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The Distinct Radicalism of Anarchism

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Anarchists tend to pose our core differences with marxists in terms of degrees of radicalism or rootedness. One of the classic ways this gets stated is that marxism deals with the political whereas we deal with the ethical.

These terms to the disagreement, once posed, are almost always immediately acknowledged and indeed embraced by both marxists and anarchists.

The marxists tend to be delighted by the framing because it smoothly follows their narrative of being the pragmatists. And additionally by and large most marxists are explicit moral nihilists — they don't believe there's a point to the investigations of ethical philosophy. They're not interested in interrogating what values or desires they *should* hold, they're interested in pursuing the desires they already have, or that they see as roughly uncontroversial. And those few marxists that do see value to ethical philosophy tend to oppose rigor in it, and also tend to disconnect it from their political work. Or else, when they do consider ethics, they tend to end up very close to anarchists.

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Conversely anarchists tend to embrace this distinction because it's obviously a distinction of radicalism. The super-structures that the marxist would typically speak entirely in terms of are ultimately simplistic macroscopic abstractions floating above a far more complicated and dynamic reality. The marxist loves to talk in terms of classes, the anarchist prioritizes talking in terms of interpersonal relationships and interactions. In such a sense we anarchists are both more universalist and more particularist. We seek the more fundamental and foundational dynamics, less bound to the vagaries of any specific historical context, but in so doing we obtain the means to analyze specific contexts with greater detail and insight. Of course we recognize the frequent practical utility of analysis in terms of oppressed/oppressor classes, but we see the fuzziness of such abstractions for what it is and are happy to go deeper than such simple frameworks. The radical position is that you can retain the insights offered by hasty generalizations — at the molar level — while also recognizing that these are ultimately not as fundamental and can be superseded by deeper dynamics — at the molecular level.

If marxism looks rather like engineering, anarchism looks a lot like physics. It should come as little surprise that I think the physics perspective ultimately trumps the “common sense” practicality of the engineering perspective. And it should be just as unsurprising that the marxists see “common sense” as the ideal starting point. You start with what you already know and only update that model once it starts clearly breaking down and you're forced to. This explains the very modular way marxist discourse has updated itself to consider things beyond their original proletariat v bourgeoisie focus. New discourses on liberation and oppression (similarly simplified into tales of relatively simple class conflicts) get grafted on to marxist thought in ungainly ways and the whole discourse lumbers on.

What is now starting to be more widely characterized in a negative manner as identity politics or “idpol” is in many respects just

domination does not equate preparing yourself to resist new or more local and particular instantiations of power, which can be all the more insidious or silencing for their relatively uniqueness or rarity.

While there's no doubt often immense utility to the practical, the stakes in this world are too high to sit back and take things for granted. The marxist and liberals both protest that their theoretical picture is surely nuanced enough and if any dramatic limitation to that picture arises it will surely be adapted to quickly. But history shows that oversimplifications into neat rhetorical frameworks have their own long-lasting momentum. People come to associate not with their original ethical motivations (if they even notice them) but merely in terms of the affiliations and strategies that once derived from such. The crude macroscopic patterns or tendencies that may well be correctly identified eventually get detached from their underlying roots. Those self-identified as underdogs remain stubbornly self-identified underdogs even when they come to rule regimes that slaughter millions, set up gulags, or occupy Palestine.

The radicalism of anarchism is what has left it fairly distinct among ideologies and mass movements, with no instances of mass murder in its name. It's hard to stray too far, to ever let inertia and some “common sense” lead you down the road of slaughter and tyranny, when your philosophy grounds itself so directly in ethics, highlights it in every way and never lets you detach from your ultimate values. Many passingly claim to be champions of liberty, but anarchism demands of every action, every plan, does this liberate? Could this be more coherent with liberty? And if there are necessary tradeoffs how exactly do they work? Can they be improved? Are there better ways?

To reach a moment where we sit back, entirely satisfied, would be to abandon anarchism. To the radical there is no litmus for “due diligence”, no final finish line, no moment where we pat ourselves on the back. The vigilance of the radical is never satiated.

to appeal to the cops and those in authority, to seek the placidity of neutralized struggle, so as to avoid cataclysm or expensive and grueling resistance. Liberals have a short horizon, they want what they can get now. And thus likewise from this perspective anarchists view marxists as just another variant of liberals. At best their dictatorship of the proletariat accomplishes a few things quickly at the expense of giving up even greater aspirations in the long run. The centralized coercive apparatus the marxists seek as a means being just another version of the same myopic Faustian bargain that the liberals make with their state. Both power structures once embraced will metastasize and grow to full blown authoritarianism. But the marxists, just like the liberals, express little true interest in this danger. Either because they ultimately just want power, or because their “practicality” blinds them to any and all “theoretical” dangers just over the horizon.

Similarly liberals and marxists have little appreciation for suffering in the here and now when that suffering is outside their “practical” focus. The liberal cares a lot about the problems that are teed up for them, never mind what’s actually of greatest stake or impact. Similarly the marxist (and the more vulgar social justice advocates) develop a kind of laser focus on some specific categories or forms of domination, often completely unequipped or unwilling to address more nuanced or complicated situations. Indeed just as marxist organizations have become particularly infamous among the activist left for tolerating and protecting abusers and rapists in their leadership, everyone is aware of circles of social justice where horrific interpersonal abuse is given a pass or becomes clouded and impossible to speak cleanly of because the perpetrators behavior isn’t easily definable along traditional dimensions of heteropatriarchal and white supremacist categories. The now quite old joke “If you want a vision of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face while shouting ‘but this isn’t Formal Oppression!’ forever” reveals just how insufficient the “practical” lens can be. Aligning yourself against the currently most prominent expressions of power and

a continuation of this kind of simplistic sort of conceptual schematization. Modern social justice is the product of liberatory insights expanding from the discourse of a small number of radicals and becoming very rapidly adopted by millions. It’s only natural that some compression or simplification occurs, and that those so overwhelmed by the onrush of new considerations try to parse it all into rigid frameworks.

Social justice has — on the whole — thus become in many regards a rather pragmatic attempt to hash out an etiquette or legal system (albeit a decentralized one largely enforced through reputation rather than state violence). This is an undertaking quite different from ethics. Indeed the biggest advantage and disadvantage of social justice is that it seeks to be as motivation-independent as it can be. It doesn’t attempt to establish *why* one should be for example opposed to misogyny. It either takes for granted that its audience already shares the same values (naturally causing some confusion from slight differences in these assumed values), or it seeks to arrange a sociocultural state of affairs independent of people’s underlying values. “Who cares what people actually believe, let’s find ways of browbeating them into at least acting decently.”

One can see why, as with marxism, most anarchists find the mainstream of social justice profoundly incomplete and insufficiently audacious. It often gives up before going deeper into challenging all power relations in and of themselves, settling instead for an incomplete intersectionality, and it shies away from the far more fractious problems of figuring out what we really value or should value, much less speaking explicitly of such values and their tensions. Of course the failure mode of some teens browbeating people over inane otherkin-style shit is a hell of a lot better than the marxist failure mode of The People’s Cops actually physically beating people.

Similarly there’s a temptation to see anarchist nuance and absolutism as frustratingly unpragmatic. There are big enemies doing a lot of damage that need to be knocked down and dithering try-

ing to add complexities to our picture or speak in terms of distant and even more idealistic aspirations can understandably seem like a bunch of sabotage and backstabbing. When there's a goal practically right in front of your nose you don't want to hear some buzzkill well-actually anarchist telling you that's not the ultimate goal and that the shortcut you want to take risks endangering their grander aspirations. Fuck their preposterously grand ambitions of a world without relations of control, you just want fucking bread. The picture you have, both of the world and your desires within it, are just common sense. Why dirty that up? Why undermine it?

There's a bit of a parallel here to the completely different definitions of "reductionism" used in the hard sciences and those used in the humanities or social sciences. In the social fields "reductionism" is shorthand for a kind of oversimplification, an imposed conceptual model that papers over complications and particulars. To reduce the descriptive fidelity of the model in favor of a toy that's easier to work with. As such in these fields "reductionism" functions almost exclusively as an epithet. However in most of the harder sciences, particularly in physics and mathematics, "reductionism" has the exact opposite valences. To reduce in physics is to minimize the description necessary to fully replicate all the particulars. Reductionism in the hard sciences is not a matter of stripping away descriptive capacity, but doing more with less, or drawing out more detail and accuracy from a previously clunky impression of things; to go from a coarsely-grained picture to a finely-grained one. You may start with a simple concept of a table, and through reductionism you get a much richer picture of atomic and molecular arrangements, the flows of wood and structural tensions in screws or pegs, of complex underlying interactions. Such reductionism ultimately enhances rather than impairs. You can still operate at the somewhat clunky level of abstraction of "table" — and that can be a good and sufficient shorthand in a large variety of situations — but you now have the freedom to move beyond the "common sense" and to predict the boundaries of its usefulness.

Marxism and social justice largely look at the radicalism of anarchism with suspicion, seeing it as the kind of "reductionism" so accursed in the humanities. As something that either gets in the way of common sense or dissolves it entirely into useless and masturbatory intellectual rabbit holes. ("Oh so we're supposed to care about individuals ultimately, I suppose that means ignoring systematic injustice and prioritizing every white dude with hurt feels cuz someone yelled at him.") The proper notion of radicalism/reductionism — as something that compliments a realization of broad patterns and ultimately provides additional useful perspectives without undermining all capacity to prioritize — is alien to them.

Of course it's also true that radical inquiry can shift and alter one's values. And additionally if the radical discovers that say the ameliorations in the union contract secured today would become a serious impediment to future advancements, or the gun law ostensibly proposed to stop murderous white supremacists in the present would make state tyranny all the more invulnerable in the future, the radical might well work against the shortsighted goals or priorities of "common sense".

This distinction between radicalism and superficial but supposedly practical impressions helps get at another divide in language and analysis. Both marxists and anarchists use the term "liberal" as an epithet. But for quite different reasons.

To the marxist the central sin of liberalism is its focus on individual liberty, a preposterous and distracting bit of bourgeois moralism. Thus naturally the marxist sees anarchists as basically another stripe of liberal.

Conversely to the anarchist the central sin of liberalism is its limited horizons and insufficient audacity. The chief tenant of liberalism, in the anarchists' eyes, might well be Keynes' infamous quote, "in the long run we're all dead." Liberalism settles for crippling half-measures, happily trading away the world and freedom of future generations for small short term gains. They are happy to make the state more powerful and deeply ingrained in our lives,