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The End of Communication?

The End of Representation?

Jesse Cohn

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What happens when anarchist politics get hitched to a culturally limited (white bohemian) aesthetic? A few years back, there was an interesting debate on a St. Louis Indymedia forum over what some perceived as the “internalized racism” demonstrated by “some of the anarchist community” at a protest. After several indignant denials from local blackblocers, an activist contributed another example:

On the march back to the park, both [local civil rights activists] Percy Green and Zaki Baruti (who are black) tried to get people to walk on sidewalks. One young white male shouted to Percy Green “get back on the street, motherfucker!” Not that he represents the ideology of all of the young white anarchist kids ... but he probably does not know who Percy Green is, nor do many of his comrades.

That kind of arrogance probably stems in part from ignorance and hotheadedness, but it must also owe something to spending a whole lot of time around other “young white anarchist kids.” And at least some of the practices that encourage that kind of insularity and isolation might be considered a poetics of the anti-aesthetic, of the unreadable and indecipherable, a refusal to engage in the difficult work of representing oneself to others, preferring instead the erratic, individual eruption of desire and aggression.

An anarchist poetics that amounts to “a form of self-imposed exile,” as Ramor Ryan describes the CrimethInc project, is in danger of becoming an end in itself (a dead end) rather than a way towards any broader social transformation. The conclusion Ryan draws from his reading of CrimethInc’s *Days of War and Nights of Love*—“It’s not enough to merely identify with the dispossessed; the task is to find common voice and organize with them”—might be read, I would argue, as having wide significance for the rest of the U.S. anarchist movement. It might be read as a call for more, and better, communication.

and self-protection. No doubt much of this has to do precisely with the need to avoid the scrutiny of what Roger describes (in “The Strategy of Concealment,” FE #375, Spring 2007) as “hostile informatives”—conservative parents, gaybashing peers, teachers, cops, etc.

Yet how often might this contrived illegibility and inaccessibility turn out to be yet another attempt to make oneself cool, to construct an image of oneself as glamorously secretive, available only to those similarly cool and in the know? How often might it amount to canceling the gesture of rebellious, defiant self-exposure—*here I am; if you don't like it, fuck you!*—by ensuring that it is effectively performed only for one's own clique, within the safe bounds of one's extended self? Maybe, particularly for teen zinesters, this serves as a kind of rehearsal for bolder acts in the future, empowerment by degrees ... but I have my doubts.

The community spaces created by anarchists tend to create a similarly privatized, exclusive version of a public sphere. I remember with a sigh the poetry night I attended a few years ago at the now-defunct Autonomous Zone Infoshop in Chicago, the most memorable moment of which was an endless, droning song, played on acoustic guitar by a morosely scruffy-looking young anarchist. Trying not to wince visibly, I sat through it, smiled appreciatively, and clapped after he was done. The perhaps intentional disdain for any kind of poetic appeal—harmony, melody, *brio*, anything—seems symptomatic to me: the people in attendance, all of them white bohemians (in the midst of the poor Latino neighborhood of Humboldt Park) were not so much tone-deaf as they were out of touch with anyone and anything outside their micro-communal world. One could only really enjoy this kind of song if one was already part of the homogenous “community” that it was part of. The counter-institution, in short, seemed to me to have little appeal or reach beyond the “counter-community” that hosted it; it was largely autotelic, self-contained, self-involved.

As long as we're on the subject of endings—or rather, the rhetoric of “the end”—I'd like to intervene in the ongoing conversation about what Roger Farr recently referred to in these pages as “the end of an era,” i.e., the era of anarchism as a “communicative” project (“Anarchist Poetics,” *Fifth Estate* #373, Fall 2006).

This historical narrative, in which we go from an old-fashioned “classical anarchism” to a post-modern “new anarchism,” is on a lot of lips these days. Where the classical anarchists are supposed to have clung to naïve notions about science, progress, and human nature, one hears, the new anarchism boldly dispenses with such outworn fetishes: thus, a typical CrimethInc broadside bids farewell to “abstractions,” “norms,” “judgments,” “conceptualizations,” and “language” itself.

I don't believe in this narrative; it doesn't quite tell the truth about where we came from, and it obscures our view of where we might want to go next. Roger doesn't quite believe in it either, because he's too well-informed. Even as he repeats it, he undoes it, falling into contradictions.

Thus, at one moment, he asserts that “classical anarchism” was “a rational, if somewhat wayward child of the Enlightenment”; at another moment, he dates the questioning of Enlightenment rationality back to the classical anarchists. Thus, on the one hand, any attempt to “communicate” clearly is suspect, a prisoner of “the old world of political representation,” enforcing “duplication and normativity,” while on the other hand, “communication” is held to be “inherent to all forms of social organization,” and “obviously, some form of normative discourse is required to coordinate our activity.” This theoretical ambiguity undercuts Roger's conclusion that we need to reject established “protest genres” in toto, instead creating “indecipherable” and “unreadable” acts that confuse the hell out of the authorities.

Don't get me wrong—confusing the authorities can be fun (and sometimes effective: Anja Kanngieser points out that groups such as Hamburg and Berlin Umsonst were able to defuse police re-

sponses to their events by making it unclear whether they were “protest” or “art,” “real” or “play”). And I’ve always found something about the dominant genres of demonstration in the U.S. to be depressing, boring, and disempowering—more anaesthetic than aesthetic. Thus far, Roger and I agree. But resorting to pure dada can be a dead end as well. By presenting our politics as “indecipherable,” we risk rendering them incommunicable; by making them “unreadable,” we risk rendering them unintelligible. When we act crazy, we confirm the ideological assumption that any alternative to the status quo is crazy.

As long as anarchy continues to appear ridiculous, inconceivable, unintelligible, nonsensical, we haven’t a chance. Conversely, we know we’re getting somewhere when our ways of doing things—mutual aid, direct action, cooperation, etc.—start to look like common sense and feel like second nature. Often this becomes possible in crises, as with the “solidarity economy” that arose in Argentina in the wake of economic collapse, or the heroism of the Common Ground Collective after Hurricane Katrina. Short of such extreme situations, however, we’re stuck with trying to convince people that there is some better way to live than the one they’re used to. Indeed, a key function of radical art is to facilitate this shift of perspective by making the status quo order of things look odd, counter-intuitive, nonsensical, bizarre (to “defamiliarize” it, as the Russian critics put it), while representing the radically new in familiar, recognizable, and comprehensible terms, rendering it intuitive and plausible, reducing the anxiety intrinsic to all social change. Thus, in the Shakespearean phrase that gave Herbert Read one of his book titles, “imagination bodies forth/The forms of things unknown.”

Ah, but that’s representation! Yes, it is. And if it has become a commonplace to say that anarchism is an “attack on representation,” this is only half true where the actual, historical anarchist tradition is concerned. By way of an explanation, I’d like to offer my own potted history.

culture.” It is probably in Spain, though, that social anarchist poetics reached their fullest expression, producing a rich visual, literary, theatrical, and even cinematic *imaginario libertario*—a representational culture that emphasized collective creativity, participation, and empowerment.

If we want that sense of oppositional community—a desire I think Roger and I fully share—then we have to pursue oppositional forms of communication.

Toward another anarchist poetics

The poetics of the “unreadable” are already to be found in much of the anarchist milieu of the US, and it’s not always to our credit. Take, for instance, the punk and hippie subcultures with which it is frequently conflated. Punk shows, much as I have loved them, tend, in my experience, to be so loud and badly amped, the songs shouted so quickly (with minimum redundancy—i.e., little in the way of refrains or repetition) that the lyrics, whatever their political content, are often effectively drowned out and lost. Something gets communicated anyway, and the sense of community may be strong, but the scene (permitting mainly the sharing of simple signs among people who know what to expect) tends to favor homogeneity, what Jello Biafra derides as the “safe little punk womb.” The collective force of Do It Yourself culture can easily turn into the collective narcissism of Talk To Yourself culture.

Anna Poletti points out the similar way in which autobiographical punk zines counter their own confessional impulses by a variety of visual, textual, and distributive tactics—limited circulation, pages crammed with teeny-tiny handwriting, fragmentary narratives, deliberately crude photocopying, words crossed out, corrupted, blurred, misspelled—that render them partially “illegible” and “inaccessible.” The zinester thus has his or her cake and eats it too, achieving both self-exposure

real individualities which appear and disappear under our eyes”); 3.) not (only) reflect the world as it is but (also) participate in its *transformation*; and 4.) make visible, within the finite, real, present world, the infinite plurality of *possibilities* (so that, as Proudhon insists, it is not “confined to photographic reproductions” of what *actually* exists but tells the larger “truth” of what can and should exist, the truth of desire).

Thus, the anarchist proponents of social art opposed not only conventional forms of realism (for pretending to passively reflect reality while obscuring the dimensions of change and potentiality) but also romantic reactions against realism (for pretending to escape from the constraints of the presently existing by fleeing from all relation).

What has been little recognized (in English-language studies, at least; in French and Spanish, it’s widely acknowledged) is how far this poetics of social art really extended. In fin-de-siècle France, the Club de l’Art Social brought together the best of the anarchist intellectual world, including Jean Grave (editor of *Le Révolté*), Bernard Lazare (novelist and anti-racist campaigner) and Fernand Pelloutier (secretary of the anarcho-syndicalist Fédération des Bourses du Travail).

Their writings were widely read in Spain, where, according to Lily Litvak (*La Mirada Roja: Estetica y arte del anarquismo espanol, 1880–1913*) and Juan Manuel Fernandez Soria (*Cultura y libertad: La educación en las Juventudes Libertarias, 1936–1939*), the concept and practice of arte social gained enthusiastic acceptance. The idea caught on throughout the anarchist world: we can see its influence on Luigi Fabbri’s attacks on the Symbolists’ “letteratura violenta” and Emma Goldman’s praise for *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*, in the correspondence of Ricardo Flores Magon and the essays of Manuel Gonzalez Prada, in Ba Jin’s social novel and the “labor literature” of Sun Lianggong, and so on. One catches the flavor of this poetics in the attempts of the Wobblies to create what Franklin Rosemont calls a “revolutionary working-class counter-

Anarchism and representation

Partisans of the classical-anarchism-vs.-new-anarchism narrative tend to link contemporary anarchist theory, or “post-anarchism,” to the postmodern theories of folks like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, primarily through the theme of a “critique of representation.” It is easy to find extravagant postmodernist denunciations of both symbolic and political forms of representation. In their most extreme formulations, contemporary anarchism and postmodernism converge: thus, Deleuze and Guattari conclude, in terms even John Zerzan might approve of, that “representation is always a social and psychic repression,” and that language is “an abominable faculty consisting in emitting, receiving, and transmitting, order-words.” Period. Moreover, Deleuze asserts, “we don’t suffer these days from any lack of communication”; rather, only “action” is needed. I hear more than an echo of this in Roger’s assertion that “unreadable poetic acts” would “not ‘represent’ an anarchist critique but perform it,” that they would not constitute “representations of desires” but “eruptions of desire itself,” and so on.

One can even read this antirepresentationalist rhetoric back into the “classical anarchist” tradition itself, as Roger suggests. Indeed, anarchism has always resisted the operation by means of which power is transferred from the “represented” to the “representative.” Most obviously, this meant rejecting the pretense of elected “representatives” to speak for their constituents as well as an opposition to vanguardism, denying parties or leaders the right to “represent” the people. By extension, symbolic representations such as money, dialectics, religion, art, and science come in for serious questioning in the works of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, among others (see “For Further Reading” below). It is no stretch to say that language itself is implicated in all of these analyses, that the word is subjected to anarchist scrutiny.

However, any careful reading of these texts reveals that their anarchist *critique* of representation is far from constituting a simple *rejection* of representation per se. Rather, they distinguish between positive, empowering, useful, and necessary representational practices, and those that manipulate, falsify, and serve dominatory purposes. The election of “representatives” is opposed precisely because it is *not representative enough*—once elected, officials are no longer accountable.

In place of such fraudulent systems, anarchists proposed participatory forms of representation such as the contractual agreements and confederated assemblies. Contracts are made directly between interested parties; popular assemblies likewise permit people to reach agreements directly, then to coordinate these agreements with other assemblies through delegates. In both cases, the representation—the contract, the delegate—is to be kept under strict control: the contract can be dissolved, and delegates who fail to obey the assembly can be removed at any time. In this way, as Kropotkin puts it, the social order is “continually modified ... *representing* every moment the resultant of all conflicting actions” (emphasis mine). Likewise, in *La Revolution Sociale* (1852), Proudhon calls for a social organization that “*represents the relation* of all interests” (emphasis in original). From this perspective, anarchy is not the negation but the *fulfillment* of political representation.

The key to this living “relation” between representations and what they represent is maintaining fluidity, avoiding what Bakunin called “petrification”: the danger is that, by becoming fixed in place, the representative—whether this is a sign or a person—will cease to accurately represent the ever-changing represented. “The true, real, [and] positive,” says Proudhon, “is what changes”; conversely, “what is false, fictitious, impossible and abstract appears as fixed, complete, whole, unchangeable.” This ontological recognition clarifies the ethical distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of representation—*not only political, but symbolic as well*.

The sociologist Daniel Colson perhaps puts it most plainly when he writes that what anarchists refuse to do is “to *autonomize* representations”—to allow them to drift away from what they are intended to represent, to become independent, and thus to dictate to and dominate the realities they were to serve. This entails, first and foremost, the negation of any “*fixed* and *final* representation,” i.e., representations of reality as static and unchanging. Since we understand the real to be in a continuous state of motion, transformation, and development, we can expect any fixed or static to deviate from what it signifies. We can resist and prevent this by finding ways to continually renew and replace signs, to make them gesture toward the fluidity of the real.

This describes pretty closely the kind of anarchist poetics that Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin called for—a poetics that scarcely figures at all in the histories Roger cites. In David Weir’s *Anarchy and Culture* and David Kadlec’s *Mosaic Modernism*, for instance, the poetics created by the fusion of anarchism with modernism is characterized by 1.) a proliferation of artistic vanguards or avant-gardes (Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, etc.), complete with manifestoes, cadres, and sectarian squabbles; 2.) a basic credo (despite the apparent diversity of the sects) of “aesthetic individualism,” inspired mainly by Max Stirner’s egoism; 3.) contempt for the popular and the accessible as hopelessly “bourgeois” and “corrupt”; 4.) an endorsement of art for art’s sake; 5.) an affinity for “propaganda by the deed” as an alternative to propaganda by the word; and, last but not least, 6.) a “resistance to representation” via abstraction, nonsense, the emptying-out or negation of meaning.

By contrast, the poetics called for by Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin (i.e., the social anarchists) called for a “social art”—an art that would 1.) reach broad working-class audiences without pandering or sacrificing complexity; 2.) charge static, abstract signs so that they evoke the concreteness and specificity of lived experience (so that, as Bakunin wrote, poetry “recalls to our minds the living,