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The Pragmatic Anarchism of Evan Greer

Anonymous

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On stage in a small indie record store in Prague, surrounded by queer teenagers singing along to her militantly anti-authoritarian lyrics, Evan Greer hadn't expected to be known or even recognized. It was 2010. An obscure transfeminine folk-punk artist from Boston, she had never been so far from home and was shocked to find the store packed with fans who had heard her songs on Napster. "There were like a hundred kids," she reminisced, "who knew all the words to my little songs about being queer." They'd burned CDs for one another, falling in love with the queer anarchist future her lyrics described. "I want something that's better than this," she sang, her acoustic guitar ringing out through the cramped room. As her young audience shouted back, "and I'm not sure exactly what it is!" Greer fell in love too – with the new audience she'd found for her queer art, yas, but also with the queer anarchist chosen family she would come to center in her music and organizing.

Long before she found community through music, Greer was a queer revolutionary seemingly by nature. While still

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in high school, she got her start in activism by organizing a protest against the 2003 Iraq War. Her passion for social justice grew further while she was a student at Swarthmore College, where she discovered her anti-hierarchical politics. Five years before the first Queers Bash Back convergence, when queer anarchism was only well-known in the context of early anarcho-feminists' dedication to free love, a college-aged Greer was fighting for abolition as a member of her local Anarchist Black Cross chapter. When she dropped out of college to pursue a career in music, she leveraged the power of technology to spread her liberatory message. Websites such as Spotify and Napster enabled her to “find my audience, authentically be myself, and pursue my dream of using music to support social movements that I cared about.” Once she shared her music publicly, her DIY and primarily acoustic punk songs – exploring themes such as politics and the family (“Hey Dad, I’m An Anarchist”), trans identity (“Assimilation”), and classical anarcho-feminism (“Emma Goldman Would Have Beat Your Ass”) – were suddenly beloved by the young, radical, and queer.

In 2021, Greer took her music and advocacy to a new level when she released the album *Spotify Is Surveillance*. This high-concept project critiqued online surveillance while celebrating the range of anarchist organizing spaces that liberated her. With songs such as “Back Row” and “Taking Down The Tent” honoring her folk-punk roots, Greer describes the sense of community that comes from both queercore and anarchism – the same affinity she felt with her young queer fans in Prague. In “Back Row,” when she sings in her softly militant voice, “We were outcasts, we were freaks / We were idealists, we believed / When the band played our favorite songs / We felt like we belonged,” she establishes anarcho-punk community as liberation in and of itself, conferring hope and chosen family.

Despite its community focus, *Spotify Is Surveillance* does not merely portray anarchy as a social force to be shouted

about in punk songs rather than a political one to be continually prefigured. Instead, it elevates anarchism to a historically established theory and ideology. In the punk anthem “Emma Goldman Would Have Beat Your Ass,” Greer harkens back to anarcho-feminist history while decrying nominally leftist strains of bro culture. Her interest in political theory goes beyond casual references in her lyrics. In addition to Goldman, she takes inspiration from abolitionist-feminist theorists of today. As she put it, “I think the autobiography of Assata Shakur is a book that every leftist-activist-person should read. I love Diana Bloch’s book *Arm The Spirit*. I’m obsessed with Mariame Kobb’s book *No More Police*, and that constellation of black-woman-led abolitionist thinking that surrounds it, and Cory Doctorow and Rebecca Giblin’s *Chokepoint Capitalism*. In her radical art, and especially *Spotify Is Surveillance*, she elevates queercore to political theory and vice versa, musically bridging the gap between ideology and practice.

As the deputy director of Internet freedom nonprofit Fight For The Future, Greer has experience with the many contradictions of online organizing, and she explores this ambivalence in her music. In songs such as the album’s title track, “Surveillance Capitalism,” she uses her guitar and voice to carve out a vision of an ideal Internet that serves all its users rather than prioritizing corporate interests. Yet, despite her longtime work for online liberation, Greer is not unthinkingly pro-technology. When I questioned her on the anti-tech strains of anarchism, she said, “I remember when both primitivism and anti-civilizationist strains of anarchism became popular, and in some ways, I think a lot of those folks saw something that the rest of us didn’t see – in terms of the enormous harm that even technologies that can be empowering can also bring, and that many technologies can amplify liberatory struggles and amplify oppression at the same time.” Because of its potential cooptation by hierarchical institutions, Greer views the Internet not as inherently radical but as a space to

advocate for liberation – or not. In our interview, she lamented that “the Internet has been something of a force multiplier for fringe ideologies. You can make a pretty good argument that that’s why we lived through four years of Trump as our president. But,” she added more optimistically, “the positive side of that is, you can turn on MSNBC and hear someone make an argument about abolishing the police.”

Anarchism is often considered hopelessly utopian rather than necessarily transformative by those who remain unscathed by state violence and anti-queerness. Yet, Greer’s anarchism is refreshingly materialist while remaining centered around a dream of a queer future. She identifies “as anti-authoritarian first and foremost – that’s kind of my main driving force – and as an abolitionist. It’s a very pragmatic anarchism, if you will.” This pragmatism is not only crucial to her DIY ethic but fuels her passion for both theory and anarchist chosen family. Unlike many adherents of insurrectionary anarchism, Greer does not solely advocate for the dismantling of oppressive systems. Instead, she dreams of building a new, liberated world in the shell of the old. In her punk rock music and ethos delivered through DIY media and evolving technology, Greer invites us ever closer to true queer liberation.