

Social War: Anarchist Archaeology

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2014

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Social War, Subjects, and Consciousness

As the author of the first Social War flyer in 1990,
I have no idea why
we chose the concept
of a Social War to illustrate
how we had been interacting
with the ideas of Jacques Camatte,
Fredy Perlman, Jason McQuinn, Hakim Bey,
and Zerzan, whose ideas at the time were unavoidable.
It just seemed to work is all.

How do we now conceptualize the contestation
that clearly continues to occur globally—
albeit in fits and starts?
The Social War theoretical device
has a number of different threads,
some of which contradict each other,
which provides for even greater clarity,
or maybe just less glare.

Social War: Anarchist Archaeology

During the latter part of the 1980s a handful of anti-academic critical theorists, basically ill-groomed chain-smokers, sought ways to communicate their ideas to the world, and to each other. These new media producers owed as much to the general availability of copying machines as they did to the rediscovery of critical and ultra-left theory, and came to be known as the zine underground: de facto theorists and journalists who found themselves trying to make sense of a once moribund anarchist movement given new life by three successful continent wide gatherings (including Chicago in 1986, San Francisco in 1987 and Toronto in 1988 and the Tompkins Square Park Riot in August 1989). I wrote for *Black Eye*, a zine that was written and produced on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and contained a mix of local radical news and anarchist theory. The Social War is an example of one of the ideas that we were then working on.

Foremost of the questions that we faced were how to conceptualize social contestation—where did these recent violent confrontations between anarchists and the forces of order come from? What did they mean? And even more important: How could we use them to up the ante and bring the whole rotting mess down?

Like myself, the writers who worked on *Black Eye* very quickly began to have some real issues with the left, not just the New Left nor the concurrent left, but the historical left, all of it—both theory and practice. The most basic problem was simple—who or what is the Social Enemy? In classic Marxism and anarchism it is the dominant economic and political system, roughly Capital and the nation-state. In the context of insurrection and utopia, however, this identification seemed worthless. The more one tries to imagine a society in which the state had been destroyed and Capital had been brought to heel to serve the needs of the human species the greater the likelihood that such a society would include even more insidious dominative

components. In this sense Stalinist Russia was no aberration, rather it was the single most likely outcome of any Marxist revolution. The same was even more true for an anarchist revolutionary society where freedom would become yet another name for a slavery of the body and spirit far more heinous than anything the antebellum South could construct. We were studying the wrong thing, it wasn't society that was the problem, the issue was far deeper and uglier than a political or economic system. Civilization itself is the protagonist, the Social Enemy. We weren't the first to discover this, Fourier in the early part of the 19th Century had stumbled on to the same formula, just from a different direction. Ultimately no one had paid any attention to his ideas after Marx had slandered him as utopian, until now. Fourier had nailed it, civilization with all its components was truly the . The forms and techniques of domination are inherent in all of civilizations constituents.

Definitions are scrambled and then ignored by the left; an example is the proletariat, the most central concept in Marxism and to a lesser extent in anarchism; the class exists as the revolutionary Subject that in emancipating itself is destined to free all other economic formations, presumably in a spasmodic class orgasm. Marx's definition of the term is precise, proletarians are wage earners, and conversely the bourgeoisie are not, they survive on rents, profits and stocks. Problem is that by the end of WWII the wage relation had achieved global dominance with only a tiny minority of the human species surviving on rents and profits. Can the human species be an economic class? According to Marx's definition it certainly seemed so. The Situationists tried to save the construct by morphing proletarian into order-taker and bourgeois into order-giver. The definition fails though, for a theorist to determine who is which class all they would do is to study the organizational chart of a corporation. The concept of class should be somewhat more robust if it is to form the basis of the dialectic that sweeps away bourgeois society.

Which leaves the final theoretical construct: what of social contestation if class struggle is a sham whereby Marxist and anarchist theorists delude themselves? The answer is that effective contestation is nothing less than Social War, where the insurrectionary goal becomes the utter destruction of the Social Enemy, rather than the triumph of one class over another. Revolutionary preservation, the idea that in post-revolutionary societies some aspects of the previous social context need to be preserved, loses resonance when it becomes obvious that nothing is worth saving. In terms of Social War class conflict resolves into the human species seeking to eliminate a social concept, civilization as it appears.

Social War also carries with it some practical components for insurrectionists. First the concept of war illuminates the ongoing, fluid nature of military (and social) contestation—where reconnaissance, alliance, betrayal, forward movement, and tactical retreat all merge into the daily realities of the temporary contingencies of fighting a sustained conflict. The concept of war, especially guerrilla war, also drives from the minds of the combatants the idea of permanence and stasis and inculcates the conceptual reality of constant change, impermanence and the need to think and act on a moment to moment basis to take advantage of the Social Enemy's weaknesses. As an example an open alleyway, in the context of a running battle with the forces of order, presents a multitude of possibilities including a new line of attack, an escape route, a place to wait and let the action run its course, or a location to disappear into and to reappear from when the odds favor the insurrectionaries.

There is an example from the history of revolutions that illustrates just what is meant by Social War. On the night of August 4 of 1798, the French National Assembly sat in session wondering what to do about the aristocracy. Slowly, using their revolutionary ideals as sole guides, they

began to pull the entire structure of feudalism in France down. This included the elimination of all juridical structures that propped up the edifice from large to seemingly small: noble lands were returned to the people of France, and the nasty little rights like keeping pigeons and birds of prey as symbols of their office were ended. It is known that almost the entire legislative corps had been drinking and continued to do so right through until morning—lubricating the debates with liberal doses of wine. Near the end of the evening the Nobles got in on the game, exiting into the hallways to discuss and propose yet another nail in the coffin of the aristocracy. When dawn fell on the August 5 feudalism was dead in France, and was never to reenter social discourse as anything other than an odd historical footnote. The only thing left intact was the continued use of noble titles—without, however, the reality of the ownership of land that such titles referred to. One of the rare examples from revolutionary history of the outright destruction of a social component with no thought to any type of preservation.

There is a certain consistency in the current anarchist use of the term *insurrection* as opposed to *revolution*. It has become standard over time and in one sense clearly indicates that the concept of revolution—the replacement of one system by another—is the last thing that anyone in the modern anarchist movement is willing to participate in or even contemplate.

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The BASTARD Chronicles 2014, a small pocketbook of texts and conversations from the 2014 BASTARD Conference on social war published by Little Black Cart.
All grammatical and spelling decisions, formatting, and errors have been left unedited as the original author is now deceased.

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