

Evaluating Lifestyle Anarchism

From Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism - An Unbridgeable Chasm*

What stands out most compellingly in today's lifestyle anarchism is its appetite for immediacy rather than reflection, for a naive one-to-one relationship between mind and reality. Not only does this immediacy immunize libertarian thinking from demands for nuanced and mediated reflection; it precludes rational analysis and, for that matter, rationality itself. Consigning humanity to the nontemporal, nonspatial, and nonhistorical -- a 'primal' notion of temporality based on the 'eternal' cycles of 'Nature' -- it thereby divests mind of its creative uniqueness and its freedom to intervene into the natural world.

From the standpoint of primitivist lifestyle anarchism, human beings are at their best when they adapt to nonhuman nature rather than intervene in it, or when, disencumbered of reason, technology, civilization, and even speech, they live in placid 'harmony' with existing reality, perhaps endowed with 'natural rights,' in a visceral and essentially mindless 'ecstatic' condition. T.A.Z., Fifth Estate, Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed, and lumpen 'zines' like Michael William's Stirnerite Demolition Derby -- all focus on an unmediated, ahistorical, and anticivilizational 'primality' from which we have 'fallen,' a state of perfection and 'authenticity' in which we were guided variously by the 'bounds of nature,' 'natural law,' or our devouring egos. History and civilization consist of nothing but a descent into the inauthenticity of 'industrial society.'

As I have already suggested, this mythos of a 'falling from authenticity' has its roots in reactionary romanticism, most recently in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, whose völkisch 'spiritualism,' latent in *Being and Time*, later emerged in his explicitly fascist works. This view now feeds on the quietistic mysticism that abounds in the antidemocratic writings of Rudolf Bahro, with its barely disguised appeal for 'salvation' by a 'Green Adolf,' and in the apolitical quest for ecological spiritualism and 'self-fulfillment' propounded by deep ecologists.

In the end, the individual ego becomes the supreme temple of reality, excluding history and becoming, democracy and responsibility. Indeed, lived contact with society as such is rendered tenuous by a narcissism so all-embracing that it shrivels consociation to an infantilized ego that is little more than a bundle of shrieking demands and claims for its own satisfactions. Civilization merely obstructs the ecstatic self-realization of this ego's desires, reified as the ultimate fulfillment of emancipation, as though ecstasy and desire were not products of cultivation and historical development, but merely innate impulses that appear ab novo in a desocialized world.

Like the petty-bourgeois Stirnerite ego, primitivist lifestyle anarchism allows no room for social institutions, political organizations, and radical programs, still less a public sphere, which all the writers we have examined automatically identify with statecraft. The sporadic, the unsystematic, the incoherent, the discontinuous, and the intuitive supplant the consistent, purposive, organized, and rational, indeed any form of sustained and focused activity apart

from publishing a 'zine' or pamphlet -- or burning a garbage can. Imagination is counterposed to reason and desire to theoretical coherence, as though the two were in radical contradiction to each other. Goya's admonition that imagination without reason produces monsters is altered to leave the impression that imagination flourishes on an unmediated experience with an unnuanced 'oneness.' Thus is social nature essentially dissolved into biological nature; innovative humanity, into adaptive animality; temporality, into precivilizational eternity; history, into an archaic cyclicality.

A bourgeois reality whose economic harshness grows starker and crasser with every passing day is shrewdly mutated by lifestyle anarchism into constellations of self-indulgence, inchoateness, indiscipline, and incoherence. In the 1960s, the Situationists, in the name of a 'theory of the spectacle,' in fact produced a reified spectacle of the theory, but they at least offered organizational correctives, such as workers' councils, that gave their aestheticism some ballast. Lifestyle anarchism, by assailing organization, programmatic commitment, and serious social analysis, apes the worst aspects of Situationist aestheticism without adhering to the project of building a movement. As the detritus of the 1960s, it wanders aimlessly within the bounds of the ego (renamed by Zerzan the 'bounds of nature') and makes a virtue of bohemian incoherence.

What is most troubling is that the self-indulgent aesthetic vagaries of lifestyle anarchism significantly erode the socialist core of a left-libertarian ideology that once could claim social relevance and weight precisely for its uncompromising commitment to emancipation -- not outside of history, in the realm of the subjective, but within history, in the realm of the objective. The great cry of the First International -- which anarcho-syndicalism and anarchocommunist retained after Marx and his supporters abandoned it -- was the demand: 'No rights without duties, no duties without rights.' For generations, this slogan adorned the mastheads of what we must now retrospectively call social anarchist periodicals. Today, it stands radically at odds with the basically egocentric demand for 'desire armed,' and with Taoist contemplation and Buddhist nirvanas. Where social anarchism called upon people to rise in revolution and seek the reconstruction of society, the irate petty bourgeois who populate the subcultural world of lifestyle anarchism call for episodic rebellion and the satisfaction of their 'desiring machines,' to use the phraseology of Deleuze and Guattari.

The steady retreat from the historic commitment of classical anarchism to social struggle (without which self-realization and the fulfillment of desire in all its dimensions, not merely the instinctive, cannot be achieved) is inevitably accompanied by a disastrous mystification of experience and reality. The ego, identified almost fetishistically as the locus of emancipation, turns out to be identical to the 'sovereign individual' of laissez-faire individualism. Detached from its social moorings, it achieves not autonomy but the heteronomous 'selfhood' of petty-bourgeois enterprise.

Indeed, far from being free, the ego in its sovereign selfhood is bound hand and foot to the seemingly anonymous laws of the marketplace -- the laws of competition and exploitation --

which render the myth of individual freedom into another fetish concealing the implacable laws of capital accumulation.

Lifestyle anarchism, in effect, turns out to be an additional mystifying bourgeois deception. Its acolytes are no more 'autonomous' than the movements of the stock market, than price fluctuations and the mundane facts of bourgeois commerce. All claims to autonomy notwithstanding, this middle-class 'rebel,' with or without a brick in hand, is entirely captive to the subterranean market forces that occupy all the allegedly 'free' terrains of modern social life, from food cooperatives to rural communes.

Capitalism swirls around us -- not only materially but culturally. As John Zerzan so memorably put it to a puzzled interviewer who asked about the television set in the home of this foe of technology: 'Like all other people, I have to be narcotized.' [37]

That lifestyle anarchism itself is a 'narcotizing' self-deception can best be seen in Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*, where the ego's claim to 'uniqueness' in the temple of the sacrosanct 'self' far outranks John Stuart Mill's liberal pieties. Indeed, with Stirner, egoism becomes a matter of epistemology. Cutting through the maze of contradictions and woefully incomplete statements that fill *The Ego and His Own*, one finds Stirner's 'unique' ego to be a myth because its roots lie in its seeming 'other' -- society itself. Indeed: 'Truth cannot step forward as you do,' Stirner addresses the egoist, 'cannot move, change, develop; truth awaits and recruits everything from you, and itself is only through you; for it exists only -- in your head.' [38] The Stirnerite egoist, in effect, bids farewell to objective reality, to the facticity of the social, and thereby to fundamental social change and all ethical criteria and ideals beyond personal satisfaction amidst the hidden demons of the bourgeois marketplace. This absence of mediation subverts the very existence of the concrete, not to speak of the authority of the Stirnerite ego itself -- a claim so all-encompassing as to exclude the social roots of the self and its formation in history.

Nietzsche, quite independently of Stirner, carried this view of truth to its logical conclusion by erasing the facticity and reality of truth as such: 'What, then, is truth?' he asked. 'A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms -- in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically.' [39] With more forthrightness than Stirner, Nietzsche contended that facts are simply interpretations; indeed, he asked, 'is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretations?' Apparently not, for 'even this is invention, hypothesis.' [40] Following Nietzsche's unrelenting logic, we are left with a self that not only essentially creates its own reality but also must justify its own existence as more than a mere interpretation. Such egoism thus annihilates the ego itself, which vanishes into the mist of Stirner's own unstated premises.

Similarly divested of history, society, and facticity beyond its own 'metaphors,' lifestyle anarchism lives in an asocial domain in which the ego, with its cryptic desires, must evaporate into logical abstractions. But reducing the ego to intuitive immediacy -- anchoring it in mere animality, in the 'bounds of nature,' or in 'natural law' -- would amount to ignoring the fact that

the ego is the product of an ever-formative history, indeed, a history that, if it is to consist of more than mere episodes, must avail itself of reason as a guide to standards of progress and regress, necessity and freedom, good and evil, and -- yes! -- civilization and barbarism. Indeed, an anarchism that seeks to avoid the shoals of sheer solipsism on the one hand and the loss of the 'self' as a mere 'interpretation' on the other must become explicitly socialist or collectivist. That is to say, it must be a social anarchism that seeks freedom through structure and mutual responsibility, not through a vaporous, nomadic ego that eschews the preconditions for social life.

Stated bluntly: Between the socialist pedigree of anarcho-syndicalism and anarchocommunism (which have never denied the importance of self-realization and the fulfillment of desire), and the basically liberal, individualistic pedigree of lifestyle anarchism (which fosters social ineffectuality, if not outright social negation), there exists a divide that cannot be bridged unless we completely disregard the profoundly different goals, methods, and underlying philosophy that distinguish them. Stirner's own project, in fact, emerged in a debate with the socialism of Wilhelm Weitling and Moses Hess, where he invoked egoism precisely to counterpose to socialism. 'Personal insurrection rather than general revolution was [Stirner's] message,' James J. Martin admiringly observes [41] -- a counterposition that lives on today in lifestyle anarchism and its yuppie filiations, as distinguished from social anarchism with its roots in historicism, the social matrix of individuality, and its commitment to a rational society.

The very incongruity of these essentially mixed messages, which coexist on every page of the lifestyle 'zines,' reflects the feverish voice of the squirming petty bourgeois. If anarchism loses its socialist core and collectivist goal, if it drifts off into aestheticism, ecstasy, and desire, and, incongruously, into Taoist quietism and Buddhist self-effacement as a substitute for a libertarian program, politics, and organization, it will come to represent not social regeneration and a revolutionary vision but social decay and a petulant egoistic rebellion. Worse, it will feed the wave of mysticism that is already sweeping affluent members of the generation now in their teens and twenties. Lifestyle anarchism's exaltation of ecstasy, certainly laudable in a radical social matrix but here unabashedly intermingled with 'sorcery,' is producing a dreamlike absorption with spirits, ghosts, and Jungian archetypes rather than a rational and dialectical awareness of the world.

Characteristically, the cover of a recent issue of *Alternative Press Review* (Fall 1994), a widely read American feral anarchist periodical, is adorned with a three-headed Buddhist deity in serene nirvanic repose, against a presumably cosmic background of swirling galaxies and New Age paraphernalia -- an image that could easily join Fifth Estate's 'Anarchy' poster in a New Age boutique. Inside the cover, a graphic cries out: 'Life Can Be Magic When We Start to Break Free' (the A in Magic is circled) -- to which one is obliged to ask: How? With what? The magazine itself contains a deep ecology essay by Glenn Parton (drawn from David Foreman's periodical *Wild Earth*) titled: 'The Wild Self: Why I Am a Primitivist,' extolling 'primitive peoples' whose 'way of life fits into the pre-given natural world,' lamenting the Neolithic revolution, and identifying our 'primary task' as being to "unbuild" our civilization, and restore wilderness.' The magazine's artwork celebrates vulgarity -- human skulls and images of ruins are very much in

evidence. Its lengthiest contribution, 'Decadence,' reprinted from Black Eye, melds the romantic with the lumpen, exultantly concluding: 'It's time for a real Roman holiday, so bring on the barbarians!'

Alas, the barbarians are already here -- and the 'Roman holiday' in today's American cities flourishes on crack, thuggery, insensitivity, stupidity, primitivism, anticivilizationism, antirationalism, and a sizable dose of 'anarchy' conceived as chaos. Lifestyle anarchism must be seen in the present social context not only of demoralized black ghettos and reactionary white suburbs but even of Indian reservations, those ostensible centers of 'primality,' in which gangs of Indian youths now shoot at one another, drug dealing is rampant, and 'gang graffiti greets visitors even at the sacred Window Rock monument,' as Seth Mydans reports in The New York Times (March 3, 1995).

Thus, a widespread cultural decay has followed the degeneration of the 1960s New Left into postmodernism and of its counter'culture into New Age spiritualism. For timid lifestyle anarchists, Halloween artwork and incendiary articles push hope and an understanding of reality into the ever-receding distance. Torn by the lures of 'cultural terrorism' and Buddhist ashrams, lifestyle anarchists in fact find themselves in a crossfire between the barbarians at the top of society in Wall Street and the City, and those at its bottom, in the dismal urban ghettos of Euro-America. Alas, the conflict in which they find themselves, for all their celebrations of lumpen lifeways (to which corporate barbarians are no strangers these days) has less to do with the need to create a free society than with a brutal war over who is to share in the available spoils from the sale of drugs, human bodies, exorbitant loans -- and let us not forget junk bonds and international currencies.

A return to mere animality -- or shall we call it 'decivilization'? -- is a return not to freedom but to instinct, to the domain of 'authenticity' that is guided more by genes than by brains. Nothing could be further from the ideals of freedom spelled out in ever-expansive forms by the great revolutions of the past. And nothing could be more unrelenting in its sheer obedience to biochemical imperatives such as DNA or more in contrast to the creativity, ethics, and mutuality opened by culture and struggles for a rational civilization. There is no freedom in 'wildness' if, by sheer ferality, we mean the dictates of inborn behavioral patterns that shape mere animality. To malign civilization without due recognition of its enormous potentialities for self-conscious freedom -- a freedom conferred by reason as well as emotion, by insight as well as desire, by prose as well as poetry -- is to retreat back into the shadowy world of brutishness, when thought was dim and intellectuation was only an evolutionary promise.

Towards Democratic Communalism

My picture of lifestyle anarchism is far from complete; the personalistic thrust of this ideological clay allows it to be molded in many forms provided that words like imagination, sacred, intuitive, ecstasy, and primal embellish its surface.

Social anarchism, in my view, is made of fundamentally different stuff, heir to the Enlightenment tradition, with due regard to that tradition's limits and incompleteness. Depending upon how it defines reason, social anarchism celebrates the thinking human mind without in any way denying passion, ecstasy, imagination, play, and art. Yet rather than reify them into hazy categories, it tries to incorporate them into everyday life. It is committed to rationality while opposing the rationalization of experience; to technology, while opposing the 'megamachine'; to social institutionalization, while opposing class rule and hierarchy; to a genuine politics based on the confederal coordination of municipalities or communes by the people in direct face-to-face democracy, while opposing parliamentarism and the state.

This 'Commune of communes,' to use a traditional slogan of earlier revolutions, can be appropriately designated as Communalism. Opponents of democracy as 'rule' to the contrary notwithstanding, it describes the democratic dimension of anarchism as a majoritarian administration of the public sphere. Accordingly, Communalism seeks freedom rather than autonomy in the sense that I have counterposed them. It sharply breaks with the psychopersonal Stirnerite, liberal, and bohemian ego as a self-contained sovereign by asserting that individuality does not emerge ab novo, dressed at birth in 'natural rights,' but sees individuality in great part as the ever-changing work of historical and social development, a process of self-formation that can be neither petrified by biologism nor arrested by temporally limited dogmas.

The sovereign, self-sufficient 'individual' has always been a precarious basis upon which to anchor a left libertarian outlook. As Max Horkheimer once observed, 'individuality is impaired when each man decides to fend for himself. . . . The absolutely isolated individual has always been an illusion. The most esteemed personal qualities, such as independence, will to freedom, sympathy, and the sense of justice, are social as well as individual virtues. The fully developed individual is the consummation of a fully developed society.' [42]

If a left-libertarian vision of a future society is not to disappear in a bohemian and lumpen demimonde, it must offer a resolution to social problems, not flit arrogantly from slogan to slogan, shielding itself from rationality with bad poetry and vulgar graphics. Democracy is not antithetical to anarchism; nor are majority rule and nonconsensual decisions incommensurable with a libertarian society.

That no society can exist without institutional structures is transparently clear to anyone who has not been stupefied by Stirner and his kind. By denying institutions and democracy, lifestyle anarchism insulates itself from social reality, so that it can fume all the more with futile rage, thereby remaining a subcultural caper for gullible youth and bored consumers of black garments and ecstasy posters. To argue that democracy and anarchism are incompatible because any impediment to the wishes of even 'a minority of one' constitutes a violation of personal autonomy is to advocate not a free society but Brown's 'collection of individuals' -- in short, a herd. No longer would 'imagination' come to 'power.' Power, which always exists, will belong either to the collective in a face-to-face and clearly institutionalized democracy, or to the egos of a few oligarchs who will produce a 'tyranny of structurelessness.'

Not unjustifiably, Kropotkin, in his Encyclopaedia Britannica article, regarded the Stirnerite ego as elitist and deprecated it as hierarchical. Approvingly, he cited V. Basch's criticism of Stirner's individual anarchism as a form of elitism, maintaining 'that the aim of all superior civilization is, not to permit all members of the community to develop in a normal way, but to permit certain better endowed individuals 'fully to develop,' even at the cost of the happiness and the very existence of the mass of mankind.' In anarchism, this produces, in effect, a regression

toward the most common individualism, advocated by all the would-be superior minorities to which indeed man owes in his history precisely the State and the rest, which these individualists combat. Their individualism goes so far as to end in a negation of their own starting-point -- to say nothing of the impossibility of the individual to attain a really full development in the conditions of oppression of the masses by the 'beautiful aristocracies.' [43] In its amorality, this elitism easily lends itself to the unfreedom of the 'masses' by ultimately placing them in the custody of the 'unique ones,' a logic that may yield a leadership principle characteristic of fascist ideology.[44]

In the United States and much of Europe, precisely at a time when mass disillusionment with the state has reached unprecedented proportions, anarchism is in retreat. Dissatisfaction with government as such runs high on both sides of the Atlantic -- and seldom in recent memory has there been a more compelling popular sentiment for a new politics, even a new social dispensation that can give to people a sense of direction that allows for security and ethical meaning. If the failure of anarchism to address this situation can be attributed to any single source, the insularity of lifestyle anarchism and its individualistic underpinnings must be singled out for aborting the entry of a potential left-libertarian movement into an ever-contracting public sphere.

To its credit, anarchosyndicalism in its heyday tried to engage in a living practice and create an organized movement -- so alien to lifestyle anarchism -- within the working class. Its major problems lay not in its desire for structure and involvement, for program and social mobilization, but in the waning of the working class as a revolutionary subject, particularly after the Spanish Revolution. To say that anarchism lacked a politics, however, conceived in its original Greek meaning as the self-management of the community -- the historic 'Commune of communes' -- is to repudiate a historic and transformative practice that seeks to radicalize the democracy inherent in any republic and to create a municipalist confederal power to countervail the state.

The most creative feature of traditional anarchism is its commitment to four basic tenets: a confederation of decentralized municipalities; an unwavering opposition to statism; a belief in direct democracy; and a vision of a libertarian communist society. The most important issue that left-libertarianism -- libertarian socialism no less than anarchism -- faces today is: What will it do with these four powerful tenets? How will we give them social form and content? In what ways and by what means will we render them relevant to our time and bring them to the service of an organized popular movement for empowerment and freedom?

Anarchism must not be dissipated in self-indulgent behavior like that of the primitivistic Adamites of the sixteenth century, who 'wandered through the woods naked, singing and dancing,' as Kenneth Rexroth contemptuously observed, spending 'their time in a continuous sexual orgy' until they were hunted down by Jan Zizka and exterminated - much to the relief of a disgusted peasantry, whose lands they had plundered. [45] It must not retreat into the primitivistic demimonde of the John Zerzans and George Bradfords. I would be the last to contend that anarchists should not live their anarchism as much as possible on a day-to-day basis -- personally as well as socially, aesthetically as well as pragmatically. But they should not live an anarchism that diminishes, indeed effaces the most important features that have distinguished anarchism, as a movement, practice, and program, from statist socialism. Anarchism today must resolutely retain its character as a social movement -- a programmatic as well as activist social movement -- a movement that melds its embattled vision of a libertarian communist society with its forthright critique of capitalism, unobscured by names like 'industrial society.'

In short, social anarchism must resolutely affirm its differences with lifestyle anarchism. If a social anarchist movement cannot translate its fourfold tenets -- municipal confederalism, opposition to statism, direct democracy, and ultimately libertarian communism - into a lived practice in a new public sphere; if these tenets languish like its memories of past struggles in ceremonial pronouncements and meetings; worse still, if they are subverted by the 'libertarian' Ecstasy Industry and by quietistic Asian theisms, then its revolutionary socialistic core will have to be restored under a new name.

Certainly, it is already no longer possible, in my view, to call oneself an anarchist without adding a qualifying adjective to distinguish oneself from lifestyle anarchists. Minimally, social anarchism is radically at odds with anarchism focused on lifestyle, neo-Situationist paeans to ecstasy, and the sovereignty of the ever-shriveling petty-bourgeois ego. The two diverge completely in their defining principles -- socialism or individualism. Between a committed revolutionary body of ideas and practice, on the one hand, and a vagrant yearning for privatistic ecstasy and self-realization on the other, there can be no commonality. Mere opposition to the state may well unite fascistic lumpens with Stirnerite lumpens, a phenomenon that is not without its historical precedents.