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Lifestylism: its merits and its failures

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No tactic amongst Anarchists is as simultaneously scorned and universally embraced as lifestylism. Some will be angered by the audacity to even call it a tactic! Even so, I could imagine the same Anarchist who would dissent upon this, would also upon close examination, probably lends some aspect of their lifestyle to their idea of a “social revolution”.

The idea that one should embody the world they want to live in, is certainly not one to be opposed. If everyone followed this, we would live in as much different world. The question is if it is *enough* to do this and only this in a world where new apartheids arise in multiplicity as we seem to topple one of the old ones. Is this even a viable attack (or an attack at all) for the working class to employ? Is it a privileged First-World position?

I believe that lifestylism (with all its egoist and Stirnerite influence) arises, in part, from cultural attributes that are not at all *bad* for Anarchists. As with most other strains of Revolutionary Socialists, Anarchists hold their comrades to high standards. We emphasize the *attack*. Most of us cannot be arsed to waste the time I am

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wasting at this very moment, or that you are wasting at this moment. The Anarchist says “go, now, we must attack!”. That being well understood, we also hold each other to high-regards in their lifestyle. Any practice seen as oppression is scrutinized. Still, I believe this not be a bad thing in practice, yet how to do we balance the accountability for our comrades and the inherently privileged tactic (or anti-tactic) of lifestylism?

Bakunin, in *Man, Society and Freedom*:

“In addition to this practical reason, there is still another of a theoretical nature which also leads even the most sincere liberals back to the cult of the State. They consider themselves liberals because their theory on the origin of society is based on the principle of individual freedom, and it is precisely because of this that they must inevitably recognize the absolute right [sovereignty] of the State”

The liberal-bourgeois notions of individual freedom run deep in our society. However, the further we travel from our sphere of influence, we find individual freedom becoming more scarce, and our lifestyle and our freedom begins to look more and more like the product of subservience and dominion of others. Anarchists know this freedom to be a sham. As an American, I know the cult of the State has given me the most the twisted notions of “individual freedom.” These notions have found their way into the revolutionary praxis.

Murray Bookchin, from *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*:

The steady retreat from the historic commitment of classical anarchism to social struggle (without which self-realization and the fulfillment of desire in all its dimensions, not merely the instinctive, cannot be

achieved) is inevitably accompanied by a disastrous mystification of experience and reality. The ego, identified almost fetishistically as the locus of emancipation, turns out to be identical to the 'sovereign individual' of laissez-faire individualism. Detached from its social moorings, it achieves not autonomy but the heteronomous 'selfhood' of petty-bourgeois enterprise.

We know, as Anarchists, that the individual is a product of the society that makes them. As many attempts that we make to be our own free-thinkers, we know that we cannot achieve freedom from capitalism and the state on our own. The only way to do such is to be a hermit, which looks more to me like a prison than freedom. Radical social change doesn't come from an individual, expressing their freedom through actions that affect only them. One's freedom is intrinsically tied to that of their neighbor, and revolution can never be won without the mobilization of the masses.

Consumer activism is a major consequence of this. It is the product of the Cult of the State as much as it is Cultural Capitalism. In America, they are almost infused. Slavoj Žižek gives a fantastic analysis of this in his RSA Animate "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce". We embrace the very egoist act of consumption. We have commodified the very ideals of egalitarianism and justice. They come at a price, and we pay it without question. We know this kind of activism is not a solution.

The Anarchist formulation of the *attack*, must remain free from these bourgeois individualist notions. Can this *attack* be a part of our lifestyle? Absolutely, but it must remain an attack to be a revolutionary act. It begs the question, which "lifestyle" scenario is engaging in agitation and attack, the Anarchist who occupies a squat, steals all their food (possibly growing some), and refuses to pay bus fare?; or the Anarchist who buys all their food (organic and vegan), pays "rent" in a housing cooperative, and has a bus card?

Who is stealing their Anarchist lifestyle, and who is buying it from the enemy?

I am inclined to say it is the former Anarchist whose lifestyle is indicative of agitation and attack. Even in the bourgeois state, we know this to not be enough at the same time. If our “lifestyle choices” were enough to subvert the system, it would’ve already been overthrown. Even under the most illegalist ethics, the individual does little on their own. The lifestyle ethic of Anarchism is not a complete or sufficient revolutionary mechanism, and I fail to fall to the notion that our enemies would ever make it so easy for us, that they would *sell* to us their own downfall.

Under the Anarchist Praxis, to me, there are three kinds of attack: *Insurrection* (violence or destruction of property done by affinity groups), *Expropriation* (the act of seizing private property and putting it to public use) and *Organized Sabotage* (worker’s strikes and other tactics in worker’s organization). The insurrectionist praxis and the organizationalist/workerist practice are well-developed and most Anarchists identify as one of two them. I am not a CrimethInc fan, but I will credit them for re-awakening at the very least elements expropriationist praxis and infusing it with lifestylism (as well as the overlap of insurrectionism that often comes with the Anarchist style of expropriation).

The lifestyle however, is not and never will be, praxis. If it cannot be funneled into an attack, if it doesn’t agitate, then it cannot be a praxis under the banner of Anarchism. The building of public and proletarian resources, the *positive* things our community does, certainly may embody an attack which furthers our cause, but these things are no substitute for the attack to come. They are based on the bourgeois notion, that if we can just live our lives in a manner which at least *appears* Anarchist, we can subvert the system. It is almost like role-playing in a fantasy world where we can forget our society must be radically changed, as soon as possible.

I am absolutely not suggesting we do not do the things which may be categorized into the above. The infoshops, bookfairs, so-

cial centers, anarchist gardens, potlucks, educational skill-shares, workshops, dance parties, and all the things we love and cherish as Anarchists, are under constant attack and threat. If we do not practice the act of revolutionary self-defense, the *attack*, then is it not all for naught? Will the infoshop not close eventually? Will the bookfair not end up crippling someone’s ability to live? Will the Anarchist garden ever be able to feed all the Anarchists? Does the food at Anarchist potlucks come from exploitation? We can build these things all day, yet unless we attack, we will exist under the same conditions. There can be no Anarchist lifestyle until there is a revolution.

So perhaps it is not the idea that Anarchists shouldn’t give their life to our movement. I feel Anarchists should be (and often are already) devoted to our cause, almost religiously. Whether they believe it or not, I believe the Anarchist is ultimately tied to a revolutionary “spirit”, in the Hegelian or Idealist sense. We are passionately moved by action. Murray Bookchin believes such metaphysical/phenomenological notions are the root of the Stirnerite and therefore lifestylist notions. I would say they are unavoidable by any Anarchist, and at the moment of attack, the Anarchist’s eyes glow in utter ecstasy and their heart rages with passion.

The formulation of the Anarchist lifestyle is not the problem. It’s that is it must be given an agenda of attack. Anarchism means direct-action, it means no compromise. The consumerist or individualist lifestyle currently practiced by many Anarchists, is devoid of both attack and substantial building, and is rooted by compromise, a trade-off with the rich. It is a deviation that must be attacked alongside the system.