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Anarchism and Civility

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

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A generally accepted anarchist tenet is that the State can only be effectively dismantled by a voluntary, cooperative and spontaneous insurrection by the people. Authoritarian revolutions gotten up by manipulative vanguardists are rejected as inconsistent with the anarchist belief that the means must be consistent with the ends. History has plenty of examples to show that seizure of power through elitist revolt, rather than furthering the goals of the revolution, actually becomes a process for the strengthening of the State in a new and more vicious form. From an evanescent moment of exultant freedom one inevitably wakes up to the hangover of a Napoleon or a Lenin or a Mao.

Nevertheless, contemporary anarchists are often still mesmerized by the call to arms, even when the chance of such a romantic gesture succeeding is nil. The only real revolutions occur when popular discontent causes the State to collapse under the weight of its own folly, not when some bloody vanguard, following whatever destructive fantasy its leaders concoct, meets the modern State head-on. This inevitably results in meaningless hardship for the people involved, with the greatest misery reserved for innocents who get in the way of either side's fallacious ideology. Being a "rebel" and

antagonizing the flatulent powers-that-be in a modern State can be an exciting game, but it is only bluster and puerile self-gratification when genuine revolt is implausible. In the end the most radical "revolutionaries" either end up as bitter, dead-end martyrs or become the next generations' "born-again" capitalists. Having had their fling, they come to believe in their new "realism" as solipsistically as they embraced rebellion. None of this brings us any closer to a solution to the problem of the State.

The fallacy of revolutionary adventurism is mirrored on a personal level by the intolerant and abusive discourse of identity politics. Everyone is pre-judged by their race, gender, sexual or religious affiliation, and socially compartmentalized in some politically correct egg basket. The goal of the anarchist movement is to establish a free, tolerant and cooperative society which will embrace diversity and celebrate difference. If the means are to be consistent with the ends, then how can such an abrasive and exclusionary practice as identity politics possibly achieve that end? Identifying the "enemy" by birth or predilection, regardless of an individual's actual beliefs or actions, is simple bigotry. Awarding moral virtue on the same grounds is simple stupidity. Similarly, essaying to act as a unwarranted spokesperson for a diverse grouping of individuals who by chance share a single basic characteristic is the most arrogant sort of elitism. Real people, stripped of their individual identities, are thus subsumed in some hypothetical one-dimensional construct that effectively denies them any complexity of character. This isn't an answer to institutionalized racism and bigotry, but rather its mirror image.

This sort of prejudicial activity has appeal for the simpleminded. It's easy to either attack or adulate a stranger on the grounds of appearance. A similar anxiety powered the old Sumptuary Laws which punished anyone who dressed above their social class - it was too unnerving for the elite to think they might make a mistake and treat an inferior as an equal, thanks to illicit appearances. Political prejudice makes it simple to get through the difficulty of

rootless modern life where there are no clear cut exterior indications of what a person might really be like. All white males (unless, perhaps, gay) are dangerous, power-driven and bigoted. All women (unless, perhaps, Republican) are intuitive, nurturing and empathetic with Nature. Members of minorities (take your pick) are morally superior to members of majorities. Classifications and labels which assist us in making such decisions are more real (and more important) than the people they describe. Et cetera. Balderdash.

The goal of a tolerant and cooperative society of free individuals can only be achieved by those very means - by being tolerant, cooperative and free. We must be better companions to our fellow mortals, whatever their outward characteristics. Civility, which facilitates cooperation, is imperative if anarchy is to really work. Pig-headed and self-important aggressiveness, hypercriticism and easy intolerance is a recipe for the status quo. We don't mean to suggest some sort of all-accepting, "turn-the-other-cheek" bourgeois crap, either. Once you get beyond the labels, there are still unfortunately plenty of folks that it makes sense to despise. Arrogant, violent, intolerant, fanatical, bigoted, manipulative, rapacious... individuals with these characteristics must be guarded against, but they are not all found in one easily recognized group. These adjectives equally describe individual men, women, blacks, whites, handicapped people - the whole gamut of the human race. Nor is anyone as morally pure as some of our new puritan idealists would insist they be. A person is the sum of their character traits, not a distillation of the most pronounced ones. Radicals are just as prone to frailties of character as industrialists. It is by their actual effect on their community and environment that we should evaluate our fellow beings, not by some dominant virtue or fault which particularly excites us. It would be far more preferable to tolerate an insensitive verbal bigot who in practice actually helps people than a pious hypocrite who mouths politically correct platitudes and then goes home and beats his lover.

Anarchism involves conscientious and responsible judgement, and the effort to see through the shucks, facades and hype of our unregenerate society. One of the most virulent traps for the contemporary Left is the aping of the knee-jerk bigotry of the Right, which involves a mean-spirited "us-and-them" prejudice through group identity. There are plenty of actual villains out there, some easily identifiable, others hidden in hypocrisy. There are equally many good people obscured by the accidents of their birth, upbringing or situation. Let us therefore focus on the individual rather than the group, and recognize that the only way we will ever really achieve the goals of Anarchy is through living those difficult precepts in the here and now, and treat each other civilly. There can be no other effective preparation for Anarchy's ultimate realization in the future.