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Anarcho-Sceneism: What it is and how to fight it

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Summer 2003

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Three Theses on Sceneism:

1. Sceneism, like any other oppressive societal construct with which we must grapple, has ways of expressing itself subtly and seemingly without malice or pretension. Even activist groups that remain open and inviting to new membership can become alienating if the discussion within them is dominated by pre-defined friendships and nostalgic anecdotes about past events or unrelated projects (especially, but not limited to; music and activism unrelated to the other members of the group). Objective analysis regarding past and current situations created by our movement is helpful. Social reminiscing about all the great things you and your friends in the group did in the past only makes said group more inaccessible to new membership, as they will feel left out of the established social circle within the collective.
2. “Anti-sceneism” can in itself become an exclusionary activity or construct. An anti-sceneist mentality must not be adopted in the same way that one can adopt a hairstyle or fashion, because to do so would be only to trade one form of pretension for another.
3. The goal of the Red & Anarchist Action Network is not to undermine or discard the punk counterculture within our movement. In fact, many of us contribute to and draw great strength from anarcho-punk and hardcore, and we see in it a wonderful opportunity to build communities of resistance. Doing this means returning the emphasis to what is “counter” about these cultures. That is, we must re-emphasize what it is within these and other subcultures that once gave them the potential to be revolutionary: anti-capitalism, not hairspray.

“Sub-cultures... are no more than glorified fan clubs. They are incomplete or escapist at best, and social organs of the enemy collaboration at worst. They are not counter.” — David (Green Mountain Anarchist Collective)

When it came time for the Red & Anarchist Action Network (RAAN) to develop a short description of itself, or “blurb”, which we could use in efficiently introducing our core values to a large number of people, we included in it one line in particular that has since become a source of confusion;

“The network was born out of a desire to... Dismantle the elitist ‘sceneism’ that has governed portions of the revolutionary movement for far too long.”

What do we mean by “sceneism” and how do we identify it as a negative force operating both consciously and unconsciously in the established anti-authoritarian movement? More importantly, how does this awareness fit into the daily practice of the Red & Anarchist Action Network; what steps can we take to put an end to Anarcho-sceneism?

Why “Sceneism”?

Sceneism is the name that we are using to describe the prevailing state of the “anarchist movement” today (at least, in North America). What we mean is that our movement now shares several fundamental characteristics with the petty social relations found inside music “scenes”; punk, indie, hardcore, etc. (of course music scenes are not the only ones that exist, but for comparative purposes they’re a good place to start)

Specifically, the hostile trends that we have witnessed within the anarchist movement have been elitism, white & male dominance, too close a relationship with a specific subculture (IE punk), and

cliques of friends who by their very existence close off new membership in the movement by making it inaccessible to those not already deeply involved.

This is not to say that we are addressing sceneism as the only problem in today's movement, but a specific one that so far very few organizations, especially informal affinity groups, have managed to combat effectively. Furthermore, sceneism must be confronted as yet another system of domination: a bourgeois-spectacular social relation operating within the anti-authoritarian movement; one that we must dismantle.

Our main purpose here is to identify and analyze "sceneist" behavior in the movement, and begin to develop concrete ways of fighting it, specifically within RAAN and especially in light of the fact that our organization has begun to grow, and that this growth is now bringing up an inevitable series of interactions with the "established" anti-authoritarian movement (that is, what is now popularly referred to as the anarchist movement).

What to be on guard against

The idea for this article as a necessary reflection on the state of American anarchism — and how our network should strive to differentiate itself — first came about as the result of a conversation between two members of RAAN. The topic at hand was the possibility of putting on a benefit concert for the network, and what such a show would ideally look like. One of the people involved was already very familiar with the established anarchist movement, while the other was not.

The more experienced activist suggested that she would be able to get a well-known anarchist speaker to come support the benefit. The less experienced activist, while unfamiliar with this famous anarchist, nevertheless pointed out that when one thought of a "well-known anarchist" speaking somewhere, one would also be inclined

Often, struggles that are not seen specifically as "anti-sceneism" will also indirectly serve as such. For instance, our practical moves to make RAAN more inclusive to oppressed and marginalized groups by creating safe spaces for them is inherently anti-scene, since it flies in the face of how sceneist anarchist groups have usually reacted to the issue (with either ignorance or condescension). Our goal should be to create a functioning network with such integral and established non-hierarchal, non-sceneist tendencies that ideally, even a Maoist could join RAAN and find himself completely unable to damage the network's functioning or core values (not that we want Maoists joining in the first place!). This is what must be done if we are to be simultaneously anti-scene/anti-authoritarian without closing ourselves off to new membership and fluid alliances.

Our organization also has something somewhat unique to it, in that RAAN can be considered a communist group, and we embrace libertarian Marxists as comrades and allies. This in itself will play a major role in discouraging close-minded anarcho-scenesters from affiliating with us, as will some of our other basic principles of unity. The trick here is to make sure that our fundamental principles (anti-sceneism being one of them) are always apparent in all activities, and that we will remain dedicated to them as our group develops. This will prevent anarcho-scenesters from joining just because they see the word "anarchist" in our title, just as it will keep Leninists from joining just because they see the word "red".

We have to remember that what we are trying to build is a new, truly inclusive anarchist/communist group. To do this means that we have to supersede the elitist flaws that exist in portions of what is contemporarily called the anarchist/communist movement. Accomplishing this takes a wide variety of initiatives, from discrediting/rejecting/fighting Leninism, to confronting the informal hierarchies of existing anarchist cliques.

of worship or status. Too often, the alternative to direct cooption or “selling out” is the establishment of a largely unattainable ideal, a “cult of personality” peppered by seductive romanticizing that ironically is itself only another reflection of an authoritarian social relation. It is this that we see as being at the very root of sceneist development.

An anti-capitalist group such as RAAN is not exempt from this effect simply as a result of having declared itself to be in opposition to the present system, and in fact it is we who bear the greatest responsibility to organize in ways that directly challenge and contradict the hierarchies found in all class societies. It is for this reason that we cannot base our movement in any sort of sub- or even “counter”-culture that continues to perpetuate capitalist values, but only in a revolutionary association of our own creation that will produce no bands to idolize, no clothing styles to mimic, and no social relationships comparable to those we maintain under capitalist domination.

It is not necessary to start from scratch, however. We can look towards the existing activity of our movement, imperfect as it is, for glimpses of hope. When anti-authoritarians converge in the street, there usually isn’t time or space to only march with your friends, or bicker over inconsequentialities. Likewise, power divisions within the movement can be made to disappear as we form into the Black Bloc, where anonymity becomes key. While the Bloc tactic itself is alienating in a larger sense, it presents RAAN with a stage upon which to put into practice some of the basic improvements we see as being essential to the movement. The Black Bloc, in which urgency separates the participants from the more common aspects of petty sceneism, can serve as a good example of how our movement should ideally work; collectively and without formal or informal hierarchies, especially of the “social” kind.

(For more on how RAAN can operate as an organized body with specific goals within the Black Bloc, see *The Crisis of the Crisis-Makers*, which also appears in this journal)

to think of the “usual suspects” of the anarchist scene as being the people who would show up to see her.

Based on that observation, the two RAAN members began to wonder if getting the anarchist to speak on behalf of the organization wouldn’t result in RAAN attracting only a very limited assortment of the people we’d hope to reach with our ideas. After a little more discussion, it was decided that getting this famous anarchist to speak would indeed not be in the best interest of the network. After all, our purpose here is to build a new and independent movement, not to merely place the old one, with all of its baggage, under the banner of RAAN (which is not to say that people already identifying as anarchists shouldn’t also be considered potential allies).

What do we see as being wrong within the current manifestation of anarchism? To put it simply, we fear that large sections of the movement have become exclusive social cliques that have reproduced within themselves all the forms of oppression tied to capitalist society. Whether such a result must be inevitable in any organization (anti-capitalist or not) born of class society is not the issue. Rather, we are disgusted by the continual failure of the recognized anarchist movement to combat this tendency and more specifically, by its actual semi-conscious attempts to do so by withdrawing into a series of alienating social circles, which we here will call “scenes”. If scenes are the bourgeois social structures that arise as a result of people struggling to come to terms with alienation, then “Anarcho-sceneism” is the held belief that a revolutionary movement can exist within, or even be based on, any such scene (especially, a “revolutionary” one).

The Red & Anarchist Action Network has, at least so far, been very free of the sort of social and interpersonal drama that has in the past plagued other groups with similar goals. RAAN members have been able to build ties through the network and meet together towards the accomplishment of goals, such as the writing of this article, and by all accounts the results so far have been excellent.

This may not necessarily hold up as we grow, but we certainly cannot in any way cultivate the culture of immature personal squabbles that has become standard in so many anarchist circles.

How to fight it?

So, given that we reject as alienating the current state of the stereotypical anarchist movement, what can our organization do to significantly differentiate ourselves from it?

RAAN has made an effort in this direction simply through the way we have chosen to organize our network. Under our founding theoretical document, the *Principles and Direction*, we exist as a series of autonomous individuals and collectives who can look to the rest of the network for support in any number of projects. Within our broad group of those who identify as anarchists and anti-state, anti-Leninist communists, we make no distinctions based on preferred ideology; and embrace a wide variety of tactics spanning the traditions of the syndicalists to those of the primitivists — towards our common goal. As such, RAAN is as open and un-sectarian a group as possible, while still managing to keep and defend for itself a firm anti-authoritarian position.

But our purpose here is not to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate each other on the extent to which we have tried to make this organization invulnerable to sceneism. Rather, we need to take a sober look at how we can further direct the operation of our network away from the current failing systems applied by large sections of the anti-authoritarian movement, especially as we continue to grow and interact with them.

Unfortunately, to our knowledge there is no non-hierarchical organizational method in existence that in itself will sufficiently guard against the marginalization of the movement into a subculture. Accomplishing this can only be the product of a continuous and conscious drive to avoid sceneism. This drive will no doubt take many

forms in different situations, and the addition of this article to the anti-sceneist culture we must develop can only be considered a first step, a call to action.

RAAN has found that the greatest amount of interest in our project has tended to come from those who — like us — are already familiar with anti-capitalist ideas, but have become disillusioned with the established movement as a result of having felt excluded or alienated from it because of something like their race, gender, sexual orientation, clothing, musical preference, or even just because they weren't already friends with the core group of scenesters who ran the main anarchist collective in their town.

As it turns out, effectively opposing sceneism is no more complicated than developing a more or less detailed analysis of how it operates based on our past and current involvements with the wider movement, and then using that analysis to create mechanisms in our own organization that will allow us to function on a wholly different basis. One of the most fundamental things that we can do in this case is to separate ourselves from any sort of reliance on youth subcultures, especially those related to or rooted in music (various forms of punk being the most obvious and relevant examples).

Marx predicted that any future post-capitalist society would inevitably have to bear the scars of the bourgeois culture from which it rose. We can see this process in effect by observing how it is nearly impossible for any expression of human creativity or joy (be it art, music, love, etc.) to take shape without reproducing in itself some form of oppressive power structure. The pretentious elitism that has become a matter of pride with those who participate in music cultures has no place inside a revolutionary organization; it too is a fundamentally oppressive structure. Any subculture — from graffiti artists to punks — that is produced from within the capitalist milieu, runs the risk of being bought out and turned into an alienating spectacle accessible to only a minority of the population. Hairstyles, clothes, and even something as apparently beneficial as the DIY ethic can be fetishized and turned into an object