

Race, Anarchy, and Punk Rock

The impact of cultural boundaries within the anarchist movement.

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“Yes that’s right, punk is dead ... Punk became a fashion just like hippy used to be and it ain’t got a thing to do with you or me.”– lyrics by Crass, The Feeding of the Five Thousand (1978).

Ever since the historic protests against the WTO in Seattle at the close of the last millenium, anarchism as a revolutionary theory has been sought after by an increasing number of people from wide ranging walks of life than ever before in recent memory. However, the undeniable fact remains that the make-up of the anarchist movement in the U.S. for the last couple of decades has been a largely homogenous one, i.e. predominantly white and middle class. It also happens to be the case that the vast majority of people who identify themselves as anarchists in the U.S. today are connected to “alternative” subcultures, such as punk rock, in varying degrees. As a person of color and an anarchist with roots in punk rock, I have become deeply concerned with the lack of diversity within the anarchist movement. As long as we fail to attract significantly diverse participation, thus remaining isolated and politically weakened, and fail to link-up with and support anti-racist struggles, we shouldn’t keep our hopes up for any radical social transformation in this country. I began to realize that a significant part of the problem lies in the subcultural lifestyle of many anarchists, including myself. What follows is an attempt to offer insight in finding answers for the ever-pressing quest for “diversity” within the anarchist community.

From the numerous situationist slogans that graced the lyrics of early punk bands, to the proliferation of anarcho-punk bands such as Crass and Conflict in the early eighties, punk rock as a subculture has had a unique history of having a strong relationship with explicitly anarchist and anti-capitalist political content over the years. Many anarchists today, including myself, are by-products of punk rock, where most become politicized from being exposed to angry, passionate lyrics of anarcho-punk bands, “do-it-yourself” zines, and countless other sources of information that are circulated within the underground punk distribution networks. Some are introduced to punk through the introduction to the anarchist social circles. Regardless of which comes first, the correlation between the punk scene and the anarchist scene is hard to miss, especially at most anarchist gatherings and conferences. It is by no coincidence that the punk scene also shares the familiar demographic as its counterpart, of mostly white, male, suburban, middle class youths.

It should be clear then, that the problem of the lack of race/class diversity within the U.S. anarchist movement will exist as long as it remains within the boundaries of any one particular culture, such as punk. To ignore this reality as merely an insignificant annoyance in an otherwise “politically correct” movement, and pretend that it can be solved as long as we recruit folks of color by being more “open,” or if one analyzes the connection between global capitalism and white supremacy, would be a short-sighted mistake, albeit a frequently made one. It is critically important to realize how cultural boundaries can alienate other communities, how subtle forms of denial and guilt-complexes prevent real solutions, and why many of our attempts in the past have failed to provide new, effective approaches in achieving a truly diverse anarchist movement.

Looking at the fact that most people who rear their heads at anarchist “movement” events are roughly between 16–30 years old, with background influences of “punk” or other “alternative” persuasions, it is easy to understand why such “movements” tend to alienate most people than interest them. Punk has primarily appealed to middle-class, straight white boys, who, though they are “too smart” for the rock music pushed by the multinational corporations, still want to “rock out.” It is also a culture that is associated with alienating oneself from the rest of society, often times in order to rebel against one’s privileged background or parents. There’s really nothing wrong with any radical counterculture having its own, distinct character, of course. Indeed, it’s probably very good for those included. But we have to admit it is exclusive. Plus, the anarchist movement today has determined its issues of importance. Rarely do these include community organizing or working for social change around issues that most people prioritize, such as against the more subtle forms of racism, ageism and sexism, for a living wage, health care, and so forth. We are often more interested in promoting anarchism and so-called revolutionary organizations than working to provide real alternatives among everyday people. The current anarchist movement, for this reason, is not very relevant to the actual lives of most oppressed people.

Quite disturbingly, my experiences have shown that instead of acknowledging their impact and actually addressing them, many white anarchists rely on either constant denial of their responsibilities or engage in patronizing, token gestures out of privilege-guilt complexes. For example, I have received quite a few very negative and defensive reactions from white anarchists whenever I would mention the words “white” and “middle class” in the same sentence. Some of them defiantly point out that they’re actually “working class” because they grew up poor or have to work. What they fail to realize is that it doesn’t change the fact that they are able to blend in and benefit from the current anarchist scene which is predominantly middle class, and from white skin privilege.

It seems as though a fairly extensive arsenal of denial and rationale has been developed within the anarchist scene over the years. One of my favorite examples is from when I approached some members of a group that was organizing the anarchist conference that happened in L.A. during the Democratic National Convention with the fact that the group was almost entirely white punks. Many of them defended it by saying, “I believe in ‘Free Association.’” or “I’m not stopping anyone from joining our group. In fact, we’d like other people to join us, but they never do.” Such remarks indicate just how little they understand that it is because they operate in comfort zones that suits their subcultural lifestyle or upbringing, which many people cannot relate to. I believe this is one of the most serious and significant obstacles that anarchists face today. Until white anarchists figure out that they actually need to proactively break through race/class/cultural boundaries, they will only continue to perpetuate the isolated anarchist ghetto.

One of the more insulting things I've heard not too long ago from a local anarchist, however, is "c'mon, I work with YOU. And you're not white... so I can't be racist." The thought of my(or any other person of color's) mere presence somehow legitimizing someone's attitude on race that is implicit in that statement is painfully absurd. But it reflects the reality that a lot of people still think in those ways. I have also encountered a slightly more subtle form of denial from anarchist discussion lists of people who insist that since the concept of race is a social construct, we shouldn't acknowledge racial identities and instead pretend as if such categories do not exist. What's funny is that they almost always identify themselves as being "white." It sure must be convenient as a white person to pretend that issues of race didn't exist, which reminds me of the similar line associated with the anti-Affirmative Action campaigns of how we now live in a "colorblind society" with "equal opportunities."

Of course, not all white anarchists are clueless about racial/class relations and their positions of privilege. In the Minneapolis anarcho-punk zine *Profane Existence*, Joel wrote circa '92, "We are the inheritors of the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist world order. A prime position as defenders of the capital of the ruling class and the overseers of the underclass has been set aside for us....as punks we reject our inherited race and class positions because we know they are bullshit". However, no matter how well-intentioned, the anarchist scene has been for the most part so deeply entrenched in the lifestyle of the know-it-all, punker-than-thou, vegan/straight edge-fascist, fashion victims or young, transient, train-hopping, dreadlocked, dumpster-diving eco-warriors that not only do most people find it hard to relate to them but they themselves are at a loss when they actually try to reach out to other communities. A typical scenario I find when this is attempted usually only amounts to the aforementioned fluffy, token gestures of solidarity, such as visiting a local black revolutionary group's headquarters and staying just long enough to take pictures with a fist in the air or inviting a person of color to an all-white group just to ease one's guilt. But, to be fair, I must acknowledge that I know of a few exceptions of white/punk anarchists that actually attempt to do serious work with people of color and/or are committed to community organizing. The point I'm making basically is that the general tendencies of most white/punk anarchists tend to be to settle for the symbolic, and fail to support the real struggles of people to change the world precisely because they have a choice as opposed to people who have to struggle for their livelihood.

It would be useful to look at anarchist groups and projects such as Anti-Racist Action, Earth First, Food Not Bombs and various other anarchist collectives to find out the extent to which such groups are influenced by subcultural lifestyles and how they deal with the issue of diversity. They tend to be good at politicizing lots of people who may identify or feel comfortable with the distinct counter-culture, but they almost never go beyond the boundaries of their comfort zones. Our closest comrades aren't people chosen because of their politics alone—plenty more share our principles and political beliefs—but we never see them, because they don't share our style or cultural preferences. Furthermore, we have seen numerous infoshops spring up in many cities over the years. They usually stand out like an eyesore by becoming more of a punk activist hangout and turning off the people who live in the neighborhood who may have been interested in the project otherwise. We should also be conscious of the fact that many times these projects contribute directly to gentrification of low-income neighborhoods, as punk and anarchist sub-societies are not well-known for their ability to pay high rents. It will ultimately depend on whether they operate as trendy, social gathering spots for punk/anarchists or a place that is respectful of and actively involves the local community.

Undeniably, there is a strong connection between cultural lifestyles and comfort zones and the extent of diversity within any movement. Groups cannot make their racial nature and composition into side issues, an ongoing “process”, or working groups. They’ve got to be right next to the groups’ foremost goals. We can keep our subcultural milieu in tact, but our organizing efforts have to step well beyond it. At this point at least, it makes more sense to organize according to neighborhoods and values than according to aesthetic tastes and specific ideologies and develop a culture that draws people together. Anarchism will not solve racism without the people affected by it. And we certainly won’t be seeing any kind of a revolution made up of subcultural lifestyle ghettos.

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