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Existential Anarchism and Lifestyle Anarchism

Anarqxista Goldman

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In 1994 the then social anarchist, Murray Bookchin, lit the blue touch paper under the anarchism of his day with an essay called “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism?” which indicted what Bookchin then saw as numerous forms of contemporary anarchism which he critiqued and openly criticised as being effete, bohemian, insubstantial, licentious and ultimately empty. For Bookchin, the dividing line between an authentic anarchism and an inauthentic one was its social concernedness, the seriousness with which it imagined future institutions which could channel anarchistic values and a philosophy which catered for the whole rather than merely [and Bookchin did think they were mere] personal tastes and personal satisfactions. Bookchin’s essay generated both heat and light in its reception but for Bookchin himself, who five years later would pronounce his exit from anarchism – now preferring to call himself a “Communist” – it was merely the prelude to his own realization that, in the main, anarchism had, in his opinion, become for most little more than a variety of trendy but ineffectual fads of little social consequence.

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Whether one agrees with Murray Bookchin or not, he does, in his own way, articulate a question worth discussing, one applicable to anyone who considers themselves on the left of politics generally but also one specific to anarchists particularly. It is the question that Bookchin himself raised [albeit in his own packaging], the question of what makes any anarchism authentic. This question is a controversial question to even ask in itself for it is concurrently a legitimate question to ask if “authentic” and “inauthentic” types of anarchism even exist. Is it for one person to judge another person’s anarchism as if there were some canons or dogmas of anarchism that judged what anarchism is? That doesn’t sound very anarchist in itself! One surely legitimate criticism of Bookchin’s original essay would be that he presumes to judge what anarchism is – in every case – and this is surely illegitimate judging by the historical manifestations of those who have called themselves anarchist in the past. So one can have doubt that it is legitimate to judge whether one person can judge another’s anarchism as authentic or not.

And yet people do. For example, the well known, and now sadly deceased, anarchist activist, David Graeber, had the following biography appended to his Twitter account to describe himself to others: “I’m an anthropologist, sometimes I occupy things & such. I see anarchism as something you do not an identity so don’t call me the anarchist anthropologist.” For Graeber, “anarchist” was definitively NOT an “identity”; it was an activity you could only see in actions taken. This explains Graeber’s reference to “occupy[-ing] things & such”, something he occasionally did in the almost 60 years of life which he lived gloriously. Graeber means to suggest that you see his anarchism in the fact he did such things and NOT in the fact that he decided to slap “anarchist” on his Twitter bio, or because he regarded himself as having an affinity with a certain group of people from the past, or a love for certain kinds of art or iconography, or had read certain texts with favour. Graeber’s mes-

sage, loud and clear in this brief, biographical note, is that actions determine an anarchist identification and nothing else really does.

I turn now to a Twitter conversation I had with an engaged and thoughtful person called solarpunkguin. Initially, they were responding to a quote I had posted from the second edition of Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* magazine from April 1906 in its "Observations and Comments" section. This particular "observation" [or perhaps it was a "comment"] went like this:

"Many radicals entertain the queer notion that they cannot arrange their own lives according to their own ideas but that they have to adapt themselves to the conditions they hate and which they fight in theory with fire and sword. Anything rather than arouse too much public condemnation! The lives they lead are dependent upon the opinion of the Philistines. They are revolutionists in theory, reactionists in practice."

Who wrote this is not indicated but if it came from the mind of Goldman herself we would not be surprised. [At this early stage *Mother Earth* was being published by Emma Goldman and edited by her close colleague Max Baginski so it could have been either of them.] The observation [or comment!] is calling out as hypocrites people too concerned with public opinion to live their own authentic lives. [Goldman sometimes regarded her co-anarchist, Lucy Parsons, as one such – but that's another story!] It is encouraging a fearless free expression, a well known trait of Goldman's own anarchism. Essentially, the existentialist argument that people live lives of bad faith towards themselves is being pre-empted by these anarchist comments. Revolutionists in their heads, such people are more reactionaries when it comes down to actually doing anything. Clearly, for the editors of *Mother Earth*, this will not do. It is a criticism of such people and an imprecation to be authentic in your radicality, dismissive or disregarding of "public condemnation" [something Emma Goldman certainly received more than her fair share of in her American years when this was first written].

In response to this quote, solarpunkguin [S] said the following and the conversation with me [A] then continued as indicated below:

S: Yeah, I know. I've been there IRL, as well, which is why I keep trying to crack both this problem and the one in my OP. The thing I keep coming back to, though, is that not everyone is cut out to be an existentialist in this manner, and not everyone desires controversy. And part of anarchism is respecting that diversity, imo, even if it's counterproductive in the short run.

A: If you can get a person to think for themselves then you've done the most important thing you can do. What you can't do is coerce them to one point of view or another. It might even be contradictory to anarchist principles to want to do so. Education into thinking not conclusions.

S: What's your take on this? [Said in reference to the following tweet from William Gillis: "So we're stuck in a situation where when certain anarchist ideas metastasize so too comes a torrent of people identifying with new watered down notions of 'anarchism' that strip out everything biting or radical beyond the few planks they've ingested (like abolition)". Gillis adds elsewhere in his thread that "newbies gonna water down and make fadish". His argument overall is that there is an inherent ceiling of "decent human beings" which can never rise beyond a certain amount. But Gillis is against "turning anarchism into a ghettoized subculture".]

A: I read the whole thread — most of which raised interesting points. I immediately thought of Diogenes and the Cynics — of which there probably weren't very many. Why? Because to be a Cynic [which was a practice not a belief] was inherently demanding. Anyone can post "anarchist" in a social media bio and think of it as a cool label. But the anarchists making a difference are the ones living it, the ones with a deeper,

affect people's lives. They are, thus, devoid of the kind of real world impact characteristic of anarchism in former times, in ways overtly political and challenging of the politics of others on the ground. Identitarian anarchisms may, in individual cases, develop into more existential ones but they are not guaranteed to and may, instead, stay stunted and performative, active only in social media terms. It is one task of the existential anarchist to encourage and educate as many lifestyle anarchists as possible to develop into existential ones.

So the difference I have been articulating here is one of effects in the outside world, one highly likely to reach out into the world and experience of others, rather than one which is about how one dresses, what music one likes and what symbols one decorates one's social media biographies with. Existential anarchism is about being so invested in one's anarchism that you can't help showing it in a life lived and actions taken. It reaches out to form a common bond with anarchisms past and present which are taking, and have taken, actions in the world [for example, in strikes, demos, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, public meetings, publishing efforts, creating schools, communal living, etc., as just some obvious examples]. Existential anarchism is not primarily focused on the individual and how they see themselves and set themselves in a social context in the way that lifestyle anarchism does; instead, it is about actions taken in order to affect the world. This distinction, I think, is far more consequential than the social/individual one some others have fixated on in the past for the real difference that makes a difference is if your anarchism is active and making a difference to anyone or anything – or not.

Anarchism, as with David Graeber, I believe is a practice and so, in the end, it matters what you are DOING much more than what you are saying as a matter of IDENTIFYING. If you concern yourself with the doing, the identifying will take care of itself.

more existential, concept of what that means, that meaning coming through in their lives. In short, its not about telling someone you are “an anarchist” – which might be a challenge to everyone around you or a meaningless label. Its about being able to see it without being told.

S: That all makes a lot of sense. Thanks!

I quote this short online conversation not to quote an example of where someone appreciated my own input but because it addresses this “authenticity” question head on – and with an appreciation of the fact that authenticity matters. Now this does not mean that it is about being in some “authentic anarchists club” or not. In fact, its very much not, and such an idea only responds to the “identity” issues Graeber was keen to put to one side as just one example. The point of authenticity here is that only the authentic anarchist [whatever we decide that is] will have any effect in the world. And surely the point of any radicality, any anarchism, is to have an effect? So the difference here is between what I would call existential anarchisms of good faith, which must have real consequences in a life or lives, and more identitarian ones which will, consequently, have less so. This also has the further consequence, I think, that it also cuts across the social/individual distinction that Murray Bookchin tried to create as a hard border in his own, related essay that I referred to above. For, put simply, Emma Goldman, who quite possibly was the originator of the thought from *Mother Earth*, was, in Bookchin's terms, an individualist anarchist [and, consequently, Bookchin is both rude towards her and dismissive of her in his own essay] but no one would thereby suggest she had no public effects. So the social/individual dividing line in anarchist thought is not here relevant [and, I think, often next to useless anyway]. What matters is if our anarchism is existential or more a matter of “lifestyle” or “identity”.

But I want to make clear at this point that, unlike Bookchin, I am not setting myself up as an arbiter of anarchism. Solarpunkguin, in

their comments, referred to “respecting that diversity” which they saw as something to do with anarchism and I am cognizant of this as well. On the one hand, it is simply impossible [and practically useless] to set out to draw hard borders around what anarchism is. You become that most un-anarchist of things if you do, the policeman. People should be, and be free to be, whatever they want to be. This can and must include inauthentic people or identitarian people or people who talk a talk but don’t walk its walk. The point I would make here is that this does not stop other people wanting, or trying, to educate people to become better, or more authentic, examples of what they are claiming to be – or to articulating “differences that make a difference” [to quote some philosophically pragmatist logic] in the manifestation of such things. Anyone can use the word “anarchist” in an online bio, use black flag emojis, post anarchist memes, and such like, and regard themselves as having an anarchist identity. But what counts from an appreciation of anarchist history, and anarchist praxis in history, is your relationship to other human beings, your philosophy of how the world should continue to exist and your physical activity in the world – what we might call gaining an anarchist education. In this Graeberian sense, anarchism is not what you call yourself, its how you live and the seriousness with which you take it. It is this I call the existential/lifestyle divide in anarchism and it is a difference that I think makes a difference in ways some other distinctions do not.

Existentialism can be regarded as an ethical appreciation of your own lived existence. This coheres well with anarchism, something which can be appreciated in much the same way, but in a social context. An “existential anarchism”, in the sense I am using it in this essay, then regards our “being-in-the-midst” of our own life and the lives of others as a question which addresses us and to which we are required to respond with an ethical answer. Such a question regards existence, in fact, as a matter of responsibility, responsibility being something important to anarchism as I have described it elsewhere. Specifically, I have written in my own de-

scription of anarchism as a set of principles that the anarchist is one who “takes responsibility” for their life – and the lives of others – in the circumstances in which they find themselves. This is fundamentally in phase with an existentialist understanding of anarchism itself in its good faith towards self and to every other actually existing self. It is in this taking responsibility that we become ethical beings rather than ones who seek to avoid either ethics or responsibility in a demonstration of what the existentialist regards as bad faith. But this is not simply appreciated as a matter of identity; it must [and can only] be exemplified in actions and lifestyle; it must be demonstrated by deeds done not aspirations left incomplete. The existential anarchist is one who believes that actions speak louder than words – and lives such an existence. Here my previous example of the Diogenean Cynic is mightily relevant.

In such a case no one is the judge but you yourself in your relationship to your own life and the lives of others. Although we all try, and often succeed, you cannot lie to yourself.

Who you see in the mirror is the person you must answer to for your life, no one else. This is the ethical and existential context of your life; that you can look yourself in the face as an authentic human being of good faith who takes responsibility for yourself and others. This, in the end, I regard as the marker of an effective or ineffective anarchism – where effectiveness is actually what counts and makes a difference.

But, of course, no anarchist is an island. One way to attenuate any anarchism is by its relationship to the anarchism, past and present, of others. This is another factor by which to set anarchisms of the lifestyle or identitarian kind in context as well. Such kinds of anarchism, as with all identitarian sub-cultures, are articulated by the use of symbols, descriptions and associations which situate their users, particularly in virtual networks, amongst people of similar proclivities or interests. But the characteristic of these kinds of anarchism is that they are performative on such platforms but never really extend into the real world in ways which