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Choosing Marginality

Jane Meyerding

1998

In marginality, I have found freedom. There are many kinds of marginality though and mine is a chosen marginality. I am a white, mostly straight, college educated male from a middle class background and could choose to be mainstream if I wanted. My marginality is far different from that of a disrespected Native American elder on a reservation, a homeless family forced to live in separate shelters, a criminalized African-American youth in the ghetto, or a teenager kicked out of her home for being a lesbian. Theirs is the marginality of the oppressed. Mine is the marginality of the drop out. These are two very different things.

My politics obviously make me marginal in some sense — it usually is not a good idea to publicly refer to oneself as an anarchist as this is liable to make a lot of people think you're a terrorist. But I have chosen to be further marginalized by temping for a living and not working at a respectable, regular job. In my senior year in college, while every one else was busily searching for a career, I quite deliberately did not. I had gone to college because that's what somebody from my class background was just expected to do. While I don't regret my college years, I consciously decided not to continue operating on

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middle class autopilot. I was going to be, rather to my parents' distress, a fuck-up. No plans except that I wanted to be a grass-roots activist and a science-fiction writer; not exactly lucrative pursuits.

After a brief stint working at Barnes & Noble — a horribly authoritarian, soul-killing place — I took up temping. In the impermanence of temping I have found some degree of freedom. With sufficient planning, I can take time off for my activism or my writing whenever I want — I don't have to go begging for vacation time. I find temping also minimizes the stress of the work place. Our culture's work ethic, unfortunately, is still rather ingrained in my actions even though I don't believe in it (at least as far as capitalist enterprises are concerned); being at a working place for only a brief time is a way of keeping myself from getting caught up in trying too hard to do a good job. Temping gives me an amount of control over my life I would not otherwise have — my job does not dominate me, unlike all the permanent office workers I see, stressed out, juggling a thousand meetings, and putting in unpaid overtime. There are of course drawbacks to temping — my income is unstable and I have only a pathetic excuse for health insurance (and until recently had none at all) — but the trade off is worth it to me.

I am not attempting to make myself out to be more radical or more marginal than thou. There are people I know who live even more marginally than I do — people who get jobs when they run out of money, or who are nomads or squatters. I also know people whom I respect, who work at permanent, respectable office jobs, who are also solid radicals and whose values and activities outside of work make them marginal in some sense, part of the anarchist milieu. The line between the mainstream and the margins is not necessarily a clear one. It's a matter of the choices people make, the level of instability and possible discomfort people want to put up with. I respect squatters, but I couldn't live like that. I respect radicals with a permanent office job, but I couldn't live like that either.

A few sentences back, what I actually should have said, “It’s a matter of the choices *some* people *get* to make...” My ability to choose to be marginal is itself a sign of privilege. Many of the people (although certainly not all of them) in the anarchist drop out milieu could have chosen and could still choose to live otherwise — to have regular, mainstream lives with permanent, respectable jobs and all the rest of the garbage that goes with that. I certainly fall into that category and may actually take advantage of that privilege some day to go to grad school, thereby demarginalizing myself.

For many people in America and across the world, these are not choices. They are made marginal by the larger forces of society — capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia and other all too familiar evils. As I said, I have pathetic health insurance and my income is unstable — by choice. If I had children to support, I certainly would not make this choice. Many people in America must, whether they want to or not, try to do the best for themselves and their families without health insurance, without a stable or adequate income, their poverty often exacerbated by the racism and sexism of hiring practices and the welfare system. Too many people have no choice.

There is some irony in my position. Even though I choose to live without adequate healthcare, I believe it is horrible that so many must live without any by force of economic circumstances. I voluntarily live a life I would not wish on others. At this point in this essay, I feel like I should say what this means, but I’m really not sure what it does mean. My chosen marginality is certainly not some noble act of solidarity with the oppressed. It is a rejection of the system, or at least aspects of it — those aspects that bind the spirit; but it is not a protest against those aspects that create material want. Arguably, by not demanding better for myself, I am in some small way undermining those who are organizing to demand at least the fulfillment of material needs by our dominant social institutions, the state and corporations. On the other hand, by living to some

degree outside of the accepted roles defined by the education and media systems controlled by the state and corporations, I am in some small way working to undermine these institutions, which are responsible for creating material want in the first place.

But really, I'm a drop out because I like being one. The current system is a dead end not only in terms of fulfilling people's material needs but spiritually as well, breeding ignorance, stupefaction, alienation, and social fragmentation. The lives of the mainstream working and middle classes are a rat race, devoid of what makes life worth living. My rejection of this life is, in part, a search for authenticity, a life that means something — as someone from a relatively affluent background, I know affluence does not bring happiness and may well be a hindrance to it. Yet I can't blame the poor for seeking affluence for few people enjoy material deprivation — and it is difficult to search for personal fulfillment if you're having trouble getting enough to eat.

The marginal lifestyle I choose to live (as opposed to the activism it frees me up to do) ultimately makes little difference — as a solitary choice. But others have chosen to jump ship too. Certainly not all members of the anarchist drop out milieu would necessarily think of themselves as seeking authenticity, but they have all rejected the mainstream as a dead end lifestyle. We anarchist drop-outs do form some sort of nebulous community with our own informal networks of mutual aid, our own fragile institutions — radical bookstores, Food Not Bombs groups, etc.

Although drop-out lifestyles alone certainly will not bring about revolution, we need to remember that the personal is political. If large numbers of people realized that what the dominant Anglo-American culture defines as respectable — a mindless forty-hour a week job at an office, with televisions, houses, cars and loads of stress as markers of success — is a crock, that we could all potentially explore much more fulfilling paths in

life if society was otherwise organized, this could do much to undermine capitalism. Chosen marginality without activism is not, on its own, subversive. But if we on the margins (and if capitalism continues of its present course, more and more people will be joining us out here whether they want to or not) attempt to create a more fulfilling way of life in conjunction with our activism, we will be that much stronger.