On Political Ecosystems

SA

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We recently had a few members of National Rebirth in Preston. They popped up with a table and some of their fascy literature and ugly flags, and attempted some conversations with passers by. They were spotted by members of our local antifascist ecosystem, who took photos, shared information in community group chats, and observed.

I wasn't there at the time. Being a more militant organism in our local ecosystem, I would have happily gone down and told them to get the fuck back to whatever rock they crawled out from under and never return. We had a brief chat in one of our groups and opinions on National Rebirth are mixed: some consider them to not be much of a threat, or not a serious threat, but I am not so sure.

I took a look at their website and was particularly surprised to find some very transparent writings about their aims, strategies, and branch goings-on. All veiled with the usual fascist dog-whistles and indirections of course. There is one article in particular I found very interesting, and which I want to deconstruct here.

In "The Nationalist Ecosystem – It DOES exist, and it is a curse, not a blessing", Grand Wizard Alek Yerbury develops an analysis of the disconnects between 'nationalist' activists and local communities. To briefly summarise Yerbury's argument, he views "protests, demonstrations and street movements" and "'Auditing', 'Youtubing', and 'Streaming'" as "staple activities of this nationalist ecosystem" which is ultimately doing nothing but perpetuating itself, and will "never develop into real political power". Having recently read D. Hunter's "Chav Solidarity", I was surprised to find some parallels with his analyses, of the disconnects between "capital heavy" activists and people who are poor, working class, or criminalised. Hunter makes similar observations of the anarchist and leftist ecosystems from the other side, as a member of a local community trying to participate in what is in effect somebody else's political ecosystem. He talks about escaping from a violent and racist upbringing, only to find countless activists and activist groups unable to engage with him or people like him with anything but contempt. As he puts so eloquently:

> I believe that the working class in this country has been thoroughly stratified, in a way which makes revolutionary change almost impossible, but I believe this can be repaired. It requires those who sit at the top of the pile to understand that they are living off bread crumbs, and in many cases I think they do, but what isn't recognized

> enough is that when they catch bread crumbs, others are going without. And for sure, we should want the whole fucking loaf, but people are gonna find it hard to fight for that loaf if they're hungry and it's gonna be even harder if they're being told what to do by people who are keeping the crumbs they catch to themselves.

Both Yerbury and Hunter point to the ways political activists of all stripes cut themselves off from the very people outside of their movements that they want and need to bring into their movements. For Yerbury, the "parallel society" constituted by the far right's organising activities are a distraction, "an echo chamber of pre-vetted, pre-screened people". His point is that the internal cultures we develop through our collective practices might bring us closer together, but are also inherently exclusionary, forming shibboleths, and presenting barriers to audiences and potential new members, who must learn our language, so to speak. For Hunter, radical leftist spaces may preset themselves as inclusive, while also completely lacking all the individual and collective interpersonal and structural skills that are needed to actually include people who are different from us. Further, he shows how this situation is a deliberate construction of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, and the class system:

> If I was unable to pay my rent or feed myself in a socially acceptable fashion, or subculturally acceptable by squatting and skipping, would I be treated in comradely fashion? Perhaps. But if I lived with the stress of going day to day without knowing where my next meal would come from or where I would sleep, would I behave in ways that would be acceptable? If I was still being told I was worthless, would I be able to interact with the social movements, filled with those who look, move and sound just like the social workers, judges and those whose houses I robbed. Some of this is in my head, but it was put there by lived experience, and I have witnessed countless interactions and exclusions between capital heavy activists and those struggling for basic survival.

Interestingly, both the fascist and Hunter come to similar conclusions on what is to be done. Although this is perhaps not surprising, as both anarchists and fascists tend towards material theories of power. Yerbury highlights the importance of local community activism at the neighbourhood level, and working with people locally across political divides, in order to demonstrate "the value of their ideology". I find it interesting that he doesn't consider how that kind of work actually directly refutes all of their fascy nonsense. He continues by connecting local and neighbourhood organising to the typical fascist strategy of "taking power" by also advocating for his troopers to also get involved with community and local government meetings and the like.

Yerbury sees our neighbourhoods and our pre-existing organisations as opportunities for entryism. Hunter instead argues for growing and nurturing our relations with people in our neighbourhoods, with an explicit focus on cultivating respect and reciprocity across difference:

> If you're a person who believes that the only way to save the planet and humanity is the total destruction of the white supremacist patriarchal capitalist system, or even if you just believe in living in an equitable and just society, where it's each according to their need, then you've got to understand how society as it is benefits you, and how you can redistribute those benefits to others in a way which allows them to fight back more vigorously.

> I don't believe this occurs through large charities, which become institutionalized and embedded within the capitalist system, I believe it happens within our communities, by entwining our lives with those in our neighbourhood who are demeaned, punished and abused by the economic and social system we live in. Our neighbour's survival needs to become our survival. Doing this won't be easy, and even if we do it, it still won't be easy. We've been trained to emphasise difference, to see the ways in which we are not the same, whether that be in the way we communicate, the way we dress, or the way we spend our free time. We have been trained to be critical of others, to judge, to assume we have the answers and that we must teach rather than learn from those that are different from us, especially those who appear more powerless than us.

An elaboration of the differences can be found by further considering the practice of "social insertion" in Especifismo. From Adam Weaver's "Especifismo: The Anarchist Praxis of Building Popular Movements and Revolutionary Organization":

> Social insertion [and social work] means anarchist involvement in the daily fights of the oppressed and working classes. It does not mean acting within single-issue advocacy campaigns based around the involvement of expected traditional political activists, but rather within movements of people struggling to better their own condition, which come together not always out of exclusively materially-based needs, but also socially and historically rooted needs of resisting the attacks of the state and capitalism. These would include rank-and-file-led workers' movements, immigrant communities' movements to demand legalized status, neighborhood organizations' resistance to the brutality and killings by police, working class students' fights against budget cuts, and poor and unemployed people's opposition to evictions and service cuts.

He goes on to state that:

> Especifismo's conception of the relation of ideas to the popular movement is that they should not be imposed through a leadership, through "mass line," or by intellectuals. Anarchist militants should not attempt to move movements into proclaiming an "anarchist" position, but should instead work to preserve their anarchist thrust; that is, their natural tendency to be self-organized and to militantly fight for their own interests. This assumes the perspective that social movements will reach their own logic of creating revolution, not when they as a whole necessarily reach the point of being self-identified "anarchists," but when as a whole (or at least an overwhelming majority) they reach the consciousness of their own power and exercise this power in their daily lives, in a way consciously adopting the ideas of anarchism. An additional role of the anarchist militant within the social movements, according to the Especifists, is to address the multiple political currents that will exist within movements and to actively combat the opportunistic elements of vanguardism and electoral politics.

This is the key distinction between Yerbury and Hunter's position. Hunter and the Especifists seek to overcome all social barriers between ourselves and our fellow workers, residents, and

community members, by building mutual relationships of solidarity and understanding across difference, and supporting the self-development of radical consciousness. In doing so, we build a network of liberated relations rooted in mutual struggle against domination. By contrast, Yerbury wants his followers to enter neighbourhood organisations and hijack and intensify any latent hierarchies, rather than pushing back against them.

So what can we learn from all of this?

Anarchists and radical leftists and fascists share a common front in terms of the site of their action, be that war or peace. That front consists of our streets, our neighbours' doorsteps, and all existing community organisations within which we can act with confidence and clarity around our values and motives. If you take Yerbury's article and swap out "nationalist" for "anarchist", it reads as a perfectly cromulent criticism of a lot of anarchist 'organising' and activity. That is not to say blackblocs, video essays, minor acts of joyous insurrection, and other practices within our countercultures are not without value, but rather to agree with Yerbury's underlying point that these things lack appeal to people who are less radical, and the more time we spend doing those things, the less time we spend in our communities, listening to and learning from less radical people.

If activists of all stripes start to take this understanding on board, what can we expect? First, an influx of activists into existing community organisations, along with the formation of new ones. Second, the potential for a wide range of conflict scenarios, as activists of different stripes clash in community spaces, and as radicals clash with liberal, centrist, and latent authoritarian views and structures. This potential for conflict is worrying to some degree, because generally we find conflict stressful and people of all stripes tend to want self-described community spaces to be pretty chill. A big part of what separates radicals from non-radicals, what some may describe as 'militant', is one's capacity for conflict. Do you think you could tolerate the daily conditions of survival on the very edges, like D. Hunter did? Some can, scars inevitable, recovery and wisdom possible, but many more are killed by their conditions, what we refer to as 'social murder'. Do you think you could tolerate a heated argument with your neighbour which threatened to destroy the wider neighbourhood's spirit and organising? The fragility and brittleness of middle-class activists and their interpersonal relationships is also a symptom of the class system. People are made fragile and brittle when they are given comfortable lives, a comfortable community, a gigantic comfort zone encompassing all of their material needs that they never have to leave, the neoliberal ideal where where we can get anything we want delivered to our door with the push of a button, and where we can cut ourselves off from any former friends, family, or associates because we lack any material dependence on them.

And that's not all a bad thing, voluntary association is a core anarchist principle, and I'm not saying we shouldn't strive to create a world where all can live safely and comfortably. But we have to understand how comfort comes into tension with struggle under our current conditions, and how comfort has been recuperated. In the neoliberal ideal, safety and comfort are choices mediated by capital: if you can pay for it, you can have it, whatever it is. And no thought given to any inequities. In anarchy, safety and comfort are things we find in our relations, each of which is completely unique and may take any form it chooses. At any one time, most of us have a few people we love, a few people we need, a few people we like, a few people we can tolerate, a few people we have to tolerate, and a few people we don't like or hate or otherwise just avoid at all costs. Whereas neoliberalism simultaneously erodes our relationships and our capacity for conflict in relationships, a relational anarchic ecological existence depends on both

our relationships and our capacity for conflict within them. Therefore, developing our individual and collective skills for handling conflict, and learning to become comfortable with conflict, disagreement, and uncertainty to some degree, have to be some of the affects or outcomes of at least some of the activities within any community, either explicitly or implicitly.

I'm looking forward to talking to my neighbours and putting together a neighbourhood assembly at some point. But what I'm not looking forward to are the inevitable party political conversations around immigration, climate change, and policing. Part of what's put me off doing this work for so many years is that I'm sick of having to defend my existence and my views, and sick of having to tolerate and argue against all the mainstream political talking points. These are reasons why we need our countercultures and those precious few people who understand us or at least put the effort in to try. Part of this work requires learning the tools to create space for difference, learning those tools by working with other people, and learning how to share them and bring them into new spaces. A lot of those tools are about being able to communicate things clearly and gently, about being able to hold space for ourselves and for others, and knowing how to intervene when toes get stepped on. These are skills that are more often focused on by social artists and feminists than anarchists. I consider myself all of these things and more, and I am still learning.

There are other things to take away from this. One may be that we should take this as a call as anarchists for us to do more of this social work, as described by the especifistas, if only on the grounds that if we don't take up space in these organisations, that space will be filled by fascists looking to gain a foothold. Certainly in terms of developing an antifascist community early warning system, having a group of activists, each of whom are members of a few different community groups, provides huge grassroots infrastructural capability. Such a structure would not look dissimilar to the diagram of the "specific anarchist organisation" given by Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro in their publication "Social Anarchism and Organisation".

Another thing to consider is, this analysis was only possible because these particular fascists have a publication culture, not unlike anarchist and socialist publication cultures, if not directly stolen from them. This raises questions in terms of information security. If we discuss praxis, if we are trying to motivate each other towards different actions through our writings, then do we reveal important information to our enemies when we do so via public forums? When our enemies do this, what can we learn from and about them? At the same time, we must be careful not to platform white supremacist cisheteropatriarchical capitalist imperialist perspectives, even and especially when critically analysing them. This article originally contained extensive quotes from Jerkbury, in an effort to present all the necessary material for readers to participate in the analytical narrative. However, I was asked by the editorial team if I could remove his words. I was grateful for their comradely critique and that gentle push back. It was a tension I had felt when originally writing the piece, and the experience only demonstrates in microcosm the importance of working in relation and in community.

Yerbury is correct that the "nationalist ecosystem" as he describes it is a barrier to his political agenda. Our own ecosystems are also barriers to our agendas via the same mechanisms he describes. What we need to do as anarchists is live in the real ecosystem of our actual and potential relations, which are determined by our physical location in our communities. We don't need to build a "parallel society", we need to live in our society as anarchically as possible. This is not to say that we should all become allistic extroverts who spend all our time in all our different communities. It would be ableist to suggest that anyone can do anarchist social work, and it

would be poor strategy and exclusionary in many other ways to suggest that this is the only sort of work we should be doing. What is needed is a recognition as anarchists of the importance of social work, along with the mobilisation of resources to enable those of us who can do this work to do it as effectively as possible. An ecosystem is a collection of coexisting niches. The antifas running the fash out of town with ballys and bats, the Food Not Bombs stall on the corner with the vegan stew, the community litter pick, and the journalists reporting all of these things on the local blog, all of these are people responding to their environment in their unique ways.

They may not all identify as anarchist, but they all have that anarchic "thrust" that Weaver identifies. All of these are people who have found, or are finding, their niches in their local material ecosystems, real ecosystems made of people and land and roads and plants and water and food and conversations. In her book "Medicine Wheel for the Planet", Jennifer Grenz echoes Sean Wilson in identifying respect, relationality, and reciprocity as the three principles of Indigenous research methodologies. The ecosystem is healthy when it is anarchic, when it consists of respectful and reciprocal relations. Our groups and movements are not a separate political ecosystem that exists purely discursively, they are part of the actual, physical, real, material ecosystem of place. What we need to do is ensure that we are aware of who is around us, and then build the appropriate relationships with the appropriate people. Each of us should be able to do things in public knowing we, our communities, have each other's backs, even if we don't always understand or agree with each other. That's what solidarity across difference looks like, solidarity across differences between our subject positions in society, and solidarity across differences between our strategies, tactics, and ways of working.

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