Urbanity Without Civilization

An Informal Vision of Post-Left Geography

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then is there until it is destroyed, but as something that breathes and can dissolve itself before re-emerging,

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This writing is as much an attempt to stoke action as it is an attempt to spur deeper theoretical considerations about what the usage of space looks like for anarchists. I am adamant that space is the major determinant of how our life *feels*. To circle back to a point made in the introduction, if we woke up tomorrow in the same city except capitalism and the state were gone, things would certainly feel better, but how different would our day to day experience of life be? Radicalism means radical change. I'm not in this so I can live a better version of the same life, I'm in this because I want a completely different life that exists on a plane separate from the current one. My rallying cry is that of a space, a usage of space, and a way of occupying space that is profoundly and completely outside of the ways space is currently used.

Introduction

The notion of urbanity we reckon with is one that is, in many ways, determined by neoliberalism, by planners, geographers, and enthusiasts who have a vision of the world that is defined by the ways industries use space, whether or not they fully realize it. When we hear about walkable cities, transit, about dense housing, it's unsaid that this is reliant on and determined by industry, developers. This is much, much more obvious to planners and geographers coming from radical traditions: the entire basis of concepts like the "right to the city" hinge on the fact that any human benefits with how cities are planned are either specifically to quell any potential issues that could make working more difficult/inaccessible to the workforce, or are otherwise side effects of things that are good for business.

Less acknowledged within planning, though, is alienation, specifically forms of alienation that exist outside of what would be a traditionally Marxist conception of labor alienation, that is to say (in a very simplified way) the removal of someone from the product of their labor and the value they create. I have long thought of running an experiment where I ask an average leftist what they think the city looks like "post-revolution", and how their life looks within it. I have yet to do this, because I am lazy, but I will construct a version of what I think would be a common answer: wake up whenever you wish, walk leisurely or take some form of high-speed transit to work (where the MoP is, of course, owned by the workers), work for a little bit, and then spend the rest of the day relaxing, attending a DSA meeting that for some reason lasts like 8 hours, doing a self-crit session, meeting with the puppygirl polycule, etcetera. I say that to say that for many leftists, the concept of a "post-revolutionary" life probably just mirrors the life of a somewhat well-off liberal in Portland, Oregon.

There are, of course, two separate criticisms that form in my mind with this. The first, and most obvious, one is a point that's

somewhat done to death, but also haunts me: we literally cannot envision a different world (cue the Fisher quote). That's not entirely our fault; our brains are absolutely and totally consumed by life under, within, entwined with capital and the state – imagining radical possibilities outside of this reminds me of the feeling of thinking about eternity. It's blinding and scary and truly somewhat impossible to fully understand and realize, but the nature of existing as an anarchist, or a leftist, or whatever is trying to construct and articulate critiques, and then living in accordance with them, to try and make that future clearer.

That part said, though, the more pertinent critique for our purposes is one that has everything to do with the alienation and the city, and the separation of the city from urbanity. It has to do with how we organize ourselves, and the insurrectionary potential of space, not as merely something that fosters radical thought (though that is certainly an important often overlooked part of geography), but how our radicalism is in many ways a question of the organization of space, and how we exist within it.

Lefebvre and the Difference Between the Urban and the City

For those who are unfamiliar with radical geography, particularly the work of Lefebvre, separating the concept of the city from urbanity can seem outwardly contradictory, but I promise you, it's very simple. To put it in basic terms (since I do not intend for this to be anything besides a short writing, please forgive me Lefebvre scholars who are much more formal and academic than me): the city is the monument to consumption and accumulation created by capital as a space for coalesced economic activity and easier social control, while urbanity is the vibrant sociocultural atmosphere, often associated with and created by density but not necessarily *capitalist* density or high populations (relevant for our purposes),

On that note, it is important to say that these communities are, in my conception of them, by no means closed, or immune to movement between them. This is becoming a very imaginative exercise, but the concept that people would not be able to move between these communities is concerning both as someone concerned with the anarchist view of free association and as someone who views urbanity as a means of cultural generation. This is where this theory is less anti-civilizational and post-civilizational: even within the most extreme ecological collapse, people are not going to forget how to move, and even if people are meant to have much smaller intimate circles than they currently do have (which I agree with entirely), that doesn't mean they will be bound to the same ~30 individuals their entire life, nor that they will never meet and have comfortable relations with more people than that.

Back to the question at hand, though, about modes of affiliation, and more succinctly the usage of the TAZ for this concept. This is, for me, the way forward for this theory, particularly as it concerns the potential for present-day action and practice. It is unlikely that any sort of community that exists in this way is likely to last very long currently, both as an issue of state repression and the fact that people that exist within and under capital are, even if they are anarchist, prone to the power-hungry nature that capital attempts to imbue in us. A nomadic and transient group of communities is also, in many ways, much more interesting and closer to something that can feasibly exist outside of authority.

The concept then becomes highly similar to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. A constantly changing and evolving and self-stimulating network of communities and people freely associating with and between one another that constitutes a series of shifting locations and specifically made places. It is a profoundly anarchistic and non-civilizational view of the right to the city: if we have a right to make our places, and places make us, then urbanization can be viewed not purely as a concept that is created and

perspective is of course with my inclusion of permaculture practices (a rabbit hole I will avoid here) yet also with my mention of a web of communities that communicate with one another. In many ways this can mirror how states began to form – a sharing of ideas and resources between what were previously very small bands of primarily nomadic people. This critique is valid and something I've paid attention to myself, and this is where I believe intentionality/affiliation is a necessity.

This theory is, of course, one that deals a lot with both nebulous ideas of the future, and, for the purpose of this section especially, with current day praxis and pragmatics. I say that as a preface for the following statement: any communities created within this theory are ones that, at the present moment, under the reign of capital and broad authority, have to be clear and self-directed so as to not replicate the circumstances of civilization. I view this less as any sort of rule, though, and more as a natural byproduct of how human intentions and wants change under a small-scale, close-knit living environment that is separate from capital. I am also not fully able to postulate or predict what would happen if the web of these communities were to continue growing, either because of the fall of capital, or in spite of it, but I imagine it would make the intentionality on one hand easier, but on the other perhaps more important.

I have considered many options for what self-affiliation could look like, and the two options I have consistently come back to are the union of egoists posited by individualists like Stirner, or Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone. The latter is particularly relevant for our use, and might be the closest concept we currently have for a theory of urbanization without civilization, but the union of egoists is also intriguing as it allows for a more directed and yet more fluid sort of affiliation. Its loose nature and inherent opposition to authority of the collective allows for the agreements it does contain to be stronger, and it also allows for an easy answer to how freedom of movement works within these communities.

that capital is attempting to emulate *within* the city. A city is a place that is, first and foremost, economic, while urbanity is, first and foremost, cultural.

Using these definitions, then, cities under capitalism almost necessarily exist without what we could characterize as true urbanity, and urbanity can certainly exist outside of cities. What we are calling urbanity, it can be argued, has been in fact best represented by small-scale, often prehistoric bands that loosely affiliated family, tribe, and community, and coalesced them into one entity. It feels a bit pedantic to refer to those as urban, even though it fits the definition – we are, at that point, applying a concept that feels aggressively modern, aggressively fast, and aggressively big to something that is pretty much the opposite of all of those things. That said, that offers an intriguing challenge to both how we conceptualize the urban, and how we conceptualize small-scale communities. Just as urbanity is not something modern, these small, tight-knit communities are things that transcend time and are, in many ways, profoundly futuristic.

What Lefebvre advocates with these definitions is the "right to the city", or, in short, the concept that people have the right to determine the way their space is created, and, furthermore, the way their lives work. This is, of course, a powerful and almost populistic rallying cry, and one that I do not disagree with entirely at all – it is, for me, something profoundly libertarian, even. The disagreements I *do* have with this concept are with the reclamation of the city, particularly given the ecological straits we find ourselves in 50 years on from the articulation of the concept. Where he sees cities as flawed sites of possibility and struggle, I find it difficult to see them as anything but furnaces where people can carry on their lives in a deeply alienated fashion. I will likely elaborate on that in the future, but this is too informal of a piece of writing for me to justify that, and I'm being long-winded as is, so instead go find many of the wonderful pieces by actual scientists that deal with cities as climatologically disastrous heatsinks.

Conceptually, then, what remains in the face of that? What does an *urbanity without civilization* look like?

Alienation and Urban Alternatives to High-Population Centers

Our challenge here is visualizing a way that dense, culturally rich, and participatory communities that exist outside, against, or otherwise beyond civilization. Which is to say it's not much of a challenge at all. The most difficult part for me is that, as someone who is approaching things as an urban geographer (or, well, more as a spirited enthusiast), I caution us against an over-reliance or fixation on past modes of organization and existence, as I feel that what has worked at one time is unlikely to work in another that has literal epochs of change in the human condition contained within it; moreover, if we attempted to live in those same ways, we'd likely find ourselves, once again, highly alienated, though in a different way. So, perhaps the real challenge is similar to a problem posed in the introduction: envisioning that way of life in a way that feels new, vital.

I default here, ironically, to what might be a form of nostalgia in its own right: my own hope for a renewal of life as direct experience rather than symbols. What I mean here is what could be called, somewhat scarily, the "critique of symbolic thought", something articulated greatly by primitivist writers such as Zerzan. Simply, the critique is that when life moved away from a series of direct actions that left us engaged with the world in a way that was profoundly visceral, and instead shifted towards *symbols* and *representation*, the process of alienation began, and that that might represent the greatest alienation of all: alienation from the things we do, a domination not simply hierarchical, but something that is imposed on ourselves.

Again, though, I begin to depart with primitivists because I remain critical of the idea that we should, or in this event even could (even most primitivists acknowledge this critique as highly theoretical more than anything actionable), return to a previous state. To channel classic anarchist "flowery prose that doesn't really mean that much" here, the only option is to rob symbolic thought of what it has, to move to the next town over with its spoils, and to burn whatever carcass it leaves in the center of our new community for warmth. The same must be done with civilization in the same way.

My view of an urban alternative to civilization and cities, then, consists of very small, intentional, permaculturally-inclined communities, weaving and interconnecting with other communities to form webs of anarchistic communities that have (hopefully amicable and positive) relations with one another. This is, in many ways, reminiscent of anarchist bioregionalism and libertarian municipalism (even the tagline in this writing is a modified version of a Bookchin title), as well as the nascent web of anarchist communes that were forming in places like Washington state and California at the beginning of the 20th century. For me, then, the main difference is that the "intentionality" I refer to pertains not to a certain organizational principle, nor to some set of rules that pretends like they aren't rules, but rather to self-affiliation.

Routes to Spontaneous Community Creation and Issues of Replication

Self-affiliation in this context is a bit of a tricky thing. The way people coalesce themselves together is, necessarily as an anarchist and personally as an individual, something I take little interest in, but it is also something I have to pay a lot of attention to in the formation of a theory of urbanity that exists outside civilization, particularly when I do not want to civilization to reform itself. Already, an obvious critique from a more orthodox anti-civilization