

Deconstructing All Relationships

Beyond Just Fucking or Fighting as Revolutionary Agendas

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Not only do we desire to change our lives immediately, it is the criterion by which we are seeking our accomplices. The same goes for what one might call a *need for coherency*. The will to live one's ideas and create theory starting from one's own life is not a search for the *exemplary* or the hierarchical, paternalistic side of the same coin. It is the refusal of all ideology, including that of pleasure. We set ourselves apart from those who content themselves with areas they manage to carve out – and *safeguard* – for themselves in this society even before we begin to think, by the very way we palpate our existence. But we feel just as far removed from those who would like to desert daily normality and put their faith in the mythology of clandestinity and combat organizations, locking themselves up in other cages. No role, no matter how much it puts one at risk in terms of the law, can take the place of the real changing of relations. There is no short-cut, no immediate leap into the elsewhere. The revolution is not a war.

– At Daggers Drawn

Theory is a dirty word in many anarchist circles. Often, it is dismissed as “useless”, “masturbatory”, or “privileged” by those wanting to either prioritize living their lives and expressing themselves as freely as possible within the confines of this death trip (art, sexual exploration, building communities of mutual aid, primitive skills, etc.), those who wish to “just shut up and fight” (riots, sabotage, armed struggle, etc.), or the ones who stifle theoretical development in favor of going through the same perpetual and unfulfilling political motions (politics, activism, etc.). While most of these pursuits can be beautiful and significant in the deconstruction of this society and the creation of free modes of living (aside from the bureaucratic, managerial, and activist gibberish), they are not in any way conflicting with the evolution of multifarious organic critical theory. In fact, without such an ongoing personal and collective investigation, examination, and critique of the complexity and depth of the totality of civilization and how we are affected by it, no personal or social transformation is even possible. And certainly any experiments we participate in will be seriously limited by our unwillingness to question more deeply our intentions, goals, effectiveness, and contribution to larger contexts. This is why I argue that the development of personal critical theory in concert with a larger theoretical framework, and connected to practical action is a vital anarchist project. The deconstruction of all of our relationships, from the personal to the communal to the larger social context, and in particular from the perspective of developing anarchist strategies, is essential.

This is no time to Swallow Anger
This is no time to Ignore Hate
This is no time to be Acting Frivolous
because the time is getting late

This is no time for Private Vendettas
This is no time to not know who you are
Self knowledge is a dangerous thing
The freedom of who you are*

The Need for Critical Theory

Theory is integrally connected, whether we are aware of it or not, to all of our actions. Even most of what we perceive as instinctual (at least at this point) contains complicated thought processes that are unique to us, our experiences, our desires, and in many cases, unfortunately, our ideologies. Any time we conceive of a desire, theory is a part of reaching its obtainment or the effort put towards it. Yet not all actions are derived from a *critical* theory, or a theory that has been vigorously developed to incorporate and understand the complex nature of the totality, and our place within it. Also, not all theory is connected with practical application in our world. But, for theory to be relevant, it must concretely pertain to our lives and not merely be an abstract overlay or removed concept. A theory disconnected from practical application will have an outcome on our world, but most likely, not how we perceived it or wished it to be (i.e. pacification, complacency, abstraction, arm chairism). However, our critical theory, by its very nature, cannot be something that is complete, solid, or ironclad. It is something to be freshly encountered and perpetually reconceived in our daily lives. It is less a methodology or program for doing or thinking, and more a persistent, thoughtful, and candid perceiving, understanding, and interacting with our world. No doubt, basic desires, wishes, interests, etc. may remain relatively constant, but how we experience and approach them is best left open and genuine.

Whether we develop our own critical theory or not, we will be guided by theoretical positions and pushes. Is it not better to deeply engage in the creation of our own unique subjective theory, in connection with others, than to – knowingly or not – accept the motivations and theoretical framework of another, whether individual (parent, teacher, boss, guru, specialist, etc.) or institution (church, political system, organization, ideology, etc.)? Since many have never been encouraged to develop critical thinking skills – they were socialized to be followers, to prefer a more complete and “time-tested” worldview, lack the confidence to develop their own theoretical basis, or are just plain lazy – people are generally more easily guided by the theory of the other. This usually leads to either the full-throttle adoption or acceptance of a single ideology (religion, patriotism, all assortments of politicism), the concoction of various splintered ideas (new ageism, postmodernism), or the lack of interest in thinking at all (apathy, passive consumerism). Regardless of the direction, thinking is done for people, and the paradigm that creates these ideologies is maintained, as it guides all thoughts and actions within, perpetuating the alienation between ourselves and our world.

Critical theory, that is self-derived, inquisitive, discerning, and deliberative theory, attempts to limit the influence of external belief systems and to develop the starting point from within ourselves, and therefore limit the alienation between the self and what is attempted to be understood or changed. A direct relationship is created. This is not to say that any of us have the answers, that there is not a historical framework to interpret, or that others cannot connect deeply to this process. It just means that all analysis stems directly from our personal experience and our own eyes, and thus is more connected to our desires, and therefore more relevant to our practice and lives in general. The connection to others in this pursuit can be a helpful and vital process, but ultimately, we must internalize and use critical processes to make these experiences pertinent to us, rather than simply wear their clothes. This is also true of examining the “historical record”, which should be viewed with a healthy amount of skepticism. We cannot view others’ positions or a historical context from a fixed or ideological position, but from true inquisitiveness. It is too easy to read what we want (or our ideology wants) from any source.

Critical theory is not limited to one specific element of life, although at times it might be helpful to temporarily isolate a specific dynamic. Ultimately, if it is to have any deeper relevance, these separate investigations need to be contextualized into a holistic perspective that incorporates an understanding of the totality. Critical theory is not bound by the dualism of morality, but instead looks to understand the complicated nature of all relationships. Dichotomies are merely oversimplifications, usually stemming from a theoretical framework that is agenda driven, rather than from one's true desire to comprehend our world and our relationship to it. These dualisms are typically intended to guide specific behavior, which may even change in given certain circumstances, but whose theoretical rationalizations remain. This approach implies an essentialness to understanding, where as critical theory stems from subjective desires in the context of the world and our relationship to it. Our desires inform the questions we ask. Since critical theory is not guided by outside agendas, there is no fear in asking certain questions, because there is no ideology to uphold which might be contradicted by certain unrestrained honesty. Ultimately, transparency in a theoretical process that is not guided externally can be the only way we can seriously examine ourselves and our world. It connects theory and practice in a way that is consistent with our desires. And, it honestly seeks authentic accomplices in our actions and in our lives.

This is no time to turn away and drink
or smoke some vials of crack
This is a time to gather force
and take dead aim and Attack

This is no time for Celebration
This is no time for Saluting Flags
This is no time for [New Aged] Inner Searchings
The future is at hand*

‘Cause We Just Wanna Have Fun

One of the primary obstacles to the development of critical theory is the exclusive focus on carving out space in the world to develop either healthier relationships with ourselves and those we are in community with, or to explore fetishized aspects of our desires. The first can, in general, have many positive aspects, but only if viewed and acted upon within a larger context, while the second can provide temporary exploration, but is often a perpetual trap which becomes a “lifestyle”¹, scene, or counterculture. Both form boxes that are difficult to get beyond, and both perpetuate an illusion of making a significant break with society. Because they almost entirely move from a reactionary position (providing an alternative to or escape from “straight” society), and because they do not typically seek society’s destruction (thinking they can coexist within or

¹ “life-style” (ism) is a touchy subject in anarchist circles, mostly stemming from how it was used by Murray Bookchin to dismiss any anarchist trend or subset which differed from his own. That is an absurd way to use the term, and is not how it is used here. The purpose of using “lifestyle” in this context is to mean a *style* of living one’s *life*. This is usually driven by either superficial elements (fashion, hipness, music, etc), or one specific element of one’s life they identify with (sexuality, hobbies, political orientation, diet, etc). There is often a homogeneous sub-culture that informs the “style” this life takes from form to detail. It often lacks much in terms of critical theory.

on the edge of it), they do not evade the limitations imposed by society. They are often guided by ideologies which attempt to make ambiguous the alienation in our lives, and aspire to convince us of the tolerable conditions of this existence, and prevent many from recognizing our role or situation in this society. Add to this the fact that the recuperation of any remotely radical theory and activity within this context is almost a given; a safety valve built into the system.

In a culture in which we are told that “comfort” is paramount and “if it feels good, go for it”, it might be wise to more deeply investigate both the motivations for this perspective (capitalism, for one), as well as our socialization². Now, I love pleasure, don’t get me wrong, and would be the last to suggest one deny themselves of any, especially if we are in touch with our intuition and senses. But without at least some investigation into where our desires emanate and how authentic they are to us, we can easily fall into unhealthy situations, reproducing the sickness of society, or become misled by fragmented or distorted feelings. But how do we begin to figure out what are socialized behaviors and which are desires that stem from our unique being? Since we are so immersed in the muck of society, this is an ongoing and often tricky exploration with no cut and dry distinction in most cases. And, once we can start to grasp what aspects of our perceived desires seem authentic, it is then a matter of not isolating or elevating a specific desire as the primary or sole focus of our lives, at the exclusion of others. We are hopefully driven by a multitude of desires, some overlapping, and some even contradicting, but unless we can touch on many of these as a related push or complex theory, then we can become unbalanced or even obsessed. This is all part of the process of critical theory.

As the narrow-minded solely-seeking pleasure seeker or short-sighted scene dweller often neglects larger contexts, it frequently seems the case that they are constantly at odds with direct action, militant struggle, or insurrection. They may view these activities as a danger to their projects, a threat to the prosperity of the communities, counter-acting their work at “finding peace in this world”, or inconsistent with their convoluted ideologies which allow them to acquiesce escape, or dwell in apathy. Any critical perspective on these projects would either question their meaningfulness, or at least, understand that they are temporary, and that their true longevity (for those which actually do make a significant break with the system) is dependent on the ultimate destruction of the institutions of hierarchical power. This comprehension, and the action which moves with it, removes to “lifestyle” from anarchism, and makes anarchism a lived practice stemming from critical theory.

This is no time for Celebration
This is no time for Shaking Heads
This is no time for Backslapping
This is no time for Marching Bands*

The Struggle Carries On...

The opposite extreme of the counter-cultural or “escapist” model is the duty-filled revolutionary specialist. Neglecting huge portions of social and other relations, the revolutionary specialist

² “comfort” is a word which is loaded or informed by the expectations of a culture. It is a manufactured concept that is dependent on standards of a context. For instance, some find comfort living in a gated community or riding in a Hummer, while others find comfort cooking on a campfire or drinking whiskey for breakfast. There really is no

often makes theirs a singular path. It is exclusively about a physical fight or solely a material concern. It is often guided by ideology or superimposed political theory that one adopts to greater or lesser degrees, while personal critical theory is neglected, or in many cases, prohibited for the good of the People or the Revolution. Often, this is a result of one who thinks it impossible to realize their own unique personal desires, feeling they are unrealistic, that they lack the imagination to connect to them, that it is out of their control, or that they should take the back seat to the larger battle. They put themselves into a larger struggle for removed or abstract concepts ("two arms for the Revolution"). They may sometimes even appear to be self-motivated and passionately driven, but ultimately they indenture themselves to "the Cause", which inevitably assigns roles and obligation. Giving these fractured or alienated soldiers "meaning" to their lives, the ideology guiding these sheep instills them with morality, guilt, sacrifice, responsibility, and obedience, not to mention the self-righteous (and often dangerous) indignation to do "what is right" for the Revolution (all of these values warrant a lengthy study themselves). Ideology, if "correctly" applied or consumed, is the basis for most justifications of horrific acts. History is filled with these acts and players, yet mostly re-written to suit the purpose of the ideology.

Aside from the ideological constraints of the revolutionary specialist, the separation of the actor from cast, or the problem of the expert, comes into play. As we will see with the activist, the revolutionary feels they can be part of a specialized group to act in the implementation of a strategy aimed to solve the problems of the world. They will be the ones who will make/change history. This mode of social change makes no significant break with the mode society currently thrusts upon us, and is thus a reactionary procedure; simply a changing of the guards. Already we are alienated and removed from directly controlling our lives, and merely switching who makes these decisions, especially when they claim to be doing it for us, should be met with disdain. The revolutionary specialist is still a politician, no matter how righteous their rhetoric, inspiring their slogans, grand their promises, or handsome their beret.

This is no time to Ignore Warning
This is not time to Clear the Plate
Let's not be sorry after the fact
and let the past become our fate
There is no fate*

Chug, Chug, Chug, All Aboard Activism!

Similar to the revolutionary specialist model, yet usually less extreme in both agenda and in action, a typical response to the miserable world we currently inhabit is the idea that if we could only organize properly, do the "good work", or focus on the right issues, we could achieve a "better world" This model also incorporates the worst of the "lifestylist" or scenester, as it is an illusion of working towards significant social change and living differently than the norms of society, when in reality, they are defined by it. This often plays out as the activist model, an ineffective, delusional, moralistic, self-righteous, alienated, and specialized method for shaping social change. There is inherent in this process, a lack of critical theory.

absolute measurement for it.

Activism is the strategy of being active in this society; to be engaged as an operative within the modes, logic, and outlets of the system. Whether legally, morally, philosophically, or theoretically (or a combination of them all) constrained by and consistent with the system's values and processes, one is a player in the system, and at most a reactionary element in it. Typically, the actions the activist takes and ideas they believe are not defined by them and are removed from their lives. Rather than prioritizing their lives based on passions and desires, they are guided by the duty-filled expectations of the activist world, and typically asked to play a role in some guilt-laden program. Activist types (often an annoying vocal minority) attempt to correct the problems in the world, in order to allow things to "run better for everyone". For instance, they deal with privilege and oppression politics (the politicizing of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) to correct our socialization along new ideological lines, the "correct ones". This short-sighted approach, often with self-righteous judgement, can never get past the simplistic and programmatic college textbook conclusions, offering a plethora of predictable, elementary, paternalistic/maternalistic, and opportunistic solutions. Like the revolutionary specialists, although even more directed by the system, activists become the experts in change, especially in connection to their specialty, the single issue. They "raise consciousness" through repetition, as they hammer their cause into our heads.

After years of going through the motions of ineffectual resistance, many renegotiate their relationship with "activism", or, hopefully, give it up altogether. Typically suffering from burn-out and frustration, the only long-term persona for the activist is the eternal defeated optimist, often sacrificing themselves to the state and victimized by the delusional egos of their (often unrecognized or unacknowledged) leaders.

By rejecting moralistic and sacrificial tendencies for those of direct immediacy, we not only feel more connected and a part of our activity, but ultimately are able to stay healthier and have a better chance of achieving short and long-term goals. The only worthy activism is to encourage people to think for themselves and to feel.

This is no time for Congratulations
This is no time to Turn Your Back
This is no time for Circumlocution
This is no time for Learned Speech

This is no time to Count Your Blessings
This is no time for Private Gain
This is a time to Put Up or Shut Up
It won't come back this way again
There is no time*

Creating Coherence Between Theory and Practice

If we are to actually connect with our desires, or live anarchy, there can be no separation between theory and practice. The two are intertwined and dependent on each other. There is always a theoretical framework (or fragments of many) at play, so it is just a question of how much we determine what they are. We can submit to other theoretical positions, knowingly or not, or we can develop our own. How we do this is a personal adventure, although we can certainly learn much from others, especially in approach or techniques (rather than detail). But,

despite the amount of time some spend in the development of critical theory, certain traps or limitations in its exploration and expression are common-place. For instance, mystification, ambiguity, jargon, and the disconnection from an engagement with the world we wish to play a role in all form barriers to comprehension and expression, and contribute to a lack of clarity in our thinking and in sharing of ideas. The flip-side to the activist model (which goes through the motions or acts in the world mindlessly), is the arm chair intellectual or political theorist who is critical of everything, theoretically, yet never connects abstract concepts to actual life or has a practical agenda; The Lazy Boy Revolution. This dwells in ineffectiveness at the same level as the activist, revolutionary specialist, or counter-culturalist, yet it carries with it a higher level of smugness and self-righteousness as it contemplates and interprets the world from a false and “safe” objectivity. And, of course, avoiding the crystallization of ideas and “the problem” and “the solution” program is a must, as abstraction can only distance ourselves further.

The deconstruction of all of our relationships with the world we inhabit is a difficult challenge, but necessary if we are to move thoughtfully and strategically. This requires the creation of our own critical theory that is derived from and is, a lived reflection of us. This certainly does not necessitate a positive vision, but does imply strategy, which combines and creates coherence between theory and practice. Remember, we are of this world.

This is no time for Phony Rhetoric
This is no time for Political Speech
This is a time for Action
because the future's Within Reach
This is the time
because there is no time
There is no time*

[*] Lou Reed, There Is No Time

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