The Hollowing of Anarchy: Gentrification

Scholium

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again, not to draw worse upon myself by contumacy. But, as I keep my eye on myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slaveholder into the dust. (Stirner)

This reads as someone who is stuck in a bad situation, with no room to maneuver. Their mind is liberated, but their body isn't. The situation is reversed in this quote from Situationist Raoul Vaneigem:

> People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth. (Vaneigem)

He writes about refusing constraints as if it's just that easy, as if it's the body that's free, and the mind trapped.

This is not a call to abandon the Situationists or dropout culture. Far from it, this piece was written with two goals in mind:

1. To provide a materially-based theory of anarchy's hollowing that complements my previous aesthetic analysis.

2. To give a clear idea of newer obstacles and limits to the subversion of daily life, in the hope that this will help us better fight against or maneuver around them.

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Anarchy can differ from other anti-capitalist ideologies in being a lived practice. If anarchy is the end goal, then it must be the means as well. This often turns out looking like working as little as possible, living communally with friends, getting by using scams, and experimenting with social relationships. Unfortunately, these more interesting and liberating tendencies based in subverting daily life are receding as gentrification closes off possibilities for living cheap in the cities. What remains in the U.S. anarchist space is activism. Lacking this daily life component, anarchy slides back into leftism.

May 68, the Situationists, and the Sixties counterculture brought ideas into anti-capitalism concerned with the first-person practice of everyday life. Rather than find and organize a supposed revolutionary subject, these tendencies start from the assumption that anyone can benefit from both present-day subversion and a revolution against capitalism and the state. They encourage rejecting imposed social roles, including those of worker, consumer, citizen, spouse, and student.

Though perhaps not apparent back then, these tendencies have a material basis. After World War Two, the new petite-bourgeois and upwardly mobile union workers in the US began moving out of urban areas. In Europe, economic crises and other political developments left vacant office and housing structures in certain large cities. It was in these contexts that said autonomous anti-capitalism found space for practice.

At risk of oversimplification, anarchy in the United States since the 80's has been an echo of the Autonomen tendency originating in Berlin. Besides Situationist ideas and histories of revolt throughout Europe, why did this milieu begin there? After WW2, the city was militarized and split along Cold War lines, prompting many Germans to leave. After a global recession in the mid-Seventies, Germany did not return to its pre-recession unemployment levels. (Trading Economics) In Berlin there were financial scandals and an informal capital strike by big landlords in response to rent control laws. They actually

had incentive to abandon their buildings and get low-interest loans from the city to build expensive condominiums. These factors led to there being hundreds of unoccupied housing and office buildings. (Katsiaficas, 89) Material conditions were ripe for large-scale squatting and, subsequently, the potential to quit work and experiment with the revolution of everyday life.

The story is similar in other places where the Autonomen were strong. Squatting in Hamburg began during the 1980-1982 recession. In Amsterdam, despite a housing shortage, there was no dearth of habitable space. According to The Economist, "Property speculators, for their part, have left property deliberately unoccupied to avoid carrying out repairs or in hope of an upturn in the market." (The Economist 3/28/81) Squatters there would also take over empty office buildings. (The Economist 5/3/80) Similar, anarchy in the United States was present in New York City's Lower East Side during the 80's and 90's where there were vacant buildings and a large squatting milieu.

We are now in the era of gentrification. The petite-bourgeois and capital are invading cities and driving up rent prices. Thus, the inspiring lifestyle of rejecting work seems less reasonable. Though it's possible that property values will stagnate in suburban or rural areas, there are limits to what this anti-political tendency can do outside cities. Population density makes for a higher probability of encounter. This is why artistic, literary, and political scenes exist in cities. Contrary to capitalist ideals of entrepreneurship and genius, intellectual and creative milieus thrive with close contact to like-minded people. So, these Situationist-inspired ideas require two things: hubs of people, and the ability to take both time and space. Postwar urbanity fit the bill.

Admittedly, anarchists and the Autonomen aren't purely lifestylists. Activism and outward-facing social struggle have always played a role in these milieus. But now that practices related to everyday life are diminishing, activism is the only

thing anarchy can live through. Hence anarchy in the United States becoming infected by Leftist mores and values. We've seen an increase in charity initiatives, as well as the impression that anarchy is only a thing we practice when and where moments of crisis or struggle occur. The day-to-day emphasis is gone. Unless you count time spent at meetings, Leftism doesn't care about daily life.

Anarchist scenes have retreated in large cities, and we are relocating to college towns that are not yet as expensive to live in. People new to radical politics are often calling themselves "leftists" now. Could it be that, due to anarchy's inability to produce visibly interesting and liberating lifestyles, anarchy doesn't seem that different from communism or socialism? Is it now just another button to wear on the coat, an idea that no longer escapes the cave of opinion into the sun of daily life?

Identity has become prominent in anarchist and similar milieus recently. Because the potential for altering the routines of life are diminishing, the desire to grab hold of the reins of ones' existence look elsewhere. This has led to an emphasis on political, gender, sexual, and racial identities. In contrast, the Autonomen collapsed identities into one. People who used to identify as communists, socialists, libertarians, anarchists, etc, just became Autonomen. The potential for transforming daily life made identity irrelevant.

This reduction of possibility also explains the recent replacement of the Situationists with Max Stirner as the primary theoretical reference point for post-left anarchy. Stirner is more apt for the isolated individual who can no longer go to a city and find a milieu, or just drop out. Stirner writes:

> Given up as serf to a master, I think only of myself and my advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not free from them; but I endure them only for my benefit, perhaps in order to deceive him and make him secure by the semblance of patience, or,