Undoing Reality

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WHEN I FIRST COINED THE TERM "MUTUAL ACQUIESCENCE" IN a 2006 essay, I was trying to understand it as an invisible social transmission mechanism for the spread of voluntary servitude. While certainly not denying the oppressive power of top down forms of domination, I sought to answer the question of why and how people become socially entrapped at the interpersonal level in a "realistic" life of acquiescence rather than being inspired to revolt both individually and collectively against their own servitude. A touchstone in this endeavor was the surrealist concept of miserabilism. Underlying the hierarchical system of domination is the debilitating idea that misery is the only possible reality. Therefore, in order to uproot domination, our submission to such an idea must itself be challenged.

The collusion involved in conforming to systemic forms of miserabilism is not just an individual psychological affair, but is socially facilitated by the interlaced lateral processes of mutual acquiescence. Mutual acquiescence is the social adhesive that affectively cements the bricks of alienation and oppression which structure our daily lives into the wall of domination known as reality. Correspondingly, mutual acquiescence acts as a major obstacle to the practice of what anarchists call mutual aid in that the latter is concerned with providing a cooperative means for vaulting that wall. In contemplating the question of why we are willing to surrender our individual and collective autonomy to the repressive demands of "reality", I have sought to place the work of Etienne de la Boëtie in an anarchist context. What he, and later Peter Kropotkin, described as "voluntary servitude" is strikingly similar to what Michael Bakunin grappled with as the "absence of the will to revolt", and what for Gustav Landauer and Max Stirner was intrinsic to their conceptions of the State as a web of dependent social relationships.

My objective here is to expand upon what La Boëtie called "voluntary servitude" by cross-pollinating Stirner's individualistically-oriented emphasis on "the unique" and Kropotkin's more socially-oriented focus on mutual aid as they intersect with the ongoing surrealist quest for a re-poetization of life. In regard to the latter, it is precisely the affective element of the poetic that has typically been missing from most accounts of voluntary servitude. Little is gained from simplistically understanding human beings as calculating rational actors who judiciously weigh the benefits of submission against the costs in deciding whether or not to acquiesce.

. In explaining the potentially subversive power of poetic desire in terms of a refusal of miserabilism, surrealist Franklin Rosemont has proclaimed, "Only by multiplying the occasions in which poetry can infiltrate the large and small affairs of life can we begin to dismantle the mis-

erability apparatus." (Rosemont, 163) From this perspective, when released from the narrow confines of its literary cage, poetry as an emancipatory force can create occasions in which both individual autonomy and mutual aid can flourish. Conversely, relationships of mutual acquiescence actively suppress poetic desire while advancing instead an emotional dependence upon the deadening forms of security offered by the authoritarian system of domination. Politically-speaking, the attempt to counter such a hegemonic system by replacing a fascist state with a communist one a la Antonio Gramsci cannot subvert mutual acquiescence. It is rather in the surrealist context of the creation of more poetic forms of living that both the individualist and communitarian spirit of anarchy can fully flourish.

Post-anarchist thinker Saul Newman has analyzed La Boëtie's concept of "voluntary servitude" with a primary emphasis on interrogating the subjective nature of the desire for self-domination in an anarchist context. As he has explained, "Our active acquiescence to power at the same time constitutes this power... Servitude then is a condition of its own making — it is entirely voluntary; and all it takes to untie us from this condition is the desire to no longer be subjugated, the will to be free." (Newman, 32–33) Given Newman's emphasis on the subjectivity of what he calls "active acquiescence", he posits an anarchic micro-politics of "voluntary inservitude" [italics mine] as an active refusal of the mind-forged manacles of subjugation (Newman, 46–47). Such a rebellious path of refusal runs counter to the conformist complicity embodied by self-servitude. Here Newman's emphasis on individual rebellion builds upon Stirner and is in marked contrast (though not necessarily in contradiction) to Kropotkin's focus on mutual aid. The latter places the pursuit of freedom in the classical anarchist context of social revolution which simultaneously incorporates both an immediate and a pre-figurative dimension. In essence, the two approaches can be viewed as complimentary in that the desire to uproot domination must address both the individual and social aspects of the yearning for autonomy. Mutual aid activities involve social forms of free association and cooperation undertaken by groups of individuals, and can be inspired and enhanced by those individual acts which refuse servitude.

Consequently, the refusal of acquiescence in a context of mutuality does not have to exclude acting upon the emancipatory desire for individual liberty, but can expand upon it and vice versa. By focusing on mutuality in relation to voluntary servitude, the concept of mutual acquiescence can lend itself to a more nuanced understanding of the willingness to submit to such servitude as being not just psychologically internalized in singular fashion but socially reinforced in practice. Therefore, an engagement with mutual aid activities does not necessarily entail a rejection of individual autonomy. In the latter regard, the concept of mutual aid points to an alternative that does not deny, but is not limited to, the will of the individual. Moreover, an emphasis on mutuality is not meant to ignore the problem that even the most well-intentioned exercise of mutual aid can sometimes inadvertently lend itself to the proliferation of new forms of voluntary servitude, particularly in a mass movement context. Like all anarchist organizational forms, mutual aid requires constant vigilance to prevent its degradation, abuse or corruption into a groupthink mentality. In any case, the ravages to the body politic of the debilitating tapeworm of mutual acquiescence must be considered in any theory of voluntary servitude precisely because the intrinsic relationship between the individual and the system of domination is complicated by the fact that humans are sociable beings who desire some degree of social acceptance.

For example, those humans cast in the role of workers respond submissively not only to the stick of social disapproval, but to the carrot of social approval (which is in essence the same stick by other means). In applying La Boëtie's notion of voluntary servitude to the contemporary

workplace, Guilliame Paoli has underscored the formative impact of the "stick" of oppressive relationships of hierarchical power on an increasingly precarious labor force in order to point out that even so-called voluntary servitude is not purely based on free choice. However, his main argument offers a critical analysis of the dangling "carrot" of "motivational training". From his viewpoint,

From his viewpoint, the supposedly "enlightened" human relations approach embedded in the managerial process of "motivational training" constitutes an insidious vehicle for surreptitiously inculcating the repressive relations of acquiescence required for insuring the "voluntary servitude" of an increasingly unmotivated work force. In response to the thin horizontal veneer of managerial techniques like "motivational training" which often boast of a participatory decision-making process but actually seek workplace conformity through ever more sophisticated forms of psycho-social manipulation, Paoli pointedly calls for "demotivational training" as an antidote.

The communicable disease of "motivational training" those considered to be recalcitrant workers at the intersection of managerial demands and peer social pressures. As it spreads, it both creates and feeds upon mutual acquiescence in seeking to produce an obedient employee mindset. The original poster child for such a doggedly clueless acceptance of wage slavery was "Mr. Block," the Wobbly comic strip character who remains infamous for his unwittingly humorous attempts at rationalizing his blockheaded loyalty to his employer in even the most exploitive of "shit jobs". The harsh conditions that characterize the latter jobs are what David Graeber distinguishes from the less obviously oppressive circumstances of what he terms "bullshit jobs" which are defined as jobs in which "a worker considers the work to be pointless, unnecessary or pernicious." (Graeber, 10) In a "bullshit job", the workplace trappings of servitude may be more hidden because the labor entailed may be less backbreaking, not as dangerous and better paid. However, the managerial dilemma remains that higher levels of motivation are not automatically forthcoming even in these seemingly less onerous "bullshit jobs". Consequently, new motivational techniques have been developed by management to extract productivity from a still reluctant workforce.

Graeber attributes the lack of motivation on the part of the occupants of "bullshit jobs" to their subjection to an alienating "spiritual violence" at the workplace. However, while those in such "bullshit jobs" may be privately unmotivated, they often remain publicly subservient. Though they may outwardly exhibit an unenthusiastic "shoulder-shrugging" form of acquiescence rather than the "shoulder- to-the-grindstone" approach typically preferred by management, they remain unwilling to go so far as to actively saw off the bureaucratic branch on which they sit in relative comfort. Moreover, apart from clandestinely slacking off at work, most of those in "bullshit jobs" typically view it as unrealistic if not impossible to even imagine chopping down the miserabilist tree of workplace domination entirely. Much less are they inclined to pull out the roots of mutual acquiescence that sprawl invisibly beneath the surface of domination because they themselves are entwined in them. Even the most seemingly innocuous forms of acquiescence required in everyday expressions of deference to the power of hierarchical superiors can for the holders of both "shit jobs" and "bullshit jobs" become incrementally internalized over time in regard to latent authoritarian assumptions about workplace reality and the acceptable limits of self-activity. Moreover, the managerial bias of motivational training creates a climate in which the liberal conceit of the "good boss" replaces the anarchic desire to put an end to all bosses. From this constricted point of view, the most that one can "realistically" hope for is the former.

Such pervasive forms of workplace acquiescence are consistent with the values of a democratic political system like that of the United States, in which the choice offered to the "citizenry"

by both parties is typically framed as being between "take charge" politicians who paternalistically claim to personally have the "people's" best interests at heart and those who make the case for progressive governance based upon the "enlightened" use of public administrative expertise in policy-making. That these two types of politicians are roughly analogous to the "no-nonsense" authoritarianism of "old school" workplace bosses and the more professional human relations approach of liberal managers is no accident. In the tawdry "reality television" melodrama starring Donald Trump as President of the United States, he took on the role of "can-do" benevolent despot which is very reminiscent of his previous business and media incarnations as a no-nonsense corporate boss. Previously, having actually operated as the autocratic CEO of his own real estate development empire, and then having acted the part of celebrity host/quick-to-fire boss for his starring role on The Apprentice, his subsequent style of ruling the country was a showcase for the iron hand in the velvet glove razzamatazz of reactionary populism.

In this manner, he openly flirted with fascism by capitalizing upon the correspondence between increasing acquiescence at the workplace and the growing receptiveness to political authoritarianism on the part of his loyal base of supporters who are quite understandably disillusioned with the more politely disempowering politics of neoliberalism practiced by such political rivals as his successor Joe Biden. In this regard, it is particularly ironic that the "greatness" referenced in Trump's jingoistic slogan of "Make America Great Again" has always involved his personal promise as the nation's erstwhile savior and surrogate boss to maintain and create even more "shit" and "bullshit" jobs, and correspondingly even more subservient attitudes, which in turn serve to insure the perpetuation of the vicious circle of surrender that buttresses the entire system of domination. In this context, Trump's con-mantra of "Make America Great Again" when obediently parroted ad nauseum by his most ardent political supporters represents nothing less than a catechism of collective despair.

On the other hand, despairing of such despair, and building upon Max Stirner's and Gustav Landauer's insights on the relational nature of the State, anarchists can seek to deconstruct the system of domination in the process of constructing "other relationships" which might displace those acquiescent ones upon which the State is built.

As Stirner has explained, "What one calls a state is a web and network of dependence and devotion; it is a togetherness, a sticking together, in which those ordered together acquiesce to each other, or in short, depend on each other: it is the order of this dependence" (Stirner, 209). Or as Landauer would later elaborate, "The state is a social relationship, a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new relationships, i.e. by people relating to one another differently." (Landauer, 214) Since the dependent relationships that constitute and perpetuate the State are the negation of both individual and social revolt, then the theoretical concept of mutual acquiescence might be the missing link in understanding how Stirner's "egoism" and Landauer's conditional notion of the State might be fitted together with both La Boëtie's idea of voluntary servitude and Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid. The latter involves the creation of mutually empowering relationships which can dismantle and replace the miserabilist relationships of mutual acquiescence which take the "reality" of domination as a given.

For surrealists, miserabilism as a way of life is rooted in the rigid assumptions of a status quo finality that constitutes "reality". In contrast to such a debilitating assumption, John Clark (aka Max Cafard, surrealist) has sought to subvert such realist thinking by examining the miserabilist basis of the ubiquitous popular culture meme of "It is what it is!" As he has explained, "From the viewpoint of dialectical thinking, the crucial challenge is to see the ways in which things are not

what they are. It always is what it isn't and isn't what it is. Getting trapped in the world of 'it is what it is' what I call Isisism — is the royal road to delusion, disaster and domination. The right road to illumination and liberation is what I call Isisntism" (Clark, "In Defense of Isisntism," 1). In this regard, the realist premise of the colloquial phrase "It is what it is!" tells us in no uncertain terms that everything outside of its commonsensical domain can be dismissed as "unrealistic" (i.e. impossible).

Therefore, what we desperately need in order to challenge the assumptions of the dominant reality is to apply uncommon sense. Since "reality" leaves out a lot more than it encompasses, what is required in order to inspire individual and social revolt rather than acquiescent resignation is what Charles Fourier called "absolute divergence".

In conjunction with André Breton's surrealist reading of Fourier in exile and his renewed anarchist affiliations upon returning to France after the Second World War, he coined the term "miserabilism" in 1956 to explain "the depreciation of reality in place of its exaltation" and denounced it as the "offspring of fascism and stalinism." (Breton, 2002, 347–348) Then, in 1965, the Paris Surrealist Group called for "absolute divergence" as a revolutionary principle at a time when Jean Paul Sartre and his anti-surrealist intellectual cohorts on the French left were deeply entrenched in Stalinism. Along with "absolute divergence", the surrealists embraced Fourier's congenial notions of "passional attraction" and "elective affinity" which stand in direct contrast to those miserabilist relationships that are the bedrock of mutual acquiescence used in the construction of the authoritarian edifice of reality. Surrealists have always sought to passionately create convulsive ruptures to the popular conception of reality as being a static entity that is impermeable to fundamental change. Because their affinities have been with the more expansive concepts of fluidity and immanence, surrealists have envisioned rupture as a welcome occurrence in that it can illuminate what "realistically" would otherwise be deemed impossible. Such dramatic upheaval is desirable from an anarcho-surrealist viewpoint because it overturns narrow perceptions and widens the terrain of possibility.

However, anarchist academic Jesse Cohn has dismissed the appropriateness of creating such ruptures in regard to the task of pragmatically building what he has termed an "anarchist resistance culture". In essence, Cohn's critique of surrealism is based on his fear that such convulsive challenges to reality might exacerbate both individual and social levels of insecurity and in so doing "invite an incredulous, angry response" on the part of those he labels as "worker-shoppers." It is the latter's anxieties that he cautions anarchists to avoid arousing and instead has urged a "careful approach". (Cohn, 393) In contrast to such a miserabilist strategy, I would contend that it is just such condescending categories as "worker-shopper" which must themselves be eradicated through the transgressive rupturing of that alienating consumerist reality of which they are a reflection. Instead, it is necessary to drastically expand the breadth and depth of Cohn's overly cautious idea of cultural resistance by daring to violate the socially imposed boundaries of convention in order to more fully oppose all forms of miserabilist acquiescence which blunt our desire for individual autonomy and mutual aid. In considering that one of the "invisible" ways in which acquiescent relationships circulate is through the vehicle of popular culture, let's return to the "Isisntism" of John Clark.

What then is the acquiescent subtext of the ubiquitous phrase: "It is what it is!"? This seemingly innocuous statement, which is found in even the most lighthearted of social repartee, can be understood as a pervasive way of offhandedly justifying a host of the indignities, inequalities and injustices that are the building blocks of that regime of domination known as "reality". Be-

cause surrealists contest reality, they are often dismissed as unrealistic. However, more to the point,

surrealists concertedly seek to overthrow the eviscerating ideology of realism. In this regard, by applying Stirner's critique of "fixed ideas" to the concept of "reality", one might conclude that if reality is a "fixed idea" then "realism" might best be correspondingly understood as an ideology. Accordingly, rather than conceptualizing reality as an unchanging entity, it is better viewed as being in a state of flux or "constant becoming".

Consequently, it is informative to ponder the meaning of the "it" words in the statement, "It is what it is!" because what underlies those words is a miserabilist resignation about the likelihood of ever challenging the reigning reality in any way. With a desire for demystification in mind, the statement might more clearly be read as: "Reality is what reality is!" The corollary being, "so don't be unrealistic" in what you demand from life. However, if one questions the repressive subtext of this ironclad idea of reality, as both anarchists and surrealists do, then the "It is what it is!" expression reeks of mutual acquiescence because hidden within the narrow limits of consensus reality are all the potentially different versions of reality that might otherwise have come into being in the past or might possibly be brought into existence in the present or future. Moreover, in expanding upon Clark's thought- provoking interpretation of the reactionary implications of the "It is what it is!" tautology, I would note that there has never been a shortage of such miserabilist expressions of mutual acquiescence.

One of the oldest of these expressions is the innocuous-sounding bromide noted by surrealist Louis Aragon in his seminal book, Paris Peasant: "Why not make the best of it?" What is often implied by that rhetorical question is that one should not try to evade, complain about, or change one's individual or collective situation, but rather should realistically adapt oneself to a life of misery. Perhaps the more recent phrase of "Just get with the program" is today's mutually acquiescent answer to that same question. Moreover, if the expected kneejerk conformity to a reality that proves to be too bleak or depressing to stomach is not immediately forthcoming, the all-too-familiar silencing commands of "Suck it up!" or "Just get over it!" or "Stop Whining!" have mutual acquiescence written all over them. On the other hand, a more smiley-faced way of encouraging a complacent acquiescence to an uncomfortable situation, or of rendering a blasé acclimatization to an unwanted development, is embodied in the seemingly benign phrase, "It's all good."

Of course, many well-meaning individuals have used these cliched phrases at one time or another without malice, or in jest, and sometimes they are even intended positively as supportive expressions of "tough love." When seen in this more charitable light, they are not meant as entreaties to mutual acquiescence, but rather are just intended as personal encouragement to "hang in there" and do whatever it takes to survive. Nevertheless, they can still have unintended defeatist consequences that can lead to the casual promulgation of an acquiescent mindset for all involved. In seeking to thwart this subliminal tendency toward a reflexively pragmatic acquiescence, if one knows that a particular situation is upsetting and simply wants to offer someone their emotional support in riding it out, one could instead say something like "It's really fucked up, but hang in there." The latter statement encourages personal resilience in a trying situation without assuming its inevitability and so opens the door to subverting or changing it at some time in the future. Moreover, in assuming a more immediately confrontative manner, one could even directly ask "WHY make the best of it?"/"WHY suck it up?/"WHY get over it?" since it's actually not "all good", or much good, and maybe not even good at all. Finally, the human desire

for peer approval reinforces acquiescent behavior with another piece of widely circulated advice: "Don't be so negative!" While the latter opinion is often offered as "friendly" counsel, it is in effect the aggressive-submissive embodiment of the "don't-rock-the-boat" mentality of mutual acquiescence.

Rather than viewing reality as a permanently congealed entity, we can instead envision it as an infinitely mutable set of relationships. In understanding that the conventions of reality constitute a social web of domination, we can seek to resist, subvert, evade, or eliminate the miserabilism of voluntary servitude in an individual context and eschew the social relationships of mutual acquiescence that structure it. Refusing to accept the impoverished form of reality on offer, we can look beyond "what is" and instead search the realm of "what isn't" for traces of a more poetic reality. In the black light of negation, we can challenge the "realistic" state of mind by focusing on what reality isn't and imagining the utopic possibilities of what it could be. Such creative explorations of the brilliant pluriverse of radical versions of reality that lie outside the miserabilist cage of voluntary servitude need not be dismissed as mere escapist fantasy, but can be better understood as freely stemming from the subversive desire to undo reality in the anarchic pursuit of individual autonomy and mutual aid.

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Surrealism and the Anarchist Imagination
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