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Style & Substance

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There has been an unnecessarily divisive debate distinguishing what the late Murray Bookchin designated as lifestyle anarchy from that of traditional ideological anarchy.

Yet under conditions of modernity, anarchist lifestyle centering upon the body and the intimate private sphere is often a necessary precursor to the development of more public articulation of systemic anarchist revolutionary sentiments.

Given that there are so many regulatory processes that serve to civilize the body in society, it was only a matter of time before it emerged, uncivilized, as the site of ideological, socioeconomic, and political struggle. Any revolutionary project of emancipation, therefore, would have to begin in the bedroom with the liberation of the modern body through the process of usurping control of what sociologist Bryan Turner calls the regimes of regulation.

The contemporary process of bodily liberation increasingly associated with anarchy frequently involves the use of body piercing, tattooing, and other forms of modification to advance the development of an emerging subversive style. As a decivilizing mechanism of the transgressive, body modification is becoming more than just a marker of adherence to anarchist lifestyles.

It is emerging as nothing less than a unique symbol of anti-industrial primitivist communication that is formalizing the contemporary struggle for freedom, autonomy, and self-determination through identification with, and empathetic nostalgic alignment of, pre-modern organic societies of the past.

According to British historian Stephan Brooke:

“Indeed, the first step on the road to utopia began, with the skin. [Dora] Russell believed that a radically reformed public world would be built on the emancipated body. A public utopia would arise from the private utopias between men and women. In this way, political desire was not only equated with sexual desire, but flowed from that desire. [T]he body [is] thus not marginal to politics, but rather its centre.”

For those with anarchist sensibilities, modernity poses significant challenges to the project to liberate the emancipated body from these regimes of regulation. As part of an effort to reduce obstacles to human

liberation rooted in industrialization, the nostalgic return to organic society typically begins with the struggle for individual freedom.

According to philosopher Krishnamurti:

“Freedom — to be free — is becoming more and more difficult. As society becomes more complex and as industrialization becomes wider and deeper and more organized, there is less and less freedom for man. [O]utwardly one becomes a slave to society, to the pressure of society; in this pressure of organized existence there is no tribal existence, but industrialized, organized, centralized control. When there is more ‘progress’ there is less and less freedom.”

As advanced industrialized nations provided the technology, the capital, and the leisure time for the servile masses to acquire unprecedented levels of materialist accumulation, the yearning for freedom and emancipation from materiality has, paradoxically, never been greater.

Many avenues are explored in the quest to fill the void brought on by conspicuous consumption, all of them leaving their seekers more shallow and empty than they were before.

My book on body piercing, *Body Piercing and Identity*, documents the sensual, spiritual, and political post-material means by which individuals are willing to deploy the body in service to their struggles to transcend an increasingly artificial, threatening, adversarial world.

In various approaches deployed by genuine explorers of anarchist authenticity, the desire for human emancipation begins with the reassertion of human agency to combat the suffocating passivity and dependency brought on by a vicious combination of unregulated neoliberal market economics and the co-opted state.

Homeless, demoralized, and denigrated inhabitants of the First World, through their own victimization by the same technological forces of imperialism and colonization that created centuries of suffering in the Third World, have finally become cognizant of the genuine depth of deprivation brought on by coercive capitalism and the collusive state. These processes are now, however, in more complex multinational forms causing the Third Worldization of disposable people of the industrialized West.

Through embodied resistance upon the skin, political opposition is continuous, ubiquitous, and enduring. Anarchist activists perpetually infuse movement societies with ostentatious displays of body modification and other aesthetic but defiant signifiers of creative resistance, displayed either on the street in more formal oppositional endeavors in private.

It was only a matter of time before public oppositional resistance and mass arousal through protest would eventually infiltrate the bedroom for a widespread democratization of sexual privilege. Piercing expedites these experiences and connects individuals to those with similarly like-minded egalitarian relationship and community ideologies.

This contemporary resistance involves a variety of stylistic and substantive forms of organic sabotage using modifications upon the body that, like colonization, is facilitated by media techniques that make dependency-breeding occupation increasingly problematic.

This signals not only a shift from reassessing the cultural value of primitive practices and advantageous customs of the underdeveloped and savagely erotic lifestyles around the world, but also indicates a wholesale resurgence and desire to adhere to these organic communal ways of life which can only be more superior to the unsustainable and devastating consequences of our own.

Although centuries too late, the knowledge and experiences linking complex struggles between the First and Third Worlds have finally resulted in an unprecedented level of empathetic global understanding among the oppressed worldwide needed to generate innovative strategies necessary to combat these vehement forms of exploitation.

Constructing the cohesiveness and rigidity through communities of resistance that will be necessary to combat these forms of civilized oppression will take nothing less than a global revolution of post-material, dependency-dismantling, egalitarian, interpersonal, intercommunity, interspecies, and intercultural resistance around the planet. But how?

Looking back in history when egalitarian relations among living things were paramount and control over one human being was rarely attempted by another, one is nostalgically returned to simple agrarian life in rural villages.

A return to organic simplicity with all its communal decision-making is now one of the most powerful driving forces behind landless peoples movements, squatting, urban homesteading, and other ecological anarchist and non-anarchist alternative globalization resistance efforts worldwide.

In the Third World, there are many examples of successful resistance against centuries of imperializing consciousness, where, until the recent proliferation and imposition of subsidized guns and amphetamines, strong communities have been able to successfully combat hegemonic attempts to oppress and colonize indigenous people in less developed contexts.

Inspired by the efficacy of these resistance efforts, body modified anarchists and other activists in advanced industrialized societies have now begun to formally and informally articulate, through embodied neo-tribal anti-modern expressions, their dreams of underdevelopment.

This has led to the global resurgence of village anarchy as the viable alternative to the status quo.

According to theorist Martin Green:

“Of the two main kinds [of anarchy], one was usually associated with . . . theory and with terrorism at the level of practice. It was essentially violent, and engaged often in assassination — anarchist and terrorist were often used as interchangeable terms.

“The other kind is usually associated with Kropotkin and Tolstoy, and in the next generation with Ghandi.

“The theory of this kind of ethical anarchism, sometimes called village anarchism, recommends agriculture, small communities, distrust of state, and peace. Within ethical or village anarchism, one can distinguish again two main tendencies. Some anarchists invested their energies in peace, others in love, in erotic freedom. Pacifism was to be associated with Tolstoy and he was one of those who most powerfully inspired [an] anarchism [which] was positively anti-erotic.

“On the whole, the erotic branch of ethical anarchism became the stronger of the two among intellectuals after Tolstoy dies in 1910. The political kinds of anarchism — obviously the violent but also the nonviolent forms thereof — lost their power with that constituency.”

As this brief summary of the popular evolution of anarchy indicates, we are now at a point where poignant visions of ethical village anarchism prevails, where peaceful and subversively sensual post-material, self-sufficient living is desired in lieu of urban, fragmented, mechanistic, dependency-breeding violence or other lonely competitive hostilities.

If we have the courage, therefore, to indulge ourselves a bit further to move the body modified anarchist activist eco-utopian project from one of complacency resting on mere anarchist theory, to one of construction working toward ethical or village anarchist praxis; we find that the worldwide, alternative globalization movement is already in the process of making this dream a reality.

From landless people in Latin America, to land titling in the Middle East, there is a reversal of these civilized forms of oppression, with slow but significant resistance through the reinvigoration of organic forms of agrarian living, which may afford the individual fewer material comforts but much more esoteric abundance in terms of freedom, autonomy, self-determination and savage eroticism (see Malinowski's 1937, *The Sexual Life of Savages*).

As James Bowen and Jonathon Purkis observe in their *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age*:

“The resurgence of interest in anarchism, which has been steadily percolating . . . over the past few decades, has now begun to form significant waves on a much wider scale, linking First and Third world

struggles. This has resulted in the formation of a diversity of political alliances coalescing around the politics of globalisation. What unites them is a fundamental questioning of the viability of existing mechanisms of decision-making, control, accountability and justice throughout the world. Whilst it is clear that the diverse concerns of these counter-movements are not reducible to single political programs or monolithic analytical tools, the theoretical concepts most apparently to the fore appear to be those associated with anarchism. When we talk about global anarchism, we mean that it is impossible for anarchist theory and practice to be formulated in ways that do not acknowledge its relationship with global flows of people, ideas, technology, economics, and crucially, resistance. Indeed, it is significant that anarchism can no longer be said to be the preserve of white Westerners. If anything, an era of global anarchism calls for a repositioning of the individual within these global flows and the need to respond to complex ethical and strategic problems which involves new formulations of anarchism.”

They further argue that our universal need for emancipation from technological, economic, and state subjugation is a strange and unprecedented process in the evolution of historic social movements, in that it unifies diverse dissidents being subjugated around the world by the same documentable, oppressive, but reversible forces promulgated by lies, dependency, and material delusions associated with modernity.

Writer Karen Goaman, editor at *Anarchist Studies*, suggests,

“The importance of peasant and agrarian ways of life to anarchism is sometimes overlooked. The critique of modern Western civilization . . . intersects with the strands often referred to as ‘primitivist’, ‘anti-civilization’, or ‘anti-technological’. Agrarian peasant movements of the global South also form a significant component of the anti-globalisation movement, which recognizes the importance of helping defend traditional and indigenous ways of life from the onslaught of globalisation. The reality is that the worship of money, technology, consumer goods, modernization and development are not creating happiness. The domination of nature and of humans has left a gaping void in people that no amount of spectacular glitter, speed and technology can fill.”