

Articles from Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed

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Anarchy and Anxiety

Before we go anywhere in this exploration, what do I mean by anxiety?

Anxiety is a fear and the resulting set of protective behaviors which form in response to a real or fabricated threat, and continue though that threat has passed. Anxiety is a fear out of its original context. It can look like avoiding conflict, bonding, criticisms, direct answers, certain places, situations, tasks, or technologies. It can manifest as over or under functioning, cliquishness, feigned helplessness, dogmatic philosophies that favor certain personalities, angry outbursts, and the desire to control situations, people, or conversations. It can lead to not having an opinion or having an opinion about everything. It can cause us to cloud agreements or expectations, create pretenses, or outright excuses. It can look like not completing tasks on time, avoiding fascinating projects, events, and discussions. So why do we have it if it's so destructive to our desired lives? Where did it come from?

The government wants us anxious. The corporations approve. Why? For many reasons, several of which you could probably guess. For instance, anxiety is a perfect form of social control, it keeps people confused, alienated, filled with self-doubt, and unable to form strong opinions or act on them. It also promotes capitalism and creates a population cheaper and more efficient to control than outright slaves; the people will fight for the privilege to stay at home buying the locks, mace, alarms, and sedatives for themselves. The structure of our society is engineered to foster anxiety, and sells us the idea that these institutions are wholesome and good for us; we would be lost without them.

Our nuclear families are defended as sacrosanct, but they breed anxiety into us, dividing us into groups too small to thrive. They keep us tired and lonely, on the edge of survival. They tell us that we're safe, we're part of something unique and special; a net that makes us stronger, but really we're being isolated, alienated, and worn out. Insecure about our place in the world, we buy more and work harder to make our little enclaves look legitimate, even when they are festering with cruelty.

Attempts at larger community are slandered as useless or corrupt. Our schools are designed to make us passive and insecure, they teach us to jump to bells and whistles, to be submissive and follow rules, and to train our physical needs to a schedule. We are graded on our ability to thrive under these controlled conditions; assessed repeatedly to determine our worth to the glorious system, reminding us we can never stop working to conform ourselves to its needs. And our efficiency will determine the amount of money we will make, the kind of home we will have, and the happiness we will be able to achieve.

The media reiterates how much worse our lives could be, how our neighbors could be serial killers, how it's best to stick to the well traveled paths of life. Stay with the herd of strangers held at arms length. It reports that all our fears are rational, the world is a scary unsafe place, filled with scary unsafe people. It promotes the uncritical acceptance of the entertainment and pseudo relationships offered by the television and internet, and we count ourselves lucky to simply be alive and so comfortably situated in our self made cells.

Advertisements remind us how inadequate we are, how we need to buy the newest technologies, more time at the gym, the best coffee, the fastest cell phones and food, and the most secure retirement. We can never achieve enough, be rich enough or beautiful enough. The goals are unattainable and we are kept leaping for them; it tires us out, makes us unsure of ourselves.

And our national myths...oh those great and shining examples of justice and equality, they remind us that if we are not achieving more, if we are not wealthy and happy in this “land of the free” then we have only ourselves to blame. No where else on Earth do we have more opportunities than here, our failures are certainly personal.

And the health care industry and self help movement? They offer us pills, over educated strangers, and behavior modification exercises to remove our negative feelings, and encourage us to contribute to society again. They urge us to feel good joining the rest of the population.

These institutions are meant to catch those of us who fell through all the other nets; it is an industry dedicated to helping us see how lucky we are, to help us sit back and relax into our productive little lives.

It is tempting to believe that there is something wrong with us, if we’ve held on to expired fears and used them to justify sets of irrational looking behaviors. After all, who but ourselves can we blame for how we feel and what we do? And yet, if we simply believe these experts when they tell us we are sick and our illnesses are of our making, then we will fall into their trap of buying cures, and succors, and staring fixedly at our navels in the company of strangers.

One approach to this dilemma is to say there is nothing wrong with any of us, the system is sick, and leave it at that. I prefer this approach to a complete and unthinking supplication to a professional diagnosis, but this reaction misses an opportunity to reclaim part of our emotional lives. Exploring the complexities of our fears and actions, and deciding for ourselves how we feel about them, whether they are helpful and appropriate, or obstacles to our desires is not buying in to their paradigm; it is part of self management.

Another route might look like asking: why try to demolish any of our feelings? Anger can arouse action, sadness can stimulate creativity, and happiness can lead to complacency. What can anxiety inspire? Anxiety produces the same physical response as sexual arousal; we could call it passion with a twist of fear and learn to like it. (Truthfully, I’m a bit addicted to it now.) I have also found some of my anxieties are useful in navigating the bureaucracies of this world, streamlining the necessary and odious tasks. But admittedly, there are other anxieties that stand resolutely in the way of the life I desire for myself, and I just can’t let it go at that.

One of the most crippling anxieties I have seen in myself and my fellow anarchists, including individualists, is social. Many of us are withdrawing critically from mainstream society and this can be a lonely endeavor, even if we are lucky enough to be surrounded by political allies. This loneliness is increased by social anxieties which can cause us to hide ourselves from each other physically, verbally, or emotionally. Excessive worrying about fitting in, not speaking up enough or talking too much, being vulnerable, sounding too smart or stupid, and fears about being liked or not disliked enough can hinder our ability to create and maintain intimate relationships and form the communities that our philosophies prescribe. It can keep us from engaging in important personal and philosophical conversations and resolving misunderstandings.

Some of my anxieties don’t stop me from being or doing what I desire, but some of them do. As an anarchist I believe that I am responsible for sculpting my life into what I want it to be and so I have delved into the mass of books, groups, classes, and videos about “overcoming” anxiety, desensitizing techniques, therapy, and the like...and I have spent a lot of time talking with the people close to me about it, getting to understand how it manifests and all the different ways I feel about those manifestations. These are just some of the many thoughts I have had on the subject.

Anxiety will rule us if we let it. I am an anarchist in progress.

Choosing Relations

If there is one place that anarchists have the power to shape our lives to our desires, it is in our personal relationships. So why don't we have all the community, solidarity, and lifelong affinity that we articulate so beseechingly? We can start with our ambiguous verbiage. There are certain words which, nowadays, offer more questions than answers. When someone uses the word solidarity, do they mean they're opposed to snitching? They want more prison support? Safe housing networks? A political platform complete with vanguard? Or maybe, please come to my rally? When someone uses the word community, do they imagine something like an extended family? What kind of family? Maybe a support network for crisis? What kind of support; what kind of crisis? Or are they just short on resources? When someone says they feel affinity with someone else, do they mean they think that person is sexy? That they agree with their political or philosophical views? Or maybe that they share a lifestyle or political tactics? Our radical lexicon doesn't seem to have words specific enough, or well-defined enough to clearly articulate the different kinds of associations that we have, or wish we had; we must rely on context or examples to give us clues to what these words mean. Simply explaining what I mean when I use these words, or what other people have meant, would not help clarify much. People will continue to use them to refer to any of their current definitions, and will make up more meanings because they are terms that can be molded to any situation. One might argue that we need to create new, more precise or distinct words to describe different kinds of affinity, community, solidarity, or other kinds of relations. I will leave that task for more dedicated word lovers.

Simply understanding what we mean when we use certain words to describe what kinds of associations we desire isn't enough to create those relationships.

Trained in our nuclear families, fed on television, seduced by clever lyrics, and promised everlasting happiness by countless ads, we are pressured to form lasting bonds, and simultaneously deprived of the ability to maintain them past the initial thrills of getting to know someone. We are told and re-told myths: that relationships can be everything we ever wanted, that we deserve the best, that we should always be comfortable, that our loved ones will never stray more than an arms length before returning more fulfilled, and when the relationship is Right both parties will feel an altruistic enlightenment which will cause them to make the most thoughtful and loving choices all the time. In practice relationships are a bit messier and a lot more work. We need motivation and skill that we may not have been taught, or may have had deliberately trained out of us by our families or our society. Our relationships start with the people with whom we choose to associate. We don't get to pick all the people around us, (or even if there are radicals around us to select from), but we do get to pick from this motley assortment of beings who we try to be most intimate with...those people who might have the most affinity with us, who might challenge us in the ways we like, who might bring out the qualities in us that we are trying to cultivate, or who might work on the projects we find most interesting or rewarding. However, we're not always skilled at assessing other people, and sometimes we're worse at gauging our own needs. On top of that, people change — our opinions change, our goals and desires change, even what we want from relationships can change. Remaining even flexibly attached to the people we choose becomes all the more challenging.

If we happen to pick someone who picks us back, and we then decide to stick with our relationships through the waning and waxing of affinity, our bonds can deepen. Unfortunately, we may form unhealthy, dependent, or isolating bonds, which weaken us as individuals and draw us

further away from the lives we desire. We may form long term relationships which, for all they offer us, should have remained cool acquaintanceships. Short term alliances can offer us more immediate gratification, which may be more appealing than a durable but thorny involvement. Certainly not everyone wants lifelong or even long-term relationships. Lifelong can feel like another way of saying life-sentence, and sometimes the difference between them is a fine line. Then again, maybe all we can manage to create is a series of short-term snuggle fests, when what we want is more like a resilient intergenerational kinship. In affinity groups of old, some compañeras knew each other for many years, having oftentimes grown up together. Because they knew each other intimately, their relationships and groups were steadfast and impenetrable when it came to attempted infiltrations. In the light of recent repressive judicial tactics, this should sound attractive to some of us. But our current society encourages us to move around, traveling from one place to another looking for better paying jobs, cheaper homes, or more fulfilling social lives. This mobility allows us not to be as concerned if we burn bridges in one town; if we run out of allies, friends, or resources in one state we can just pick another with fresh opportunities. No roots needed. Regrettably, this transience also impedes our opportunities to create and sustain lasting associations.

Even so, simply staying in one place long enough to go beyond an initial bond with someone isn't a guarantee of maintaining relationships either; once on the inside, it isn't always so charming. We allow ourselves to perceive more flaws, shortcomings, and less attractive idiosyncrasies. We find that knowing someone deeply means not liking all of their personality, and realizing that we, in turn, are not liked in many ways. It can mean uncomfortable shifts in how we feel about each other, like finding new acquaintances more immediately interesting or becoming more sensitive to rejection from that person who knows us so well.

This is where all the early claims of abiding alliance start to haunt us. Armed with fresh insights and criticisms and thanks to ambiguous definitions, social anxieties, and straight-out changes of mind or heart, this is a ripe moment for opting out of the relationship with a feeling of superiority. Let's just say we stick around through the initial disappointments, though. We choose to stay in relationship even though sometimes we dislike each other and keep changing our rules, needs, and desires. Now what? Are we in the relational clear? No. We can't leave out that we coerce, we manipulate, we push boundaries, we forget (conveniently). We hurt each other, regardless of what precautions we take, what limits we impose, how often we talk it out, or how much we say we are sorry afterwards. Maybe it isn't the same injury every time, but we continue to trespass upon each other, because it is impossible to be close and not misuse each other periodically. We schedule time together, time apart, maybe even time to talk with trusted peers, a mediator, or just time to yell at each other. In the end, we accept the pain as inevitable, we forgive, we remind ourselves our companions are accepting and forgiving, too, and that this is the work needed to stay in relationship with someone. We continue to appreciate our cohorts, remind ourselves what we cherish about them and why we remain in relationships, and how the characteristics we love are frequently the same ones we hate. Perhaps in all this we learn more about ourselves, and that helps us in all of our relationships. But there's still more to it.

After all this time of choosing, forgiveness, and clarification, we may find that at times what we desire is in direct opposition to the wishes of our close companion. Our requirements change, and we can't even depend on getting our basic relational needs met by one other. We have to negotiate things we never imagined we would compromise, and the last shreds of our myths about soul mates and best friends forever must finally be laid to rest. There is no denying that

it is difficult managing even one of these close relationships, and our radical theories encourage us to negotiate between the needs, desires, and intensities of several of them, and then balance all of those with our own needs and desires. It can be down right daunting. There are many challenges to long term relationships: from finding people you have affinity with to staying connected through shifting desires, errors of judgment, negotiations, arguments, or splits. Basing relationships on having affinity with someone is key to the beginning of anti-authoritarian relationships; knowing that affinity fluctuates so we can skillfully negotiate any schisms between our immediate desires and our long term goals is only one of the difficulties in managing them. There is no point where we can stop working to meet our relational needs and continue to have them satisfied. Holding on to the myths that relationships will be perfectly fulfilling can lead to apathy, sadness, fewer creative thoughts about our lives, and inflexibility when the changes do come. Radicals have invented and tried many different strategies to deal with the difficulties of long term relationships. We have used polyamory, peer counseling, mediation, affinity groups, co-housing, co-parenting, training camps, worker cooperatives, skill shares, crit-selfcrit, soma therapy, study groups, internet blogs, radical mental health groups, etc, with varying degrees of success. We have learned a lot about how to create and maintain radical kinship, and continue to explore new relational directions. There are no quick answers or short cuts to having lasting camaraderie, but we have come up with some very interesting possibilities to address certain inadequacies in our society. I, for one, am enjoying the continuing challenge.

The Age of No Opinion

I'm too much of a realist to believe in anarchism.

— Anonymous Realist

Lately I have had the displeasure of engaging in philosophical discussions with a segment of our so modern population that believes that critiquing dominant ideologies is self-righteous. Some others, who even though they feel the injurious nature of our state, won't form strong judgments about it because they believe they would then be seen as a fanatic, stupid, duped, or missing the grand joke of human life...that no opinion matters because nothing we ever do will change the way the world is now.

We are a worn down population — tired out emotionally from politicians' scare tactics, lack of exercise and nutritional food, frenzied media blasts which offer consumption as an antidote for our lack of meaningful relationships, days and years of meaningless wage earning tasks, and trying to make ourselves feel okay about our lives, which is most tiring of all.

Tearing it all down philosophically is complicated. Figuring out what aspects of this culture are useful to us, harmful to us, helpful, or neither is difficult; there are no clear lines. Who is the enemy? Even as anarchists this can be unclear. The short answer is: the state, of course. But scratch beyond that thin veneer of agreement and we dissolve into factions as to what to do after the state has been abolished. Do we have worker-collective factories that maintain an approximation of our current lifestyles, or do we exchange our computers for spears and warm up our drums? Or will it be a sort of magical miscellany of loosely related communities, each of them fluid in its structure and interacting with the environment and other groups in its own way? The arguments go round and round endlessly, and we become our own worst enemies,

which seems understandable because arguing about minutiae is all we have right now. There is no revolution in sight, and no specifics in that glorious and fictitious situation to persuade us to prefer one path over another.

Here I would like to make a distinction between two types of critique. The first is personal, the second is systemic in scope. In the personal realm, in relationships and small communities, there can be a play of power where it is difficult to distinguish between dominators and submitters, the intelligent and the ignorant, the powerless and the powerful; these things are fluid and changeable since they involve the shifting of people's personalities, or the fluctuations of group knowledge and commitment, and are often contextual and therefore difficult to evaluate with certainty. Established regimes or institutions are not so liquid or difficult to discern in nature. It is very easy to distinguish the oppressiveness of large organizations, and increasingly important to do so. It can be more frustrating to make critiques on a macro scale because it is less likely we will be able to shift these goliaths directly. Regardless, it is system-wide critical assessments I am concerned with here, particularly pertaining to the state.

It is advantageous for states that they should foster populations reluctant to form energetic, articulate, and radical critiques about them. Statists have studied the psychology of their populations, reviewed their past mistakes and victories, and synthesized this information into a patriotism-making propaganda machine which they have unleashed with some disturbing successes.

With the help of the media, the modern state creates nationalist yarns to inspire and distract. For example, one popular us narrative showcases how the state has (generously) allowed women, people of color, formerly poor folks, non-christians, and people with alternative lifestyles (i.e. gay) to join the decision-making echelons. This inclusion and subsequent showcasing has persuaded some of the previously unrepresented multitudes to buy into [again with the economical metaphors? Or is it deliberate this time?] the myth that anyone can rise to the top of the money pile in the us. Not surprisingly, just as with all minor rearrangements in the face of the government, these superficial changes please enough people to weaken an opportunity to foment real change — the agenda all along.

There are large numbers of people who have swallowed this kind of nonsense, and trust in the state to manage our social relations and logistical needs, with few or no objections.

For those of the population who, despite the goodies dangled before them, object outright to this system, the promoters of the state offer a scattershot mixture of self-doubt, guilt, and intimidation.

As a first defense the state offers a simple way out for folks who don't want to think very much beyond knowing they are dissatisfied (and have no passion to do anything about their discontent anyway). Statists very nicely explain that the machinations of government and society are too complicated for mere citizens to understand. No one in the general public is so brilliant or talented that they could keep their succors (or is it suckers?), and have complete freedom without inflicting a harsh word, bruise, or tear. They offer a pat on the back for caring, and ask you to keep working and paying your taxes so they can do their jobs, too. We all have to sacrifice something, and we don't all have to know what's going on. After all, the sufferings of contemporary life are inextricably woven together with their most cherished comforts and safety. Restrictions on freedom must be accepted to maintain this security, and a certain amount of violence is necessary to protect these goodies from other people or states who murderously covet them. Statists, in the worst fatherly tone, perpetuate the impossible utopian crap that it is every good citizen's right to

be comfortable, safe, and happy, and that it is their government's job to see to that, if the people will just be good enough to keep quiet and let them do their duty.

The second line of popular defense alleges that where the state has certain deficiencies, the problems are really with the citizens not pulling their weight. They have not denied that some people don't get a fair chance because of class, gender, or race. They have not denied that there is crime, homelessness, malnutrition, illiteracy, and pollution accompanied by new diseases and ecological damage. In fact, they have admitted to many shortcomings. But instead of allowing this ownership of the failings to be used as an argument against the state, they use their limitations to garner more support; the state recognizes the problem, the state has programs that prove that they care, but they need each person help to make the changes we all want. They expound on a communal sharing of fault, in which each enlightened citizen is responsible for doing everything in their power to make life better for all. If you haven't, then you have no right to complain that the government can't fix it. For example, if you don't vote, you don't have the right to complain about any government actions. This blame approach apparently disorients and paralyzes some people in an overworked, strung-out, and guilty population. Feel dizzy yet?

This brings us to a third line of state defense: defeat stories. Parables of great movements end with easily repealed reforms and, ultimately, conformity and support for the state. They have threatened upstarts with the poverty and horror of other revolutions. They have pledged retaliation, violence, or death for uprisings. And one of our very understandable responses is to tell ourselves we don't live in revolutionary times; why should we worry ourselves with things we can't fix when we could just focus on the positive things that are happening and have a good time with our petty revenges? Sure it's a little scary, crazy making, or unfair sometimes, but haven't we enjoyed some of it, too? Aren't we free to grumble and gripe? Or slip into a sullen, dark, and immobilizing ennui? You wouldn't want to hurt anyone would you? You aren't a terrorist are you?

Now for the double mind fuck. Are you comfortable? Are you more comfortable now than you would be watching your friends and loved ones getting pepper sprayed, their heads bashed in, imprisoned, or shot? Is having that little bit more freedom really worth the lives or limbs it would cost? Are you willing to sacrifice your loved ones? And would anything really change in the long run? I mean, isn't ultimate failure what characterizes every anarchist revolution to date?

Presumably if you are reading this you might say, "But I really DO see through it all. I really DO have passion to change something. I really, really, really want it to be different. What can I do?" And what are the answers to these vital questions? How can anarchists compete with the safety, comfort, and ease the state offers? We can't.

There are plenty of people awake to the facts of our well-padded cells and mediocre allowances. We can relax into a self-satisfied belief that we're already doing all we can, or face alternatives which are less comfortable, less safe, and more difficult to negotiate without making matters qualitatively worse for ourselves. The aversion to discomfort is understandable; we don't want to give up how good it is for how bad they promised it will be if we cultivate a real challenge to them. We crave action, and they have cleverly offered us pseudo-dangers in the form of video games, epic movies, roller coasters, extreme sports and martial arts...or the opportunity to watch others take these challenges on reality tv. For anarchists these can be entertaining or educational, but we want something real and lasting. Where is it? Vandalism? Petty theft? Animal liberation? Sabotage? Too many of us have been harassed, bruised, or spent time in jail not to feel acutely the personal price of such activities. Are there any safe alternatives to marching uselessly in a

sanctioned path with sanctioned speakers and feeling like the cowed masses that we are? One thing I know about revolution: if it were to happen, it would be uncomfortable, scary, and dangerous...yes, even more intimidating than facing forty-plus years of wage slavery.

Not only are we discouraged and overwhelmed by the flash and scope of the state, but the courage, desire, and ability to act has been trained out of us. The ability to form the close networks needed for such actions are destroyed by nuclear families, scarcity of time and goods. We are all laboring for the future, the possibilities. A future we have nearly given up on seeing in our lifetimes. A future we argue about and discuss in detail.

Should we find all the places in our lives where we are succumbing too much to the current system, where we are feeling a little too cosseted, and destroy them all? There is an excitement, a courage and energy that comes with risking danger, even hurting ourselves in finding our limits. There is learning from the past, where we went wrong when we were so close, where we let go and where we held too tightly. There is visioning how it could be possible, with a firm view of the outcome and a variety of methods to attack the status quo how we could affect this struggle, and as they learn from our tactics we learn from theirs, and as they adapt and suppress so we adapt to evade, and strike with intelligence.

I have been preparing myself for something...parkour, soma therapy, radical study groups, herbal medicine, community building...my dying breath will be the moment I let go of the belief in large scale anarchy in my lifetime.

The Politics of Blame

So let's just say, hypothetically, that a container ship runs into a bridge and spills a lot of fuel oil into a bay, and the news networks decide to cover the story...what would be the first angle they would emphasize? Who is to blame for the mess, of course: was the pilot on drugs, drunk, or asleep? Was containment started by the right people at the right time? Who will pay for this disaster?

Blame asks for the names of the people responsible for something wrong or unfortunate that has happened. Judicial systems are founded on the concept of blame. In every conflict two opposing parties argue over who is the victim and who is the perpetrator; there is very little room for nuance in this polarized scheme. Religions reveal similarly dichotomized paradigms with terms and concepts like sinner and saint, or good and evil. As an anarchist I am more interested in why it is politically desirable for the state to use blame, and how conflicts or problems can be understood without playing into the roles prescribed by such a mind-set.

The use of blame is advantageous for several reasons. The black and white nature of blame lends itself perfectly to having an other, which allows governments (and churches) to garner support for their policies. For instance, blaming individuals for real or fictitious acts of rebellion and labeling them "terrorists" allows a government to justify the increased surveillance of its citizens, to mask a collapsing economy, or validate a foreign occupation or war. Any desired changes to laws can be spun as solutions to a problem of these others. A population of others can also be exploited for monetary gain (eg re-building projects in war zones or domestic prisoners), or used as justification for any number of cutbacks to social programs.

Another benefit of having a paradigm of blame is the ability to dispose of influential opponents by pinning mutually created or fabricated atrocities onto them. As long as citizens accept these

patsies, the government can do as it pleases. And lucky for the government, blame is in limitless supply, and cheap to manufacture.

Blame can be a seductive short cut for creating false resolutions to complicated, large scale problems. The average citizen has an interest in accepting this model of conflict resolution because it allows the majority to feel innocent, and requires no self-reflection or changes to the social order. All faults in the government are masked just enough for people to ignore them, which is more convenient for maintaining a daily existence inside the system. Of course, the use of blame works the same magic inside the anarchist milieu.

It is not difficult to come up with examples of how blame can sneak into a conversation between anarchists. It can look like someone asking questions such as: who was responsible for this? Who was bottom-lining that? Blame also can be disguised as a politically correct line, “We don’t have more people of color, women, and age diversity in the milieu because such and such group hasn’t challenged their non-revolutionary tendency to associate with people of the same age, class, and race as themselves.” Blame can also masquerade as a call to action, as suggested by statements that begin with “We will never have a revolution unless everyone is willing to..”

It is tempting to blame each other as an excuse for our lack of headway in toppling the government, but this insidious practice is distracting to our efforts. Blaming one another causes us to lose perspective in what we are up against: we overlook the very purposeful complexity and diversification of the power of the state, and are tempted to think it would be simple to disassemble if we would all just work together and do one or two things differently.

The use of blame also encourages an anarchist conservatism by weeding out the more fringe behaviors, the destructive or controversial choices, which have implications that may be more difficult to comprehend fully. It cuts off new avenues of thought and action by confining us to one path of resolution when faced with a complicated situation. Is the spirit of non-conformity and dissent only appealing when it is pointed at the government?

A paradigm of blame fosters fear by promoting conformity to an unattainable standard of perfection; if an anarchist openly admits she committed an act which she regrets, and the general response is to condemn and then punish and/or ostracize her, very few people will want to step forward with their errors. Blame encourages people to hide their mistakes or hide themselves from the comrades they disappoint.

If we can’t allow for fuck-ups, especially big ones, then there will always be allies hiding their remorse, or feeling like frauds.

The bigger pictures are veiled when we use blame; it uses a narrow interpretation of events which minimizes why people do what they do, and the circumstances they are operating in. Understanding these influences can help us identify weaknesses in our movements, and show us where we could support one another in our struggles.

But it is difficult not to look for the person who is at fault when something goes wrong, and perhaps harder not to seek to punish comrades when we are adversely affected by their actions. We must find a way to challenge each other’s choices and behaviors without the use of blame. So what is another way? How do we deal with the mistakes of others and ourselves without becoming punishing or moralistic? There is no simple answer, but there are some ways we might start to divorce ourselves from this divisive, state-approved approach to conflict.

Getting around the blame trap could start with rejecting the value system put forward by capitalists. Specifically, we could decline to valorize efficiency, logic, or perfection — all of which underlie the concept of blame. Also, changing our language around conflict, refusing to use the

labels the government uses to assign polarized roles in controversies, (eg victim/perpetrator, guilty/innocent, truth/lie, or right/wrong), can remind us of the complexity of these situations, and encourage more creative resolutions. Not seeking the Truth of who is at fault when problems arise is also key to leaving blame behind; instead, our primary aim could be a rich understanding of the people involved: their intentions, motivations, experiences, histories, and limitations. This approach could inspire communities to think of every conflict as social in nature, problems we need cooperation to understand, analyze, and remedy. This collective response could help circumvent the assigning of blame and punishment by involving interested members of a community, rather than focusing on the questionable acts of a few isolated individuals.

Anarchists have used a variety of tactics to approach the problem of dismantling the state. Appreciating and utilizing this diverse approach is what keeps us vital and impossible to eradicate, and reminds us there is no one way to be an anarchist, and also no one person, group, or tactic to blame for our failure to accomplish our objectives. There are no rules about what strategies are most successful, and no laws to judge each other against. Each of us is free to hack away gleefully at whatever leg of the state we find most appealing or rewarding to attack.

Letting go of blame requires trust. Trust that we're all doing something amazing... maybe something no one will ever talk about, but something secret that will continue to inspire us over the years, and something we can carry in our hearts forever.

Anarchist Solitaire

Independence. It's part of the national identity. A true-blue US citizen is bold, righteous, proud, innovative, strong, perhaps not very educated, but most certainly independent. One of the biggest holidays in the US celebrates national independence, typically with an excess of cheap flags, barbeques, and alcohol. At night, simulations of bombs bursting in time to the national anthem entertain hordes of citizens relaxing in armchairs and enjoying a bloated sense of nationalistic superiority, while conveniently ignoring the poverty of their options.

So what does independence mean? It can describe such indistinct concepts as self-government, autonomy, freedom, self-determination, nonalignment, self-sufficiency, etc. Part of the problem with the word is that it is so vague. It could encompass almost any activity that someone wanted to engage in, as long as no one told that person to do it. It's an ideal that requires distance from others; solitary desire. But is it even possible to achieve? Perhaps in some small ways. One could be independent of a certain person's control, or another person's opinions. This certainly has appeal for anarchists because it encourages us not to conform, to maintain our opposition, to govern ourselves, and be free. But can anyone be truly independent? What would we be free from? Each other? Things? Underneath its star-studded exterior, I believe independence is an impossible label, like the concepts of perfect and good. No one is really independent. So why does this concept exist? What is the use of it?

In addition to being a dissent-baffling sham for the state, citizens who value independence can be very lucrative. If the population is convinced that they shouldn't want or need any help from the state, it leaves money available for other, more important endeavors, like colonization. It also forces citizens to purchase their own healthcare, protection, education, and shelter, further stimulating the economy. The desire to appear independent also encourages maximum productivity from all able persons, increasing revenues from taxes. And if the population-sedating propaganda

and money weren't enough, there's always the fatigue and anxiety from being overworked to wear down any potential opposition. And if you aren't happy with this situation or can't keep up? It's your own damn fault, 'cause you're a US citizen, and you can do anything if you put your mind to it.

What about a black flag waving anarchist? Does our mythic identity include a fierce independence? Is the model anarchist very different from the model US citizen? I get a nervous twinge in my gut when I pose these questions to myself.

In our milieu the idea of independence could go hand in hand with the DIY scene. It meshes nicely with the individualist and egoist perspectives. Anarchists like Voltairine de Cleyre have talked about independence being so important to making well-rounded radicals that they advocated an avoidance of dependent relationships, such as marriage. Many of us already choose to live in near isolation from each other, interacting minimally with the anarchists around us, or mainly through the internet. I have even witnessed communitarian anarchists resort to individualistic rhetoric when tensions arise in their scene. And who of us doesn't get dreamy eyed imagining ourselves to be like Guy Fawkes on November 5th? So, what does being independent give us that's so great for our movement?

The concept of independence, however nebulously understood, does promote some valuable traits in radicals and in our larger networks. It encourages us to take responsibility for our own lives, and become skilled as individuals. It provides the freedom to be selfish and self-serving (as we should be!) without guilt, so that we can follow our desires. It assumes that everyone is strong and competent enough to assert themselves as needed, and keeps us on our guard for potential predators. It keeps relationships in a mode of fluid negotiation, where the desires of all parties are actively promoted. It encourages us to be efficient, able to function on our own, and to be prolific, so that our movement thrives and we are not a drain on the people around us. It supports us feeling strong and competent, prepared for emergencies. It makes for a fulfilled anarchist with a sense of self, who can Get Shit Done. At what cost, though?

If the reasoning behind encouraging independence is that it will create well-rounded people to propel a strong movement, then we need to consider what falls by the wayside if we overvalue this concept. Firstly, it could create a hierarchy of worth, which could lead us to devalue certain people (ie those who can't take care of themselves because of age — either too old or too young — skill, or ability). Secondly, if we take for granted that each person has made their life exactly what they desire because they are self-governing, then how willing or inclined will we be to point out when we think we see them exploiting or being exploited by another? Exploitation could become invisible to us, and would undermine our fellowships by allowing inappropriate behaviors to continue unchecked. Thirdly, this mindset could encourage people to think in solely individualistic terms; while this may be rewarding in some ways, it could also set up anti-social or competitive interactions, where the closeness associated with needing and providing for each other is lost.

Canonizing independence could also impair our ability to cultivate our most empowered selves. Being solely responsible for our lives and circumstances would let the state off the hook and could lead to feeling stressed about our individual performances. It could also promote perfectionist and controlling personalities, people who can't relax, take their time and enjoy, and certainly those who can't ask for or receive help graciously. It would also encourage us to hide any areas in our lives where we are dependent. The state craftily provided us with the medium of money to help us obfuscate our interdependence. This allows us to fool ourselves into thinking we are

independent, by paying people money instead of forming the friendships and social networks that are necessary to get even our basic needs taken care of. There is something decidedly lopsided in so much of that kind of independence.

In the past we were shucking off our traditional roles, asserting ourselves as individuals and more concerned with becoming autonomous. I believe now is the time for anarchists to draw closer together, and to begin to behave as the flexible association of philosophical relations that we are. Navigating the line between communitarianism and individualism is not so easy, since we have no one tradition to follow. Our broken and mixed heritages offer a lot to borrow from, to shape our relationships to mesh with our various philosophies. This is beautiful because it allows us to honor our desires for independence and not re-create the rigid roles that are so confining in many societies. But this also leaves us with a lot to negotiate, attempt, and re-negotiate with those we choose to associate with.

I understand why so many of us choose to work alone; at times independence seems easier to achieve than lasting affinity. I have watched many beautiful communities blossom and then fade into oblivion as the years pass. I see this work of repairing our ability to bond deeply, and depend on one another for entire lifetimes, as one of the great tasks that lie ahead for us. By being more mindful of who we give our money, attention, time, and skills to, we can keep all the benefits of independence while supporting our collectives, groups, and projects more effectively. We can become truly well-rounded anarchists who can critically engage, and provide mutual aid without compromise to our ideals or associations.

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