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Desire Armed

Anarchy and the Creative Impulse

Creativity is essential to anarchist practice. This is a banality that should go without saying. But when an endless rehashing of old ideas and practices, repeated demands for models and, perhaps worst of all, a turn toward marxist and academic leftist ideas as sources for intellectual stimulation indicate a withering of practical imagination within anarchist circles at least in the US, perhaps it is time to explore the question of creativity more deeply. Certainly it would be a more pleasant task than going through all the failings of present-day anarchists in this regard. So I would like to share a few ideas about creativity, imagination and desire that I have been mulling over for years, exploring and experimenting with ways to apply them in my life and relationships, in the hope that those who want to get beyond this malaise my find them of interest.

I start from a basic premise: it isn't possible to talk meaningfully about either creativity or desire without referring to both of them. The reason is quite simple. Desire, in its vital, healthy, fully living form is nothing more nor less than the creative impulse, which realizes itself through the practical application of imagination to one's life and one's world. But somewhere along the line, even anarchists seem to have lost track of this dynamic conception of desire, accepting instead the passive conception of desire as nothing more than a mere longing for some external object that one lacks, a conception that is quite useful to modern capitalism.

This conception of desire is economic in its essence and like all economic conceptions is based on scarcity, which is to say, poverty. The object of this sort of desire exists before the desire arises, either as an idea or as a concrete thing, but is not immediately accessible to the individual who wants it. Since this sort of desire is nothing more than a sense of lack, it can be easily channeled toward these already existing objects in the interests of whatever powers have the strength to harness this lack. William Blake rightly understood that this sense of lack was not truly *desire*, but rather the mere *ghost of desire*, the weak afterimage left behind when desire is drained of its vitality, its capacity to act and create its own object.

It is only in relationship to this *ghost of desire* that the pathetic, poorly thought out theoretical assumption, "Society creates our desires" makes any sense at all, but even on these terms the statement remains a load of shit, a symptom of the marxian intrusion into anarchist circles with its implication that it is impossible to experience freedom now. The fallacy of the statement lies in its assumption that society acts and creates. In fact, *society creates nothing.* Society is nothing more than a shorthand we use to describe an interweaving set of activities and relationships between individuals that tend to reproduce themselves within a specific context. Capitalism is simply one of the terms used to describe the most recent, economy-dominated set of such activities and relationships. Thus neither society nor capitalism create anything at all. Rather, an unquestioning acceptance

of the currently existing set of relationships and activities leads to an acceptance of devitalized desires, mere ghosts incapable of creating their own objects and thus satisfying themselves. And this leads people to continue to act and relate in habitual ways that reinforce this condition.

There are many factors that can drain an individual's desire of its vital energy: desperate poverty, emotional trauma, repressive onslaughts from those with greater power (parents, teachers, cops, soldiers, priests, government and corporate institutions, . . .), but on the large scale, desire is drained of its creative essence when life is drained of its voluptuous generosity, its luxurious excess. To some extent, this begins to happen anywhere that authority and hierarchies of wealth and power exist. But most social orders have simply contained these effusive aspects of life in festivals and carnivals rather than fully suppressing them. Even Catholicism in the Middle Ages continued to leave room for such contained expressions of voluptuous excess. In the Western world, the puritanical morality of Protestantism managed to suppress this tendency in a timely manner (though not without quite a fight . . .) serving the needs of the rising bourgeois class. Condemning voluptuous pleasures, luxurious excess and the generous squandering of life, this morality instead gave value to work, thrift and measured moderation. Tellingly, the first two were also called *industry* and *economy*. And the last corresponds well with *bookkeeping*. By suppressing the values that gave desire its basis as a creative force, puritanical morality suppressed desire itself, ultimately driving it into unconsciousness. Here it no longer exists as a vital, living energy, but as an often monstrous and always sterile ghost. Without the generous, luxurious fullness of life as a basis, it is transformed into a lack, a longing, that seeks an object outside itself to fill its emptiness. Life becomes mere survival, the desperate hunt for such objects to sate an endless hunger. Only this utter degradation could allow desire to be harnessed to the machinery of industry and the economy.

There are several practical considerations that can be drawn from these ideas. First of all, there is the basic anarchist idea, which unfortunately seems to have been forgotten by many present-day anarchists, that society creates nothing, that rather everything is created through the activity of individuals relating to other individuals and to their environment. It follows from this that any genuinely anarchist practice begins with individuals taking possession of their activities and relationships, becoming the conscious creators of their own lives. This leaves no room for victimism and stands in utter contradiction to the marxian idea that no one can experience freedom as long as this society exists. This marxian concept reifies freedom, making it a *thing* external to us that will only be achieved in some distant future and on a global scale. But I prefer the dialectic of Heracleitus to that of Marx. For me, freedom is not a promise for the future, but a way to continuously

confront the world where I exist now, taking possession of my life with all my might, in conflict with everything that stands in my way. This ongoing conflict (which will not end simply because we somehow manage to eradicate the entire institutional framework of authority) is what makes the essential destructive, negating aspects of anarchist practice one with the creative aspects. Consciously creating our lives as our own means destroying every chain that holds as back, smashing through every barrier that gets in our way. Thus, there is no use in waiting for some condition to hand us our freedom. We need to act now for our own sakes and on our own terms, not for any cause nor on terms set by those who want to maintain the ruling order.

In light of all this, the liberation of desire takes on a particular meaning: it is the revitalization of desire as a creative impulse, its liberation from its impoverished, sterile condition as a desperate longing for an external object. This project means creating our lives and practice in direct opposition to the social world that surrounds us and its values. In other words, rejecting the impoverishment that resides in the values of thrift, industry and measure, of lives and goods for sale, in favor of voluptuous pleasure, luxurious excess and the generous squandering of life, freeing life from the chains of survival. I think it should be obvious that this is another situation in which our anarchic end coincides with the means, in that creating our lives in a luxurious, voluptuous manner is already the freeing of desire as a creative force.

But those of us who want to take on this project need to, first of all, examine the ways this impoverishment has inserted itself into anarchist circles. I don't want to go into a detailed critique of identity politics (including the transformation of one's personal choices into moral identities) and political correctitude. Suffice it to say that these intrusions from the post-whatever, academic left into anarchist thought and practice have always been about creating rules, limits and boundaries, not about destroying them. They are the measured voice of impoverishment intended to put and keep each of us in our place. But there have been some other trends within anarchist circles in recent years that could have had a potential for enriching it, that did seem to do so briefly before falling into moralistic and mystical thinking. I am speaking of the critiques of certain broad areas of human activity like language, art, symbolic activity and the like. Where these critiques have been examinations of the limits of these activities, they have opened the door to interesting explorations of how we might expand beyond these limits, enriching our lives and our worlds. But expanding beyond the limits of these activities does not require their destruction (unlike the institutions of power, language, art and symbolic activity are not barriers, cages or chains, simply specific tools/toys with their limitations), but rather their enrichment. Unfortunately, the most strident voices proclaiming on these matters moved away from exploratory critique into

mystical and moral condemnation. Rather than challenging the limits of these oh so human activities with the aim of enriching our lives, these prophets of despair declare that until we could be rid of these things, we cannot know freedom, because for them freedom consists of a return to a universal oneness that they claim once existed. As puritanical as any Calvinistic theology and as deterministic as the most vulgar marxism, this sort of theory (or rather ideology) offers nothing to any sort of practice. Like the ideologies it imitates, it drains desire of any life turning it to mere longing, and so we end up not with interesting critical explorations, but with *primitivism*. Those anarchists who want to live creatively, enriching their existences, making their lives expansive, voluptuous and rich, don't just need to refuse these pseudo-critiques, but also to attack them fiercely, using exploratory practical critique that provides a basis for an ongoing theoretical practice to expose the ideological nature of these sad sermons.

But perhaps the aspect that is most difficult in achieving the voluptuous, expansive life that is necessary to revitalizing desire as a creative impulse is getting beyond survival. I have tried to discuss this question with people many times on several levels, and always the conversation reverts back to how to survive better, with greater ease and comfort, and so the point is missed. But this is understandable. We all have to eat. We all want shelter at least in bad weather. We all find ourselves in a world where money seems to make the rules. Even if we abstractly realize that money is simply the physical (or more often now virtual) manifestation of a particular sort of social relationship in which we all take part — in other words, a product of our activities — , making that realization meaningful in practice seems quite difficult. Yet I think that it comes back to starting from oneself here and now, what one wants to do, how one wants to go about one's life and projects immediately. First of all, survival is simply the postponement of life to the future. It centers around *maintaining* existence, not *enjoying* it. Stirner rightly pointed out that the enjoyment of life consists in consuming it, in using it up. And this is why life, which only exists in the present, and survival, which puts life off to the future, are at loggerheads. So the first step to revitalizing desire as creative impulse is to grasp life now, enjoying it immediately.

The centrality of immediacy in this endeavor fits with the idea that desire as creative impulse does not have any preexisting object. Rather it creates its object in the process of realizing itself. This means that its object cannot be identified, institutionalized or commodified. It cannot be made into a chain on liberated, vital desire. Desire, in this sense, is thus the enemy of the civilization in which we live, because this civilization exists only through identifying, institutionalizing and commodifying. And these processes are nothing less than the erection of prisons for desire. As a creative drive, desire attacks these attempts to prevent it from moving forcefully in the world. The objects that it creates for itself in its

realization are not external things (though such things my come into being as a byproduct of the creative impulse) but rather active relationships, the only sort of wealth that enriches those who squander it freely. And this is why desire has to attack institutionalized relationships that freeze activity into routine, protocol, custom and habit — into things to be done to order.

Another aspect of the refusal of the domination of survival over life, of the future over the present, is the refusal to let utility and effectiveness dominate over enjoyment, playfulness, experimentation and poetic living. The very concepts of utility and effectiveness again give desire an external object, an end outside of itself. They start from the assumption that there is a lack that must be filled, and so again remove life to the future. Refusing utility and effectiveness does not mean that what one creates in the process of living her life will be useless or ineffective; it simply means that use and effectiveness will be secondary to pleasure, enjoyment and intensity. Let's consider one of the most basic human needs: food. We could very easily limit ourselves to getting a hold of just a few basic simple foods, preparing them in the blandest, simplest ways and thus sating our physical hunger. Instead, we enjoy exploring varieties of flavors, creating complicated concoctions to stimulate our pleasure, transforming eating (and all of the processes that lead up to into) into a voluptuous, sensual, even intoxicating experience . . . This food remains useful, but it has gone far beyond usefulness, because the pleasure principle has stimulated our creative impulse. Other creative endeavors operate in a similar manner. I may write a poem with a specific purpose behind it, something I am trying to say, but what makes it a poem is not this utilitarian aspect. What makes it a poem is the utterly useless play of words and images, the dance that gives a certain voluptuous humor and convulsive beauty to the words. In fact, in a poem, I always consider this aspect far more important than any intended message, because this is what expresses the attitude toward life that I endeavor to put into practice in revolt against this world.

So, as I see it, voluptuousness, excess, squandering generosity, immediacy, gratuitousness and playfulness are keys to rediscovering (or rather re-creating) creativity in an anarchist manner. There is no place here for renunciation or self-denial. Thus, the critique that grows from this attitude asks, "Can I make this activity, relationship, tool or toy my own or is it a barrier to my expansive creation and enjoyment of life?" If the former, I will grasp it as part of the expansive wealth of insurgent self-creative living, always seeking to push it beyond itself, as I push myself beyond myself. If the latter I will attack it with the aim of destroying it, recognizing it for the prison that it is. Having moved in this way beyond the cages of survival, utility, tactics, strategy and subjection to the future, it is possible for those anarchists willing to take this route to rediscover the creative spark and revive the practical imagination that will bring a dynamic of enjoyment and

strength back to our fight against this world. But these thoughts are only the beginning of an ongoing exploration and experimentation. They are unfinished and never will be finished as long as there are those who insist upon living free and creative lives in and against this world.

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