

Primitive anarchy and the anti-alphabet

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Summer 2024

The way I see it, primitive anarchy is a total challenge to the pacified social field. This means that it is multi-faceted and at once constructive and destructive. Sabotaging the horrors of deep sea mining or “artificial intelligence” requires a different approach than the rewilding of everyday life. Inasmuch as the anti-alphabet is a part of primitive anarchy, it belongs with efforts to rewild everyday life. From this perspective, I think what it does can be summarized in three theses, on which I’ll expand below:

1) The terms of the pacified social field – the nouns, verbs, and adjectives of everyday language – are not actually words. Language abolition is only a secondary and proximate goal of the anti-alphabet. Nonetheless, it is necessary to implement a demolition of each term as a term.

2) For what passes as language in the pacified social field is in fact focal points for bodily gestures (noun-gesture, verb-gesture, adjective-gesture). By focusing our bodies’ gestures, the noun-, verb-, and adjective-gesture pacify them, implementing the effects of power.

3) Once everyday terms are demolished as terms, uncovering the gestural focal points their linguistic appearance conceals, these focal points in turn can be attacked. This is where the anti-alphabet comes in, replacing disciplined everyday gestures with those of the future primitive.

The pacified social field consists exclusively of bodies’ gestures. There is only physical action (including passivity and thinking, each of which is a type of physical action), gestures modified by situations and modifying them in turn. Power does not repressively subjugate these bodies from some imaginary outside. Rather, the effects of power inhere in the articulation of bodies in situations and in the articulation of situations through bodies. The battle between everyday obedience and everyday resistance is fought in and through gestures.

Implementing these gestures, bodies pacify themselves and each other. Power in everyday life is anonymous and ubiquitous. It operates by setting permissible responses of bodies to situations – through expectation and habit, peer pressure and education, and sometimes through outright policing. In any given situation, that is, bodies can only act in a limited number of ways. The number fluctuates and the precise actions depend on the situation and the body – some of us are braver than others, more irritable and less “stable”, or again more resistant or less. But there is always a range of permissible actions in a situation: some outright obedient, some outright

resistant, most somewhere in-between. But all of them remain pacified and remain in the realm of everyday resistance and obedience: they are all the result of a governance implemented in and through our bodies' gestures.

This governance of bodies by setting permissible response parameters is thus not only an inscription of these bodies into situations, but also a delineation of outcomes and strategies for each. It constitutes both body and situation, defining the latter and thereby conducting the conduct of the former.

Situations are defined, and bodies' gestures delineated, by what we may call gestural focal points. Every situation we find ourselves in is in some way meaningful, and every action that can be taken in a situation has a range of outcomes that depend on the situation's meaning. Not all action is necessarily purpose-driven. But all action is directed towards something. "Meaning" in social situations is not a primarily linguistic phenomenon, although it can be expressed that way. But "I am talking to a friend," "you are wrecking your car," "s/he plants trees," "we take a walk," "they throw bottles" are actions governed by focal points even if they are not expressed verbally. Rather, the focus of these actions and their constituent physical gestures is written into the flesh of my, your, their, our bodies themselves.

This is how power implements governance. No unique being has ever encountered another unique being in the pacified social field. Rather, I, a "person," encounter you, a "friend." And moreover, while a "friend" is seemingly straightforwardly a social category, and the underlying body of the "friend" is seemingly not, they both are in fact an effect of pacification. As friendship is implemented in a series of behaviors between two or more bodies over time, this series is quite different for a "human" friend than it is for an "animal" or "plant" friend. The underlying body is no blank canvas free from power. Nor is "friendship," the social category, without pacification. Friendship between humans, to be sure, comes in wide varieties and changes over time. It may be implemented in a hug or a handshake, in facial expressions indicating joy or interest in one another; it may manifest in a specific directedness of the torso and limbs towards the friend, in modulating speech patterns or the speed and direction of one's walk or speech, in certain idiomatic expressions intimating a shared past, and even in minutiae like the positioning of eyebrows, feet, and hands during interactions. Across this range of arrangements, contortions, expressions and phrases, a gradient of intimacy is projected (neither too little nor too much) that differs from friendship to friendship, and within one and the same, from situation to situation.

But the concept of "a friendship" governs each and every gesture, streamlining it into pacified intelligibility. Subsuming the vast range of idiosyncratic expression into the concept of "a friendship" is an ongoing process accompanying every individual gesture. It is a work of distinction from other categories, such as "lover," "acquaintance," "colleague," "family member." It is also a sharply delineated minefield of gendered expectations (female friendships allow for more intimacy, both physical and mental, than their male or intergendered counterparts – a constellation now thankfully complicated, and hopefully soon superseded, by the emergence of transgendered friendships). And finally, it is a (usually overlooked) work of distinction from friendship between species.

Friendships with animals often use similar gestures to those with humans, inasmuch as this is physically possible, and across the same range of idiosyncrasy. Hugs, kisses, and speech patterns

vary from individual to individual again, but are usually present in some form; physically turning to one another, locking glances, exchanging smells and sharing meals, accommodating each other's idiosyncrasies are just as widespread here as they are with humans. But they are much more harshly governed by the streamlining of intentionality. For a friendship with an animal is always mixed with socially delineated relations of dependency and superiority. It sits awkwardly besides formal ownership, and is hemmed in by the hazards of anthropomorphization.

Thus the governance of my body's expression is twofold within the pacified social field. First, as I approach what I classify as "a friend," my gestures are directed to them and to the category "friendship." My gestures thus remain socially appropriate to the category. As I hug, only my torso touches – never the lower body, never the face – and while my voice conveys warmth and intimacy, my touch remains restrained. I am always ensuring to be "more intimate than..." while remaining "less intimate than..." I share who I am – to some extent, always uncertain and always precarious. This is after all a friend, not a lover, nor a family member, colleague, or other.

Secondly, it is a human friend, or animal friend, or plant friend. It is not as though the governance of my gestures does not extend to the supposedly biological substrate supposedly beneath "friendship" – as though "friend" was imposed but "human" or "animal" are not. The distinction between social and natural categories, as obvious as it seems, means nothing here. I am as little able to approach you as a unique being as I am able to approach you as "a friend" without further categorization. Instead, I approach "a male friend," "a female friend," "a transgendered friend," "a snake friend," "a cat friend," "a cactus friend," and so forth. Far from allowing my uniqueness to interlock with another uniqueness, my gestures are rather governed by the "type of friend" that I face. This is why I end up hugging but not kissing, telling this tale but not this other, feed and water but not confide, etc. Each and every gesture of mine may be drenched in love for you – but it remains governed by the categories inherent in its directedness. My uniqueness can never reach yours – unless and until we do away with the governance directing our directedness, and conducting our conduct accordingly.

"Friend," "lover," "colleague," "snake," "cactus," "human," "hug," "kiss," "love" – none of these acts in everyday life primarily as a term (though they are frequently expressed that way), they are all focal points governing bodies in the pacified social field. Everywhere, the subsumption of gestural expressions and individual and situational idiosyncrasies into the concept of "a friendship" is an ongoing process accompanying each individual instance. Conversely, without the governance of each gesture by the concept, these gestures would be quite different, free to implement the uniqueness of the relation without the focal point of governance.

The terms of everyday life are not terms, and language does not work within it as language. Analyses of each term can show that it is itself meaningless, and can uncover the power relations underneath. That is step one of the anti-alphabetic attack.

Once it is established that each term in itself means nothing and thus doesn't in fact function as a term but rather marks a site of contestation, "language abolition" becomes a gestural intervention. This second part examines the gestures implemented by, and governed through, the focal points "friend," "animal," "hug", etc. In each of these gestures the governing work of the focal point implements its disciplining effects even after the linguistic expression of this focal point has been established to be meaningless.

Such continued presence of the focal point even after its term is demolished is another aspect of how the pacified social field manifests, and of its resilience. Demolishing language in itself achieves nothing, that's why liberalism is so successful. Self-evidently following a disciplining focus, we continue to implement pacified gestures, and thereby allow power to structure our lives. But by exposing the terrain of contestation hidden within the seeming self-evidence of each term as a term, "language abolition" can move on to analyze how power manifests within the terrain uncovered in the first part.

On this basis, the third part of our activities can invoke the anti-alphabet as a pathway towards abolishing the power relations implemented in pacified and pacifying gestures. With the anti-alphabet outwardly looking like an alphabet, this may at first glance seem like a return to a purely written, theoretical intervention into language alone. But that is not the case.

Demolishing each pacifying term as a term shows that the focal point stands on its own and is not a linguistic entity, and that there are really only gestures at war with one another. Knowing this, the intervention by the anti-alphabet does not attack "language." Rather, it counters each focal point by dissolving it into other focal points whose main characteristic is that they implement their own dissolution. "Friend," "animal," and "love," for example, do not dissolve by themselves. But their anti-alphabetic counterparts do. Therefore, when bodies' gestures focus on the anti-alphabetic counterparts that dissolve by themselves, the governance of gestures dissolves in turn, its focus unravelling beyond discreteness into indeterminacy, fading into undifferentiating instability.

This is the point of the anti-alphabet. Just as the term indicates the pacifying focus around which power disciplines gestures, so the letters of the Anti-Alphabet implement a dissolution of focus by which power – literally – loses its grip on reality. The recalcitrant materiality of everyday reality does not thereby disappear. But it stops being self-evidently pacified, and becomes instead never-ending dissolution. Along with all the other efforts, techniques, and strategies of primitive anarchy, therefore, the anti-alphabet can contribute to bringing about the future primitive.

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Plastic in Utero issue #3

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