; typos and errors fixed.

theanarchistlibrary.org