

A Few Notes On The Culture & Anarchism

William Gillis

13 August 2008

Iain Bank's novels about an anarchist society called The Culture have garnered widespread literary acclaim and single-handedly re-launched Space Opera. They are stunningly popular and influential books (although still somewhat obscure in America).

But. While they've inspired much discussion about anarchy, they've been virtually ignored by the anarchist movement and what outside discussion has taken place has been passive and disconnected. This is not entirely surprising. Among the upper echelons of Science Fiction there are few undertakings considered more rude than tearing apart a piece of fiction to seriously dissect its politics. It is what it is. A constructed *what if*. If you didn't appreciate the nuances the first time through you're just an idiot. The insinuation that the author might straightforwardly engage in base politics is insulting. Nor is there anything in the anarchist movement less glamorous than utopian hypothesizing. Theory and futurism are considered meaningless pursuits hopelessly disconnected from the real world. Few within the modern milieu think it possible to wrestle anything of immediate substance or tactical value from such meanderings, thus they're largely derided as a waste of time.

Nevertheless there's no denying that Science Fiction and Anarchism have a long and twisted past together, from the more explicit black-flag-waving of Ursula K Le Guin and Ken Macleod to the more subtle explorations by Vernor Vinge, Kim Stanley Robinson, Cory Doctorow, Samuel R Delany and Bruce Sterling (to name but a few). As the cliché goes, the first science fiction author was the daughter of the first anarchist & the first feminist (Shelly, Godwin and Wollstonecraft). Besides being history's most prominent radical, individualist and forward-thinking identities, Science Fiction came into popularity about the same time Anarchism crashed and burned – leeching, one is forced to suspect, off the same idealistic current.

So I hope no one will mind if I turn a critical eye on The Culture and examine their utopia from an explicitly anarchist perspective. (Even if Iain Banks himself seems to hail from a more moderate socialist background, he and Macleod make a lot of noise about being comrades and the dreaded "A-word" has appeared more frequently in-text as his novels have progressed.)

First, a short overview of The Culture:

The Culture is a large, galaxy-spanning society devoid of laws and government, with a deep hostility to authority and coercion. More of a tendency than formal body its members are bound only by free association, often in differinglly identified lumps

and spread out in constant migration. Its ranks are largely split between three forms of existence: Mind, Human and Drone, (AI, biological & robot) with extensive self-modifications commonly taking place within each category. Its Minds tend to build giant ships or habitats around themselves. Its Humans alter their genetics extensively, often in pursuit of greater pleasure (drug glands, butterfly wings, etc). While its Drones favor using force fields to interact with the world. The Culture's citizens are used to social and material freedom and consequently they exhibit both extreme self-confidence and a subtle guilt complex, that is to say smugness and an overactive conscience. The latter of which leads them to meddle extensively in the name of Liberty & Progress. This often cold-hearted utilitarianism, coupled with their utopian success (and unacknowledged idealism) has left them the most respected and feared force in the Galaxy.

In short The Culture is equal parts an allegory to American Hegemony and an exploration of Anarchist Utopianism. But The Culture isn't just a wish-fulfillment exercise in which the Big Mean Perfect Anarchy goes around beating up Poor Little Evil Empires. The Culture is partially based in fantastical posits, but it also has some real-world grounding.

Things The Culture Gets Right:

1. Hierarchy is impeded by space. Three dimensions facilitates free association on a far qualitatively larger scale. Autonomous lifecosystems/ecosystems provide an unprecedented level of self-sufficiency and independence. Relativity and the sheer size of space fundamentally restricts lines of control. Once a civilization moves to space it will very quickly be forced to dissolve all pretenses of centralized authority.
2. Space-faring societies would almost certainly abandon planets to build their own habitats. Gravity wells are disgustingly cost-inefficient. There's no point in setting up permanent, sedentary settlements on planets — much less struggling for domination over them — when far purer resources are scattered about in abundance. Unlike planets, asteroids and comets are decentralized, uninhabited and easily accessible.
3. Post-scarcity societies have no need for private property (as opposed to personal possession). When every individual controls the means to production, individually, occupation and use become the only relevant claims. When I can build anything I want whenever I want it, there's no real point in using force to maintain control over a surplus.
4. When anyone can record anything and transmit it freely, acts of aggression are effectively outlawed. If your every action taken in public is truly public, it's extremely hard to manipulate others or engage in violent coercion. Crime, in the common sense, is largely impossible and restitution quickly obtained. Free association is the most diffuse police system possible and maximizes both choice and personal responsibility.
5. Anarchies are more efficient than other forms of social organization. The more fluid and dynamic a society becomes, the better it's able to process and enact original or ingenious ideas. Individual autonomy provides intellectual redundancy and best respond to local conditions, whereas hierarchical or collective processes minimize net intellectual capacity.

Decentralized, bottom-up tendencies maximize evolutionary iterations. In wartime, anarchies tend to accomplish far more with far less.

6. Any sufficiently rigorous ethical system is indistinguishable from consequentialism. Deontology is just a retarded version of rule-utilitarianism, but the wider one's access to the context of an ethical act, the less such rules help. Granted, any moral good or base desire must take into consideration the present, the marginality of future predictions and the effect upon oneself, but that just makes it a particularly robust consequentialism. Whereas deontological approaches inherently flounder as context widens. All of us ultimately recognize — whether we judge ourselves capable of making an informed choice — that sometimes the ends *do* justify the means.

I don't really care that The Culture blows up stars, meddles with other civilizations, conspires to start wars and accidentally causes the occasional gigadeath. On the whole I'm willing to take them at their word that they do more good than bad (unlike America, whose state-power is based on exploitation and inextricably embedded in a deterministic negative-sum game of westphalian realism).

My concerns are more interpersonal and sociological.

Decidedly Un-Anarchistic Aspects To The Culture:

1. The separation of Minds, Drones and Humans is hierarchical because there's no in-betweens. While Banks makes vague handwavings about the infinite malleability of forms of existence within The Culture and we must cut him some slack as a writer, there's never even passing mention of Humans or drones self-improving to the point where they become Minds. If this is an oversight, it seems a monumental one. The Culture is endlessly cited as the most imminent thought experiment of a posthuman society (and often as proof that anarchism and transhumanism are exactly the same thing). But while The Culture is quite obviously posthuman, it doesn't focus on self-improvement, exploration and expansion the same way that transhumanism does. And, frankly, seems a little unrealistic. There's no way 40 Trillion people could have their hands on near-infinite technology without a significant portion of them setting off to better themselves.
2. The sedentary behavior of most Culture citizens is indicative of widespread self-restriction. Beyond showing no interest in becoming Minds themselves, The Culture's Humans and Drones tend to just dick about in hedonistic pleasure and ineffable arrogance rather than proactively striving to make a difference. Special Circumstances is always portrayed as a very small minority within The Culture, and while everyone tends to take pride in its accomplishments, almost no one set out to change things individually. While SC infiltrates and manipulates thousands of different cultures and civilizations, they don't go everywhere, and it's decidedly weird that more citizens don't strike out for themselves and have a personal go at fucking over teh Prime Directive. Even the Elench (a breakaway, more fervently Anarcho-Transhumanist tendency in The Culture) are practically defined by their conservatism. The Elench trawl the Galaxy for new experiences to help change and improve themselves, but are remarkably blase and limited about the whole thing, pretty much mirroring The Culture's ship + riders archetype. Worst of all, people across The Culture

and its various offshoots tend not to seek the capacity to make particularly complicated things for themselves, but instead rely entirely on the Minds.

3. The Culture is repeatedly portrayed as depending entirely on an built-in tendency of Minds to like Humans. Banks offers up a multitude of reasons why the Minds have no interest in altering their core desires re: being nice to humans, but none of them are entirely satisfactory. At the end of the day the Minds' anarchistic benevolence is based on gut-level conservatism and laziness, not any objective morality. In short, The Culture's anarchy works because its most able citizens have yet to kill the cop in their heads. This is excruciatingly annoying and best demonstrates just how afraid Banks is of sounding radical. The only character I found sufficiently anarchistic was the Grey Area — the most despised and ostracized starship in the history of The Culture thanks to its unapologetic inhibitions when it comes to mind-reading. (Which it uses extensively, without consent, to track down, torture and kill fascists. As well as occasionally to repair relationships and help people overcome trauma and misconceptions.)
4. Such hostility to mind-reading and deeper forms of intimacy/honesty betrays The Culture's broader comfort with subtle forms of manipulation and secrecy. Culture citizens, being sedentary and bored, tend to pass the time with elaborate social and interpersonal games that are based on artificial scarcities of information. People engage in spats, cliques and conspiracies over the most meaningless and arbitrary stuff. And while this is realistic (just look at the present day Anarchist Milieu), their easy-going comfort with such acts of borderline cruelty is disturbing. Granted, there are limits to the degree of casual power-mongering Culture citizens consider acceptable, but even so they display no imperative or desire to reduce such behavior. At best there's a tired exasperation with it. Which is realistic, I suppose, given The Culture's weird preoccupation with more-or-less plain human existence. But it's still decidedly less than anarchist.

Banks portrays The Culture as being unique among galactic civilizations (dating back billions of years) for their suspicion that sudden technological raptures smack of coercion. Given his portrayal of such "Subliming" this certainly appears an admirable reaction. ...But sometimes stagnation smacks of coercion too.

There are, of course, many setting criticisms to be made; FTL and hominids are entirely unnecessary but annoyingly still regarded as a reasonable crutch. (Probably because so many authors are still secretly infected with a lust for skiffy. It'd be nice if the Brits got over the influence of Blake's 7 sometime this millennia, I'm just saying.) Half the high-technology is utterly fantastical while the other half is perfectly reasonable, and the conjunction can be annoying. But most centrally, whenever Banks turns his attention to low-tech worlds they're invariably some cookie-cutter rendition the European Middle Ages (or, to shake things up, early 20th century Europe). Which is beyond lazy. I mean, seriously. Some level of anthropological awareness would be nice. The growth patterns of Western Civilization are hardly a-contextual historical inevitabilities, or even probabilities.

And this pertains just a teensy bit to Anarchism, as I hear tell it's arguably possible to have anarchistic societies without world-shatteringly advanced technology (!). Bank's explicitly mentions home-grown anarchists threatening the rule of their tyrants, but operatives from The Culture seem to default on liberal reformism. Generals replace Kings, and Presidents replace Gen-

erals, slowly preparing a society to understand freedom. I'm sorry, but I have a hard time swallowing the conceit that the poor weak-brained peasants need such coddling. And a harder time seeing The Culture as a singular apex of almost marxist development, so far removed from and inaccessible to lower tech societies.

Of course it's hard to look too closely at a fictional setting as vast The Culture's without feeling a little ashamed. Any nitpicking can generate its own excuse and on such decades-old thought experiments you have to cut the Author some slack. Still. SF is intended to thought-provoke and some of those trains of thought are worth hijacking.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis
A Few Notes On The Culture & Anarchism
13 August 2008

Retrieved on 11 June 2023 from humaniterations.net.

theanarchistlibrary.org