

As We See It!

Columbia Anarchist League

1985

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Preface

The following is the AS WE SEE IT! statement by Columbia Anarchist League, the now-defunct group, who originally published ANARCHY: A Journal of Desire Armed.

It was conceived in the Spring of 1985 and appeared in print later that Winter. The transcription below was keyed in and sent to spunk press in the Summer of 1994 by me, and any typos/errors were probably made by me.

By ajoda

Introduction

This statement is a provisional draft of Columbia Anarchist League positions adopted largely in the spring of 1985. It is not meant to be a finished or unalterable statement, but it is a good reflection of our minimal common perspectives at this time. Critical comments are welcome and will be taken under consideration for future versions of this statement.

1

Throughout the world the vast majority of people have no control over the most basic social, economic and political decisions which profoundly and directly affect their lives. We are forced to live, work and die according to the dictates of hierarchical organizations — from schools, corporations and unions, to their culmination in the nation-state. We are indoctrinated in government-run and religious schools. We are forced to sell our lives and labour in capitalist economies, while those who own and control the means of production not only profit from our toil, but determine the shape and disposition of ever larger areas of both the social and natural worlds. And we are regimented, taxed, and cowed by integrated systems of local, regional and national governments. They not only make laws regulating our work, culture and social intercourse, but maintain vast propaganda apparatuses, police forces, prison systems, armies, surveillance networks, and to ensure our compliance, even torture centers and death squads when necessary.

2

The hierarchical and alienating organization of social life imposed upon us by these dominant institutions creates continual crises in every person's life, and in every realm of human activity. These crises often appear most intensely in the realm of production — in which most of us must each day sell large portions of our lives for a wage that can never possibly repay us for what

is in turn taken from us. We are forced to labor under a system which allows us neither control of the content of our work, nor its conditions, its organization, or its purpose and meaning. And we do all this in exchange for the “privilege” of buying a few mass-produced commodities and standardized “services” that will always remain empty and unsatisfying substitutes for the rich and joyful lives we all in actuality desire. In fact, nearly every facet of life in modern society has by now been colonized by hierarchy and alienation — family life, sexuality, education, culture, knowledge, communication, health care, transportation, etc. Everywhere the dominant social institutions impose on people an organization of their daily lives that is external to them. Everything is organized for ulterior purposes, without the participation of those most directly concerned, and usually against people’s actual values, aspirations, and interests. As a result of this, it isn’t very surprising that people experience many aspects of their lives and bodies as being unreal, alien to them, or as being subject to irresistible forces of mystifying origins.

3

The poverty, the meaninglessness and the alienation of everyday life in the modern world are not accidental by-products of an otherwise sound social system. They are the inevitable and primary products of a system which at its core is not only disastrously counterproductive, but in its present nuclear phase is increasingly suicidal. This system consists of a relatively coherent structure of self-reinforcing social relations of compulsion, hierarchical authority, and commodity exchange whose common basis can possibly be most easily understood using the concept of “alienation”. The word “alienation” denotes the process by which people’s acts can become estranged — and no longer appear or be felt as their own. The institution of human slavery for example involves an obvious process of alienation of the slave’s life-activity. When originally free people were first captured by slave-holding societies, it was necessary to forcibly enslave them since they naturally realized that the work, deference and passivity required of them was absolutely alien to their own desires and will. The unity of their desires, will and activity was completely broken, but they could easily feel and understand this alienation because of (and also resulting in) the necessity of its imposition by force.

However, once their slavery had been forced for a certain time, they would consciously develop habits of self-repression to avoid being punished for forgetting the role they were required to play. They would adapt to the expectations of the slaveholders by learning how to be slaves and thinking of themselves as slaves, albeit reluctant ones. And finally, many of them would over time (and especially with the passing of generations) come to really see themselves as slaves, to believe that slavery was a natural institution, and that it was their natural place to be slaves. Their habits of self-repression would become so internalized and unconscious that they would forget they were originally only habits. They became slaves in fact, and if the opportunity would come for them to escape they would no longer even be able to see the opportunity because they would no longer realize that somewhere deep inside they wanted to escape. Their alienation was so complete that they could no longer feel their desires as their own, or exercise their will outside of a sharply circumscribed area of their lives. The process of alienation involved in the institution of slavery is analogous to the process of “socialization” through which we all learn our “natural” places within contemporary institutions of the nuclear family, compulsory (mis)education, wage-slavery, representative “democracy,” etc.

4

According to the classical description of alienation in the realm of work under capitalism, when people's labor-activity is sold to capitalists in exchange for a wage, this labor-activity is alienated. Since it is controlled by the capitalist (whether the capitalist is a person or an institution such as a corporation or the state) and not by the individual, the individual worker finds her/himself acting according to the dictates of a logic that is externally imposed. S/he becomes a mere cog in the machinery of a productive apparatus which has a purpose above and beyond those of all the workers involved in it. Each individual worker is isolated from the rest as much as possible by the corporate or bureaucratic management of large businesses, while the lines of hierarchical authority maintain discipline within a rigid division of labor in an organizational system designed to make profits, accumulate capital and reproduce the power of the managers. The collective activity of all the atomized working people thus continually reproduces an entire organizational system which appears to take on an inertia and direction of its own as even the actions of the managers become more and more rigidly determined by the logic of organizational reproduction and expansion to which they too must submit.

5

Ironically, it is people's own alienated gestures and labor-activity that make up the actual substance of the institutions which in turn oppress them. And the same process of alienation takes place not only in the realm of production, but also in every other sphere of social activity. This results in an entire social world that always appears to be out of anyone's control, moving inexorably along its own mystifying path according to its own hierarchical and alien logic. Thus the economy is said to regulate itself by the influence of an "invisible hand" through which we become the victims of depressions, inflation, unemployment, etc. And in the political sphere the organs of local, regional, and national government exhibit similar tendencies. The political parties become more and more the same, while none are ever capable of controlling the crises which prompt their election, or their coup d'état. All governments are forced to submit to the alien logic of the same international system. East and West, the results are basically the same though the means be different. And in all the other spheres of life that have become dominated by hierarchical forms of organization the individual is subjected to the same processes since by definition all hierarchical organization involves compulsion, and compulsion always requires that the individual alienate his/her own activity, in order to fit him/herself into the roles required. Ultimately, the more our lives are devoted to performing all the alienating roles of hierarchical commodity society, the less we are able to live — the less our lives are in any sense really our own.

6

People are never merely the passive victims of an externally imposed repression and manipulation. Through our "socialization" (our "social conditioning") into this society, we have each learned to participate to different degrees in our own self-repression and self-manipulation. Our conformity is enforced, not only by the bosses' orders and the policeman's gun, but by the in-

ternalized boss and policeman of our own behavior that each of us carries within us, and which we call “character”. Character is the form taken by alienation in the individual. It is like a layer of deadened psychic scar tissue or an armoring which each of us has been forced to develop in order to cope with a hierarchical and alienating society. By developing this unconscious layer of armoring (this habitual layer of compulsive self-repression) we protect ourselves from some of the harsher effects of hierarchy and alienation, but only at the great cost of both isolating and inhibiting ourselves, as well as deforming our activities and thoughts.

Character can be variously manifested as: compulsive inhibitions, chronic muscular tensions and anxieties, chronic feelings of guilt, perceptual blocks or a chronic narrowing of the perceptual field, exaggerated respect for authority figures, adherence to dogmas and inability to think for oneself, compulsive fears or paranoia, chronic feelings of insecurity, compulsive role-playing and inability to drop pretenses and “be oneself,” religious beliefs and beliefs in other types of absolutes, racism, sexism, ad nauseum. Character is the integrated organization of all the internalized and habitual incapacities which serve to adapt individuals to the demands of an irrational society. It is the means by which hierarchical and alienating social structures have invaded and colonized our very bodies and experience. We have all been crippled by it. Many people have been so mutilated that they now identify more with repressive and exploitative institutions than with their own spontaneous impulses, desires and feelings. Character is a mechanism created by the interaction of social conditioning and our responses to it. It enables us above all to treat others and ourselves (and be treated by others) as commodities on the market to be bought and sold, and as objects within hierarchies to be ordered and manipulated. Hierarchical capitalist society demands that human beings be treated everywhere as if they are really only objects. The development of character is our way of becoming those objects and forgetting that we were once something more.¹

7

Ideology is the manifestation of character in the realm of logic, language and symbols. It is the means by which alienation and hierarchies (and thus character) are all rationalized and justified through the deformation of human thought and communication. All ideology in essence involves the substitution of alien concepts or images for human subjectivity. Ideologies are systems of false consciousness in which people no longer see themselves as subjects in their relation to their world. Instead they see themselves in some manner as though they are objects which are subordinated to some type or other of abstract entities which become the “real” subjects or actors in their world.

Whenever any system of ideas and duties is structured with an abstraction at its center — assigning people roles or duties for its own sake — such a system is always an ideology. All the various forms of ideology are structured around different abstractions, yet they all always serve the interests of hierarchical and alienating social structures, since they are hierarchy and alienation in the realm of thought and communication. Even if an ideology opposes hierarchy

¹ For a more detailed description of the concept of character from our perspective, see “Beyond Character and Morality”, available from the C.A.L. — send an SASE. See abridged form in *Reinventing Anarchy: What are the Anarchists Thinking these Days?* edited by Ehrlich, Ehrlich, DeLeon & Morris; published by Routledge & Kegan Paul (1979). See also *Wilhelm Reich: Character Analysis* published by Noontday Press.

or alienation in its content, its form still remains consistent with what is opposed, and this form will always tend to undermine the apparent content of the ideology. Whether the abstraction is God, the State, Technology, the Family, Humanity, Peace, Work, Love, or even Freedom; if it is conceived and presented as if it is a subject with a being of its own which makes demands of us, then it is the center of an ideology and it is a lie. Capitalism, Individualism, Communism, Socialism, and Pacifism are each ideological in some respect as they are usually conceived. Religion and morality are always ideological by definition. Even resistance, revolution, and anarchism often take on ideological dimensions when we are not careful to maintain a critical awareness of how we are thinking and what the actual purposes of our thoughts are. Ideology is nearly ubiquitous. From advertisements and commercials, to academic treatises and scientific studies, almost every aspect of contemporary thinking and communication is ideological, and its real meaning for human subjects is lost under layers of mystification and confusion.²

8

At the epitome of ideological mystification lies the spectacle. The spectacle is the organization of appearances made possible through all the modern media of communication. The ease with which images can be detached from their sources and reorganized for representation in these media in accord with the ideologies of our dominant institutions forms the technical basis for the manipulation of not just isolated images and ideologies, but of the appearance of reality itself. As the scope and power of the spectacular organization of society increases, more and more of what was once directly lived has been reduced to its re-presentation as images to be consumed. For the organization of spectacular activity is also the organization of the actual social passivity of its spectators, which is its necessary counterpart. Instead of living their lives directly, people are increasingly seduced into becoming mere spectators who consume the images of their own alienated lives that are unilaterally presented to them by the dominant institutions of modern society. The spectacle is not a collection of images, but more importantly it is a social relation among people mediated by images. The major problem with contemporary media is not just that they always present hierarchical perspectives as if no others are possible (although this ideological narrowness of content obviously exists). It is a far deeper problem of the very form or structure of the mass media. In the end content is less important than the hierarchical and alienating structure of the media which present it. Whatever the overt messages, the ubiquitous, but covert message produced is that each of us is only a powerless spectator in a world over which we can have no control. Our only choice is to select between the options allowed us by the invisible powers which determine everything else.

9

If our institutions, culture, and social relations were really direct expressions of our own collective desires and needs they would rarely be questioned. There would be little opposition to them since they would be fulfilling their purposes. But whenever a system of alienating social relationships is imposed upon people as ours is, it inevitably engenders widespread resistance.

² For a more detailed description of ideological or positive theory, as well as its contrast with critical theory, see CAL's "An introduction to critical theory."

Such engendered resistance is the natural result of forcing people to accept an alien way of life as if it were really their own. Whenever people are forced to repress and to act against their own impulses, perceptions, judgment and values, they tend to rebel — sometimes directly, openly and consciously, but often covertly, or even unconsciously. Even when such an alien system exists for generations, and people are so “socialized” and indoctrinated that it comes to seem more real than their own selves, even then there is inevitably widespread resistance, though it may express itself only sporadically and largely remain confined to subterranean undercurrents of rebellion or negativity. The institutionalization of repression and alienation is always followed by a return of the repressed drives, desires, and wishes are seen as never being annihilated outright, but instead always return to people’s experience expressed in other forms (such as in their dreams or unconscious slips). Similarly, institutional repression never entirely annihilates people’s ultimately ineradicable desire to live and control their own lives. Rather, people’s resistance to the imposition of the artificial constraints of fundamentally irrational and authoritarian social systems will always continue to be expressed in thousands of ways in each day of each person’s life. This engendered resistance within the heart of our everyday lives is a natural and spontaneous response to the imposition of authoritarian social relationships. It is a generalized, yet usually unconscious movement of negation which contains within itself the seeds of all potentially conscious movements for libertarian social change. And in fact, most other radical political, social and religious movements also have their roots here. From a vague and ambiguous urge to “do something” or “change things”, to minimal acts like high-school vandalism, on-the-job theft, and ridicule of authority figures, to major acts like the decision to participate in a riot or wild-cat strike; spontaneous expressions of negativity may be the unexplored and uncharted pivotal points which hold the most promise for genuine social radicalism in the near future. At the least we must realize that the exclusion of all but conscious and coherent activities from one’s perception of political “reality” can only be self-defeating where radical perspectives are concerned.

10

It might seem intuitively obvious that any act of resistance to a repressive and alienating social system is a step (no matter how small) in the direction of creating a new society. However, such an assumption is far from the truth. In practice, it becomes obvious that many acts which superficially appear opposed to hierarchy and capital, are in actuality quite compatible with them. These acts of partial opposition always begin with a basic acceptance of the necessity for hierarchical power and social alienation, and only resist specific “abuses” or “injustices” within the overall system. Because partial opposition has such a narrow focus on reforming only certain aspects of the social structure, it has the paradoxical effect of strengthening the social system it appears to fight by legitimizing the overall system at the same time as it helps it depressurize and adapt to demands for social change. This depressurization of social forces demanding change is sometimes called “recuperation”. By recuperating impulses toward genuine social change, and channeling these impulses toward the real or imagined reform of the existing social system, the system not only eliminates a threat to its continued existence, but it also strengthens its hold on people by giving the impression that fundamental reforms may be possible by a piecemeal process, and that any more radical opposition might threaten reforms already made. Partial op-

position is always contrary to any genuinely radical opposition because it always accepts the ground rules of hierarchical commodity society as its own.

Liberal reformists, “radical” moralists, and social democrats would all prefer that we fought for “realistic” reforms on our knees than for radical change on our feet. False opposition is a special case of partial opposition. It is an attempt to appear total or radical, while remaining only partial in actual practice. This type of opposition is especially typical of Marxist-Leninist groups. They claim to be revolutionary, but their actual practice reproduces all the hierarchical and bureaucratic tendencies of the society they criticize. Despite their radical pretensions, they ultimately maintain only a coup d’etat mentality and seek to install themselves in power as a new and “enlightened” ruling class. A further special case of partial opposition can be called spectacular opposition. Spectacular opposition involves the manufacture of an image of revolt which has few or no roots in any real social existence. In this type of imaginary opposition, celluloid images of revolt are created by “media radicals”, or by the media itself, whose content is minimal or absent.

Radical opposition on the other hand attempts to subvert hierarchy and alienation at their roots. It is always a conscious opposition to the totality of the existing social system since it is based on an understanding of how that system operates in an integrated fashion as a whole. This holistic perspective reveals that when only one aspect of the system is challenged, the system as a whole will compensate and recuperate the challenge until it has been sufficiently defused and reintegrated, at which time the system is then able to begin reversing any reforms which no longer serve its purposes. The only type of movement which can ever hope for real change is one which challenges the social system as a whole at all times, even when it is concentrating on particular aspects of that system.

11

The absolute elimination of all social alienation is probably an impossibility, and those who demand the attainment of such abstract absolutes are most likely dogmatic fanatics to be avoided. They are the would-be Robespierres of future reigns of terror. However, between the Scylla of fanaticism and the Charybdis of an unprincipled and opportunistic reformism, lies what we believe to be a realizable and viable conception of a qualitatively more free, equitable and enjoyable social system. Such a system would not be “pure” or “perfect”, but it could involve a genuinely radical restructuring of society that would change the balance of social relations — ending the current historical dominance of hierarchical and authoritarian social relationships, and replacing that dominance with a self-reinforcing system of non-hierarchical social relationships which can be called a type of anarchy.

12

Anarchy literally means “no ruler”. In its best sense it signifies a social system in which political hierarchies and authoritarianism are not tolerated. Instead of hierarchical rule by monolithic institutions over the general public, anarchy in this sense demands the most complete, widespread and effectively direct control possible by all those who are involved. This does not just mean that anarchists have some sort of vague or abstract belief in “democracy”, or “consensus”, or

“individualism”. This means that anarchists demand explicitly direct and concrete popular participation within and control of every significant social institution by those who are affected by them — not just control over institutional organization and management, but also and just as importantly, over their direction, ends and very existence. This can only be achieved through widespread and conscious commitment to libertarian social and institutional values and practices (self-management, spontaneity, autonomy, cooperation, human-scale organization, direct responsibility/accountability/action, and maximum flexibility) within a reorganized institutional framework centered around very specific, workable and effective means of libertarian communication and decision-making.

13

Any genuine resistance and opposition to hierarchical society — any movement which seeks to make a real and significant qualitative change in the way society is organized — must be a self-consciously and critically radical social movement. And any such movement must involve as its central feature a prefiguring of the type of society which it seeks to create, both in its own organization and in the quality of the everyday social relationships which it fosters. The concept of prefiguration is another way of saying that the means of social transformation largely determine the end which is produced.

Thus a traditionally Marxist-Leninist movement will almost invariably translate the dictatorial style of its typical means (hierarchical political party organization, ideological and dogmatic thinking, “democratic centralism”, a vanguardist mentality, and generally conservative social values) into the actual monolithic bureaucratic dictatorships we have come to expect as its end (Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, etc.). While on the contrary, libertarian revolutionary movements attempt to create alternative organizations and counter-institutions (directly and democratically controlled) as means toward the end of creating a genuinely self-managed society. In practice these organizations can be (and have been) as diverse as anarchist affinity groups and federations; rank-and-file workers groups, anarcho-syndicalist unions, and factory committees or councils; libertarian community groups, neighborhood groups and municipal movements; collectives and cooperatives of all types; a multitude of cultural institutions from workers centers, study circles, free schools, radical libraries and documentation centers to cafes and punk clubs; as well as guerrilla groups and factory or community self-defense groups and militias when necessary.

14

We understand that the conditions of our lives and our experiences in the dominant social institutions constantly drive us to question, resist, and find the methods of organization which challenge the established social order and established patterns of thought. On the other hand, we recognize that we are fragmented, dispossessed of the means of communication, and we are all at different levels of awareness and consciousness. Columbia Anarchist League is one small self-organized group within a worldwide movement of people who are committed to challenging their lives and transforming their world. We do not see ourselves as yet another leadership looking for followers, but as a group of like-minded people working toward a more libertarian society. We seek to help demystify all the ideological pretensions which paralyze people and leave them

powerless to act outside of established institutions. We seek to challenge every instance of hierarchy, exploitation, alienation and mystification, to stimulate, encourage and help people who are involved in libertarian struggles, and to generalize our experiences, to make a total critique of our condition and its causes, and to help develop the widespread revolutionary consciousness and activity necessary for the total transformation of life.

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