

Capitalism means never having to say you're sorry

dot matrix

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Poke an anarchist whose project involves an exchange of money for goods, and chances are you will have to duck to avoid the stream of sticky, apologetic defensiveness.

“If we don’t charge, how do you expect us to provide you with this stuff and still sustain ourselves?”

“What should we do?”

“It’s classist to think that people can do this for free...”

And so on.

While the apologies and excuses do acknowledge that something contradictory and complicated is happening, the rationales tend to fall back into the same old purity reasoning, not much more engaged than disingenuous complaints about Zerzan’s use of a typewriter.

These simplistic responses distract us from the questions that we could get creative with. Once we acknowledge that capitalism is in the air we breathe then we can have more interesting conversations.

Part of the problem is people’s desire to make money doing things that they believe in. While we all understand wanting a coherent life in which what we spend most of our time doing leads to what we envision for a better world, there is a strong argument that any exchange allowed by this culture is recuperable. (Volunteers and social workers are both easily integrated into — even more, are crucial components of — capitalism.) So maybe we have to give up on the idea that anarchist projects are compatible with a livable wage. Even though this goes directly against the Marxist thinking that our political validity is based on the kind of work that we do.

Which are the circumstances, projects, and times that we can best do for free? What are the limits on what anarchists do for money? What is the appropriate relationship of anarchists to businesses, especially businesses that wave the circle-A? What makes an anarchist project different from a nonprofit (nonprofits being notorious for demanding that employees be “true believers” who must dedicate far more hours and energy to the organization than most businesses would, or could, ever ask for)? What counts as *sustainable* for an anarchist project?

One of the reasons for charging money for goods is to play a part that makes sense to newcomers. Commercial exchanges are interactions that are comfortable for people in this culture, even more comfortable than the other projects that are the other common first faces of anarchy

(like Critical Mass and Food Not Bombs). And it's exactly the transitional space that commercial anarchist projects inhabit that makes them both thorny for dedicated anarchists, and easier for newbies to deal with.

Part of the issue is the disparate and mutually exclusive definitions of anarchist. There are all kinds of projects that call themselves anarchist and that practice ideas contrary to each other. How about a for-profit publishing business that is worker-owned and -controlled, but that requires people to work overtime and produces only a small percentage of anarchist titles relative to their large percentage of non-anarchist books? Does it make sense to call theirs an anarchist business? What about a business that competes with other anarchist publishing and distribution projects, becomes financially successful through this competition, and is thus a centralizing force in the anarchist book publishing niche? Can this project and its success appropriately be called anarchist? Is there any way to avoid this scenario when projects attempt to compete on a large scale (especially if they succeed)? How about big, well-known businesses that sponsor events on the same day as other smaller anarchist events, because "it's the only way that the businesses will survive?" What about businesses that call themselves anarchist and hire anarchists, but that seem to denature the people they hire, none of whom engage in anarchist activities or communities once they've quit or been fired from the project?

Some questions to consider for specific projects... Does anyone engaged in it expect to live off the profits? Does the project attempt to compete on a large stage (ie does it use the standard capitalist business model)? How is the project open and transparent? How is it not? Does it encourage and support, or shut down and compete with, other anarchist projects? What else are the people in the project involved in? Does the project have a centralizing tendency, or is it part of networks, and if so, what kinds of networks?

Anarchists are engaged in juggling two incompatible concepts: one is a fundamental opposition to the world we live in, and the other is the need to actually live in, and we hope have an impact on, this world. We all have to find our own ways, with as much help and critical feedback as we can stand. Sometimes more.

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