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Notes on Anarchist Canon and Memory

An Imperfect Critique

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I have noticed a disappointing trend with my anarchist milieu situated in the Pacific Northwest of Turtle Island. It is a concerning disregard and total dismissal of our inherited anarchist theories and histories, again from people who call themselves “anarchists.” I have noticed this is particularly a problem from White people. Self-proclaimed anarchists here behave as if they are past the droning of Proudhon, Kropotkin, or Malatesta, while still engaging in the same Sisyphean “debates” trying to approach conclusions already reached 100 years ago, while using different language are really just concepts such as the principle of voluntary association, the merits of violence and nonviolence, or if organized Platformism is the way to go.

I view this as a serious crisis within the anarchist movement and its consequential ability to power-map and effectively combat capitalism and the settler state here. While I hope this issue is contained to my locale, I have a feeling comrades elsewhere can relate. What made me aware of this crisis was an experience last year; the grievous misfortune of a comrade dismiss-

ing Kropotkin as an “irrelevant dead old White man,” who then followed up by telling me I should really read Adrienne Marie Brown’s work because she explains to us mutual aid present in animals... as if Kropotkin wasn’t a zoologist, and didn’t already write the foundations of his *Mutual Aid* based off these conclusions, again, already reached 100 years ago.

I posit there is a new, stilted tendency that has now been birthed which I dub the “Instagrammification” of the anarchist movement. They are either the wild, muddy campist mix of detached polcompball (Political Compass) memes, or liberals personally disaffected during the early stages of COVID-19 that were “radicalized” by slides. This has led to a passive consumption of bite-sized and sterilized, out of context anarchism, rather than an active participation and practice. I have come to the conclusion that the way I run my account, and that a lot of anarchists run their accounts, combined with the Phoenician octopus of Meta algorithms, contribute to the watering down of our movement. To “creators” specifically: we need to use the attention our accounts get with incredible care, we should be focusing more on resources and building praxis than semantics or lifestyle memes. Perhaps the most subversive use of our accounts is to paradoxically move people “off” the platform. This is to the point that Mutual Aid as a practice now is not something inherent into our organizations and wider organic social functioning, but specifically is made to be “done” as performance. And even that performance now more and more seems to *only* be nefariously asking oversaturated strangers on the internet to fill up your CashApp.

I have noticed a disturbing trend where anarchists are actively avoiding materialism. Yes, there is an inability or straight unwillingness to study primary sources altogether. But moreover I see that we are becoming enveloped in aesthetic campism instead of an inherited, and continuously renewed and challenged, historical throughline of praxis. What these ‘anarchists’ are deploying in their self cultivation

is a wilful amnesia of real anarchism in favour of the laissez-faire values of liberal capitalism that are easily consumable in small doses. These small doses do not challenge us to actually think or learn our history in any way. Perhaps discussions about the equilly liberatory and oppressive aspects of gender in our milieu would be further ahead if we were absorbing what He-Yin Zhen already observed in China about abolishing the nannü gender binary 100 years ago. Or, why is there still a constant automatic economic deferral to Marx when anarchists have always had Proudhon to also refer to? Yes I know Proudhon was socially conservative but this does not matter in the context where he has already worked through valuable economic conclusions for anarchism. Could we avoid falling into some of the same disappointing Left-Authoritarian “Unity” pitfalls we keep slipping into if we took seriously the lessons of our comrades who struggled in Russia, Ukraine, China, or Cuba? What frustrates me the most is that we are often unnecessarily re-inventing the wheel our forebearers already painstakingly learned and constructed for us.

As Nsámbu Za Suékama reminds us, *This problem is inherently a liberal one*. It is a liberalism that has taken root in our scenes that emphasizes exhausting ritual performance, and elite-captured-identity-deferral that disempowers everyone and overburdens our BIPOC comrades. The (honestly, fair) resentment pointed towards the book-buried peacock *only* deferring to a European canon (we have all interacted with the other side of this) is likely what has driven the dismissive “that’s a dead old white man” phenomenon (DOWMP). However, I question, if these people are still unable to differentiate between power, violence, and authority, when these are things already clearly understood by some of our European forebearers who fought against the same system imported here, are some of our forebearers really still useless? (Even if White European anarchists are not your forebearers, there is obviously still useful information to glean for the same

reason.) I blame the DOWMP on this liberalism. In my experience, those engaging in DOWMP are the same White people that hypervisibilize and fixate on Audre Lorde to perform their “good allyship.” For us settler anarchists, Tawinikay reminded us to draw upon our own histories, and that we should *gain confidence in communicating our own politics of anarchism to Native comrades*. Now that all praxis has been relegated to the realm of performance, which I think is driving most cyclical burnout, it seems that even just *reading* a text now signals a wholly support of the entire writing and the author’s whole life. Supposedly, to even read a DOWM now is to approximate yourself to Whiteness. The Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro (FARJ) reminds us:

When anarchism ceases to be a tool of the exploited in their struggle for emancipation and functions as a hobby, a curiosity, a theme for intellectual debate, an academic niche, an identity, a group of friends, etc. For us, this view seriously threatens the very meaning of anarchism.

This is not an angry White take on “how dare you not defer,” or an attempt at competing for political space against BIPOC. It is only a plea to fellow young anarchists for us to study our own histories and not unnecessarily repeat our historical errors. Jakhi Lodgson-McCray, when turning himself in for allegedly torching 10 NYPD vehicles, reminded us that it is the fault of state and capital—the COINTELPROs and their domestic warfare campaigns—that there is a crater in the memory of our movement. While our memory crater is the fault of our enemies, it is *our responsibility* to fill the gaps back in again, learn from our histories and carry them forward.

Remembering the work that has already been done, and breathing life into our histories by practicing them, is the antidote against liberalism and the key to us making revolution.

That revolution will never be televised. It will never take place on Instagram, or Reddit, or Twitter, or Bluesky, or any of it. I am tired of this pretend-you’ve-done-it-more-than-the-next-person competition. I am exhausted with those of you that have made a simple game of this.

And no, me criticizing Meta platforms is not ableism actually.