

# **On Addiction, Ableism and Anarchism**

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Addiction is something that touches almost every individual, directly or indirectly, and often is the ravaging menace of marginalized communities. The Anarchist community is not an exception, we've lost comrades in this struggle, and the void felt from their loss and subsequent rifts stay for longer than anyone wants to acknowledge. We are also no exception in reproducing and replicating systemic ableism. All too often, we exploit neurotypical privilege even amongst the most social justice-minded of us.

I am an addict, one whose struggle has not been easy. For the purpose of this essay however, I will refrain from sharing specifically on my own experience. I am first and foremost writing as an Anarchist. Also, when I'm speaking about addiction, understand I am also talking about alcoholism and behavioral addictions.

## The Addict

Even in the first world, the addict is one of the most vilified and marginalized voices. Navigating through the capitalist system as an addict is all too often a painful variable in the cycle of self-destruction. They are the recipients of a social disgust, a brutal police state and a draconian justice system. The addict is disowned, estranged, and disinherited. Some become lost vagrants or outcasts. They are what people picture when thinking that a different world might be impossible.

Everyone knows the addict. They are our siblings, comrades, parents, lovers, and idols. Their stories are not all the same, and surely the experience of the drug addicted sex-worker who faces abuse daily, is going to be different than that of the white collar executive, whose drinking problem is the family's well-guarded secret. These "intersections" of systemic oppression reveal a striking conclusion which seems apparent but is all too often ignored. From the HIV and methamphetamine co-epidemic amongst the queer community, to the heroin dens serving child-soldiers in Liberia, *addiction goes where oppression goes*.

Whether you believe addiction to be a disease or a disorder, it most certainly is a disability and certainly is not a moral affliction. This is important to remember when talking about addiction in a social justice or Anarchist context. Under capitalism, the addict has an immediate adversity in their relationship to production, the same way other marginalized groups like people of color, women and queer people do. The state holds the same grudge as the ownership class, seeing mass-incarceration as the only viable solution.

## Ableism: The addict's struggle

As the addict ponders if another cure to their misery is possible, the neurotypical savior will always know the solution. The addict needs to grow up, the addict needs to be a *productive member of society* (which sounds Orwellian to any Anarchist), the addict needs to be punished, the addict needs medication, the addict needs authority, the addict needs rehabilitation, the addict needs *you* to save them.

It's more than obvious that upon considering any of these options, the addict's mind drifts to simply needing another fix. Whether the chicken or the egg came first, the addict knows their addiction as a crippling disability as well it knows addiction as a chronic, progressive, and deadly disease. They learn even before they begin their downfall what their relationship is with society. The addict experiences life in a irreconcilably antagonistic world. Viewing the neurotypical world

through the foggy lens of compulsion, they grow increasingly distrustful of the those who believe they are acting in their interest.

This ableism makes its way into every level of society, and therefore every social relationship, and this is all too true amongst Anarchists. Alienation, judgement, and gossip are always done before someone approaches with well-meaning concern. Sympathy, as the ability to have compassion for those with whom you do not have the shared experience with, is often misunderstood by most neurotypical people trying to “help” addicts. Sympathy is something often abused, misconstrued and postured. The addict knows this well. They grow even more hostile.

The same way the gay man’s struggle is different from that of a transperson, but both struggle against the same system, mental illness is often different struggle than that of addiction, while both struggle against the same ableist system (and they are hardly mutually-exclusive either). The social experience between them is very different. One thing is certain to me though, to be neurotypical is to be privileged. It is not a bad thing in any regard, it is simply something to be aware of and avoid exploiting.

## **Mutual-Aid: Intersections of Anarchy and Recovery**

A common opinion is that the greatest asset to the addict is those who share a common experience and struggle. This is true in social justice regards too, and is commonly held belief amongst those organizing other marginalized voices. It is of no surprise to Anarchists, that the most successful organizations are mutual-aid organizations. You’ll find “Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution” at the top of my reading. There is no Anarchy without the concept of mutual-aid, even if the book was the product of half a century’s worth of critical development of Anarchist theory before it.

The 12-steps often dominate the recovery praxis of these organizations. Anarchists have also developed more intersectional radical mental health projects like the Icarus Project which embrace neurodiversity and also a diversity of solutions. Many Anarchist spaces host both, which I think is good yet other Anarchists might be critical of. Regardless, AA’s success as a sustainable and international organization, founded on principles of voluntary association and mutual-aid, should at the very least spark the interest of the Anarchists. But what did Bill W. (the founder of AA) have to say about Anarchism?

Bill W. in “AA Comes of Age”:

*“When we come into AA we find a greater personal freedom than any other society knows. We cannot be compelled to do anything. In that sense our society is a benign anarchy. The word ‘anarchy’ has a bad meaning to most of us.... But I think that the gentle Russian prince who so strongly advocated the idea felt that if men were granted absolute liberty, and were compelled to obey no one in person, they would voluntarily associate themselves in the common interest. AA is an association of the benign sort the prince envisioned*

*But when we had to go into action – to function as groups – we discovered that we also had to become a democracy. As our old-timers retired, we therefore began to elect our trusted servants by majority vote. Each group in this sense became a town meeting. All plans for group action had to be approved by the majority. This meant that no single individual could appoint himself to act for his group or for A.A. as a whole. Neither dictatorship nor paternalism was for us.”*

The “gentle Russian prince” Bill W. was describing was Peter Kropotkin. Bill goes lengths to describe his reasons for adopting a decentralized and anti-authoritarian organizational structure based on mutual-aid and how he borrowed from Kropotkin’s theories on mutual-aid. So in a sense, Anarchists have already influenced the ways in which addicts find recovery. Many Anarchist ideals and principles made themselves into AA’s organizational companion to the steps, known as “The 12 Traditions”, which keep the organization decentralized and non-hierarchical across nations.

So what is to be done with this observation? How do we build a better world for the addict and act in solidarity with them? I think there is somewhat of a spark being born within the radical mental health organizations like the Icarus Project. We also can focus on attacking the ableist system and mass incarceration with the same strategies as we attack all other systems of oppression. But most important, we can realize that we have each other, and remember that mutual-aid is an intrinsic factor of evolution. It is not something we have to create, it can only be realized and embraced.

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