

Anarchism, Representation, and Culture

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Over the last decade and a half, cultural historians like Patricia Leighton, David Weir, David Kadlec, and Allan Antliff have rediscovered the role of anarchism in the formation of modernist avant-garde aesthetics. Their new historical narrative posits a “resistance to representation” (Kadlec 2) and an embrace of “stylistic fragmentation” (Weir 168) as thematic links between modernism and anarchism: modernist moves toward abstraction and anti-art can be seen as informed by the individualism of Max Stirner, founded on the uniqueness of the ego, that irreducible fragment which belongs to no group and therefore cannot be represented.

This new narrative is attractive in many ways, as it forces us to rethink the politics of modernism. There are some important relationships between modernist struggles against the limits of symbolic representation and anarchist critiques of political representation (which Proudhon called a “subterfuge” and Bakunin “an immense fraud”). However, the emphasis that this new narrative places on Stirnerite individualism might make many an anarchist squirm. Stirner has always been marginal to anarchist theory, and largely irrelevant to anarchist practice: the movements that constitute anarchism’s appearance on the world stage—the First International, the Makhnovist rebellion in the Ukraine, the Spanish revolution of 1936—were workers’ movements, populist and communitarian rather than egoist, scarcely compatible with Stirner’s declarations that “truth... exists only—in your head,” or that “community... is impossible” (471, 414). “Fragmentation,” for an anarcho-communist like Errico Malatesta, is simply the secret of authority’s success: “the age-long oppression of the masses by a small privileged group has always been the result of the inability of most workers to agree among themselves to organise with others” (84). Moreover, what glues any sort of organization together is precisely the use of language to communicate, to make common—in other words, the use of symbolic representation: thus Malatesta writes that “revolution is the forming and disbanding of thousands of *representative...* bodies which, without having any *legislative* power, serve to make known and to coordinate the desires and interests of people near and far” (153, emphasis mine). In this light, social anarchists rereading the history of art and literature find the new narrative of modernism as an anarchist “resistance to representation” unsatisfying: despite the strangely disproportionate influence exercised by individualist anarchist ideas on seemingly everyone from Mallarmé to Motherwell, the long and rich tradition of social anarchism seems to have had nothing to say about poetry. Where is a social anarchist aesthetic to be found? Does it exist?

At first glance, the answer might appear to be no. Most of the well-known social anarchists who remarked on art and literature seem merely to rehearse some sort of utilitarian didacticism, reminiscent of Socialist Realism. Thus, Peter Kropotkin calls for writers and artists to “place your pen, your chisel, your ideas at the service of the revolution,” to depict “the heroic struggles of the people against their oppressors” and “fire the hearts of our youth with... glorious revolutionary enthusiasm” (*Kropotkin’s Revolutionary* 278). It all sounds a little too close to the kitsch mentality—“the people” are to be represented as “heroic,” the “oppressors” as dastardly, and so on; when Kropotkin advocates the “subservien[ce]” of “realism” to “an idealistic aim” (*Ideals and Realities* 86), Milan Kundera would call this a “categorical agreement with being,” a will to exclude from view whatever is “essentially unacceptable in human existence,” and to impose this representation on life (248). Hardly a conception worthy of the name “anarchist.”

However, something changes when we reread these comments through the lens of Murray Bookchin’s ecological version of dialectics. Bookchin insists that

Reality is always formative. It is not a mere “here” and “now”... reality is always a process of actualization of potentialities. It is no less “real” or “objective” in terms of what it could be... [than in terms of] what it is at any given moment. (*Remaking Society* 203)

This definition of reality as composed both of actuality *and* potentiality, both “what it is” *and* “what it could be,” is kin to Kropotkin’s assertion that “realistic description” should be “subservient to an idealistic aim,” particularly when this is read in context. Kropotkin is discussing the shortcomings of a particular kind of “realism”—that of “the French realists,” particularly Émile Zola, for whom “realism” means “a description only of the lowest aspects of life”—the bestial misery of coal miners, alcoholics, streetwalkers. First of all, Kropotkin argues that Zola’s Naturalism, which purports to render a panoptical “anatomy of society,” offers only a myopic view of that society: “the artist who limits his observations to the lowest and most degenerate aspects [of society] only... explores only one small corner of life. Such an artist does not conceive life *as it is*: he knows but one aspect of it, and this is not the most interesting one.” Moreover, Zola’s focus on the “degeneracy” of life under capitalism is merely the mirror image of “the... romanticism which he combated.” The idealism of the Romantic poets led them to avert their gaze from the ugly present, fleeing into a mystical beyond; however, the Naturalists seem no more than their Romantic counterparts to recognize that the “highest” manifestations of “life” are to be found “*beside and within its lowest manifestations*” (86).

Kropotkin judges Zola’s Naturalism to be “a step backwards from the realism of Balzac” (86) because it so rigorously adheres to the actual that it appears to exclude any sense of the possible: the “anatomy of society” that Zola renders in *Germinal* is one in which everything is driven by fatal necessity: rebellion appears futile. Zola’s “anatomy” of capitalist exploitation may indict the cruelty of the system, but it inadvertently defends that system by making it appear unchangeable—even “natural.” It evokes pathos, but not revolt. Ultimately, an ultramaterialist representation which freezes living men and women into immobile objects produces the same lousy results as an ultra-idealist representation which turns away from the material world. Where Romanticism mystifies reality, Naturalism reifies it.

For Kropotkin, as for Bookchin, it is the dialectical *relationship* between material and ideal, between actual and potential, that is indispensable to any genuine “realism” in art or politics. Kropotkin is arguing for an aesthetic which is neither Romantic nor Naturalist, neither idealist nor (in the corollary sense) realist—an aesthetic which Proudhon called “critical idealism,” while carefully positioning himself against both “idealist” and “materialist” metaphysics (Rubin 94; Proudhon, *System of Economical* 16–17; Proudhon *Oeuvres* 11.59). For Proudhon, art can and should represent “nature” as it is, performing its mimetic function of “rendering things,” but at the same time present an image of “things” as they “should” be—a potential which exists in a dialectical relation to the actual within which it is always embedded (*SEC* 434). Art which cleaves to one pole or the other of this dialectic is a failure: since, as Proudhon remarks in *Du principe de l’art*, “the real is not the same as the truth” (qtd. in Rubin 94), it is possible to transcend reality by telling the truth, what Theodor Adorno called the truth of “the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it” (*Aesthetic Theory* 135). The reverse is also true: to merely reproduce the real (as in Zola’s Naturalism) would be to fail to tell the truth, i.e., to lie. “if [art] is limited to simple imitation, copies or counterfeits of nature,” Proudhon insists, it will end up “dishonoring the same objects which it would have imitated” (“S’il [l’art] se borne à une simple imitation,

copie ou contrefaçon de la nature, il ne fera qu'étaler sa propre insignifiance, en déshonorant les objets mêmes qu'ils aurait imités") (Proudhon qtd. in Crapo 461; translation mine). Thus, in the moment that art frees itself from mere imitation, it can fulfill its deepest moral commitment, realizing the principle of justice by revealing the "should be" within the "is." What Proudhon calls the "social destination" of art, in the end, is not only to *reproduce* what exists, but also to *criticize* what exists by reference to what *can* and *should* exist. This is Kropotkin's "realist description" in the service of an "idealist goal."

In fin-de-siècle Paris, we find another group of social anarchists working along very similar lines: the *art social* group of Paris, with Bernard Lazare as one of its brightest lights. Against the Symbolist aesthetes, partisans of "social art" maintained, with Proudhon, that art has a "social mission," but like Kropotkin, they rejected Naturalism as an "incomplete" program (Lazare 5, 27). In his 1896 manifesto, Lazare declared that

the reproach which had to be made to naturalism lay in its incompleteness, its... considering only bodily functions and not mental functions to be real; also its disfiguration [enlaidir] of pleasure with ugliness [laid], instead of showing real things under their aspect of perfection. (27–28)

Naturalist representation, by privileging the "material" over the ideal, renders a picture of life in which there are objects, but no subjectivity; in so far as Zola's coal miners seem to live a merely "animal life," *Germinal* endorses that bourgeois ideology which depicts the working classes as mindless brutes, incapable of rational self-governance (29). Moreover, by subordinating "pleasure" to "ugliness," Naturalist writing encourages us to turn away from life in disgust at least as much as it encourages us to revolt against social conditions.

If this sort of realism is a dead end for Lazare, so is Mallarmé's Symbolism, which he sees as an "idealist reaction against Zola and naturalism": the Symbolist "error," he asserts,

was to turn one's back on life, it was to return to the old romantic theory, whose basis [fond] is christian: life is abject, one must go beyond life [il faut aller hors la vie]. Starting from this point, one cannot but end up in the mystico-decadent swamp [au marais mysticodécadent]. (28–29)

The same revulsion with life that is evoked by objectivist representation is the starting point for an anti-realist, subjectivist aesthetic—a flight away from representation. In place of Naturalist reification of reality, all Symbolism can offer is mystification. Neither aesthetic offers enough to revolution.

The alternative to Naturalism and Symbolism, for Lazare, is a "social art," "neither realist nor idealo-mystical," whose "principle" is "that life is good and that its manifestations are beautiful," while "uglinesses are the product of the state of society," and which "represent[s] not stable beings, fixed in a chosen pose, but beings in evolution"; this art, in accordance with Proudhon's critical idealism, "must not content itself with photographing the social *milieux*... it must release from them the ideas which they contain" (29–30). In short, social art is a representational aesthetic, a modified realism which embraces both of those aspects of reality which are polarized and isolated by Naturalism and Symbolism: where Naturalism excludes the dimension of potentiality and Symbolism excludes the dimension of actuality, social art insists on including both,

activating the dialectic between them. In so doing, it provides a stimulus to revolt, engaging both writer and reader in a historical process of change, thereby overcoming the “artistic egotism” which results from the alienation of artists from their community context (19).

But does *art social* escape the trap of kitsch aesthetics? What does it mean to insist that “life is good and that its manifestations are beautiful,” while “uglinesses” are merely transitory? Is this not a “categorical agreement with being,” repressing the “essentially unacceptable in human existence”? I don’t believe that Lazare’s social art suffers from the kind of blinkered mentality that Kundera rightly criticizes. For elucidation, I’d like to turn to a more recent anarchist theorist.

Peter Lamborn Wilson, better known by his nom-de-plume of Hakim Bey, is usually associated with the anti-representationalist aesthetic of individualist anarchism. However, in a 1991 essay titled “Amoral Responsibility,” Wilson expresses a social anarchist vision of art. Wilson insists that every text, no matter how fictional, inevitably offers a “representation of life,” and that its politics are to be found here (57). It is important to note that Wilson’s concept of “representation,” here, is very different from Zola’s: where Zola wished to neutrally record what happens, Wilson argues that “nothing ‘just happens’ in a book” (54). The power of the writer to shape and condition even the most referential reportage of reality is considerable, and confers on the writer a corresponding “responsibility for the text’s *representation of life*” (57). On this basis, Wilson offers a critique of horror fiction from Victorian times to the present that mirrors, in many ways, Lazare’s critique of Naturalist fiction.

“Every fiction,” Wilson asserts, “prescribes as well as (or more than) it describes.” How so? As Peter Marshall reminds us, “there is no unbridgeable gap between normative and prescriptive statements”—that is, between claims about “what is,” “what could be,” and “what should be”—“since the former contain the moral and practical potential of the latter” (138). What must be avoided is collapsing this dialectic between is, could, and should into the flat “logical fallacy” of “maintaining that because something is, it follows that it ought to be” (144). Wilson sees this reduction of values to fact as an almost inescapable tendency in fictional representation. Because a fiction presents itself as a microcosm, “a kind of world,” it posits at least an implicit claim to represent the macrocosm, i.e., *the world*, “reality” per se (54). That is to say: a fiction embodies “a worldview,” a “view of what life ‘really’ is—or should be” (54–55). Where Lazare accused the Naturalist novel of representing life as irredeemably ugly, Wilson sees the radical ugliness of Horror fiction, its tendency to represent “life” in terms of suffering and nausea, as evoking a worldview in which “sensuality connects only to disgust” (56). Instead of projecting a critique of the negativity present in life as it is constituted here and now, it expresses a universal loathing for life in general: “Life, love, pleasure—all is death, all is shit and disease” (56). Wilson suggests, in other words, that the typical horror text is a secular revision of Christian dualism—as Lazare put it, the notion that “life is abject, one must go beyond life.” That is to say, “by its very nature,” this sort of writing is “politically reactionary” (Wilson 56) because it suggests not a categorical *agreement* with being, but a categorical *disagreement* with being, and an embrace of nothingness.

A social anarchist aesthetic, in short, does not simply map the ideal *onto* the real, or take the ideal *for* the real; rather, it discovers the ideal within the real, as a *moment* of reality. This goes beyond merely preaching a social gospel, beyond “dull moralisation,” as Kropotkin called it (*Ideals and Realities* 86); it is a complex, dialectical interplay between the imperatives of realistic reflection and idealistic persuasion. Thus, George Woodcock speaks of “the constructive artist” in whose work “some *living quality* can be apprehended growing out of the ruins of tragedy and

evil” (*The Writer and Politics* 183; emphasis mine). This “living quality,” the “seed beneath the snow,” as Colin Ward puts it (22), is what a social anarchist seeks in art no less than in life.

The lessons that this social anarchist tradition has to teach us extend beyond the aesthetic. Right now, large sections of the anarchist movement in the U.S. and elsewhere are influenced by the theoretical work of John Zerzan, whose opposition to all forms of “representation,” symbolic *and* political, runs so deep as to include a call for the abolition of art and language itself. To represent, for Zerzan, is simply to mediate, reify, and alienate. Since every form of organization depends on symbolic mediation, Zerzan’s anti-representationalism is also highly anti-organizational. If Zerzan is right about representation, then it follows that revolt must either be recuperated into some representational system or else remain unorganized and fragmented, in which case it can be easily contained—a dead end either way. However, what if Zerzan is overlooking the possibility of other, *non-reifying, non-alienating forms* of representation—*dynamic forms* which, as Lazare wrote, “represent not stable beings, fixed in a chosen pose, but beings in evolution”? This kind of aesthetic representation corresponds to a kind of political representation: direct democracy. Direct democracy is precisely the sort of representational system one would create if one believed, as Bookchin says, that “Being is not an agglomeration of fixed entities and phenomena but is always in flux, in a state of Becoming” (“A Philosophical Naturalism”)—or as Proudhon said, “that the true, real, [and] positive... is what changes, or at least what is capable of... transformation, while what is false, fictitious, impossible and abstract appears as fixed, complete, whole, unchangeable” (*Philosophie du progrès* 247–248).

Radical direct democracy is not “resistance to representation”; it is an alternative *model* of representation that is *dynamic*, which does not seek to escape the world of multiplicity and motion but embraces these phenomena as the essence of living. It not only allows us to create policy directly, but keeps open the possibility of our intervening our own representation, empowering us to quickly withdraw the authority of spurious representatives and replace them with better ones. The recallable “delegate” is more truly “representative” than an elected official, because the system does not assume that the popular will is a reified object. Direct democracy assumes that what must be represented is complex and changeable, and therefore provides as many opportunities as possible for it to manifest itself in a fuller, more all-sided form.

Zerzan writes that art begins in the “substitution” of an “abstract... representation” for “the real object, in its particularity,” suggesting that “in the transfiguration we must enact, the symbolic will be left behind and art refused in favor of the real” (56, 62). On the contrary, wrote Bakunin, “Art is... the return of abstraction to life”; while it is “concerned... with general types and general situations... [it] incarnates them... in forms which... if they are not living in the sense of real life, none the less excite in our imagination the memory and sentiment of life; art in a certain sense individualizes the types and situations which it conceives... it recalls to our minds the living, real individualities which appear and disappear under our eyes” (*God and the State* 56–57). I think Bakunin’s vision of art, the art that represents living beings in evolution and releases from them the ideas which they contain, is still a viable one: a social anarchist aesthetic.

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