Anarchists in Wonderland: The Topsy-Turvy World

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2003

Throughout this thoroughly muddled dispute, the most consistently reasonable theorist for the post-left tendency has been Jason McQuinn, founding editor of Anarchy Magazine. McQuinn's take on the post-left idea is essentially a recapitulation of the themesthat have preoccupied him since the 1970s: the critique of ideology, the rejection of moralism, suspicion toward formal organization, and the liberatory power of individual desire. These are familiar topics for many anarchists today, and have also found significant resonance among non-anarchist sectors of various radical movements.

There is much to be said about each of these notions in their specifically anarchist form, and McQuinn's latest essay (posted at the IAS website) offers ample opportunity to reflect on their implications for our praxis. What all this might have to do with rejecting "the left" as such, however, remains rather obscure. Indeed many of the core ideas of post-leftism trace their genealogy to left traditions themselves. The critique of organization, for example, is deeply indebted to the work of Jacques Camatte; the insistence on linking subjective psychological factors with broader social forces is presaged in the thinking of Cornelius Castoriadis; and the whole re-orientation toward domination as our central critical term was theorized by the Frankfurt School and by Social Ecology long before it gained currency in the pages of Anarchy.

Despite the provenance of many of its own fundamental principles, however, post-leftism adamantly rejects any accommodation with what it takes to be "the left". This phrase itself seems to expand or contract to fit the circumstances; when post-left anarchists talk about leftists, sometimes they mean sectarian splinter groups and authoritarian demagogues, and sometimes they mean everybody from Bukharin to Bookchin. Many anarchists drawn to the post-left label appear to live in a world in which all leftists are Leninists, except when they're liberals, and where the left as a whole is an ominous iceberg of power-worship threatening to sink a virtually Titanic-sized anarchist movement.

Since I do not live in that world, I am frequently at a loss when asked to reply to the claims of post-leftism. In the world where I live, the left is an extraordinarily variegated continuum of conflicting participants and perspectives, not a monolithic entity that can be reduced to a few neat premises. And the anarchist movement is a relatively small but vitally important current within that broader continuum, a current that still has much to learn from other radical tendencies

and social movements. But in the hope of sparking something like a coherent debate on these questions, I will once more venture down the rabbit-hole and see what sense I can make of post-left theory in its myriad forms.

McQuinn's latest essay begins on a promising note. He observes, accurately enough, that the "void in the development of anarchist theory" has "yet to be filled by any adequate new formulation", and offers the post-left alternative as a way to address this gap. His conclusion strikes a conciliatory tone as well: "there has been a long, most often honorable, history of anarchist and left syntheses." This would seem to leave considerable room for critical engagement between anarchists and leftists.

But this raises an obvious problem: Why are McQuinn's more judicious statements of the post-left position at odds with both the details of his own argument and the vehement declarations of so many other post-left anarchists? The simplest explanation is that adherents of post-leftism are still working out the specifics of their vision, something that other anarchists can hardly fault them for. In this process, however, a number of the more troubling versions of post-left thinking will require serious reconsideration if the tendency is to live up to its own best intentions. And it is far from clear that McQuinn's current proposal is able to accommodate this much-needed reconsideration.

Perhaps the most telling instances of post-left zeal can be found in a sprawling on-line debate from 2002, hosted by the comrades at infoshop.org. The exchange can be found here:

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Just about the only thing to emerge clearly from that discussion was that a number of the more vocal post-left anarchists are committed to a series of implausible claims that McQuinn's essay does not address, much less defend. We might simply stop at this point and ask, Will the real post-leftists please stand up? But maybe a more productive approach is to read McQuinn's contribution in light of the background provided by less discreet fans of the post-left position.

Let's begin with the nebulous notion of "the left" that animates the post-left critique. The leftists we meet in the extravagant denunciations proffered by post-left anarchists are an impressively protean bunch: they are all simultaneously totalitarians and reformists; their movements are disintegrating, trapped in inevitable decline, yet their mere presence threatens to overwhelm those anarchists foolish enough to ignore the urgent danger; they are ruthlessly fixated on an all-encompassing abstract ideology, yet at the same time they fritter away their activist energies on single-issue concrete campaigns. Even their opposition to capitalism is mostly fake. McQuinn himself relies on such caricatured portraits more often than not; his essay resounds with telltale modifiers like "all" and "every", "always" and "everywhere". This lack of nuance does little to further anarchist evaluations of left practice.

McQuinn is similarly fond of sweeping assertions about what "the vast majority" of leftists have thought and done throughout history. More careful descriptions are overshadowed by categorical pronouncements: "For leftists, the emphasis is always on recruiting to their organizations, so that you can adopt the role of a cadre serving their goals." To an extent this can be chalked up to simple rhetorical excess, but such undifferentiated claims are often taken literally by the post-leftist faithful, who fail to notice that these indiscriminate generalizations do not accord well with McQuinn's ringing criticisms of reductionism.

The post-left image of "the left" is not just overly simplified, it is frequently wrong on the particulars. McQuinn writes, for example, that the "critique of everyday life" is "largely incompatible" with "most of the New Left of the 60s and 70s." In Germany, France, and North America,

at the very least, large segments of the New Left enthusiastically embraced the critique of everyday life; indeed the profoundly anti-authoritarian upsurge of that era — which was of course accompanied by an authoritarian backlash — owed much of its vigor and incisiveness to this re-orientation toward everyday relationships. The influential three-volume work The Critique of Everyday Life was written not by an anarchist, but by the French leftist Henri Lefebvre.

Themes such as the critique of everyday life and the critique of ideology have in fact been central to radical forms of left politics for decades. The classic primer by Richard Gombin, for example, The Origins of Modern Leftism, devotes a pivotal chapter to "A Critique of Everyday Life". More important, the concrete practice of countless New Leftists was explicitly predicated on a forceful rejection of precisely those values which McQuinn takes to be constitutive of the left as such. This strand of left radicalism did not appear out of nowhere in the 1960s; it has its roots in earlier figures such as Alexandra Kollontai or Wilhelm Reich, and found one of its most articulate spokespeople in Herbert Marcuse, whose work on the topic reached back to the 1930's. All of these individuals were non-anarchist leftists.

Similar points could be made about the critique of industrial technology, which McQuinn also takes to be essentially foreign to leftist thought. The actual history of the left includes numerous instances when such innovative critical approaches emerged to contest the conformism and repressiveness of the cadre model. There is no sensible reason to collapse this multifaceted record into a one-dimensional tale of leftist perfidy. Moreover, some leftists have been thoughtful and resolute allies of anarchism at crucial junctures in our history. Many anarchists learn about the Spanish revolution through the superb account Homage to Catalonia, penned by George Orwell. Orwell was a leftist who fought side by side with other leftists and anarchists against both the right and the Stalinists in Spain. Today one of the chief ways that inquisitive anarchists have easy access to the classics of our own tradition is through the work of leftists like Daniel Guerin. Selective memory will not help us make sense of the conflicted history of left interactions with anarchists.

But the problem here goes beyond one-sided depictions of the left. Post-left anarchists also rely on a truncated conception of anarchism itself. McQuinn's essay is not immune to this tendency; at several points he insists that anarchism as a whole rests on an "indelibly individualist foundation". If this were true, it would be difficult to explain the centuries-old internal struggles between individualist anarchists and social anarchists. Without recapitulating these debates here, suffice it to say that many contemporary anarchists reject McQuinn's contention that "collectivism" is inherently suspect while "individual self-theory" is the source of liberation. His ill-considered invocations of Stirner aside, McQuinn neglects the crucial dialectic between individual and collective that is the distinctive feature of social anarchist praxis. While we can probably all agree with McQuinn's observation that "without the autonomous individual, any other level of autonomy is impossible", post-leftists would do well to remember that the reverse is equally true: Without autonomous collectivities, individual autonomy is impossible. McQuinn's commitment to individualist assumptions leads him to misconstrue this fundamental relationship. Getting things more or less backwards, he writes that "only free individuals can create a free, unalienated society." But free individuals do not drop out of the sky; they are themselves the product of free societies.

This myopic insistence on individual autonomy comes back to haunt post-leftism when its more hyperbolic advocates take the floor. In the aforementioned infoshop debates, several spokespeople for post-left positions emphatically declared their opposition to egalitarianism (hardly

surprising in a tendency that takes its cues from Stirner and Nietzsche), and a number of them claimed to reject social institutions per se, maintaining that all social structures of whatever sort are inherently oppressive. Forgetting the cultural context within which many US-based anarchists operate, some of these post-leftists carry the ideal of rugged individualism to the point of self-parody, declaring that in the liberated future, nobody will ever have to associate with people they don't personally like. One of them summed up the post-left stance by saying simply "I want to be left alone", free of all the annoying attachments of social life, without other people interjecting their own opinions or offering critical comments on each other's behavior.

Though the promoters of these notions strenuously deny it, what this attitude amounts to is a rejection of the very possibility of communal existence. If all social structures are inherently oppressive, there is no point in trying to create a free society. If libertarian and participatory social institutions are impossible by definition, we can all stay home and read Foucault. It may seem trivial to state these matters so baldly, but sharing the world with other people means that sometimes we can't do exactly what we want to do, and sometimes we will indeed need to cooperate with people we don't like very much. The false promise of absolute individual autonomy is not simply an idle fantasy, it is profoundly indebted to those classical liberal principles that underwrite capitalist society as we know it. Genuine autonomy is not the mere absence of constraints. In its more extreme versions, the post-left vision is encumbered by a negative conception of freedom, a conception reduced to the liberty of atomized individuals, who jealously guard their private rights and prerogatives. It cannot accommodate a positive conception of social freedom, a kind of freedom that flourishes in cooperation with others and demands equality as its necessary counterpart, a kind of freedom that is embodied in anti-authoritarian social structures and cooperative social practices.

Many post-left enthusiasts also seem to think of "leftists" as a bunch of busybodies who are constantly telling other people what to do. Some leftists do fit this description, and it is likely that this propensity often compounds the existing authoritarian disposition of a certain leftist personality type. But apart from the fact that these same trends are fiercely combatted by many other leftists of a more anti-authoritarian disposition, there is something disconcertingly complacent about the unexamined perceptions of proper behavior that underlie this particular post-left complaint. After all, liberatory forms of social interaction sometimes require us to challenge each other's opinions and actions rather than just accepting them. The world will not be a better place if we keep our thoughts to ourselves and largely leave each other alone — especially when we're engaged with people who are not our personal friends and familiar acquaintances. The time-honored anarchist principle of free association does not license insularity; instead it encourages exploration and mutual recognition, including critical contestation of what other people say and do. This is how social cohesion is kept transparent and solidarity is nourished. To abandon such efforts in the name of individual sovereignty would mean an impoverishment of anarchist comradeship.

McQuinn's essay does not confront this form of post-left repressive tolerance, whose deeper implications are actually an invitation to intolerance and parochialism. Rather McQuinn focuses his attention on the manifold shortcomings of contemporary radical politics. Overlooking the aporias of his own theory, he notes that "leftists have incomplete, self-contradictory theories about capitalism and social change." But we all have these. Capitalism is a contradictory system. Revolutionary social change is an incomplete process. Working through these contradictions requires close attention to the concrete determinants of currently prevalent modes of domination

and hierarchy, so that we can create forms of resistance adequate to the particular demands of our specific historical and social situation. Under present conditions, trumpeting our commitment to "general social revolt" simply promotes the kind of false generalism that is already rife in North American anarchist circles. Too many of us think that since we're anarchists, we are "by definition" opposed to all forms of oppression; thus we don't really need to grapple with any of them in particular. This is one area where an informed engagement with several left traditions could do anarchists a lot of good. Instead of the abstract negation of existing society that post-leftists sometimes preach, critical contact with "single-issue campaigns" and experienced activists can help us move toward a determinate negation of the systems of power that surround us.

Learning from the civil rights struggle, for example, or the strategies pioneered by peasant revolts in the global south, could bring a wealth of grassroots perspectives to bear on the contestations we are part of in our own local contexts. But an anarchism that hopes to "stand on its own and bow to no other movements" will be ill equipped to engage in this sort of learning process; indeed it will be unprepared for active solidarity with those movements it consigns to "the left". This attitude exacerbates the existing tendency among anarchists to consider our own perspectives invariably more comprehensive than those of non-anarchists. Whether there is in fact "a huge divide" between the project of abolishing "every form of social alienation", on the one hand, and the myriad sub-projects concentrating on particular instances of alienation on the other, is not a question that can be answered in advance. The more radicalized and ambitious such concrete struggles become, the more they narrow this gap and reach toward fuller forms of liberation. But this is a matter of practice, of hands-on confrontation with specific manifestations of unfreedom under definite historical conditions. To declare such "partial goals" woefully incomplete is to miss the point. Adopting a more all-encompassing critical viewpoint, even one that fancies itself free of reification and ideology, does not in itself render the social circumstances ripe for total revolution.

In overlooking these potentially radicalizing occasions for mutual aid and reciprocal learning, the post-left tendency deprives itself of a much-needed counterweight to its individualist preferences and its skepticism toward democratic procedures. At times this suspicion toward collective endeavors and toward non-anarchist varieties of radicalism suggests a misguided desire for purity: We are the only ones with an uncompromising commitment to thoroughgoing liberation in all spheres of life, post-left anarchists sometimes seem to say, and we must guard against contaminating this precious legacy with insufficiently intransigent elements. In its most unreflective form, this mindset is nothing more than a recipe for anarchist sectarianism, the bane of any movement that wants to change the world.

All of this casts a rather different light on McQuinn's forays into psychology. He is convinced that left anarchists who are unpersuaded by the rhetoric of post-leftism are simply anxiously resisting "the self-examination necessary for genuine self-understanding." In reality, a number of post-leftism's critics have tried to provoke greater self-examination among anarchists, a more serious re-appraisal of the lacunae within our own traditions, by questioning the tendentially elitist undertones that mark so much anarchist discourse. Individualist strands of anarchism are especially susceptible to a disdain for "the masses", and the post-left persuasion frequently accentuates the inegalitarian aspects of this worldview. A few post-left anarchists go so far as to extol the right wing tendencies within anarchism as a healthy corrective to the grave dangers of social equality and the dastardly connivance of anarchists and power-mad leftists.

On this score, McQuinn's essay sets off alarm bells for readers familiar with the neglected history of anarchist flirtations with the right. Anarchism has long had something of a Janus face, oscillating between emancipatory and exclusivist poles. Stirner himself is an exemplary figure in this regard: simultaneously the chief inspiration for one wing of anarchism, and a darling of the right, from its proprietarian faction to its pronounced elitist and authoritarian variants. The problem here is not really that of an "opening to the political right", as McQuinn anticipates, but rather the naïve notion that anarchists can now, through force of will alone, walk through the looking glass into the promised land of "neither left nor right". Post-left anarchists would do well to examine the history of this foolish slogan before adopting it into their repertoire. In its modern form the phrase was popularized by the right wing of the German Greens, particularly the far-right authoritarian Herbert Gruhl, during the reactionary backlash of the early 1980's. But the roots of the neither-left-nor-right idea go considerably further back; a version of this stance was popular within the nationalist and populist völkisch movement in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and the pretence of offering a 'third way' between left and right became one of the major selling points for European fascism.

Anarchists have not always escaped this kind of political disorientation. From the peculiar response of Proudhonists to the Dreyfus Affair, to the Italian syndicalists who joined Mussolini, to the "national anarchists" and "third positionists" of today, anarchist militants have sometimes found a comfortable home on the extreme right end of the spectrum. Although post-left anarchists often dismiss such cases as either isolated or irrelevant, the record of anarchist crossover into far right terrain is in fact remarkably long. Among the better known examples are Georges Sorel in France, Günther Bartsch in Germany, Troy Southgate in Britain, and Bill White in the US. The desire to move 'beyond left and right' played a key role in several of these instances, and continues to do so today. The conclusion to McQuinn's essay suggests an indifferent attitude, at best, toward this regrettable history.

All in all, the post-left paradigm still needs a lot of refining. In the midst of condemning reductionism, reification, and the failed politics of the sectarian left, it relies on a reductionist view of left history and a reified notion of absolute individuality while encouraging the sectarian strands within anarchism. The much-needed process of theoretical and practical refinement would be more effective if post-left adherents could bring themselves to engage with the criticisms put forward by left anarchists. Indeed that step alone might spur a re-thinking of the categories post-leftists hold so dear, along with a recognition that there are important libertarian and anti-statist strands within the left. Drawing the consequences from this recognition would likely mean a major overhaul of post-left anarchy in its present form. In place of wholesale rejection of a mythical "left" that is devoid of distinctions, post-leftists would have to acknowledge that the left, just like the right, is an extremely heterogeneous spectrum, not a single entity, and that some of its currents warrant more than scorn.

Anarchists are working toward a society where everyone who wants to can participate in social affairs on an equal footing, where domination and hierarchy have been replaced by solidarity and self-management. The project of creating such a society will require cooperation with a broad range of oppositional movements, many of whom have solid grounds for refraining from a wholehearted embrace of anarchist doctrine. A nuanced understanding of how our own principles can be articulated to the insights and experiences of compatible struggles will go a long way toward overcoming the blind spots in the anarchist tradition. An anarchism that wishes to avoid reification and leave the mistakes of the past behind will take this lesson to heart.

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Retrieved on July 8, 2009 from news.infoshop.org

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