

Against Community Building, Towards Friendship

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The Dangerous Failings of Community

As long as I've been around other anarchists, I've witnessed an unremitting reverence for the sanctity of community.

The idea of community is held in such high regard by anarchists that it's eerily reminiscent of USA liberals paying fealty to the "sacred ground" of their nation's capitol. Community is something consecrated and unassailable to anarchists. It's the bond that binds us to our fellow true believers. It gives us belonging, direction, purpose, safety, all those good things.

But does it really?

The more time I spend amongst anarchists, the more I find the "anarchist community" ideal to be inherently unattainable and isolating. It seems every attempt at building an organized egalitarian community ends up enabling gross misconduct by certain members and the end result is always demoralizing burn-out for everyone involved.

The attempt to group disparate strangers who barely get along, based on an imagined affinity (typically ideology, but painted in such broad strokes so as to be rendered inconsequential) inevitably manages to crash and burn every time.

A gentle, alienated soul's deep pining to build community will often get exploited by abusive people so they can insert themselves into their target's life. By attaching themselves to a community, virtually anyone can gain instant access to the minds and hearts of people that would never have associated with them otherwise. Anarchists are so dedicated to maintaining the ideals of egalitarianism, openness, inclusivity, mutuality and fraternity, that they'll put up with a whole lot of shit from people that demonstrate over and over again that they don't share the same values as them. Abusive people are tolerated and even accepted by us so long as they identify as belonging to the anarchist movement, because of course anarchists aren't fond of gatekeeping or erecting barriers to entry.

When a person announces they're a member of the anarchist community, we immediately hand them a black cat badge to pin to their shirt (usually metaphorically, sometimes literally) and welcome them with open arms, no questions asked. Predictably, parasitic abusers are able to swagger into our spaces flashing that official membership badge, and they get to work preying on vulnerable, empathetic people who are looking for fellow travelers who share their ideals.

Again and again I've witnessed these entitled parasites take advantage of the compassionate anarchist spirit and they'll often spend years tearing people's lives apart until the community becomes so toxic and unbearable that everyone abandons ship to try and preserve their mental health and physical safety. In the end, everyone seems to end up more exploited and traumatized by the anarchist community experience than they would have been without it.

Due to my experiences both managing and participating in various anarchist spaces, I'd really like to throw out the entire idea of anarchist community and re-imagine how anarchistic interactions can be manifested going forward.

Much like the related ideologically sacred institution of democracy, the whole concept of community is insidious and underhanded, an ideal seemingly designed to manipulate people into associating with bullies and dickheads by whittling away at basic human needs like autonomy, self-determination and consent.

Too many times, our dedication to building unfettered communities open to all people lowers our guard and lets cops, rapists and assorted authoritarians infiltrate our movements and inflict lasting damage to both our collective and individual psyches.

A community in its current form almost requires everyone involved be socialized in extreme docility, forced to exist in a perpetual state of submission to everyone around them. Otherwise, the community would almost certainly implode.

Without that docile meekness being forced on all the community members, the billions of people living boxed up and piled on top of neighbors they're barely able to tolerate would inevitably sharpen their fangs and rip each other apart to reclaim the personal space every living being needs in order to exercise their autonomy and individuality.

If our sharp claws weren't meticulously and regularly yanked out of our fingertips by the upholders of community, to forge us into obedient and pliable little shits, the entire concept of community would be rendered unworkable.

Both the metaphorical and literal concrete walls that contain us and our egos would quickly crumble into rubble without the authority of the community to hold them up.

There's a word that describes how we feel when we need time to ourselves but can't get it because we live in these vast interconnected global communities, surrounded wall-to-wall, block-to-block, nation-to-nation in every direction by other people and have no way to tune out their vociferous voices and energies. It's the mirror image to loneliness - 'aloneliness'. This innate state of being was surprisingly only coined recently, in 2019, by Robert Coplan, a Canadian psychologist.

If loneliness is the yearning to connect to others, being alone is the deep-seeded need to disconnect from others and retreat into the self. This is something that becomes harder and harder as the communal collective is centered and the individual is increasingly diminished and cast as a villainous foil to the precious community ideal.

Also in 2019, a study of nearly 20,000 people (Scientific Reports volume 9, Article number: 7730) established that we need to spend regular time immersed in nature to maintain our well-being. Too often, our proven need to embrace these solitary experiences is discounted because so much reverence is placed on the building and expansion of society and community by the authorities who shape our world.

Re-imagining Our Social Bonds

Someone posed this question to me recently about my frequent critiquing of democracy:

"If you're against democracy, how would you propose consensus be reached among an anarchist community?"

Before I can answer the question, I should point out that most definitions of 'commune' wildly conflict with anarchy. Take this common definition, for example:

"organized for the protection and promotion of local interests, and subordinate to the state; the government or governing body of such a community."

So like a lot of the authority-based concepts certain anarchists feel the need to appropriate, a community is assumed by polite society to come with a certain expectation of authority.

To avoid the inevitable confusion that comes with the strange urge some people have to re-define preexisting concepts, I'd really like to bypass this loaded word completely and instead try to instill a more anarchist bent to the concept of community as anarchists presumably mean it...

So let's just call it 'friendship', since that's essentially all we desire from what we term an 'anarchist community': Trusted friends we can live with, play with, learn with. It's a simple and effective word that only has positive connotations, and isn't going to make anyone think of all the glaringly authoritarian communities held together by a state's threat of violence and built and maintained by exploited workers who most often can't even afford to live in said communities.

I think it's important we use clear and concise language to describe our objectives as anarchists, and too many of the words we lean on when outlining our desires for a domination-free world have hierarchical baggage permanently weighing them down.

Okay, now let's rephrase the question in a way that leaves no room for misinterpretation...

"How would I suggest you make decisions when you have disagreements with your friends over which course of action to take?"

Well, I wouldn't suggest anything.

People really don't need me or anyone to direct their interactions with their friends or dictate to them how they should define and fulfill their relationships.

If you and your friends need me to prescribe you a program to adhere to in order for your friendship to function, you're clearly not interested in practicing anarchy.

Why even put the effort into maintaining the friendship if you need to involve an external body to create systems, laws and processes to ensure the friendship remains equitable and fulfilling? If your friend isn't being fair to you, why are you still their friend?

Anyone who would exploit you, diminish you, neglect you or deny you your autonomy isn't acting as a friend and doesn't deserve to be considered one. A friend cherishes and respects you. A friend encourages you to fulfill your desires and does everything they can to help achieve your needs.

And if you're not friends with the people you're in disagreement with, why do you care to reach consensus with them? Why share experiences with them and tie your fate to their desires if you don't even like them?

Is your idea of 'community' (friendship) a suffocating debate club where people who don't even get along have to endlessly negotiate with each other and reach some arbitrary consensus in order to continue to co-exist?

Wouldn't it be a lot easier to just not enter into formalized relationships with people whose values so conflict with your own as to provoke such intractable conflict?

If you truly desire anarchy, it's important to make your own decisions unhindered by the decrees of lionized authority figures and their taped-together social systems. Only you and your friends can decide how to best maintain your friendships and how to commune with each other in a way that benefits all parties.

Unless you're disabled in a way that affects your sociability, it's unlikely you need formal rules of association to be directed to you before you can form bonds with other humans you wish to commune with. That's all social systems are really, a set of rules someone decided everyone should have to follow, regardless of whether or not they share the same values. It's fundamentally defeating to anarchy when self determination, freedom of association and autonomy are overwritten by someone else's values. Upstanding citizens of the nation might prize free speech, democracy, morality, free markets, peaceful protest and community, but that doesn't mean you have to.

No authoritative body should presume to possess the power to tell others how to solve disputes they have with their friends. If you can't get along with a friend without ordinances from above then you should probably question why you remain friends with them and if the relationship is worth the emotional toll it exerts on you, your friend and those around you.

This all of course assumes you're adept at socialization, which admittedly a lot of us aren't, due to a diverse array of disabilities and emotional traumas, but that's just more proof that no one can or should prescribe exact instruction to people for creating social relations amongst themselves. Every relationship is different, and the only real prerequisite should be a desire to share experiences and support and nurture each other.

Discarding Bad Relationships

Like I've mentioned, there are a lot of abusive, exploitative people who enter our spaces, create a world of hurt, sap everyone of their energy, sabotage our projects by creating constant conflict and division without actually contributing anything, and then when someone finally objects to their behavior, they assert their supposed democratic right to continue to force themselves on everyone because "you have to reach an understanding / consensus / agreement with your fellow community member".

Fuck that.

If someone is abusing or exploiting you, just eject them from your orbit. You're not under any obligation to kowtow to the desires of a person who has demonstrated they have little respect for you or your values. Once they've shown you they're not your friend with a pattern of selfish and harmful actions, it's not your responsibility to protect their ego and keep shining their black cat badge.

You have to live your own life and can't pour all your energy into making some random bully feel included in your social circle because they've announced they're some stripe of anarchist. Anarchy isn't a numbers game, it won't matter if there's one less member in your anarchy club, especially when that person has demonstrated they don't actually give two shits about doing anarchy.

We need to know our limitations. We need to stand up for each other when we see abuse and not allow the abuse to be tolerated and normalized under the guise of community, democracy and inclusivity. It's important to set clear boundaries with people and cut ties with them when they cross those boundaries and begin to damage your mental health and sense of safety.

As for what those boundaries should be? There are so many disparate personalities and unique circumstances that can occur in a relationship, so as always it's not realistic to set universal metrics. There's really no fail-proof program for human association, which is why it's so important for each able individual to be aware of their own boundaries and be ready to enforce them. But generally, if you no longer feel safe in a space because of a certain person's presence, feel you're exerting too much energy to satisfy their unreasonable demands and getting little back in return, or frequently feel anxiety due to their words and / or actions... It's likely time to cut ties.

When you're in an organized community with someone, you're denied direct control over the relationship. Instead, your interactions are dictated by whatever social norms and rules have been developed by those who formed the community, often long before you were born. If you don't want to be around someone any more, you have to wrestle with the system's checks and balances,

essentially pleading for permission from the community and its decision-making mechanisms to disassociate from the person.

In any community, a communal divorcing is a time, money and energy consuming social affair involving the proclamations of multiple people both familiar and unfamiliar, public hearings, and an exhaustive bureaucracy.

On the other hand, ending a simple friendship is much simpler because you directly control who you choose to spend your time with, without an entire community body inserting itself into your private life. No one can force you to be their friend and devote your time and energy to them everyday, but communities constantly force you to negotiate with unkind neighbors, relatives, coworkers, landlords, bosses, teachers and others who you'd never spend time with if you had the autonomy to choose.

Freedom of association is an anarchist principle that always manages to get undermined and maligned by the fiercely un-anarchist principles the assorted anarcho-democrats, Chomskyists and Bookchinists insist on bringing to the table. I'd argue there's no anarchist principle more important than being able to choose who to spend your time with. I'd much rather choose a few friends than amass community members.

Systems Don't Protect People

People protect people.

We tend to put a lot of faith in the systems that govern us, and assume they'll protect us from harm when more often than not the systems fail us at every turn with tepid half-measures and bureaucratic meandering.

Building our own systems to live by can be a worthwhile pursuit, but if we try to extend those systems to a wider sphere of people, they'll inevitably break down as an increasing number of those people find the system doesn't serve their diverging needs and begin to rebel.

The bigger a community and its bureaucracy grow, the more disconnected from people and their needs the community gets, until the point where a community becomes devastatingly isolating and dehumanizing to everyone forced to exist within its towering walls.

A lot of anarchists have reacted to me speaking ill of community with fear and anger because they've internalized the idea that "community support" is something necessary for their survival. But if they're being honest with themselves, by community support, they really just mean welfare from the state. This fear of losing access to healthcare, unemployment / disability insurance, and a pension doesn't really have anything to do with their concept of community, and is really just a form of cognitive dissonance.

As an anarchist, I know the state doesn't work for me and never will. If a community is a collective bureaucratic body that assigns duties and resources to people depending on prefigured factors, it's acting as a state, regardless of whatever fancy new tag is affixed to it, and it will no doubt grow increasingly isolating and destructive as the years wear on and the power of its architects and benefactors is cemented.

We already have authorities that decide who gets how much and when, and it's brought us nothing but suffering. We already have community and it treats us like trash every day of our lives. Pretending this disconnected forced grouping of disparate peoples with wildly diverging

values, needs and desires is somehow capable of serving us equitably and with care and respect is mournful.

Community always seems to be the spark that ignites an inferno of hierarchy and domination. So much horrific oppression and death has been justified in the age of Leviathan by attaching it to "the good of the community". I've seen so many people, including anarchists, sweep all manner of abuses under the rug in a desperate attempt to "protect the integrity of the community". Somehow the community is always put before the people who inhabit it, as if a precarious idolon drawn from thin air and held together by nothing but collective resolve is more sacred than life itself.

Arranging people into societies and communities and nations and cities and suburbs and civilizations that have wildly varying resources only serves to separate us and creates permanent warfare among us, with those lucky enough to belong to the more resource-rich communities getting every advantage over those in more barren, parched lands.

Community is an ever-expanding wave that washes over the land, leaving its salt in the soil and forever amassing momentum until it morphs into its final form: an impregnable global civilization with no chink in the armor, no weakness we can assail in the hopes of containing its immense authority... Until finally the wave collapses under its own weight, adding a thick layer of blood to the salted land.

Friendship can't scale up to swallow the planet. Friendship remains forever small, personal, intimate, deliberate, voluntary, decentralized. This is a feature, not a bug. Friendship allows you to associate and disassociate with others at will, while always maintaining your individuality, the sanctuary of your headspace and the clarity of knowing who you are and what you need. The dictates of anonymous wider society and the supposed common good needn't cloud your mind when you form friendships rather than build communities.

Community is division. It's nationality, it's borders, it's imperialism, it's haves and have nots, it's cruel, brutal, unending warfare against the sacrificial out-groups to benefit the blessed in-groups.

Your friends don't exploit you. If they do, they're not your friends.

Communities exploit everyone, both within and outside their very clearly defined borders, every minute of every day of every year and they have for centuries. Draining the most underprivileged community members of their blood, sweat and tears to chiefly benefit the most privileged in the community: the bosses, the academics, the desk jockeys, the landlords.

The potholes in the neighborhoods of the working poor are always as deep as canyons, while the privileged classes who work and sweat far less can commute in the comfort of their air-conditioned Teslas bump-free on the smoothest of asphalt.

European welfare states and other 'progressive' communities exist on the backs of the poor of the colonized global South. Resources and intensive lifelong labor are stripped from billions of people who receive only basic sustenance in return, so the residents of those hallowed Western communities can lounge in comfort with their wide assortment of state-granted privileges.

I've heard some wannabe world-builders say friendship is a weak bond to base a life on, that friends are as unreliable as the anonymous community members they so revere. But those same people will always extol law, order and democracy no matter how many times those houses of straw blow up in their faces. And honestly, is anything more insufferable than utopian communists critiquing someone else's supposed idealism?

Bureaucrats and their communal systems won't give us anarchy. Maybe a little social democracy as a treat, at least until the system collapses back into fascism when enough wealth accrues at the top.

So what is the purpose of building an anarchist community? If the difference between a community and a group of friends is that the community is bigger, more impersonal, more bureaucratic, more policed, with highly diverging values and a centralized concentration of power... Then what use is community to a group of people who seek to decentralize everything in their path, dismantle systems, negate authority and become as ungovernable as possible? What use is community to anarchy?

I really feel we should be making friends rather than building communities.

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