Becoming Disruptive
An Interview with Lewis Call

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

Lewis Call is Associate Professor of History at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. One of the founders of post-anarchism, Call has written extensively on post-structuralism, anarchism, political economy, science fiction, network technology, cultural studies, and sexuality. His book *Postmodern Anarchism* (2003) is considered a seminal work on the intersection of postmodernity and anarchism. He received the Distinguished Lecturer Award from the California Faculty Association (California Polytechnic chapter) in 2005 and his paper "Sounds Like Kinky Business to Me: Subtextual and Textual Representations of Erotic Power in the Buffyverse" won *Slayage Journal's* Mr. Pointy Award for Buffy Studies Scholarship in 2008. His most recent book, *BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, was released in 2012.

Your work on the intersection of post-structural political philosophy and anarchist theory led you, along with Saul Newman and Todd May, to develop a line of thinking that has come to be called 'post-anarchism', in which classical anarchist thought is coupled with postmodernism to critique Cartesian subjectivity and modernist essentialism. What prompted you to read post-structural and anarchist theory in conjunction with one another, especially with regard to the work of Nietzsche and Deleuze?

I remember reading Michael Ryan's excellent *Marxism and Deconstruction* and thinking, "I want to do for anarchism what Ryan did for Marxism." I wanted to inject the anarchist tradition with a heavy dose of radical post-structuralist philosophy. I knew that anarchism was flexible and fluid enough to accept such an injection, and I thought the results might be interesting. I admired the modern anarchist tradition but, like Saul and Todd, I really thought that modern anarchism could benefit from an encounter with structuralism and post-structuralism. I was really just looking to update the anarchist canon by adding some new critiques. I didn't realize at the time that we were helping anarchist theory mutate or evolve into what we now call 'post-anarchism'. But in retrospect I suppose it's not surprising that this happened. Again, it just shows the flexibility and adaptability of the anarchist tradition.

Nietzsche was a natural choice. I had already written my dissertation on Nietzsche's troubled yet productive relationship with the Enlightenment. It made sense to deploy Nietzsche against certain Enlightenment ideas about subjectivity and essence. Nietzsche

led directly to Foucault, whose post-structuralist genealogies strike me as quite anarchist in their political orientation. And Foucault led to Deleuze. Deleuze is absolutely indispensable. He had certain unique thoughts about spatial relations and structures of organization (the rhizome, for example). He also had some ideas about psychology and power that aren't really to be found anywhere else. It was with good reason that Foucault said this of his friend: "One day we may call the twentieth century Deleuzean." Deleuze has had a very broad influence on post-anarchism, especially in recent years. When I wrote the editorial introduction for the inaugural issue of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* (2010), I noted that most of the essays in that issue were informed by Deleuzean theory in one way or another.

One of the ways your version of post-anarchism overcomes post-Enlightenment subjectivity is through a focus on continual self-recreation, or what you've called an 'anarchy of becoming'. How does post-Enlightenment rationality constrain classical anarchist thought and in what ways might a focus on becoming allow us to pluralize anarchist inquiry beyond traditional critiques of the state?

You're quite right to suggest that the idea of becoming is central to my version of post-anarchism. The focus on becoming comes from both Nietzsche and Deleuze. The concept of an 'anarchy of becoming' is meant to challenge a one-sided focus on being that dates back not merely to the Enlightenment, but, if you believe Heidegger, to the very beginning of Western philosophy. The problem with being, from an anarchist viewpoint, is that it implicitly sanctions statism. The state is constant, static. It is, if you'll forgive a bad pun, a state of being. And it's a state of beings, a collection of citizens or political subjects who are expected to be static. We're meant to produce, reproduce, pay our taxes.

What fascinates me about becoming is the way in which it radically destabilizes both the state of being and the beings of states. By constantly reinventing or recreating ourselves, we completely undermine the form of political subjectivity that stands at the core of the modern state. If we are always becoming, the state doesn't know how to make us subjects. It can't get a fix on us. We disrupt the sensors. I actually think that this form of disruption is more effective, at this point, than some of the more traditional forms of anarchist action. We organize, form anti-statist groups, demonstrate; the state is still there. But if we focus on constant becoming, we ensure that the state, monolithic juggernaut that it is, can never quite get ahold of us. We slip through the cracks, as it were. I myself have become quite a few different things over the years: anarchist, vegetarian, Taoist, nudist, polyamorist, etc. I hope to be freakish in so many different ways that the modern disciplinary state can't figure out how to regulate me.

It has become commonplace in postmodern political theory to argue that individuals are not single subjects, but aggregates of multiple, often conflicting sites of subjectivity. Do you find that to be true and, if so, what implications does the idea of multiple loci of subjectivity have for how we understand the mediation of identity and exercise of agency

against a background of disciplinary statism and cultural commodification?

I find it completely plausible that in the postmodern condition, what we call a 'person' is in fact an aggregate of various subject positions, some of which may indeed conflict with one another. Following a line of reasoning developed by Sherry Turkle, Mark Stephen Meadows, and others, I tell my students that living in the postmodern world is a lot like having multiple personality disorder, but without the disorder part. It's just normal. They all understand this intuitively; they have one kind of subjectivity at school, another at home, a third with their lover, and so on. You can take it further. Consider the different forms of becoming that I mentioned in my response to the previous question. Each one of these can constitute a different subject position. All of them exist within me at all times, at least as possibilities. Each of them manifests actively from time to time. Often several of them manifest simultaneously, and then they can begin to interact with one another.

The fragmentation of subjectivity in the postmodern era does not imply any loss of agency whatsoever. If anything, it implies the opposite. Every one of our selves now has the potential for agency. If I contain many personas and each of these has its own agency, I'm actually capable of far more agency than the old-fashioned Cartesian subject. Joss Whedon recently explored this idea in his cyberpunk thriller *Dollhouse*. Eliza Dushku's character Echo has something like 37 different personalities. As she said, "I'm all of them, but none of them is me." She was able to negotiate between her different personas to attain a powerful agency. Here again, I feel that we've hit on an effective strategy for resisting disciplinary statism. The state knows how to discipline coherent, unified, rational Cartesian subjects. I don't think it knows how to discipline these trippy, dispersed, incoherent postmodern subjects.

The issue of commodification is trickier. Late capitalist culture can co-opt and commodify almost any subject position. Each of these little postmodern micro-personalities is potentially a consumer with its own brand identity. Fragmentation is all well and good, but how does it help us if we simply fragment into our Nike self, our Starbucks self, our Lexus self? Here I think the only thing that saves us is a kind of mutual reciprocity: consumer capitalism gains control over our various personas, but at the same time, those personas can have a disruptive effect on the consumer system, which doesn't know how to track them. Take amazon.com's preference engine, for example. It thinks I want Jacques Derrida, Pat Califia, Robert Heinlein, J. K. Rowling. Right in every case, but Derrida is for my theory-self, Califia for my pervert-self, Heinlein for my science fiction-self. Rowling is for my wife; I place all my amazon orders through her account, which I hack.

One of the ways you challenge the logic of commodification is through a radicalization of gift giving, in which gifts "without return" disrupt capital coding by disavowing value exchanges, particularly those requiring market-oriented monetization. At a time when governments are cracking down on Internet piracy, copyright infringement, and file sharing, what purchase (no pun intended) does your concept of gifting hold for reassessing

the link between private property rights and liberal governance, as well as the constitution of an 'information society'?

The gift economy fascinates me because even though it is one of the world's most ancient economic forms, and even though its values are entirely antithetical to those of modern capitalism, the principles of gift exchange continue to haunt all modern economies. The tribal aquacultures have very old gift economies: the Trobriand Islanders that Marcel Mauss studied or the tribes of America's Pacific Northwest, who appear in interesting forms in the fiction of Ursula Le Guin. The concept of the 'gift without return' comes from Georges Bataille's theory of general economy, via the work of Jean Baudrillard.

The advent of computer networks has given this ancient economy a stunning postmodern relevance. Networks represent a radical challenge to the assumptions of the market economy, particularly the assumption of scarcity. Liberalism tells us we need markets to allocate scarce goods. But digital data is now the major commodity form in the post-industrial information economies, and such data is never scarce. Digital data can be replicated perfectly, infinitely, at no cost. It makes no sense to apply the logic of scarcity to data. It makes perfect sense, however, to treat data according to the precepts of the gift economy. Data wants to be distributed, and if there's one thing a gift economy is good at, it's distributing resources. In a gift economy, people give wealth away in exchange for prestige. That keeps the wealth moving.

In a network economy, the logic of gift exchange keeps the data moving, keeps it growing. This is the logic behind Richard Stallman's Free Software Movement and the Open Source movement, which has given us the Linux operating system, the Apache web server, and so much more. It's simple, really. If you give away quality software, people will like you for it. They will use your software, they will help you expand and improve it, and it will eventually become the standard. Wikipedia also operates as a gift economy. Jimbo Wales has inspired legions of Wikipedians to give away a vast treasure trove of knowledge. It's arguably the single greatest body of human knowledge ever assembled. People give their knowledge to Wikipedia for, essentially, a pat on the back, the satisfaction of a job well done, perhaps a little 'barnstar' (the prestige symbols which Wikipedia awards to its most dedicated Wikipedians).

Certainly the content industry would love to eliminate this subversive gift economy. So would the governments who do that industry's bidding. The U.S. government is the most obvious culprit, with its DMCA, SOPA, and PIPA.[1] All of this alphabet soup is designed for one purpose: to make data artificially scarce, so that it will have a price greater than zero, so that it can continue to serve as a commodity. But in the long run, I believe that this attempt to manufacture scarcity must fail. The history of peer-to-peer file sharing shows us why. Early file sharing services like Napster were vulnerable; they were too

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1 Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), and Protect IP Act (PIPA), respectively.

centralized. Today's radical file sharing networks are fully distributed. They are truly peer-to-peer, in the sense that all nodes on such a network are equal. And they are gift economies. The only currency on Bittorrent is generosity. Those who give data are 'seeds'. Those who take data are 'leeches'. The language shows how strongly Bittorrent values giving. Those who maintain a share ratio greater than 1.0 (they give more than they get) gain social prestige on the network, creating a powerful incentive for generosity. And because the network is fully distributed, it can't be shut down. It's just millions of ordinary users with ordinary PCs. Sure, the Swedish cops might raid Pirate Bay once in a while, but there are many other torrent tracker sites out there. National governments and law enforcement agencies are powerless to stop this global deluge of data.

Honestly, I think the most interesting and effective forms of radical political action are happening online these days. When Julian Assange posted all those American secrets on Wikileaks, that was a gift to the free people of the world. Assange got plenty of prestige for that (and also notoriety, which is another form of prestige, quite valuable in the hacker economy). When PayPal cut off Assange's funding, Anonymous hit PayPal with a huge distributed denial of service attack. That DDoS, dubbed "Operation Avenge Assange," was another gift to the free people of the world. But of course Anonymous, like most online groups, has always operated by the logic of the gift economy. That goes back to the earliest days of Anonymous, on 4chan.org's /b/ board, where prestige went to those who posted the most obscene, repulsive, or transgressive images. That's a perverse gift economy, but it's a gift economy nonetheless. More recently, Anonymous has gifted the people of the Arab world with the tools they need to control the means of information, to protect themselves from their autocratic regimes, and to promote what has become known as the Arab Spring. When I see things like that, I can't imagine people dismissing the importance of online gift economies.

You've also written extensively about post-anarchical tropes in science fiction narratives, including the works of Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin. Why is science fiction uniquely situated for investigations of power formations and exchanges of desire, if at all?

Science fiction is ideally suited for the investigation of power and desire, for two reasons. The first has to do with science fiction's unique ability to imagine or create new worlds. Le Guin is an especially gifted world creator, but she is by no means alone. All the good sci-fi writers do it. Darko Suvin famously argued, back in the 70s, that SF is all about cognitive estrangement. It's a form of literature that puts the reader into a cognitive environment radically different from her 'normal' environment. This offers clear benefits to radical politics by creating the possibility of utopias and dystopias that can be contrasted with real life. But more recently, SF has moved in a very different direction, toward what *Battlestar Galactica*'s Ronald D. Moore calls 'naturalism'. In some ways, this offers even more interesting radical possibilities, because it allows science fiction to show us a world recognizably similar to our own. SF can then tweak that world just slightly to comment on specific issues or problems in the real world. I think this strategy can be very

effective.

The second thing that strikes me as important about SF is the genre's formal elements. Like every genre, SF has certain conventions of form. But SF is fairly unique in that its form is always in flux. The formal convention in science fiction is that the form should always be changing, evolving, mutating. That strikes me as inherently subversive. What we have here is a form that is constantly performing a kind of auto-critique. If the form can question, challenge and critique even its own formal and aesthetic conventions, then it should be able to challenge social, cultural, and political structures quite readily.

Another popular culture artifact that you've mined as a site of analysis is the television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), in which a female vampire slayer, Buffy, battles vampires, demons, and other forces of darkness, but often finds herself drawn— sometimes erotically—toward the characters she has been called to combat. In your view, how can pop culture items, like Buffy, be used to critique essentialist representations of sexual identity? What impact might the dissemination of queer erotic representations through mass media have on heteronormative social discourses, more generally?

I think that *Buffy* and the other works of Joss Whedon have made a crucial critique of essentialist representations of sexuality. My recent book, *BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, shows how this critique operates not only in *Buffy*, but also in Whedon's recent cyberpunk show *Dollhouse*. Whedon's Dollhouse is inhabited by programmable people who can be 'imprinted' with any personality, any sexuality: gay, lesbian, bisexual, kinky. In one episode, Eliza Dushku's character, Echo, is imprinted as a dominatrix. This dominatrix is extra fictional: an actress playing a 'doll' imprinted as a pro Domme. She has what Baudrillard would call a high order of simulation. So she can get away with saying things that most people can't say. She provides a thoughtful, articulate defense of BDSM as an ethical practice, emphasizing trust, consent, and desire. To me, that's radical. Whedon's telling an audience of young science fiction fans that it's okay to be sexually different. He seems to be saying that not everyone is straight or vanilla, and that this difference is empowering.

I find the same message in his other works. At the 2012 *Slayage* conference in Vancouver, I presented a paper on Whedon's *X-Men* comics. These comics endorse all kinds of sexual difference. A man made of solid steel loves a woman who becomes completely intangible. A half-alien woman loves a man who's a big, blue furry monster. A man whose eyes emit uncontrollable beams of force pursues a relationship of erotic dominance and submission (D/S) with his telepathic mistress. The comics endorse all of these unconventional sexualities, but in a way that's gentle, funny, unthreatening. Hundreds of thousands of young people read these comics. Young queers and perverts can read them and think, "Hey, I'm a sexual mutant too, just like the mutants in this comic, and it's okay. I can make it work, I can find a way to live and love and be happy." To me that's what's so powerful about pop culture. It can present these empowering, subversive messages to a

mass audience.

Right now I'm working on a paper about Whedon's Black Widow. I see her as the heir to third wave feminism's anti-essentialist tradition. Like Buffy, Black Widow embodies a very third wave kind of glamorous, sex-positive girl power. But Buffy was a middle class white girl, whereas Black Widow is a Russian of ambiguous social class. The scene where we meet her in Whedon's *Avengers* is conducted in Russian. So she also seems to embody the third wave concept of 'intersectionality', the idea that gender and sexuality always have to be read in terms of their intersections with other forms of difference, like ethnicity or class or nationality or language. I think Black Widow is an extremely anti-essentialist character. As she admits to her friend Hawkeye in the movie, she knows what it's like to be unmade. The character represents a radical deconstruction of identity, which implies an equally radical repudiation of identity politics. What we're left with is an unstable form of gender and sexual identity, very postmodern, actually very queer, and entirely at odds with all universalizing or essentialist positions. Not bad for a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster that grossed a billion dollars worldwide.

I think queer media representations can have a huge impact on heteronormative discourses. We need to remember that heteronormativity operates entirely within the realm of culture. Indeed, it *is* culture. For example, my state (California) outlawed gay marriage in response to a homophobic culture war, financed in large part by the Mormon church. Now the U.S. Supreme Court will consider the constitutionality of Proposition 8, but Justice (and I use the term loosely) Antonin Scalia has already made his decision, without considering any of the evidence or arguments. "If we cannot have moral feelings against homosexuality, can we have it against murder?" Scalia asks. Yes. Yes, we can. His rhetoric on this issue is absurd. It's full of false analogies. He couldn't pass a freshman rhetoric class with this stuff. So how does he get any traction with this ludicrous rhetoric? Because the culture allows it. When it comes to sexuality, our culture sanctions forms of rhetoric and argumentation that would be rejected out of hand in debates on any other topic. What's the solution? Change the culture. Invoke popular culture against the heteronormative. One of Scalia's most eloquent critics has been George Takei, who famously played Mr. Sulu on *Star Trek*. Science fiction comes to the rescue again!

Finally, the last two years have witnessed political demonstrations worldwide, from the toppling of Middle Eastern dictators to Greek and American protests against economic austerity and financial inequality. Some commentators have argued that social media have accelerated such protests, allowing them to galvanize support over a collapsed spatiotemporal landscape. Though helpful in chronicling events on the ground, what dangers, if any, do heavily corporatized media and technology pose for the ability of demonstrators to transcend the social spectacle and assert a micropolitics of resistance?

I think the political benefits of social media outweigh the dangers. This became especially

apparent during the Arab Spring. In Egypt and elsewhere, the revolutionaries were using social media, like Facebook and Twitter, to organize their real-world political actions. Synchronous, real-time social media sites, like Twitter, are particularly effective for organizing flash mobs and other kinds of spontaneous, large scale political demonstrations. People can use their cell phones to take pictures and video of political actions and events, and post these to Tumblr or YouTube. In this way the people can create their own version of events, their own news and commentary. They don't have to accept the corporate media's version of things. I know that Facebook and Twitter and Google (which is YouTube's parent company) are all multi-billion dollar corporations with their own agendas, and I do take Google's "Don't Be Evil" slogan with a healthy grain of salt. But I also feel that the agendas of technology corporations are largely irrelevant because the tech they produce can instantly be hacked and repurposed by users.

The corporate media say that Mubarak shut down the Internet. That's nonsense. The Internet is a fully distributed, user-driven network of networks. It has no off switch. Mubarak ordered Egyptian ISPs to isolate their networks from the rest of the Internet. Nine out of ten complied. Egypt still had 12 percent of its normal access to the global Internet. In any case, the people don't need the corporate ISPs. They used "Speak to Tweet," which let them call various international phone numbers and leave voice mail messages, which would then instantly be converted into tweets with the hashtag #egypt. Great hack. Google and Twitter did that. Very not evil. French Data Network provided free dial-up Internet access for any Egyptian with a phone and a modem. It's important to remember that you can get Internet access with nothing more than a telephone. And everyone has telephones. The tech is now within reach of practically everyone. People can easily seize the tech, make it their own, use it for their own purposes. And that's exactly what they're doing.