

# Issues That Divide Anarchists

in the United States

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## ***1. Lifestyle versus Social Anarchists***

This is undoubtedly still the biggest divide in the anarchist movement. It is more accurately described as a split between individualist anarchists and social anarchists. So-called lifestyle anarchists have vehemently rejected the label, and have viciously attacked Murray Bookchin for having highlighted the distinction. Individualist anarchists are centered around Primitivism, Crimethinc, *Anarchy*, *Green Anarchy*, *Fifth Estate*, *Earth First*, and *The Match*. Individualists often deny that they are individualists, claiming that they are social anarchists too. In these notes I will refer to fanatic anarchist individualists as Egoists, considering that they believe in the absolute autonomy of the individual, see society as an aggregate of such autonomous individuals, and often cite Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* as one of their favorite texts. About half of the issues discussed below are related to this basic split in one way or another. Social anarchists are represented in the United States by the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (and other similar federations throughout the nation), *Social Anarchism*, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, and in general the rest of the anarchist movement. This split is peculiar to the United States (with perhaps just an inkling of it in England); that is, it is not found in the international anarchist movement, which is overwhelmingly grounded in social anarchism.

## ***2. Definition of an Anarchist***

So-called post-left anarchists deny the label of anarchist to all anarchists who reject the fanatic individualist stance of post-leftists. They claim that social anarchists are leftists not anarchists, and of course "left" is a derogatory term for them. Similarly, some social anarchists, especially some platformists, deny the label of anarchist to the individualists, claiming that the beliefs of these people have virtually nothing to do with anarchism as understood historically. Each side also accuses the

other side of being sectarian. It is not a question drawing boundaries around anarchism to distinguish it from other political initiatives, which is natural and inevitable, but a disagreement about where the boundary will be drawn.

### **3. Membership Organizations**

Some social anarchists, often calling themselves platformists, believe strongly that a membership organization of anarchists is vital and necessary to achieve an anarchist revolution. The history of this tendency has been written up by Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968*. Egoists will have nothing to do with this, bitterly denouncing platformists. Not only are they opposed to organizations of anarchists, but to organization in general, for example, workers councils at the workplace, or neighborhood assemblies, or housing co-ops. The affinity group is the largest social form that they will contemplate. In practice though, self-contradictorily, they organize themselves enough to publish magazines, run infoshops, and operate houses for traveler kids. This is a huge split in the anarchist movement, which basically follows the individual/social split. Nevertheless, not all anarchists who remain unaffiliated with any of the recently established federations of anarchist communists are egoists.

### **4. Meetings**

Egoists hate meetings and refuse to go to them, ridiculing and disparaging them, saying that they are a waste of time. Meetings, and the decisions taken at them, infringe on the autonomy of the individual and are therefore rejected. For the rest of the anarchist movement, meetings are a normal and necessary part of being an activist, and of planning and executing projects and campaigns. Social anarchists claim that no cooperative endeavors could take place without meetings, and therefore argue that the rejection of meetings by egoists is highly destructive to the anarchist revolution.

### **5. Voting**

Egoists reject voting, even consensus voting (obviously, because they don't go to meetings to begin with). When pressed as to how even a small affinity group of eight will make decisions about a common course of action, they say that it is contingent, and that the group will be able to figure it out. Essentially, they refuse to endorse or accept an explicit voting procedure, relying instead on informal practices. For social anarchists, voting is also a contentious issue, however, mainly because of confusion about whether to operate by majority rule or consensus voting. So-called consensus voting is the predominant practice however. Often it is believed that this means that majority rule has been rejected. It does not. It means merely that simple majority rule has been rejected. So-called consensus voting is a procedure for arriving at the largest possible majority on any given issue. Many groups function without ever having clarified explicitly what voting procedure they are following, and often decisions are made rather informally, through a sense of the meeting, which often is based however on hidden hierarchies.

## ***6. Workplace versus Community organizing***

Anarcho-syndicalists have traditionally (and still do) focused exclusively on workplace organizing. Anarcho-communists have generally been more focused on community organizing, although not to the exclusion of organizing at the workplace too. Libertarian municipalism, a strategy proposed by Murray Bookchin, decidedly rejects workplace organizing and calls instead for the establishment of municipal assemblies, after getting control of local governments by winning elections. These divisions may be breaking down somewhat. Libertarian municipalism never became a strategy that is actually being practiced. Contemporary anarcho-communists typically include both neighborhood and workplace organizing. Only traditional anarcho-syndicalists stick doggedly to the workplace as the primary arena for revolutionary struggle.

## ***7. Black Bloc Tactics***

Black bloc tactics have been bitterly controversial. They were not surprisingly condemned by the main progressive (i.e., left-liberal) protest organizations which are imbued with a pacifist ideology. But also within the anarchist movement itself, the arguments have raged. This is an issue which doesn't split along individualist / social anarchist lines. Most anarchists are agreed that there is nothing wrong in principle with symbolic destruction of property, or with militant street fighting, especially when this is done in self-defense or in defense of other less prepared demonstrators. The argument has been about whether it is efficacious. Are the gains overshadowed by the disadvantages? This may be a moot question, because it would seem that most of those who were forming the black blocs have consciously decided to abandon the tactic (at least in the United States; Europe is another matter).

## ***8. Summit Hopping***

Since the Battle of Seattle in 1999, anarchists and other protesters have been following the ruling class around the world as it meets first here and then there in annual meetings (WTO, G8, WMF, etc), conducting the business of empire. Questions emerged early on about whether this (summit hopping) was a useful expenditure of resources for radicals. The matter has more or less resolved itself though because very few anarchists have the money to travel like this. So the protests have continued but have taken on distinctly local airs.

## ***9. Protest Demonstrations***

A very faint opposition to the politics of protest has finally begun to emerge. Critics of protest marching claim that the tactic accomplishes almost nothing, and that it is therefore an incredible waste of resources, which are always in short supply in left radical movements. The organizers of the demonstrations continue to believe that the marches and rallies make a difference. The habit of organizing marches to protest policies of the ruling class is deeply entrenched in opposition culture, and it is a worldwide practice. It will take a revolution in strategic thinking to dislodge it.

## 10. Civilization

Primitivists have decided that civilization is the problem, not capitalism. In the extreme version, not only modern industry, but language, art, mathematics, and agriculture are all rejected, as having contributed to hierarchy. Not all egoists go this far (they're not all that batty), but the habit of denouncing civilization, instead of capitalism, has become quite common in the anarchist movement. There are many primitivist themes in *Crimethink*, and now in *Green Anarchy*. This obviously has serious consequences for revolutionary strategy. Primitivists are reduced to waiting for civilization to destroy itself, or else trying to help the process along. In the meantime they will try to learn survival skills. Critics point out that egoists have once again gotten tangled up in an abstraction. A world wide anarchist society would be a civilization. In fact, the historical anarchist movement has been a struggle to create a higher level of civilization, not get rid of civilization. Critics of primitivism deny that it has anything to do with anarchy at all, claim that it has usurped the name, and that it is sowing enormous confusion and doing terrible damage to the fight for a free society.

## 11. Work

Egoists have launched a campaign to abolish work. The trouble with this is that they are attacking an abstraction. The term work could refer to chattel slavery, serfdom, indentured service, backyard gardening, garage workshop repairs, mutual aid barn building, tenant farming, unpaid housework, shop keeping, management, or self-employed professionals and trades people, to name just a few uses. Egoists however haven't even bothered themselves to specify wage-slavery as the type of work they are against (presuming this is what they actually mean), but just condemn work in general. *Crimethink* has added a twist of its own, namely, don't work, quit your job. There was a precursor initiative in the 1970s – a Zero Work initiative – by some activists related to the autonomist movement. Critics point out that by attacking work in the abstract, rather than concrete wage-slavery, egoists have muddied the waters and damaged the anti-capitalist struggle. They have shifted the focus away from fights at the workplace into the dropout culture and dumpster diving.

## 12. Post-Left Anarchism

So-called post-left anarchists have drawn a circle around a very narrow definition of anarchy, namely, extreme, fanatic individualism, and have declared that all anarchists outside that circle are not anarchists at all but leftists. It is an extremely sectarian move. They are especially disdainful of anarchists who engage in workplace organizing. They also claim that anarchy is not, nor has it ever been, a part of the left. This way of thinking and talking has spread far and wide in the anarchist movement. It is quite common now to hear the term left used in a derogatory way, even by anarchists who have no affiliation with post-left anarchism. Critics claim that post-left anarchists have impaled themselves on an abstraction. The term left has always been vague, its boundaries being rather fuzzy. But the historical ignorance shown by those claiming that anarchy is not part of the left is truly astonishing. Moreover, 'left' is an inherently relative term, its meaning depending on the starting point. For extreme right-wing republicans, mainstream liberals are left. However, post-left anarchists have simply invented their own highly idiosyncratic definition and then used it to rewrite history. Critics claim that what they are really against is just leninism. So why don't they simply say that instead of

attacking anyone who thinks that anarchists have to organize to make a revolution. Post-left anarchists are in fact just attacking social anarchists, in this round about way, by taking an ordinary word, redefining it, putting a negative connotation on it, and then sticking the label on their opponents, thus defining them out of the revolution. This has been an extremely divisive campaign. It's no wonder that anarcho-communists have replied in kind, and written post-left anarchists out of the movement.

### ***13. Spiritualism***

Many contemporary anarchists, in marked contrast to nineteenth century anarchists, are uncomfortable with an anarchism that does not include a spiritual dimension. But of course there are as many definitions of spiritual as there are persons making an argument for its necessity. For some it merely means moral or ethical, and is counter posed to the scientific outlooks of earlier generations which tended to slight morality. For others it means communion with nature. Derrick Jensen believes in talking to rivers, for example, and believes that he can understand coyotes talking to him. Some, like Starhawk, use it to mean a rather comprehensive female centered cosmology. For some it is a pervasive mysticism. Quite frankly, I hardly know what to make of all this, but I can't think that it is healthy.

### ***14. Nihilism***

Recently some egoists, like Aragorn, have been pushing nihilism, claiming that it is a part of, or at least useful to, anarchism (*Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century*, 35 page pamphlet). A book of essays on Nietzsche has even been compiled, which attempts to appropriate him for the anarchist tradition (John Moore, editor, *Frederick Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition*). Brian Morris, the brilliant British anarchist, demolished the effort in a short review article in *Freedom* (25 March 06). This is one weird campaign.

### ***15. Christian Anarchism***

A very small contingent of contemporary anarchists identify as Christian Anarchists. Only one major anarchist thinker took this position, namely, Leo Tolstoy. Other anarchists have overwhelmingly been atheists, and, in the classic period, they vigorously fought religion. Their unrelenting attacks on religion are not characteristic of the contemporary anarchist movement, however, much to the chagrin of some (like me). Tolstoy of course could hardly be called a Christian. He lived by a religion which he pretty much invented himself. It's hard to know what to say about this tendency. They see it as legitimate of course, and defend it. Their critics say that it is a contradiction in terms. Anarchism, they say, is completely at odds with everything Christianity stands for.

### ***16. Image of what a world anarchist society would look like***

Anarcho-syndicalists see anarchy as a system of workers councils federated at the local and regional levels. Anarcho-communists tend to see anarchy as a world full of autonomous communities. Libertarian municipalists see anarchy as a confederation of municipal assemblies or town councils.

Egoists see anarchy as an aggregate of autonomous individuals. They are unwilling to even talk about the social forms that anarchy might take, evidently because they don't think in those terms and don't think that anarchy *will* take social forms. Situationism, a related tendency, has pictured a free society in terms of generalized self-management. This image has recently been quite nicely fleshed out in Ken Knabb's *Joy of Revolution*, which is a useful synthesis of the work and community perspectives. The picture that one has of mature anarchy obviously determines the strategy that is settled on to get there. Orthodox anarcho-syndicalists focus exclusively on workplace organizing. Anarcho-communists focus on work, housing, and community, in varying mixes. Libertarian municipalists focus on setting up popular assemblies. Egoists occupy themselves with attacking the system in various ways, trying to destroy it and get it out of their lives, so that they can live as they please.

## **17. Food Not Bombs**

A few lonely voices have criticized Food Not Bombs for really being no different from any other charitable organization that feeds the poor, like the Salvation Army. These critics claim that this is not a revolutionary activity. A loud clamor erupted across the anarchist movement denouncing such criticism. But the arguments in defense of it were not all that convincing, to my mind. Thousands of anarchists though are obviously fondly devoted to the organization.

## **18. Violence**

If ever there was a political, theoretical, and moral muddle it is the issue of nonviolence. Anarchists have been on both sides of the issue. On the one hand we have Zapata, Makhno, Durruti – warriors. On the other hand, Tolstoy, Goodman, Landauer – pacifists. And in-between, the bulk of anarchists, I believe, who do not reject revolutionary violence in principle but are not engaged in it, and may even believe that it is not an effective strategy. Anarchism also had its period, long since past, of "propaganda by the deed" (or rather one wing of anarchism did). These were people who were dead serious about fighting capitalism, with dynamite if necessary. Most anarchists rejected "propaganda by the deed" even at the time. In the contemporary anarchist scene, there are those who automatically assume that armed struggle will be necessary to establish anarchy while others vigorously reject and oppose this view. So this is the debate.

## **19. Punk Rock**

Contemporary anarchism's close ties to punk rock is not so much a clearly defined issue that divides as it is a pervasive uneasiness among some anarchists. As it happens, hundreds of people come to anarchism through the punk rock subculture. This is a subculture characterized by a near total rejection of the established society, but it is not necessarily imbued with many coherent anarchist ideas, especially those of social anarchism. Critics complain that to the extent that anarchism is identified with punk rock the anarchist movement is seriously handicapped in winning over ordinary Americans. Nobody that I have talked to has the slightest idea of what to do about this, if they even want to do anything.

## 20. Platformism

It is my understanding that not all members of the recently established federations of anarcho-communists call themselves platformists. So even within these organizations there is some disagreement or uneasiness about the label. Nevertheless, one of the main web sites of this tendency, *Anarkismo*, explicitly identifies with platformism, as do many of the most prominent founders and activists in these organizations. It is a strange identity, to my mind. Whatever. Most platformists do not mean by adopting this label that they adhere strictly to the original platform written in 1926 by Russian anarchists. What they mean is that some explicit platform, some clear statement of goals and strategy, is necessary. They insist on this, in part, to counter the vagueness of individualist anarchism and its unwillingness to take explicit stands on the goals and strategy of the anarchist revolution. But is having a platform unique to anarchists? It is not. All political parties and all voluntary organizations have platforms or explicit statements of purpose, which are often incorporated into constitutions and bylaws. So what's all the fuss about? Probably about the content of the platform, not the existence of a platform as such. Which of course brings us to all the issues being discussed here about the nature of anarchism and strategies to achieve it.

## 21. Leninism inside the Federations

Post-left anarchists are not the only ones who criticize the Federationists (for lack of a better name). Their complaint, that federationists are organizing themselves, is ridiculous. But there is a more serious criticism, namely that the federations, as currently conceived, transfer over into themselves, obviously inadvertently or unconsciously, a whole lot of leninist baggage, even though they reject the goal of seizing state power and generally insist on internal democracy. For example, they call for anarchists to intervene in mass movements to radicalize them; they point to what they see as different levels of radical consciousness and recommend that anarchists tailor their message to the particular level of consciousness of their audience in order not to alienate it; they claim that an anarchist revolution cannot be made without a membership anarchist organization; they believe that the organization must preserve through periods of quiet the new ideas generated by the working class during periods of struggle; they insist that the organization assume the role of leadership of ideas; they call for the unity of the working class; they put more stress on building their revolutionary organizations than they do on actually bringing into being anarchist social forms like workers councils, neighborhood assemblies, or housing co-ops. These are not anarchist ideas: they come straight out of bolshevism, critics claim. In short, federationists, in claiming that theirs are not merely propaganda organizations, but rather are interventionist, violate what might be said is the first principle of anarchist revolutionary strategy: fight first for your own liberation. As far as I know, these charges have never been seriously answered.

## 22. Radical Environmentalism

It is quite commonplace in the contemporary anarchist movement to hear people talk about "red" and "green" anarchists. These are very spurious labels. I know of no social anarchists who call themselves "red" anarchists. It is my impression that the red/green distinction was invented by primitivists in order to bolster their position by denigrating social anarchists. Primitivists hate Marx, for exam-



ple, and associate him with "communism," and therefore with "red." It is a form of red-baiting, it seems. Most social anarchists believe in class analysis and are anti-capitalist. Apparently, this makes them "red," in the eyes of primitivists. The "red" however is way off the mark, as applied to anarcho-communism. Communism in this phrase does not refer to soviet communism or leninism or even to Marx. The phrase was in use years before the Bolsheviks ever appeared on the scene. It refers to Kropotkin, to communalism, and to the original idea of communism, as practiced even in the Middle Ages, and as articulated later by utopian socialists, for example, as meaning local community control and autonomy. Most of the so-called green anarchists I know deny that they are primitivists. They claim that they are social anarchists. What is amazing, though, is how commonplace this way of talking has become, nevertheless. As for green anarchism, how in the world did it ever happen that "green" anarchists are claiming exclusive rights to radical environmentalism. Bookchin practically invented the orientation single-handedly in the late '50s and early '60s. There were radical environmentalists decades ago, before primitivism was even thought of. Do social anarchists reject radical environmentalism? Of course not. Anyway, since we're talking about "issues that divide," this is definitely one of them.

## ***23. Animal Rights***

Many anarchists claim that the defense of animals and the protection of their rights should be on a par with all the other issues that occupy left libertarians. They say that how "society" treats animals is closely connected to, and reflexive of, how "society" treats humans (and workers, for example). Others deny this, saying that the struggle against wage-slavery, for example, should take priority over the defense of animals. So this is the dispute, and it can get quite heated.

## ***24. Identity Politics***

This is not an issue peculiar to anarchism. It divides the entire left. Identity politics emerged out of the New Left, as the massive radical movements of the sixties began to dissipate. It is the New Left's most lasting (and in my view, the most unfortunate) legacy. They were called the New Social Movements, and were based on race, gender, and sexual orientation (mostly, but also on numerous other identities – welfare mothers, disabled, ethnicity, age, immigrants, veterans, students, obesity, and so forth). These movements thrived almost everywhere at the expense of class analysis and anti-capitalist struggles. Although they did a lot of good, they also did a lot of harm. In recent years, since the Battle of Seattle in 1999, the pendulum has been swinging back a bit towards class struggle. But in anarchist circles there is still hardly anything as divisive as identity issues. As far as I know, no one yet has succeeded in getting a worthy handle on the issue.

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