

Towards an Anarchist Critical Theory of OCD

Synthesizing an Anarchist OCD

OCD Rebellion

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Contents

OCD is Dis-Order? Anarchy is Order?	3
Anarcho-Grubbism?	5
Anarcho-Primitivism?	5
Noise Not Music	6
The Paradox of Purity	6
Categorical Order	7
Crime and Anarchist Criminology	7

Looking on the anarchist library there is nothing specifically related to OCD. Ugh.... Same as a few years ago, while there is a lot of criticism of psychiatry and diagnostic logics used to pathologise and often otherise and exclude folks, what is not talked about in detail is specifically OCD, which stands for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and how it relates to the anti authoritarian and no hierarchical ideology, milieu and 'state' of social formation called anarchism, anarchists and an-arche. In terms of. General academic theory there has been an attempt by writers Matthew Hiller and Eva Stepney called "The Paradox of Purity" pointing out certain guidelines for what could make a useful approach to critical theory. It touches on themes and thinkers that I also found relevant such as Mary Douglas and her work on purity, pollution, ritual and dirt such as found in the classic text "Purity and Danger," in 1966. While I find an essay in and of itself what I often think is a missing thread not only in this article but in larger radical (and even "anarchist") discussions is the usage of anarchist theory and thinkers which can locate key concerns in not only the phenomenology of OCD but in cultural conceptions which can make it a cross match for critical analysis.

OCD is Dis-Order? Anarchy is Order?

A lot of critical theories as well as more poststructural theories are about challenging binaries and things which structure and control our life whether of normality, rationality of even concepts of order, chaos and control. As stated in the aforementioned article a Critical OCD approach looks to challenge binaries of Order/Chaos, similar binaries that are crucial to contemporary, social and historical conceptions of anarchy. Anarchist parlance has had a long history with playing between anarchism and its association with chaos, violence and disorder. Anselme Bellagarigue has the famous quote "Anarchy is order, government is civil war," with the famous anarchist emblem painting the anarchist A over an O to symbolise in avarice to hegemonic notions that anarchy is in line with harmony order. While some anarchists have thought to recuperate anarchism from negative notions of chaos, messiness and disorder some anarchists have embraced it such as Enzo Martucci in an essay titled "In praise of chaos" who gave chaos a new meaning to signify non conformity, flux and freedom.

Order is a weird term taking on multiple associations, some metaphorical, some societal and some even at the micro and even visual scale. An example of this is the anarchist inspired writer James C Scott and his use of the visual in *Seeing Like a State* to elucidate "Visual and aesthetic" order (A supposes characteristic of Authoritarian High Modernism). OCD can be contrasted to order in many ways but in this section it is interesting to look at the often found label "symmetry/Order" OCD with OCD finding heavy cultural concepts with psychotic levels of neatness, harmony and visual unity with "Im so OCD" often referring to a need to have things in just the right order, so precise as to try to reach absolute perfection. As Meaghan Rice of TalkSpace says "Symmetry and Ordering OCD is a subtype of OCD causes a person to focus excessively on how things look or are arranged, balanced, or positioned."

This leads to distress if the compulsions or actions to neatness, balance, position or order/perfect things aren't done "correctly. While this is just one aspect of OCD it is to note that there has been work with OCD in disability studies regarding order. As the writers of *The paradox of Purity* put it, "Disability studies scholars have challenged medicalized and individualized accounts of OCD, arguing that the disorder is instead a symptom of modernity, in which individuals over-

internalize social imperatives towards order and control (Davis 11; Castel 302; Fleissner 34). To this end, they present OCD as a constructed category that pathologizes thoughts and behavior that are deemed as excessive or unproductive, with treatment acting to discipline non-normative ways of being.” While not cited in the article, this passage is similar to the one found in “The philosophy of Dirt” on page 126 echoing the work of Norbert Elias in “The Civilising Mission,” in which the early modern period is exemplified by a new desire for self discipline and self control, with the increase of modern forms of surveillance creating an internalised form in which shame and disgust continue to rear their ugly head. For Olli Langerspetz, the aim of purity in the early modern period was not hygiene, or health but an intensified control of the private life of peoples, culminating in a sort of self respectability culture which reinforced norms of self government maybe even literally. Other writers such as Nikolas Rose in ‘governing the soul’ echo these sentiments, as it was influential in shaping the ideal mora; compass of the obedient worker. He calls it ‘the government of the self’ and the book is subtitled *The Shaping of The Private Self*. It talks about work, family, war and governmental techniques of increasing the obedience and self discipline of the citizenry.

In “What is Radical OCD” I used the analogy of “canvas,” to point out that what may amount to not simply “anarchist” but more widely Radical Writings about OCD cannot be contained, singularised into a formula or blueprint. The potential is expansive, so much so that one essay or even one writer cannot do justice . In “Disability Praxis” Bob Williams-Findlay Talks about a political consciousness of the disabled, as well as the self organised movement and identity for disabled and thus also mentally ill/Neurodivergent folk. While OCD communities do have some establishment they are not inherently or even frequently political in nature, most concerns are due to social stigma, a lack of societal understanding and complications due to funding and even professional knowledge of the condition. Popular remedies for OCD such as talk therapy are notoriously ineffective for treating OCD as many psychologists have only a baseline degree of knowledge. A critical OCD looks to change this and explore underlying systemic gaps which may be relevant to these concerns, critiques of capitalism, the market, government activities and the psychiatry industry seem rife for dissection. Other marginalised identities such as those of Child, Gender, Sexuality and Race are also of concern as what symptoms show up in OCD is culturally and socially contingent with certain identities adding to the stigma around the lived experience of OCD for sufferers. An example of this is OCD about Gender identity with OCD often relating to uncertainties around ones gender as well as who and what they are attracted to. Themes like this are explored by Bebe Montoya in her zines about Gender OCD titled “How to laugh instead of wanting to die” and “Rude awakenings Vol 1.” As she explains in her insta post on it gender OCD can be brutal, especially for those in leftist, activist and radical spaces, she describes the environment as “puritanical” and “paranoid.” AS they explain this type of OCD can mimic the worse in left wing identity politics as they explain how it can cause an “all consuming” guilt just for existing, believing something about them is intrinsically harmful. I would have to agree that purity culture can be a mainstay of radical politics for better or for worse, while it is good to police against bad behaviour and hierarchy, it can often have an inverse effect of constraining freedom, especially when the natural imperfection and learning of peoples isn’t fully embraced. I also have similar experiences with OCD relating to my sense of Gender at least in my case as a man. In other parts of “What is Radical OCD” I tried my hat at humour with me using, “poshness” to showcase a kind of “Ick” mentality of OCD tinged “disgust.”

Anarcho-Grubbism?

In What is Radical OCD or at least the drafts I hinted at certain associations between anarchy and “dirt” in all of the senses we can ascribe to those words. Simon Springer an anarchist geographer even embraced the title, calling himself a dirty anarchist, associating discourses of “cleanliness” with exclusion, borders and the individualising of spaces and territory. Its no secret that anarchists in one way or another are associated with dirt, from images of a disease filled, backwards crime ridden backwater, to crusty punks listening to disclose and disrupt anarchists have taken up the mantle as the sin qua non of political dirt. In certain parlances dirt is associated with the upper class and with high society, those who are more likely to support and benefit from the racist, capitalist and authoritarian status quo. The embrace of punk qualities is a rebellion to the existing order embracing the marginalised and what would be considered abrasive showing that its not about the look but the content. This is true for punk as punk has progressive messaging with abrasive and crusty musical themes. Going back to Simon Springer he not only associated dirt with the increasingly endangered planet earth and all of its soil and soot but also with connection, sociality and inclusion. As Springer puts it “An anarchist’s connection to the planet represents a threat to the present circumstances precisely because our dedication to mutual aid and convivial togetherness are a constant source of anxiety in the face of borders, bisections, and boundaries.” This fits well as it is said that dirt is not about danger and that it is truly about the crossing of boundaries as purity and danger is not just about taboos and rituals but also about power and boundaries. He goes on to describe social life as a messy “entanglement,” almost like the roots of a tree itself.

Anarcho-Primitivism?

Its no secret that John Zerzan is an eclectic figure in the anarchist movement, writing against technology, civilisation, the state and even... yes.... Numbers. In Numb and Number John zerzan railed against even the idea of counting as a reification of mentalities of control as he puts it “Number is the key to mastery: everything must be measured, quantified. It is not what we can do with number, but what it does to us. Like technology, its intimate ally, number is anything but neutral. It tries to make us forget that there is so much that shouldn’t or can’t be measured.” When it comes to “Arithmomania” or Compulsive Counting it can be seen that the counting of functions such as steps, tries, breaths and even food intake is often done to maintain a sense of control, as Danica Leigh from TreatmyOCD says “Counting may bring a brief sense of relief, safety, or completion. But because that relief does not last, it can reinforce the pattern and make counting feel necessary the next time distress arises,” counting at some point changes from a tool to a mental structure which regiments daily life. Overall Those with Arithmomania or “Counting OCD” would have an interesting conversation with the long time anarchist writer, it seems as if both primitivists and OCD activists alike share a grip with the tortures of counting! Ugh!! Talk about Boring!!!

John Zerzan also has other gripes related to at least my “OCD phenomonology” mainly his support of ambiguity and his criticism of the idea of taboos and order. In page 12 of “A peoples History of Civilisation” Zerzan thought that a lot of hierarchy was created by religion and its impurity taboos which were used to control and dominate people and in the name of the taboo

control and restrain behaviour. There are obvious parallels between the anarchist Zerzan and the anthropological and religious work of Mary Douglas.

Noise Not Music

The famous saying goes “Dirt is matter out of place.” This is one of the main philosophical and linguistic lessons Douglas tries to punch home in her 1966 work *Purity and Danger* as well as her 1968 essay on Pollution. Now how does this relate to the Noise not Music scene, a largely informal scene of bands, genres and artists comprising sounds from hardcore punk, D beat, power violence, Crust punk, crusher crus, Grindcore, Noisecore and even death grind? Well as mentioned before punk subculture and anarchist subculture have been heavily interlinked for multiple decades now with punk bands often using anarchist iconography as well as certain bands being rostered with actual anarchists, on the anarchist side punk is a common subgenera of music for self styled anarkiddies and was one of the things that helped many get into anarchism. Genres like crust punk have often been regarded by Mums, conservatives and naysayers alike as “noise” while metal music also gets this label, punk scenes readily embrace the raw abrasive non technical connotations of this monicker. Punk embraces noise, using distorted guitars, bass, loud melodies and loads of feedback... x2!! Now to the crux of the matter some have theorised/philosophised that what dirt is to ideas and categorical phenomena noise is to music and melody.

The Paradox of Purity

As stated before the Paradox of Purity is an early work envisioning a sort of critical approach for OCD, it goes over some of the history with OCD standing in as “Obsessional Neurosis” in Freuds work and how discussion on OcD has largely left some of the psycho-analytic framings of the Freudian term in question. The writers also urge would be scholars and OCD Warriors to take a critical look at what is even to be made of any current “disability studies” with a key particularity for the uniqueness of OCD as an experience, a clinical discourse and a social history. As one can see it is very influenced by the Foucauldian notion of Disciplinary power as well as marxism, using terms such as “discipline” “discourse” and false consciousness. Taking from Williams-Findlay’s marxist and historical materialist approach in *Disability Praxis*, one wonders if this article envisions such tools used in radical historiographies of OCD entering how economic modes of production and the change to capitalism may have interacted with what we now know as the clinical classification of OCD. It does challenge a lot of the heart of ERP therapy as it is critical of the pathological approach which leads o ERP in general, it sees the tension between disability activism and conventional treatments for OCD labelling the belief in the latter potentially bourgeois false consciousness. As the article puts it “medical and therapeutic approaches to OCD do aim at regulating “disordered” forms of thought and behavior. As opposed to cultivating any kind of critical perspective, the putative goal of these approaches is to make those with OCD more like everyone else. To restate the question posed by McRuer: is this as good as it gets for those with OCD? Can there be alternatives to medicalization and the presumption of false consciousness?”

Categorical Order

To combine concepts illustrated both by anarchist sympathetic, James C Scott and religious scholar/Anthropologist Mary Douglas we come at the term “Categorical order.” For Mary Douglas this may describe differing sections in a hierarchy, gender relations and the logic of contamination/categorisation where things considered irreconcilable are kept away from each other, this logic can be used to understand how hill populations saw their identity in James C Scott’s book “The art of not being governed.” An example of this is in the section on ‘Ethnogenesis’ in page 261 “Many such ethnicities can be understood as asserted structural opposition’s between binary pairs “serf versus free cossack, civilised versus barbarian, hill versus valley, upstream (Hulu) versus downstream (hillir) nomadic versus sedentary, pastoralist versus grain, wetland versus drylands, producer heirarchia; (shan,gumsa) vas egalitarian (Kachin, gumlao).” Hill populations such as the Karen, and the Kachin had looser social formations and often played hard and fast with identity categories. This fluid logic paved its way into their livelihood as how they ate and how they reproduced signified shift and change, they were the Danger to the pure and holy hierarchs’ of the valley/padi states. For the tribes of Zomia their names often symbolised the sort of way those on top of the state hierarchy saw them, as Scott says they were associated with rudeness and savagery, over time the names stuck on internally as a form of endearment. These identities didn’t just signify differences in attitude, subsistence patterns and location but were often used as a weapon of concealment and flux to remain illegible to state authority and sometimes for economic advantage. The same anti essentialism that puts forward the likes of Judith Butler in terms of gender theory is embraced by Scott when it comes to race and ethnicity, pointing out how the categorical order of creating discount tribes, villages and communities is often a valuable part of state-making projects, showcasing the links between statism and racist colonisation/imperialism. He puts it here in page 263 “The enterprise of dividing up the natives into mutually exclusive, territorially delimited tribes was not an administrative mania peculiar to cartesian enlightenment,, or for that matter anglo Saxon, Calvinist tidiness.” Here again we see the word “order” and all of its various meanings take centre stage once and for all. In all of this tension between chaos vs order hill vs valley it is to note that Scott is on the side of the more “Anarchic” as he criticised the states slow a foot efforts at categorising the fluid social phenomena it attempts at governing.

Crime and Anarchist Criminology

One think a phenomenology and critique centred around OCD could explore is “criminality” particularly crime and its attendant fears, and dynamics. Its not coincidence that a major fear of those with especially severe OCD is getting in trouble with the law, OCD subtypes such as pedophilia OCD, Harm OCD and Hit and Run OCD are documented clinical phenomena. Anarchist scenes and subcultures are heavily focused on the topic of “crime” as that question is seen by authoritarians to be one of the main bulwarks against the idea of anarchy. Positions such as police and prison abolition are advocated for by anarchists and those as diverse as Emma Goldman and Lorenzo KomboA ERVIN HAVE ALL DEALT WITH THE SUBJECT OF CRIME. In a book called False Memory OCD by Dave Preston is a book that deals with fears of criminal actions in regards to OCD. As it describes on page 18 the fears often amount to uncertainties about

whether someone has done something immoral or illegal. Given the fact that OCD sufferers are not any more likely to actually commit a crime than the average person, phenomenologies of OCD would seem to be interesting from an anarchist perspective entering on fear, harm, law, crime and responsibility. A Essay to the Writers

The writers who wanted to Envision a “Critical OCD Studies” have done a lot that I love, I recommend the article to many, even sending the article to certain professors and lecturers that I know of. It says at the end that OCD phenomenologies may even open up new questions seldom explored in Disability Studies such as questions about the necessity and limits on social concepts like order and control, the role of uncertainty and freedom in life and how OCD compulsions structure ones relation and understanding of the world in terms of time, freedom, self management and the social environment one finds themselves in. For these I as a sufferer of OCD certainly have my answers, as well as questions of my own, which I would love to iterate upon.

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