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# The Allure of Insurrection

monkey bars

August 16, 2009

This essay is an attempt to clear up some of the uncertainties and claims about insurrectionary analyses being incomprehensible, hopefully to the benefit of those who have been critical of this tendency. As well, some topics in anarchist writing and the often dogmatic arguments between anarchist factions. I hope it need not be said that this is in solidarity with gender and queer struggles, and all struggles people face in this prison called society, to the exclusion of none.

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Within the often ingrown and masochistic anarchist milieu, certain trends have emerged invoking insurrection and social war. While this trend has been marginalized and attacked from within the milieu, it is often forgotten that this is not a new trend. Many if not most anarchists in history have been insurrectionaries—believing that it is a futile waste of an individuals' life, or the lives of a whole group, to dedicate themselves to pondering, planning, expecting, or waiting for a revolution, much less an anarchist revolution, much less a successful one. Another trend,

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historically very small but seemingly prevalent in today's anarchist milieu, balks at any suggestion of militancy or conflict, seeking to simply prod society in libertarian directions until its institutions are transformed. Criticism is aimed at the strategy of these notions, suggesting that such r/evolutionary conditions cannot be brought about through the work of a handful of activists, and it is pretentious to think otherwise. As well that the major institutions of society will not peacefully lay down while 'the people' overhaul them. Perhaps the most compelling response is the simpler: that a life spent planning, expecting, waiting for the revolution (or 'social change') is bound to be deeply dissatisfying, like a life of pent-up desire shrouded in celibacy. Although, given the entrenchment of a masochistic Western work ethic, there are many who gain pleasure from 'activist work' and working toward a goal of revolution or social change they are not likely to glimpse. While such activists (anarchist, communist, otherwise) prod other radicals to put in their hours, so to speak, building lasting institutions and interfacing with 'the public', it is evident in the tiny numbers of various radical and leftist movements that for most people, one job is enough. When offered the choice between waiting for some revolution, or working for it, I'm not sure which form of self-inflicted pain is better. Or can I mix them? Or should I just kill myself?

This critique of activism and social revolution is well-trodden, so I will limit it here. I also do not wish to degrade the interests and ideas of different radicals—so long as they are borne of true interest, and not moral duties or political platforms. I also will not lay out a long critique of the anarchist subculture; such themes are already well-discussed (see Feral Faun's *The Anarchist Subculture: A Critique*). I don't wish to fully attack subcultures, which play a valuable role in personal exploration and realizing lives safer from the malaise and depression of mass society, for myself included. Yet I do seek the limits of the anarchist movement and subculture, or any similar institution. My main concern here is to write on present

thing that's fun, imaginative, poetic, even mysterious, and even if I don't understand all of it. But that's just me. If it's not your style, then skip it, and I might skip everything else. Certainly, children's books and newspaper articles and introductions and breakdowns and outlines all have value, as do aphorisms and whimsy, parables and nonsense. So let's not make them all the same. A lot of people are drawn in by writings that are easy to read and relate to, but convey a sense of intrigue, wonder and magic. If anarchy doesn't have some mystery that makes people want to know about it, then they'll turn back to channel 5. And if the same style of writing becomes normal, mundane and predictable, then what was an epiphany becomes a drag. I want to be challenged, to hear new ideas, to laugh, cry, jump, play. This goes not just for writing; I want the same excitement and curiosity from art, music, actions, gatherings, infoshops, and whatever I can get. Anarchy that doesn't suck your soul: anarchy without politics. And not just to hear about it; I want to taste it. I want a Dionysian orgy of liberty, not a monastic cult of anarchism eschewing present life for future utopia. And if I can't, then I, like so many before me, will leave. Many people 'join' 'anarchism' because it offers them something they need, or satisfies some urge; and many leave 'the scene' because it no longer fulfills anything. Rather than thinking of how to 'build the movement', why not think of how to fulfill ourselves and those around us through our relationships and actions? To stop thinking like salespeople and start thinking like friends and comrades.

If you were about to criticize this because 'Foucault was a Maoist': I'm not Foucault. Let's make our own collages and learn from who we want to learn from. And let's burn up all our judgements, preconceptions and rigid ideologies in one great big fiery potlatch and kiss and fight and laugh and, as a wise person once said, go on about our way to the great and sublime conquest of the nothing.

be it a street festival, construction, or blizzard) offers a mold we may escape in order to pursue our own mischief. One need only look through the thin veneer of any event to see the possibilities on the other side. But even if the greatest likelihood of success lies in skipping the mobilization and appearing in other locations, it can't be elevated to a dogmatic strategy.

The discussion requires a healthy dose of hedonism. If there is something at a mobilization that you desire, be it friends, a specific action, or to revisit a great experience you had before, then goddamn well do it. And don't feel guilty about it. But don't try to make everyone else do it for your reasons. Likewise, if you don't wanna go, then goddamn well don't. Simple as that. And if people do what they love and don't fuck with each other, then maybe they wouldn't drop out of the anarchist movement so quick. Maybe they'd like to stay. Constructive criticism is absolutely valuable and important. Disagreement is healthy. Strategy is a good thing to think about. But criticism should never be elevated to dogma, judgement and expectations of how others should act. And we should never be slaves to a strategy.

The same argument above goes for the writing style of many insurrectionists. So often anarchists throw out these pieces because they're allegedly incomprehensible. Perhaps some are, but most don't require that much education. They can usually be understood without reading Nietzsche, Tiqqun, Agamben or whoever they cite. And I say that because I haven't read most of these authors/journals, and still understand the essays I've read. They just require some imagination to read them and enjoy them. Yet even so, people can write cryptic slang poetry if that's all they want to write. Again, criticism is valuable. But judgement over someone else's writing style is bullshit, especially if you don't give it much chance. What I and many people like about this writing style is that it departs from the programmatic, ideological lay writings of so much propaganda.

Just because the average person can read a diluted form article about Issue A doesn't mean they'll want to. So I love reading some-

trends in insurrectionist writing and ideas, hopefully to lend them clarity for those who have been mystified by them. Of course, this is my perspective, and undoubtedly will clash with various aspects of other insurrectionary pieces. Let it be.

Politics is by and large a military phenomenon—it is governed by force, but mostly by reserve-force, perceived force, potential force, and the fears and thrills that these instill. Foucault wrote of how the popular utopia of an egalitarian democratic society always coexisted with a military utopian dream of complete control and order, of effortless surveillance and punishment embedded into the (mostly urban) architecture of society. Anarchism as a political philosophy is not exempt from this. The revolution is the military motor of anarchist politics. The 'free society' is guarded into the future, presumably, by threat of further revolution. Insurrectionism puts several twists in this. For one, it is often willing to confront the military nature of society in general, and to acknowledge the military nature of conflict with its institutions. This is a degree of realism often lacking in those who fail to see conflict with society as more than activism. The use of Sun Tzu is not frivolous or counteractive. It is fun and poetic, but it is also a wake-up call to consider the real dimensions of anarchist conflict.

The good insurrectionist pieces are almost always suggestions and ideas, not platforms or campaigns. One of the key notions is to think for yourself, and really to think seriously about your context as an individual, an anarchist, a collective, and what you are faced up against. If people think creatively and bring in new ideas and tactics, we will all be better off than when everyone expects event organizers to plan for them, or when every action is a rehash of the last. The problem with mass mobilizations is not the numbers, and not even the number of cops. It is their mass orchestration, their nature as spectacle. The poetry and joy of a spontaneous insurrection is rarely found in a pre-programmed, planned mass action. So people often go home disappointed and depressed.

But if participants can cease to be participants, forget the strategy and logistics announced to them, and break out of their mass mold...then a world of possibilities unfolds before them. The social roles and division of labor inherent to institutionalized activism may dissolve. Yet this will only happen when a mass action ceases to exist as a mass action, and becomes a carnival, a riot, an insurrection. Or when it ceases to be any *thing*, and becomes a thousand different stories, a thousand emotions. This is the allure of insurrection, most simply seen. It is a yearning to break out, to destroy walls and norms, to forget every social fact, to see, hear, feel and know things we'd never imagined. This is where desire plays in, much to the chagrin of repressed Western radicalism – this unquenchable thirst for better experiences. The term insurrection can be misconstrued. Much as a generalized insurrection to shake society's foundations could be beautiful, it may not be much closer than a revolution, and certainly can't be planned. Yet it is the moments, actions or even extended periods where the social order is suspended that feed our souls and give us a taste of dreams. This is similar in some ways to the experience some describe following meditation, and surely there are many ways to access it. This is not less radical than fetishizing a long-off utopian revolution in our minds; *of course* we'll be there if it happens. But in the meantime let's dwell in our immediate lives, with the joys and sorrows that come with it.

The prevailing anarchist mythology is of planning, preparing and waiting for the revolution; and after the rev, complete, unbridled freedom. Yet little thought is given to what freedom could mean, to what adventures and ecstasies might be pursued. Without suggesting anything as ridiculous as a 'strategy' of learning about what we would do with our freedom, it is still a relevant concern. With no experience and little thought given to deep personal desires, and how they manifest into our relationships, how would this freedom manifest in lives unyoked from society? How

will they avoid re-creating relationships of alienation, domination and boredom?

This is not a pessimistic lament about the futility of any libertarian dreams. It is simply a caution against uncreatively stamping 'anarchist' on the same mode of social/political organization that has built bourgeois and socialist revolutions. It is an urge to overcome political ideologies and seek on a deeper level what sovereignty and self-determination could mean to us. Just as conflict with society may be brought into the immediate living context, so may our dreams and desires. One can pursue adventure, epiphany, wisdom and ecstasy in the immediate life as urgently as they pursue a rupture with the society that crushes these sensations until we forget them. Writing poetry or climbing a tree can yield as much joy and insight as a riot. This is not remotely to suggest abandoning creative destruction and physical acts of rebellion, but simply to say that there is no dogma regarding what composes an anarchistic experience.

It is no secret that the anarchist milieu frequently and dogmatically splits around various issues, perhaps almost every issue that is vocalized. I don't advise a form of muted harmony or compromise to create a meaningless unity in some 'movement.' Rather, one might simply take a different tack in discussing and critiquing the theories and proposals that circulate. Strategic thinking, when elevated to a dogma, may be the anarchists' Achilles' heel. So much discussion occurs under the guise of 'what is best for the movement?', 'what is most effective?' and other drivel. The debate over whether to host mass mobilizations is a simple example. The mainstream arguments are both useless. A choice between the mass-spectacle experience of a pre-planned protest and the hyped-up drudgery of activist work 'in our communities', the answer is obvious: neither.

Luckily, no debate is as simple as its alleged two sides. A lot of great experiences and relationships may come out of one's life in a community. Likewise, a mass action (or any massive disturbance,