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No Such Thing as Neutral

On the Tools We Use

Ignatius

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While I had already conceptualized and begun writing this piece prior to the publication of “An Anarchist Anti-Gun Manifesto,” the final form of “No Such Thing as Neutral” has been largely influenced by the response to the former. In particular, I was inspired by the common response of guns being “a tool” and “therefore neutral,” of the assumption that my critique of guns, and their world of relations, was of a moral character, and as such the concept of “neutrality” would hold some rhetorical weight. This piece is an attempt to break out of the confinement of moral frameworks we operate within, especially when we aren’t aware of our doing so. It is an attempt to argue for a more explicit articulation of desire, a more explicit analysis of the world of domination around us. As with every line of ink I have ever left on a page, this piece is, at its core, a call for more explicit action.

When we, as anarchists and associated radicals, talk of objects or tools, moral frameworks tend to creep their way into the conversation. However, the way these frameworks butt in is less explicit than one might assume, often disguising themselves as the anti (or non) moral argument. These frameworks

frequently sneak into our discussions through the trojan horse of “neutrality.”

It would be impossible to count the number of times I’ve seen a discussion on the use of particular tools or tactics begin, and often end, with a flippant statement about how said tools are “neutral” and therefore neither “good” nor “bad.” Such statements are typically employed, knowingly or otherwise, in an effort to deflect critique of a particular tool or tactic and move to some place of resignation that tools are outside of the realm of critique by their nature of being “neutral.” Despite seeming to argue against a moral interpretation of tools, this rhetoric implicitly reinforces a moralistic view of the world by presupposing a good/bad binary and placing “neutral” somewhere within it.

All tools have some existent way in which they are produced (in this case I mean the literal production of tools as objects). All tools have some intended use at the point of their production. All tools have realized uses once they are employed in the world. All tools affect the ways we relate to the world around us, even if their effects are small. There is no separating a tool from the relations it engenders, and there is no such thing as a “neutral” relation. Therefore, there is no meaningful way in which a tool can be considered “neutral” outside of a moral interpretation of the world.

This argument may appear semantic, but I ask that you sit with it for a time before making that claim. I believe this shift in language and lens by which we talk about tools is imperative for us (anarchists and fellow travelers) to move towards a place of more meaningful communication of our desired ways of existing (and how we wish to attack the current ways of existing forced upon us). Let us take a moment to consider a few specific examples: a handgun/rifle, a car, and a doorbell security camera.

At this point, you’ve likely already read an entire piece outlining some of my broad analysis on guns (specifically in a US

context), but I'll summarize a few key claims here. Handguns and rifles are machines primarily produced in factory settings, designed with the explicit purpose of being a device that can quickly mortally wound a living thing. The most powerful of these machines primarily serve to bolster to immense power of the US military and police forces. Even when owned by self-identified radicals, within a world dominated by commodities, guns can engender a reactive and reactionary positionality, limiting insurrectionary potential by granting the illusion of concentrated power that is easily fetishized.

Cars are machines primarily produced in large scale, assembly line factories. Their intended design is to allow individual people to travel large distances in relatively short amounts of time. Their existent production (speaking of both gasoline and battery powered) encourages continuing ecocide, a hyper extractive relationship to the world we live in. Their production also encourages ecocide through the continual encroachment of drivable space into green spaces. The existence of these machines is both reified by, and itself reifies, a world of commodities and consumption. These machines, and the current world they reify, leads to thousands of preventable deaths among people forced to use them as a means by which to access their place of employment.

Doorbell security cameras are machines primarily produced in assembly line factories. Their production, like the existent factory production described above, reifies and is reified by the capitalist mode of production. The existence of these machines serves to bolster the security apparatus of civil society, encouraging individuals to police their neighbors (and even themselves) under the guise of "safety." The companies producing these machines frequently have agreements with law enforcement allowing for the footage they record to be used in active investigations even without the consent of the device's "owner."

You may agree or disagree with some of the claims I have made about the specific devices I have listed, and clearly none of the above discussions are anything close to exhaustive. But even if you disagree with the claims and even if you agree that there is much more to be said in each case, it becomes impossible to meaningfully make the claim that any of these machines are “neutral” in this type of analysis. The mode of production, the intended use, the actual use, and the existent effects of these machines are not “good.” They are not “bad.” They are not “neutral.” They just *are*. We can argue for days about what exactly their mode of production/intended uses/actual uses/existent effects are, but we cannot deny their existence which is precisely what I believe the use of “neutrality” in the context of tools attempts to do.

Whether you are motivated by belief in the possibility of a more preferable way of living, or if you prefer to focus primarily on the art of negation of the existent, or if you exist in the wonderful space between the two, I ask that you make the effort to as curious and as explicit as you can possibly be in explorations of your analysis of the world around you. I ask this of you, not because it is “right” or “correct” but because I want us to build more meaningful connection with one another.

I want us to find others who share some desired way of relating to the world. I want us to prime ourselves to define meaningful actions, carry those actions out, and to learn from them. All of this is an expression of my desire. So do with that what you will. If it resonated at all for you, then I hope we find one another in the street someday. And if it didn’t resonate, then I expect we’d pass each other without thinking twice, and I’m okay with that.