

Caught in the Web of Deception: Anarchists and the Media

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As long as the present social order exists, it will be impossible to avoid interaction with the various facets of the power structure. Those of us who call ourselves anarchists need to choose to make these interactions clearly adversarial and conflictual, reflecting our desire to destroy the power structure completely. Such a choice requires knowledge of the enemy. Almost every anarchist recognizes that the state and capital are facets of the power structure and has some minimal understanding of how these function as such. Increasing numbers of anarchists are recognizing that technology and ideology are also part of the network of power. One would think that from this they would draw the due conclusion that the technological system for the dissemination of ideology, the media (I use the word media to refer specifically to this system in its totality, not to refer to specific tools it uses to carry out its function, since some of these tools can be used in different manner, even against this function), is an inherent part of the power structure and, therefore, an enemy of all rebellion and of every attempt to create free life. Yet even in the face of the intense concentration of the media into a very few mega-corporational hands (a fact that should reveal something of its nature), there are still some anarchists who will directly — and in a nonconflictual manner — interact with it in an attempt to communicate anarchist ideas on its terrain. This shows a lack of understanding of how the media functions.

The media plays a specific role in the power structure, a role that, in a democratic state, becomes not only essential, but also central to the functioning of power. But before continuing, it is necessary to confront the illusions many have about democracy. While it is true that democracy can merely mean a decision-making process which offers all involved a say or a vote in each decision (why this is incompatible with anarchy is a subject best dealt with at another time for the sake of brevity), in the present era, democracy is also and more essentially a system of state and social power which maintains social peace by allowing the expression of the broadest possible spectrum of opinions. The democratic state is able to allow such a broad spectrum of opinion precisely because opinions are basically substanceless. Opinions are ideas that have been drained of all vitality. Separated from life and from any projectual basis, they have become harmless blathering that ultimately strengthens the democratic state by making it appear tolerant and open as compared to feudal or dictatorial states.

From this, the political function of the media should be obvious. It is the mediator and processor of democratic opinion. It devours the complexities of life and social interaction, of international relations and insurgency, of cultural breakdown and economic necessity... the totality of reality in the present, and mashes them to mush between its teeth, then digests them and shits out...turds. All of the complexities, all of the vitality, all connection to real life has been leached out, and we are left to decide whether these nearly identical brown lumps stink or not. The reality from which from which these turds were produced is so distant that we “know” that we can’t effect it directly, so instead we buy the binary logic of the democratic state, argue at the pub over the stinkiness of turds and vote for those politicians whose bullshit exudes the sweetest aroma. To be for or against this war, that law, whatever candidate, policy or program is no threat whatsoever to power. The purpose of the media is precisely to promote the predigested thinking that keeps us passive in the face of a distant reality, always ready to choose between the options offered by the democratic state, options that all end up subjecting the chooser to the power of the state and capital.

The media has another essential function. It is the creator of images for consumption. It creates celebrities and personalities for people to look up to and vicariously live through. It creates role images for people to imitate in order to invent their “identity”. It creates images of events separated from and placed above life. It is through these images, ingested uncritically, that people are to view and interpret the world, formulating their opinions out of this virtual unreality. To the extent that the media succeeds, the result is a passive, predictable population consuming the trash dished out by the social order.

In choosing to seek to get one’s ideas across through the media, one is choosing to feed these ideas to this masticating monster, to offer one’s self to this life-draining ghoul. For anarchists this makes no sense. It is impossible for the media to portray anarchism as a living praxis or anarchists as complex multi-dimensional individuals. It is therefore not possible to express anarchist ideas in a worthwhile way through this forum. The ideas will be chewed up and shat out as one opinion among many, one more turd about whose odor the public can argue. The living individuals get chewed up and shat out as images — of freaks, of intellectual brooders, of street rioters — but essentially as images not living, acting beings. The media is part of the power structure, and, as such, is our enemy. We can’t play their game and win.

An outstanding example of how this process works can be seen on the segment about anarchists that appeared on 60 Minutes shortly after the demonstrations against the WTO in Seattle. This twelve-minute collage of interviews and images was probably the best that anarchists could expect from cooperating with the media. And from start to finish the media carried out its task. From over two hours of interviews and several hours of video footage from the events in Seattle, the show’s editors selected what they (or their bosses) wanted to use to make up this brief segment. Using the title, “The New Anarchists”, already these experts in mediation had made a separation between the viewers and these new “celebrities”, this “new” subculture. The image-building specialists interviewed the one they called the “philosophical guide” separately from the other anarchists; the interviewer and this one to whom the media attributed a guiding role sat face-to-face as peers. The other anarchists were interviewed as a group, some of them seated on the floor, the camera angle leaving the impression that all were seated lower than the interviewer. A viewer who didn’t know better would be left with the impression that these “new anarchists” are followers of leader, even if he is only called a “philosophical guide”. The interviewer very clearly directed what was said with his questions — this is his specialty after all. By allowing the

interview to pass in normal fashion, these anarchists played right into the hands of the media. By answering the questions, they weakened their arguments, fell into clichés such as the dull old saw about property destruction not being violence and helped to further marginalize and spectacularize themselves. I have not yet seen a media depiction of these “new anarchists”, of the “Eugene anarchists” (a term that anarchists in Eugene would do well to destroy as soon as possible), or whatever term the particular journalist, interviewer or newsperson chooses to use that was not this manipulative — because that’s how the media functions.

In the wake of the demonstrations in Seattle, there has been a lot of attention paid to anarchists in the media, particularly focussing on the question of property destruction. Much has come out of this that I find disturbing though not surprising. Some anarchists have begun to worry about their media image. Thus there are those anarchists who condemn property destruction because it will give anarchists a bad public image. But these are so ridiculous that they disturb me less than those who publicly insist that “property destruction is not violence.” By using this argument that has come out frequently in the media, anarchists are letting themselves get drawn into the values of this society; they are measuring their words to fit them into the viewpoint of democratic dialogue. This viewpoint seeks to force revolutionary action to fit into the moral equation of violence/nonviolence. For anarchists who determine their actions for themselves, on their own terms, such equations are useless; they have no significance. Central to anarchist activity in the present is the necessity to destroy the state, capital, and all institutions of power and authority in order to create the possibility for every individual to fully realize herself as he sees fit. Such total destruction — the destruction of a world-encompassing civilization — will be violent. There is no sense in denying or apologizing for this. . What each of us does to achieve this is determined by each individual in terms of her desires, dreams, capabilities and circumstances — in terms of the life he is seeking to create for herself. It has no relationship to any sort of morality. Therefore, as anarchists, we have no use for dealing with such questions as: “Is property destruction violence or not?” “Is this an act of self-defense or offensive attack?” We have no reason to care. Our desire is to attack and destroy all power structures and this determines our actions. These other questions are based on the hypocritical moral rules of power that serve no other purpose than to place weighted chains on our ability to act. So of what use is it to us to speak to the media about these questions on its terms, using its guidelines of how to speak of these matters and following its protocol? In fact, of what use is it to us to talk to the media at all?

In dealing with the media on its terrain, one chooses to give up determining one’s own actions on one’s own terms. As the 60 Minutes episode made so clear, dealing with the media on its terrain is accepting delegation. One turns one’s ideas over to the masters of “communication” to be masticated into more opinions in the ideological marketplace. One gives the reality of one’s life over to these experts in separation to be turned into 60-second images of isolated events. One turns the activity of communication over to those whose specialty is the one way “communication” of devitalized, pre-digested non-ideas and non-events that create social consensus. And then one complains about how badly one was represented in the media. Why did one choose to be represented at all? The choice to accept media representation is no less an acceptance of delegation than voting or unionism. The rejection of delegation, so central to an anarchist and insurrectional perspective, includes the refusal to deal with the media on its terms.

If we take self-determination and self-activity as fundamental bases for anarchist practise, the way to communicate our ideas is clearly to create our own means of communication. Graffiti, posters, communiqués, papers, magazines and pirate radio can all be used to express anar-

chist ideas without putting them through the masticating mechanisms of the media. These self-determined means of communication can be distinguished from the media in that they are not attempts to mediate opinions and images while claiming objectivity and dishing out pre-digested pabulum to a passive audience; they are actual attempts on the part of anarchists to express their ideas not only in the words but also in the method through which they go about expressing them. Of course these methods, which we can take into our own hands, will not get out to nearly as many people as a mainstream newspaper, magazine or television show. But such considerations could only be of significance to those who want to evangelize, to those who view anarchy as a belief system to which we must convert people if there is ever to be a revolution. To paraphrase some Italian comrades: if one has no commodities to sell, of what use are neon signs? And in the era of the reign of capital, evangelism — even anarchist evangelism — is ideological marketeering. To those whose interest is creating their lives as their own and destroying the society that prevents this, such marketeering is worthless.

Unfortunately, since the anti-WTO actions in Seattle, the media has been drooling over the anarchist morsel, and there have been anarchists willing to give it what it wants. Undoubtedly, the media will continue to hound anarchists for as long as anarchy is a marketable item. It is therefore necessary that we anarchists recognize that the media is part of the power structure just like the state, capital, religion, law...In other words, the media is our enemy and we should treat it as such. In this light, the action of three Italian anarchists — Arturo, Luca and Drew — becomes exemplary. When a journalist invaded the funeral of their comrade in search of a juicy morsel of news, they beat him.

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