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Anarchy, Neo-Impressionism and Utopia

The wandering of Humanity

Allan Antliff

1998, Summer

“The tramps refused to obey; they abandoned time, possessions, labor, slavery. They walked and slept in counter-rhythm to the world.”

—Anais Nin, *The Tramps*, 1946

Anais Nin’s encounter-with the homeless wanderers of her day—the tramps of Paris, “in counter-rhythm to the world” reminds me of an enduring duality in anarchism. We stand at one remove from capitalism, attempting in our own way to live in a degraded world in spite of it. In the quest to realize our ideals many of us have joined the ranks of such rebels, who subsist on capital’s margins.

Recently someone at Detroit’s Trumbuilplex spoke to me of wandering, riding the rails across the continent. Others traveled too—punks and tramps who gave barely a passing nod were comrades in a shared adventure that moved from roadside campouts to the squats-and info shops of the cities. He found his community there, traced out among those on the

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margins of everyday life, beyond capitalism's jailed society of obedience, constraint, and self-negation. When I met him he and a companion were preparing to travel again; this time to Chiapas, Mexico. Unknown to most anarchists wandering too has an important history within our movement.

In this essay I've set out to recover that history and, hopefully, to give these anarchist travelers a sense of the continuity of rebellion animating their lives.

Let us return to Europe and an earlier time, toward the end of the 19th century. Following the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871 successive Republican governments presided over an explosive expansion of French industrial capitalism which eroded older forms of production and community life. The capitalist juggernaut was made possible thanks to a new infrastructure of railroads and roads which penetrated the countryside, bringing economic transformation to hitherto relatively untouched areas.¹ In villages, towns, and hamlets, craftsmen were displaced by cheap goods mass-produced in factories. Small-scale farms geared to the material needs and ecological capacities of the local community were undermined by imported produce from abroad and the reconfiguration of agricultural production on a large-scale, export-oriented basis. This process was augmented by a great depression that lasted from 1873 to 1896. Then an economy in crisis forced artisans and peasants into debt, and from there to the mines, factories, mills, and urban centers that fed the industrial capitalist monolith.²

¹ Roger Magraw *A History of the French Working Class: Workers and the Bourgeois Republic, 1871-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 5-7. Similarly, the capitalists of North America have dreamed up a network of super-highways intended to link up the non-unionized and impoverished production centers of Mexico to Northern consumption points. See 'NAFTA Superhighways Threaten North America,' *Earth First!* (September-October, 1997): 17-20.

² *Ibid*, 5.

derer himself, are surrounded by a beautiful Neo-impressionist landscape. Harmony in freedom has transformed the anarchist “utopia” into reality.

Which brings me again to our present-day wandering. Anarchists such as Cross’ Wanderer were outcasts, but they also were free. Their freedom resided in a day-to-day life apart from capital and the revolutionary vision they propagated to the wretched workers encountered along the way. Like Nin’s tramps they too abandoned time, possessions, labor, and slavery in a refusal to obey. And like them they existed in counter-rhythm to a world in which their ideals were deemed valueless. But anarchism’s wanderers were not capital’s victims. They struggled for a better world—just like their counterparts do today, as they pass from Detroit to Chiapas, and a thousand places in between.

Roger Magraw writes that as the old skills and rural communities died, uprooted, alienated, deskilled workers sunk into drink, crime, and domestic violence.³ But many of the displaced refused to be victims. They entered into a state of revolt against encroaching capitalist servitude: and their revolt found articulation in an anarchist critique of marginalization and the cruel existence of the dispossessed.

Nowhere was this critique more clearly encapsulated than in the art of the Belgian and French Neo-impressionists, a group of artist-revolutionaries whose paintings and graphic contributions to journals such as *Le Pere Pinard*, *L’Endehors*, *La Plume*, *L’Assiette Au Beurre*, and *Les Temps Nouveaux* played a key agitational role in the anarchist movement.⁴

Take, for example, “The Wanderers” (1897), a lithograph produced by the Neo-impressionist Theo Van Rysselberghe for an album of prints issued by *Les Temps Nouveaux*. Van Rysselberghe took his title, “The Wanderers,” from a poem of the same name by the anarchist playwright Emile Verhaeren. Beneath the print was a passage from Verhaeren’s poem which reads:

“Thus the poor people cart misery for great distances over the plains of the earth ...”

Who are Van Rysselberghe’s dispossessed? In the late 1880s and early 1890s the workers of Belgium repeatedly rose up in a series of mass strikes, riots, and violent clashes with the police and army. The first such incident erupted in the industrial city of Liege, where an anarchist commemoration of the Paris Commune led to full-scale rioting that spread throughout the country’s industrial mining region.⁵ We can better grasp the desperation of the Liege region’s anarchists through photos and drawings of their living hell—the prosperous” towns

³ Ibid, 11.

⁴ All these journals were anarchist publications.

⁵ Stephen H. Goddard *Les XX and the Belgium Avant-Garde* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 24.

where workers were reduced to combing slag heaps for bits of coal after hours. Men, women, and children worked ten to thirteen hour days, six days a week, in the mines and mills of Belgium. They were paid at or below subsistence level; and if there was no work, they starved.⁶

Van Rysselberghe's Wanderers are working-class refugees displaced by poverty, the police, and the army. In the 1890s thousands of such families were forced onto the roads of Belgium by grinding unemployment, lockouts, or vicious acts of government suppression. "They cart their misery for great distances," Verhaeren wrote. Enraged at the injustice, Van Rysselberghe depicted these rebels in their most abject moment of defeat, condemned to wandering without end in a world ruled by an economic system that "capitalizes everything, assimilates everything, and makes it its own."⁷

Where might they have wandered? Perhaps to the city, to join the despairing multitudes of unemployed and underemployed. Henri Lebasque's lithograph, *Provocation* (1900), bears testimony to the kind of marginal life awaiting them there, in the great marketplaces of capital. This print was also distributed by *Les Temps Nouveaux*.

Provocation is a stark critique of starvation in the face of capitalism's "plenitude," the provocation being the commoditization of bread, humanity's most basic sustenance. A child stands weak and listless, staring at loaves of bread displayed in a brightly-lit shop window. Business prospers while the child starves. Similar testimony to the inhumane idiocy of capitalism is captured in a drawing by Georges Bradberry for *Les*

⁶ Ibid, 56; 69–70, notes 6, 7. Thus turn-of-the-century 'free trade' functioned as a tool of impoverishment, much as it does under the current NAFTA agreement in which North America's workers 'compete' with imports from the industrial gulags of Mexico and Mexican peasant farmers 'compete with U.S. and Canadian corporate agribusinesses.

⁷ Jacques Camatte, *The Wandering of Humanity, The World We Must Leave* (New York, Autonomedia, 1995), 39.

the way in which the discrete colors are scientifically applied to compliment one another while preserving their own, unique character."¹⁵

Thus the Neo-impressionists fused utopia with reality, giving their ideals a material presence in the form of social critiques on canvas that pointed toward an anarchic future. Of course this future could not be achieved without revolution. And the anarchists knew that among the masses of displaced and dispossessed workers condemned to wandering by a pitiless capitalist order, the memory of revolts and the hope of revolution remained. In fact, many anarchist militants came from the ranks of these working class itinerants, who played a key role in the movement as they traveled from place to place spreading revolutionary ideas through pamphlets, songs, and conversations. In his turn-of-the-century account of French anarchism, called *The Anarchist Peril*, Felix Dubois wrote of one such *trimardeur* (vagabond, tramp), nicknamed the Sot, "who lived on the highway." He was one of many who had "turned his back on a corrupt society" to become "a wandering and amiable bohemian" in the service of the anarchist idea.¹⁶

In 1896 the Neo-impressionist Henri-Edmond Cross paid homage to one such anarchist in an illustration issued by *Les Temps Nouveaux*. Copies of this print may well have circulated the length and breadth of France and beyond. Cross entitled his print, "The Wanderer." The Wanderer sits alone, caught up by a visionary revelry. Behind him is the vision itself. The revolution has won and workers are throwing the insignia of capitalist oppression—flags and other symbols of authority—into a raging bonfire. These workers, and the wan-

¹⁵ Robyn Sue Roslak, *Scientific Aesthetics and the Aestheticized Earth: the Parallel Vision of the Neo-impressionist landscape and Anarcho-Communist Social Theory* (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1987), 204. Roslak's is by far and away the best study of Neo-impressionism to date.

¹⁶ Felix Dubois, *The Anarchist Peril* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 82.

capital, “booming as they may be, are no more perceptible, having no more planetary importance, behind the fold of terrain that hides them, than the lark’s nesting in the bottom of a furrow.”¹⁴ Without a doubt these paintings are utopian. We know that Pissarro and other anarchist artists also depicted the brutalization of landless peasant laborers on the large capitalized farms of rural France. However the Neo-impressionists were equally enthralled by the life-cycle they encountered in Europe’s small hamlets and landholdings, where self-sufficiency and pre-capitalist ways still persisted.

In fact, Neo-impressionism’s technique was suffused with anarchist utopianism. The Neo-impressionists applied unique and discrete colors on the canvas—the small dots of paint that give these paintings their soft glow and shimmering radiance—according to scientific principles of vision, so as to produce an overall harmonious effect. They saw their painterly technique as an analogue for the harmony in freedom that could unite humanity and, in turn, reconcile us with nature. Robyn Sue Roslak writes that the visual synthesis of the neo-impressionist canvas reflected:

“... The progressive process through which Harmony and Variety in Unity (terms which defined the ideal anarchist social structure) were achieved. These, of course, were the very terms which the Neo-impressionists and their critics used to describe Neo-impressionist painting. There, individual spots of paint, akin to the human individuals in anarcho-communist social theory, are amassed to form unified, harmonious, synthetic compositions, which appear as such because of

¹⁴ Octave Mirbeau, “Camille Pissarro,” *L’Art dans les deux Mondes* 8 (10 January, 1891): 84. Cited in Martha Ward, *Pissarro Neo-impressionism and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 181.

Temps Nouveaux’ July, 1907 issue. “The starving man,” Bradberry writes, “envies the satiated beasts!” And so a rural out-cast stands mute by a field of fattened cows; valueless, penniless, and “worthless.”

While some anarchists focused on the dispossessed’s plight, others gave tangible form to the oppression of work in the crucible of capitalist modernity. In 1889 the Neo-impressionist Camille Pissarro created a small booklet, entitled *Social Turpitudes*, which depicted the drudgery of emergent forms of urban wage labor. Among them is a depiction of seamstresses slaving under the watchful eye of a supervisor. They hunched over piecework in a debtors’ prison, where they have been condemned by their poverty to endless, repetitious tasks. Pissarro also showed the brutalization of day-laborers. An illustration for the May, 1893 issue of *La Plume*, for example, depicts the backbreaking drudgery of stevedores who spent their lives—when they could obtain work—shoveling and hauling coal.

Thus far I have discussed the anarchists’ damning criticism of industrial capitalist labor and the injustice of working-class destitution. However this was not the sum total of their critique. Anarchists also pointed to different possibilities, possibilities they found latent in Europe’s besieged pre-capitalist ways of life. Here critique was wed to utopia, and the condition of wandering took on new meaning. The latter theme emerges in a second depiction of wandering by the Neo-impressionist Maximilien Luce, entitled “Factory Smokestacks, Couillet” (1898-99). Luce was an uncompromising working-class militant who was briefly imprisoned for his anarchist activities in 1894. Towards the end of the 1890s he traveled through northern France and Belgium recording his impressions of the oppressive mining towns and factories.⁸ An exhibition of his paintings held in 1891 led one anarchist art critic to write

⁸ Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siecle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 145.

of “the bleeding soul of the people, the life of the multitudes anguished and inflamed by suffering and bitterness.”⁹

Factory Smokestacks is dominated by the grim industrial capitalist inferno of Couillet, where treeless streets of rooming houses disgorged workers daily into the hellish maw of the mills. But in the corner of the painting a man and boy walk away from the entrapment of this inferno. Their destination is unnamed; their purpose, undetermined. They might be setting out on a journey, or perhaps they seek momentary respite from the grey, polluted environment they leave behind. In any event, they are passing from one world to another—the rhythm of capital gives way to the rhythm of nature.

Luce and the Neo-impressionists were fully aware of the violence emergent capitalism unleashed on nature’s rhythms and the crippling contortions its industries imposed on humanity. They read the writings of Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin, who both condemned the disequilibrium of industrial capitalism as a violation of harmonious social relations and, ultimately, of humanity’s relationship to the earth. Writing in 1864 Reclus observed that the capitalist ‘pillages the earth;’ he exploits it violently and fails to restore its riches, in the end rendering it uninhabitable. The truly civilized man understands that his interest is bound up with the interest of everyone and with that of nature.”¹⁰

Turn-of-the-century anarchists revolted in the name of a harmonious utopia in which property would be held in common and social and ecological conflict would be banished. Harmony entailed a freedom that respected and nurtured differences while sustaining the good of the whole. Just as mutual aid undergirded the diverse interrelatedness of plants, insects, and animals, so humanity could realize a greater

⁹ Georges Darien, “Maximilien Luce,” *La Plume* LVII (1891): 300.

¹⁰ Elisée Reclus, “Du Sentiment de la nature dans les sociétés modernes,” *La Revue des deux mondes*, 1 (December, 1864): 763. Cited in Marie Fleming, *The Geography of Freedom* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988), 114.

diversity through cooperation.¹¹ “However, this farsighted and demanding vision ran against the grain of history. Far easier and more ‘sensible’ to follow Marxism, which gloried in the myth that the industrial capitalist System could ‘use’ unending wealth, and had only to be harnessed for the social good of all.”¹²

Where could the anarchist utopia find a sure footing in the world? In the first instance, among other anarchists. Reclus wrote of our obligation “to free ourselves personally from all preconceived or imposed ideas, and gradually group around ourselves comrades who live and act in the same fashion.” Such “small and intelligent societies,” he argued, could form the basis of a greater harmonious social order.¹³

However the growing community of anarchists was not the sole social force working against the industrial capitalist leviathan. Reclus and others looked to the surviving patterns of communal existence among the peasantry, where the traces of a different social rhythm still prevailed. Pissarro’s great Neo-impressionist paintings, such as *Harvesting Apples* of 1889, capture the cadence of this life, where work was as yet untouched by the regulatory regime of capitalized production. These workers take their time. They pause to chat amongst themselves and their activity is voluntary and cooperative. Here humanity transforms the world through cultivation, rather than destruction.

Thus, everyday life approaches a condition of harmony akin to anarchism—or so the anarchist writer and critic Octave Mirbeau thought. Mirbeau wrote that Pissarro’s canvases depict a world animated by “the ideal,” where the cities of

¹¹ See Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988).

¹² For the definitive critique of Marxism’s ‘mirroring’ of industrial capitalism’s workings see Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

¹³ Reclus to Clara Koettlitz, 12 April 1895. Cited in Fleming, *The Geography of Freedom*, 175.