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Why Anarchism?

**A Love Letter To Our Doubters, Burnouts, Expats,
& Refugees**

William Gillis

12th December 2013

I've identified as an anarchist for over two decades. Like any ideology or flag of identification it is, to most people, a weird, antiquated sort of thing to do. Relatively few people actually care about the world and those with the audacity to set out to change it are rarer still. Even among them radicalism is infrequent, and such prominent flag-flying practically extinct. It is, I'll readily admit, on the face of it rather intellectually suspect. Akin to the lone old Marxist grumbling in the back of the hackerspace at the nerve of people to choose terminology outside his tradition's memetic scaffolding. We're all busy getting things done as informed, free-thinking, universally iconoclastic individuals these days, why willingly chain yourself to the baggage of centuries old political tensions and the flotsam of small but frequently problematic milieu?

This sort of questioning washes in with every wave of burnout and trauma. What once felt exciting and liberating becomes all too familiar and constraining. And in many people's need to push back, to reassert their underlying agency as human beings rather than characters in a political narra-

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tive and question ties of assumed “affinity” with scurrilous personalities or behaviors they end up floating away entirely.

So I thought I’d write a little piece about why I don’t leave. How coming in originally with a deeply suspicious and critical eye on these issues I ended up nevertheless choosing to hoist the black flag on which nothing is written and cast a huge chunk of my life in its shadow.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone familiar with me that it’s ultimately not about the people or even the history but the word and conceptual space itself.

“Anarchy” is unarguably the greatest and most consequential Orwellianism in the world. In every language to have touched Greek it bundles a kind of sociopathic chaos onto the concept of pure freedom. Freedom in our common tongue isn’t merely slavery, it’s a nightmarish state of death and domination devoid of substantive empathy. And the implication is the root of virtually every paradigm, social ecosystem, and cognitive strategy on display: That there is no escape from lines of domination, no aspect of relation to one another outside the binary of controller and controlled. Anarchy, as a word, is the ultimate reset button on those who dare to dream outside the rules of the games we play. A reminder that society is, supposedly, a zero sum game, and any present deviation from that reality a fleeting collective irrationality, capable of being popped at any moment by exploring too far or thinking too deeply. We have a word for the absence of rulership, and we use it to signify *fractured* rulership.

This is, once you start to notice it, a poisonous, ruinous affair that spreads widely if subtly in effect. There are many kinks in our languages and conceptual schemas, and we frequently manage to work around most of them, but “anarchy” sits at the center of a topological defect so vast it almost characterizes the entire landscape of our social relations. That we *might* be able to slither out an equivalent victory without contesting this conceptual perversion directly shouldn’t blind us to its

centrality. We are not merely using an ungainly word to describe something everyone is basically already on board with. We are challenging an assumption that underpins virtually every other political, ethical or motivational paradigm. Both conservatism and liberalism, broadly recognized, see sociopathy as fundamental, one embraces that nihilism opportunistically, the other seeks to hide from it by embracing arbitrary, short-sighted abstraction and rejecting all inquiry into the roots.

The prominent use of the term “anarchy” is not a pedantic definitional battle to save the legacy of some long dead but kinda awesome communards, nor is it an attempt to set our lives by their historically-situated rhetorical proclamations and strategic fumbblings. It is a surgical strike on the chessboard and a clearing of the air. No endeavor can make significant headway in the long run without self honesty. It is through pressing concepts and notions to their extremes and examining their high-energy behavior for contradictions or simplifications that we avoid getting lost in a miasma of localized abstractions of indeterminate depth or arbitrariness, unable to effectively navigate or orient ourselves. A willingness to bite bullets, to fearlessly and seriously swim to the boundaries of the possible, is vital not just in changing the world but having any agency in our own lives.

And what is lost through identification with the marginalizing term “anarchy” is arguably more than made up for *through that marginalization*. While all those who identify with anarchy do not always live up to the radical inquiry it suggests, at worst anarchist circles serve as fertile territory for explorations in extremism. Unbridled sociopaths, the inventively unhinged, and ideological robots of a thousands colors contribute to a deluge of first-hand data and such productive, passionate experimentation as found nowhere else. There are also, of course, saints and angels to be found in abundance too, human beings so sharply and intensely human you can get addicted to their realness. Through two centuries of struggle “anarchy”, like the

word “love” has become a defect pummeled into a hole. Things happen there. Radiation comes blasting out.

I’m not arguing that mundane, petty, shortsighted prickishness doesn’t in some ways characterize wide swathes of those who identify as anarchists. Or that utterly reprehensible behaviors and structures aren’t replicated by many wrapped in our flag. We all know that most communists are just capitalists who think the game should be confined to social capital. But, however much we may opportunistically or aspirationally use the phrase, there is no “anarchist movement”. There are rather countless circles and individuals on various trajectories, interacting at this single point and sometimes allowing the goodwill or romanticism attached to “anarchism” to bind them to people of wildly different motivation or experience. Anarchism has gone through *many* iterations, with bundles of associated things rising and falling, while other, largely unrelated waves do the same. There are *many* anarchist cultures and global scenes, some almost hermetically sealed to each other. Whatever horror appears to span the anarchist world you’ve seen, it is likely that this too shall pass. Far better and far worse, and just far different ones will take their place. Some of today’s breakaway clusters, insurgent inclinations, and alien appropriators will be tomorrow’s mainstay.

Some of this is just inevitable cultural tectonics, some of it is the direct result of conscious exploits or better ideas. People can and do have significant impacts on the trajectory of anarchist milieus and conceptual evolution. Things will change and you *can* have a significant effect in changing them.

But no, not every victory is immediately possible wearing the anarchist flag. Don’t get me wrong, there are countless critical insights unique to anarchist discourse, some still to be detached as modules and exported like so many others to “the left”, to subcultures, and to the mainstream, others so deeply embedded with a universal rejection of power relations they are possibly undetachable. Some things will likely only ever

Work on some feel-good campaign adrift and at the mercy of a wider context? Get high off cynical elitism reading Baedan? Vacations are good and all, but at some point everything else starts to pale in comparison. The cruft and collisions anarchy can draw are often quite wild and I don't blame anyone occasionally ducking out for some security or safety. But amid the blazing horrors, the anarchist singularity is simply the best place to find rooted concepts and as a result real, long-term hopes and the sort of affinities that really truly matter. Not just people deeply committed to good, but friends who will find paths towards it that you didn't even think of. Not just victories in the immediate, but opportunities for coherent progress on the whole.

I hate to break it to you, but there's no avoiding it at this point. You're in this for the long haul.

be possible under the flag of anarchism. Yet, if you're looking for a specific victory the anarchist label is indeed sometimes a bad bet. You can do better with the loose "movement of movements". You can do better with your friends. You can do better within "non-ideological" projects that sacrifice processing efficiency by cloaking deep motivations and settling on superficial but productive affinities.

Some people will tell you anarchism is about the existing insights. Those too largely can and will be exported. It's not the array of tools and insights developed so far but the rootedness that has driven those insights.

As I said "Anarchism" has a clearer etymology than "feminism", or "communism", or "socialism", or "social justice", and it targets not something as macroscopic and aggregate as "women" or "community" but an incredibly important conceptual tangle that gets at the root of many of our society's problems. The crux of "anarchy" is an ethical orientation, not a political platform. It's intellectually easy to be a sociopath and also a feminist or a communist, or whatever. In the very best currents of such traditions "never holding control over another mind" is still only loosely stitched on as a bullet point. Anarchism is simply more closely tied to "no power relations ever" or "see others freedom as your own" and this matters in a wider array of situations than something historically particular. Anarchism can be corrupted and obviously often is, but it's harder, in the grand scheme of things, to corrupt anarchism than anything else. We've numbered in the millions and moved the world yet deliberately never seized power. For all the shit that's cropped up in our ranks, unlike virtually any other comparable framework you care to name no anarchist has ever been responsible for genocide or megadeath. That is actually, sadly, amazingly unique in history. Our focus on power itself rather than any of its instantiations has an effect that's hard to deny. We may fuck up, but we course-correct. If

not ourselves then our comrades. The cognitive dissonance is usually just too great.

Yes, this bias sometimes comes at the expense of immediate returns, praise, and the exhilaration of momentum. Do our banners fly over huge armies? Not always. But what often matters more is who gets the ball rolling, who provides the tools that otherwise wouldn't have been considered or dreamt of. What anarchism provides is not so much an ideological platform and a cohesive movement but a think tank and a laboratory. It is far from the only space capable of insight and has no monopoly on useful information—indeed many spaces are practically defined by exclusive access to certain experiences and insights. But just as it is hard to plot a radical arc that doesn't pass into “anarchy” there is still so much more to discover and resolve. Beyond our current experiences, beyond our present concerns. This is the realm of maximum possible impact. Anarchists exist in and are native to virtually every struggle and community. We famously punch many many orders of magnitude above our weight and we do so not by seizing other people as tools but by providing people with new tools, by seeing hopes and dangers long in advance. The whole point of getting to the roots is to map out the stuff no one else has seen yet, to recognize new possibilities, to prepare for wildly different futures, to do the hard work no one else sees the utility in. You don't walk away from that awareness and somehow come out more productive.

Probably the complaint I receive the most is: there's so little forgiveness or empathy in the anarchist community, it's all just hyper line-drawing moralism. Well, yeah, you get some decent human beings in a room suddenly more free from bullshit and they'll start upping their standards. Opening your eyes to power relations and daring to stand against them is a fucking dangerous, traumatizing thing. Suspicion and defensive walls are only natural. This creates a mildly productive competitive dynamic where we're all constantly burning bridges while each learning more about decency all

the time. This state of affairs works well enough yet of course is suboptimal. People get run out for being from a different culture; while some sociopaths are allowed to dig in deep once they learn some sufficient “rules” to play within. The latter is an amazing opportunity for us to preemptively map out every last corner for sociopathy to hide in through experiment. The former, however, doesn't take much to change. All it takes is meeting people halfway yourself. You don't have to change the entire “scene” all you have to do is get critical mass to count as your own scene. And share your insights!

The second most frequent complaint is that anarchism has failed to ingest certain good ideas or realizations from other people. In my experience that's just not true, or at least not a good portrayal of what's going wrong. There's plenty of anarchists deeply aware of critical race theory, or ableism, or neuroscience, or Hayekian calculation limits, or whatever—and plenty of anarchist discussions and developments on those ideas. The problem is internal communication and documentation; so many of our theoretical insights and developments happen in conversation or on the ground. Circulation takes forever. Right now we're in a stage where we're constantly re-inventing the wheel. We don't publish our ideas to the world in any accessible or mapped way, just to our immediate friends. So we entered the 00s lurching, bitten by the 80s luddite zombies and didn't sufficiently embrace or shape the internet. So what? This is rotten and embarrassing situation to be sure, but it's obviously a transient one that you can help speed up our recovery from.

At the start of this I wasn't entirely honest, I too have tried to leave anarchist circles. Almost a decade ago, but years after I'd done my time in various trenches and cycled through burnouts. I know the allure. The laundry list of failings and frustrations with the milieu, with the canonical discourses, with the daunting challenges we face. But you've got to be honest with yourself. What are you going to do, just go ride bikes?