

From Agency Erasure to Radical Subjectivity

Embracing Anarchist-Informed Intersectionality

reimagining

2023/02/24

The tension between individual agency and the structures that shape us has been a topic of debate in philosophy and sociology for decades. However, there is a disturbing trend emerging where some popular forms of social critique seem to ignore individual agency altogether, erasing our unique subjectivity in favor of a belief that we are solely products of social systems. This crude and imbalanced conglomeration of analyses creates a flattened conceptual landscape that, through its top-down, synoptic vision, detrimentally limits building coherent mental maps and thus restricts potential forms action might take.

In this short piece, I argue that while we are undeniably influenced by the communities and systems we are a part of, we must also recognize the importance of individual agency and reject simplified, essentialized thinking. By embracing anarchist-informed intersectionality, we can work towards breaking down domination – on both systemic and interpersonal levels – to create a world of interconnected, yet fluid societies that allow each individual to freely develop their own radical subjectivities.

There is a style of analysis that we are noticing more and more frequently which seems to completely ignore the “agent” in the structure-agent problem, effectively engaging in agency-erasure, as if we’re solely products of social systems. The notion that agency – and our individuality – is wholly subsumed within the structures that surround and influence us, that we are mere products of these structures, “free” only to act in ways that reify existing systems is so incredibly one sided the traction this thinking has gained seems almost ridiculous.

It is true that in some very real ways, we are beings inherently comprised of “communities”. From the clusters of microorganisms that make up our body’s biome, to the specific cultures and milieus we have been immersed in, these societal particularities can imbue our perspectives with distinct ways of thinking. As the systemization of such relations compiles to take on warped and domineering hierarchical forms, they both ascribe to us particular social claims and privileges, and conversely, deny us others based on our positionality within these power structures.

But buried within the complex context of this existence, each of us is unique. You are, in the truest sense, unlike any other. We have the capacity to create radical subjectivities that operate outside of and in conflict with the strictures that confine us, to develop different, novel lifeways and ontologies.

The root of this kind of analysis may well be people rightly rejecting colonial-capitalist “individualism” and with it, erroneously, all forms and conceptions of individualism. It is crucial to know we have agency: that each one of us holds the potential to change the world, both individually and together.

The importance of recognizing and maintaining a balanced yet radical understanding of individual agency cannot be understated, as failing to do so leads to a flawed framework of liberal identity politics, which not only serves as an anti-liberation, recuperation of actually radical forms of identity politics, but also creates a framing the far right can easily manipulate for their own gain.

This increasingly apparent flaw of liberal identity politics – understood here as a liberal recuperation of radical identity politics which consists of disparate essentialized identity groups competing for recognition from the state rather than organizing around identity for the purpose of solidarity-based liberation and the freedom to shape identity – is rarely mentioned.

This framework, disconnected from any meaningful deconstruction of systems of domination, creates a gaping conceptual chasm for the far right to fill with thinly veiled patriarchal white power narratives under the guise of equal representation. The logic of liberal identity politics is not only ill-equipped to handle this very real threat, but over the last decade has proven to have actually provided ideological scaffolding for the far right to exploit and gain traction.

To clarify, it is important to be explicit. The criticism being levied here is not directed at organizing around marginalized identities for political objectives, but rather a particular manifestation of it that appears to embody successful recuperation and co-optation efforts of past truly radical iterations.

To combat this issue, we must first openly recognize its existence. Not simply that the far right are leveraging aspects of the theoretical framework but that the Marketplace of Oppression which the framework inherently produces is a gift to them. It is fundamentally flawed in that its essentializing prerequisites reify status quo power structures through: competitively seeking recognition from status quo power structures. We need to promote clear ways of discussing these issues that align with the goals of liberation and cannot be co-opted by either the fascist right-wing or vulgar “big tent”, anti-identity politics, left-liberal, social democrats.

And with critical acknowledgments of the sinking ship of liberal identity politics explicated, we can then help people along through pushing actually radical forms of analysis that supplant it, that present more complete pictures of societal and interpersonal dynamics, to provide people with conceptual tools which they may use to create their own comprehensive understandings.

By exposing the limitations and potential dangers of liberal identity politics and advocating for a more radical form of intersectionality grounded in anarchist principles, we sow the seeds of new ideas that can take root in the minds of those entrenched in conventional liberal analysis. With time and cultivation, these ideas can blossom into a broader and more transformative understanding of social freedom.

Anarchist informed intersectionality recognizes the complex overlapping nature of oppressive systems. It also deals with interpersonal instantiations of domination and works to see how macroscopic systems which comprise the status quo are ultimately made up of billions upon billions of oppressive relations, based on power-seeking individuals leveraging whatever social claims available to attain power.

Power can be capital, it can also be raw control or hierarchical domination: oftentimes all of the above. This method of social critique allows for us to recognize individual positionalities

within this network of domination most often referred to as “Modern Society” or “Western Civilization”, not to engage in the liberal Marketplace of Oppression, in which each essentialized group or social class vies for its recognition from the very state which creates privilege, maintains oppression and facilitates perpetual dispossession, but to seek methods to break down its walls, flatten hierarchy, subdue power, and pursue mutual freedom.

This is not simply because ethics demand it – which they surely do – but that solidarity is the clear path toward a freer world. A world comprised of a multiplicity of societies made up of fluid communities, complexly interconnected in an ever-expanding mycelial like network in which each individuals personhood and actions freely develop – like the mycelium of a single mycorrhiza extending and connecting multiple plants of different species – to create systems within systems so interdependently linked yet intrinsically unique and hyper-contingent, they could not be fully mapped, controlled, dominated or throttled, from either above or within.

As we move forward, it is important to remember that each of us holds the potential to effect change in the world and expand degrees of freedom. Let us reject one-sided analyses that promote agency-erasure and limited, essentialized thinking, and instead embrace and expand radical forms of critique and action that recognize the complex and overlapping nature of oppressive systems, as well as the unique agency, subjectivity, and importance of the individual. Through acknowledging our agency and rejecting simplifying, static conceptions of reality, we work towards creating a freer world: toward anarchy.

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