

Anarchism, academia, and the avant-garde

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Initially, I was to write a critical auto-ethnography of my life in the academy. But I quickly realized that writing critically about the academy is almost impossible. During the 1980s, we all became used to the idea of reflexive anthropology, the effort to probe behind the apparent authority of ethnographic texts to reveal the complex relations of power and domination that went into making them. The result was an outpouring of ethnographic meditations on the politics of fieldwork. But even as a graduate student, it always seemed to me there was something oddly missing here. Ethnographic texts, after all, are not actually written in the field. They are written at universities. Reflexive anthropology, however, almost never had anything to say about the power relations under which these texts were actually composed.

In retrospect, the reason seems simple enough: when one is in the field, all the power is on one side – or at least, could easily be imagined as being so. To meditate on one's own power is not going to offend anyone (in fact, it's something of a classic upper-middle-class preoccupation), and even if it does, there's likely nothing those who are offended can do about it. The moment one returns from the field and begins writing, however, the power relations are reversed. While one is writing his or her dissertation, one is, typically, a penniless graduate student, whose entire career could very possibly be destroyed by one impolitic interaction with a committee member. While one is transforming the dissertation into a book, one is typically an adjunct or untenured Assistant Professor, desperately trying not to step on any powerful toes and land a real permanent job. Any anthropologist in such a situation will, in fact, mostly likely spend many hours developing complex, nuanced, and extremely detailed ethnographic analyses of the power relations this entails, but that critique can never, by definition, be published, because anyone who did so would be committing academic suicide.

One can only imagine the fate of, say, a female graduate student who wrote an essay documenting the sexual politics of her department, let alone the sexual overtures of her committee members, or, say, one of working-class background who published a description of the practices of Marxist professors who regularly cite Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) analyses of the reproduction of class privilege in academic settings, and then in their actual lives act as if Bourdieu had been writing a how-to book instead of a critique. By the time one is a senior faculty member, and thus secure in their position, one might be able to get away with publishing such an analysis. But by then – unless one is reminiscing – one's very situation of power guarantees the object can no longer be perceived. On the one hand, my thoughts lead me to the conclusion that it would be safer to admit to being an anarchist than to write an honest auto-ethnography of the academy. On the other hand, I am an anarchist. And it strikes me that the dilemmas that come out of this reality provide an interesting commentary on the academy and its *modus operandi*, which I present in this chapter.

Consensus and direct democracy

I conducted my doctoral research in a rural community in Madagascar, during a period in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which most of the countryside there had been largely abandoned by the state. Rural communities, and even to some degree towns, were to a large extent self-governing; no one was really paying taxes, and if a crime was committed the police would not come. Public decisions, when they had to be made, tended to be made by a kind of informal consensus process. I wrote a little bit about the latter in my dissertation but, like most anthro-

pologists, I couldn't think of all that much interesting to say about it. In fact I only really came to understand what was interesting about consensus retrospectively, when, ten years later, I became an activist in New York. By that time, almost all North American anarchist groups operated by some form of consensus process, and the process worked so well – it really seems about the only form of decision-making fully consistent with non-top-down styles of organization – that it had been widely adopted by anyone interested in direct democracy.

There is enormous variation among different styles and forms of consensus but one thing almost all the North American variants have in common is that they are organized in conscious opposition to the style of organization and, especially, of debate typical of the classical sectarian Marxist groups. The latter are invariably organized around some Master Theoretician, who offers a comprehensive analysis of the world situation and, usually, of human history as a whole, but very little theoretical reflection on more immediate questions of organization and practice. Anarchist-inspired groups tend to operate on the assumption that no one could, or probably should, ever convert another person completely to one's own point of view, that decision-making structures are ways of managing diversity, and therefore, that one should concentrate instead on maintaining egalitarian processes and considering immediate questions of action in the present.

One of the fundamental principles of political debate, for instance, is that one is obliged to give other participants the benefit of the doubt for honesty and good intentions, whatever else one might think of their arguments. In part, this too emerges from the style of debate that consensus decision-making encourages: where voting encourages one to reduce their opponents' positions to a hostile caricature, or whatever it takes to defeat them, a consensus process is built on a principle of compromise and creativity where one is constantly changing proposals around until one can come up with something everyone can at least live with; therefore, the incentive is always to put the best possible construction on others' arguments.

All this was very much like what I'd witnessed in Madagascar; the main difference was that since American activists were learning this from scratch, it all had to be spelled out explicitly. So the activist experience did throw new light on my original ethnography. But it struck me just how much ordinary intellectual practice – the kind of thing I was trained to do at the University of Chicago, for example – really does resemble just the sort of sectarian mode of debate anarchists were so trying to avoid. One of the things which had most disturbed me about my training there was precisely the way we were encouraged to read other theorists' arguments: basically, in the least charitable way possible. I had sometimes wondered how this could be reconciled with an idea that intellectual practice was, on some ultimate level, a common enterprise in pursuit of truth. In fact, academic discourse often seems an almost exact reproduction of the style of intellectual debate typical of the most ridiculous vanguardist sects.

Anarchism and the academy

All this helped explain something else: why there are so few anarchists in the academy. As a political philosophy, anarchism is going through a veritable renaissance. Anarchist principles – autonomy, voluntary association, self-organization, direct democracy, mutual aid – have become the basis for organizing new social movements from Karnataka to Buenos Aires, even if their exponents are as likely to actually call themselves Autonomists, Associationalists, Horizontalists, or Zapatistas. Yet most academics seem to have only a vague idea that this is happening, and

tend to dismiss anarchism as a stupid joke (for example, “Anarchist organization! But isn’t that a contradiction in terms?”). There are thousands of academic Marxists, but no more than a handful of well-known academic anarchists.

I don’t think this is because academics are slow on the ball. It seems to me that Marxism has always had an affinity with the academy that anarchism never could. Marxism is, after all, probably the only social movement to be invented by a man who had submitted a doctoral dissertation; and there’s always been something about its spirit that fits the academy. Anarchism on the other hand was never really invented by anyone. True, historians usually treat it as if it were, constructing the history of anarchism as if it’s basically a creature identical in its nature to Marxism: it was created by specific nineteenth-century thinkers (Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, etc.), it inspired working-class organizations, became enmeshed in political struggles, and so on. But in fact the analogy is strained. The nineteenth-century thinkers generally credited with inventing anarchism didn’t consider themselves to have invented anything particularly new. They saw anarchism more as a kind of moral faith, a rejection of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination (anarchism literally means “without rulers”), and a belief that humans would be perfectly capable of getting on without them. In this sense, there have always been anarchists, and presumably, always will be.

One need only compare the historical schools of Marxism and anarchism, then, to see that we are dealing with a fundamentally different sort of thing. Marxist schools have authors. Just as Marxism sprang from the mind of Marx, so we have Leninists, Maoists, Trotskyites, Gramscians, Althusserians, to name a few. Note how the list starts with heads of state and grades almost seamlessly into French professors. Pierre Bourdieu (1993) once noted that if the academic field is a game in which scholars strive for dominance, then you know you have won when other scholars start wondering how to make an adjective out of your name. It is, presumably, to preserve the possibility of “winning the game” – of being recognized as an intellectual titan, or at least, being able to sit at the feet of one – that intellectuals insist on continuing to employ just the sort of Great Man theories of history they would scoff at in discussing just about anything else. Indeed, Foucault’s ideas, like Trotsky’s, are never treated as primarily the products of a certain intellectual milieu, as something that emerged from endless conversations and arguments in cafés, classrooms, etc., but always as if they emerged from a single man’s genius. Here, too, Marxism seems entirely within the spirit of the academy.

Schools of anarchism, in contrast, always emerge from some kind of organizational principle or form of practice: Anarcho-Syndicalists and Anarcho-Communists, Insurrectionists and Platformists, Cooperativists, Individualists, and so on.¹ Anarchists are distinguished by what they do, and how they organize themselves to go about doing it. And indeed this has always been what anarchists have spent most of their time thinking and arguing about. They have never been much interested in the kinds of broad strategic or philosophical questions that preoccupy Marxists, such as, “Are the peasants a potentially revolutionary class?” (anarchists tend to think this is something for peasants to decide) or, “What is the nature of the commodity form?” Rather, anarchists tend to argue about what is the truly democratic way to go about a meeting, at what point organization stops being about empowering people and starts squelching individual freedom. Is “leadership” necessarily a bad thing? Or, alternately, about the ethics of opposing power: what

¹ Significantly, those Marxist tendencies that are not named after individuals, like Autonomism or Council Communism, are themselves the closest to anarchism.

is direct action? Should one condemn someone who assassinates a head of state? Is it ever okay to break a window?

Marxism, then, has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy. Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice. Now, this also does imply that there is a lot of potential complementarity between the two. There is no reason why one couldn't write Marxist theory, and simultaneously engage in anarchist practice; in fact, a lot of people have, including me.² But if anarchism is an ethics of practice, it means nothing to say you are an anarchist unless you are doing something. And it is a form of ethics that insists, before anything else, that one's means must be consonant with one's ends; that one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means; that as much as possible, one must embody the society one wishes to create. Therefore, it's very difficult to imagine how one could do this in a university without getting into serious trouble.

I once asked Immanuel Wallerstein why he thought academics engaged in such sectarian styles of debate. He acted as if the answer were obvious: "Well, the academy. It's a perfect feudalism." In fact, the modern university system is about the only institution – other than the British monarchy and Catholic Church – to have survived more or less intact from the High Middle Ages.³ What would it actually mean to act like an anarchist in an environment full of deans and provosts and people wearing funny robes, conference hopping in luxurious hotels, doing intellectual battle in language so arcane that no one who hasn't spent at least two or three years in grad school would ever hope to be able to understand it? At the very least it would mean challenging the university structure in some way. So we are back to the problem with which I began: to act like an anarchist would be academic suicide. So it is not at all clear what an anarchist academic could actually *do*.

Revolutionaries and the university

If one were to follow Wallerstein's lead, it would no doubt be possible to write a history of academic sectarianism, starting perhaps with the theological quarrels between Dominicans and Franciscans in the thirteenth century – that is, back when the quarrels were literally between rival sects – and tracing it down to the origins of the modern university system in Prussia in the early nineteenth century. As Randall Collins (1998) has pointed out, the reformers who created the modern university system, mainly by putting philosophy in the place formerly held by theology as master discipline and tying the institution to a newly centralizing state, were almost all exponents of one or another form of philosophical Idealism. His argument seems a trifle cynical, but the pattern was repeated in so many places – with Idealism becoming the dominant philosophical mode at exactly the moment that universities were reformed, first in Germany, then

² One might note that even Mikhail Bakunin, for all his endless battles with Marx over practical questions, also personally translated Marx's *Capital* into Russian. I also should point out that I am aware of being a bit hypocritical here by indulging in some of the same sort of sectarian reasoning I'm otherwise critiquing: there are schools of Marxism which are far more open-minded and tolerant and democratically organized, and there are anarchist groups that are insanely sectarian. Bakunin himself was hardly a model for democracy by any standards. My only excuse for the simplification is that, since I am arguably a Marxist theorist myself, I am basically making fun of myself as much as anyone else here.

³ In fact, a Medieval historian tells me that at least in many parts of Europe, Medieval universities were actually more democratic than they are now, since students often elected the professors.

England, the United States, Italy, Scandinavia, Japan – that it’s difficult to deny that something is going on here (Collins 1998: 650):

When Kant proposed to make the philosophy faculty arbiter of the other disciplines, he was carrying out a line which made academic careers in themselves superior to careers within the church . . . When Fichte envisioned university professors as a new species of philosopher-king, he was putting in the most flamboyant form the tendency for academic degree holders to monopolize entry into government administration. The basis for these arguments had to be worked out in the concepts of philosophical discourse; but the motivation for creating these concepts came from the realistic assessment that the structure was moving in a direction favorable to a self-governing intellectual elite.

If so, it explains why followers of Marx, that great rebel against German Idealism, can form such a perfect complement to the spirit of the academy – its mirror image, even – while serving as a bridge through which habits of argument once typical of theologians can get carried over into domains of politics.

Some would argue (as I think Collins would) that these sectarian divisions are simply inevitable features of intellectual life. New ideas can only emerge from a welter of contending schools. This may be true, but I think it rather misses the point. First of all, the sort of consensus-based groups I refer to above put a premium on a diversity of perspectives too. Yet anarchists don’t see discussions as a contest in which one theory or perspective should, ultimately, win. That’s why discussion almost always focuses on what people are going to do. Second, sectarian modes of debate are hardly conducive to fostering intellectual creativity. It’s hard to see how a strategy of systematically misrepresenting other scholars’ arguments could actually contribute to the furtherance of human knowledge. It is useful only if one sees oneself as fighting a battle and the only object is to win. One uses such techniques to impress an audience. Of course, in academic battles, there is often no audience – other than grad students or other feudal retainers – which makes it all seem rather pointless, but that doesn’t seem to matter. Academic warriors will play to non-existent audiences in the same way that minuscule Trotskyite sects of seven or eight members will invariably pretend to be governments in waiting, and thus feel it is their responsibility to lay out their positions on everything from gay marriage to how best to resolve ethnic tensions in Kashmir. It might seem ridiculous. Actually, it is ridiculous. But apparently, it is the best way to guarantee victory in those odd knightly tournaments that have become the hallmark of Collins’ “self-governing intellectual elite.”

On the idea of the avant-garde

I seem to have argued myself into something of a box here. Anarchists overcome sectarian habits by always keeping the focus on what anarchists have in common, which is what they want to *do* (smash the state, create new forms of community, etc.). What academics want to do, for the most part, is to establish their relative positions. Perhaps it might be best to take it, then, from the other side.

Anarchists have a word for this sort of sectarian behavior. They call it “vanguardism,” and consider it typical of those who believe that the proper role of intellectuals is to come up with

the correct theoretical analysis of the world situation, so as to be able to lead the masses on a truly revolutionary path. One salutary effect of the popularity of anarchism within revolutionary circles nowadays is that this position is considered definitively *passé*. The problem, then, concerns what should be the role of revolutionary intellectuals. Or, simply put, how can we get past our vanguardist habits? Untwining social theory from vanguardist habits might seem a particularly difficult task because historically modern social theory and the idea of the vanguard were born more or less together. Actually, so was the idea of an artistic avant-garde, and the relation between the three – modern social theory, vanguardism, and the avant-garde – suggests some unexpected possibilities.

The term avant-garde was actually coined by Henri de Saint-Simon (1825) as the product of a series of essays he wrote at the end of his life. Like his onetime secretary and later rival, Auguste Comte, Saint-Simon was writing in the wake of the French Revolution, and essentially was asking what had gone wrong. Both reached the same conclusion: modern, industrial society lacked any institution that could provide ideological cohesion and social integration, unlike feudal society that had the medieval Catholic Church. Each ended up proposing a new religion: Saint-Simon (1825) called his the “New Christianity,” and Comte (1852) termed his the “New Catholicism.” In the first, artists were to play the role of the priesthood; Saint-Simon produced an imaginary dialogue in which a representative of the artists explains to the scientists how, in their role of imagining possible futures and inspiring the public, they will play the role of an “avant-garde” – a “truly priestly function” in the coming society – and how artists will hatch the visions that scientists and industrialists will put into effect. Eventually, the state itself, as a coercive mechanism, would simply fade away.⁴

Comte (1852), of course, is most famous as the founder of *sociology*; indeed, he invented the term to describe what he saw as the master-discipline, which could both understand *and* direct society. He ended up taking a different, far more authoritarian approach to societal transformation, ultimately proposing the regulation and control of almost all aspects of human life according to scientific principles, with the priestly role in his New Catholicism being played by sociologists themselves. It’s a particularly fascinating opposition because, in the early twentieth century, the positions were effectively reversed. Instead of the left-wing Saint-Simonians looking to artists for leadership and the right-wing Comtians fancying themselves scientists, we had fascist leaders like Hitler and Mussolini imagining themselves as great artists inspiring the masses, sculpting society according to their grandiose visions, and the Marxist vanguard claiming the role of scientists. The Saint Simonians at any rate actively sought to recruit artists for their various ventures, salons, and utopian communities, though they quickly ran into difficulties because so many within “avant-garde” artistic circles preferred the more anarchistic Fourierists, and later, one or another branch of outright anarchists.

Actually, the number of nineteenth-century artists with anarchist sympathies is quite staggering, ranging from Pissaro to Tolstoy to Oscar Wilde, not to mention almost all early twentieth-century artists who later became Communists, from Malevich to Picasso. Rather than a political vanguard leading the way to a future society, radical artists almost invariably saw themselves as exploring new and less alienated modes of life. The really significant development in the nine-

⁴ Saint-Simon was also perhaps the first to conceive the notion of the withering away of the state: once it had become clear that the authorities were operating for the good of the public, one would no more need force to compel the public to heed their advice than one needed it to compel patients to take the advice of their doctors. Government would pass away into at most some minor police functions.

teenth century was less the idea of a vanguard than that of Bohemia (a term first coined by Balzac in 1838): marginal communities living in more or less voluntary poverty, seeing themselves as dedicated to the pursuit of creative, unalienated forms of experience, united by a profound hatred of bourgeois life and everything it stood for. Ideologically, they were about equally likely to be proponents of “art for art’s sake” or social revolutionaries. And in fact they seem to have been drawn from almost precisely the same social conjuncture as most nineteenth-century revolutionaries, or current ones for that matter: a kind of meeting between certain elements of (intentionally) downwardly mobile professional classes, in broad rejection of bourgeois values, and upwardly mobile children of the working class – the sort who managed to get themselves a bourgeois level of education only to discover this didn’t mean actual entry into the bourgeoisie.

In the nineteenth century, the term “vanguard” could be used for anyone seen as exploring the path to a future free society. Radical newspapers – even anarchist ones – often called themselves “The Avant-garde.” It was Marx who began to significantly change the idea by introducing the notion that the proletariat were the true revolutionary class – he didn’t actually use the term “vanguard” in his own writing – because they were the one that was the most oppressed (or as he put it, “negated” by capitalism) and therefore had the least to lose by its abolition. In doing so, he ruled out the possibility that less alienated enclaves, whether of artists or the sort of artisans and independent producers who tended to form the backbone of anarchism, had anything significant to offer. The results we all know. The idea of a vanguard party dedicated to both organizing and providing an intellectual project for that most-oppressed class chosen as the agent of history, but also, actually sparking the revolution through their willingness to employ violence, was first outlined by Lenin in his pivotal 1902 essay, “What Is to Be Done?”; it has echoed endlessly, to the point where in the late 1960s groups like Students for a Democratic Society could end up locked in furious debates over whether the Black Panther Party should be considered the vanguard of the movement as the leaders of its most oppressed element.

All of this in turn had a curious effect on the artistic avant-garde who increasingly started to organize themselves like vanguard parties, beginning with the Dadaists and Futurists, publishing their own manifestos, communiqués, purging one another, and otherwise making themselves (sometimes quite intentional) parodies of revolutionary sects.⁵ The ultimate fusion came with the Surrealists and then finally the Situationist International, which on the one hand was the most systematic in trying to develop a theory of revolutionary action according to the spirit of Bohemia, thinking about what it might actually mean to destroy the boundaries between art and life – but at the same time, in its own internal organization, displayed a kind of insane sectarianism full of so many splits, purges, and bitter denunciations that Guy Debord finally remarked that the only logical conclusion was for the International to be finally reduced to two members, one of whom would purge the other and then commit suicide. (Which is actually not too far from what in fact ended up happening.)

⁵ Note however that these groups always defined themselves, like anarchists, by a certain form of practice rather than after some heroic founder. Presumably this was in part because any artist who admitted to being simply the follower of another artist would abandon any hope of being seen as a significant historical figure just by doing so.

Non-alienated production

For me the really intriguing question here is: why is it that artists have so often been drawn to revolutionary politics to begin with? Because it does seem to be the case that, even in times and places when there is next to no other constituency for revolutionary change, the place one is most likely to find it is among artists, authors, and musicians; even more so, in fact, than among professional intellectuals. It seems to me the answer must have something to do with alienation. There would appear to be a direct link between the experience of first imagining things and then bringing them into being (individually or collectively) – that is, the experience of certain forms of unalienated production – and the ability to imagine social alternatives. This is particularly true if that alternative is the possibility of a society premised on less alienated forms of creativity.

This would allow us to see in a new light the historical shift from viewing the vanguard as relatively unalienated artists (or perhaps intellectuals) to viewing them as the representatives of the “most oppressed.” In fact, I would suggest that revolutionary coalitions always tend to consist of an alliance between a society’s least alienated and its most oppressed. And this is less elitist a formulation than it might sound, because it also seems to be the case that actual revolutions tend to occur when these two categories come to overlap. That would at any rate explain why it almost always seems to be peasants and craftspeople – or alternately, newly proletarianized former peasants and craftspeople – who actually rise up and overthrow capitalist regimes, and not those inured to generations of wage labor. Finally, I suspect this would also help explain the extraordinary importance of indigenous peoples’ struggles in that planetary uprising usually referred to as the “anti-globalization” movement: such people tend to be simultaneously the very least alienated and most oppressed people on earth, and once it is technologically possible to include them in revolutionary coalitions, it is almost inevitable that they should take a leading role.

The role of indigenous peoples, curiously, leads us back to the role of ethnography. Now, it seems to me that in political terms, ethnography has received a somewhat raw deal. It is often assumed to be intrinsically a tool of domination, the kind of technique traditionally employed by foreign conquerors or colonial governments. In fact, the use of ethnography by European colonialists is something of an anomaly: in the ancient world, for example, one sees a burst of ethnographic curiosity in the time of Herodotus that vanishes the moment gigantic multi-cultural empires come on the scene. Really, periods of great ethnographic curiosity have tended to be periods of rapid social change and at least potential revolution. What’s more, one could argue that under normal conditions, ethnography is less a weapon of the powerful than it is a weapon of the weak. All those graduate students constructing elaborate ethnographies of their departments that they can never publish are really doing – perhaps in a more theoretically informed way – is something that everyone in such a position tends to do. Servants, hirelings, slaves, secretaries, concubines, kitchen workers, pretty much anyone dependent on the whims of someone living in a different moral or cultural universe, are for obvious reasons constantly trying to figure out what that person is thinking and how people like that tend to think, to decipher their weird rituals or understand how they get on with their relatives. It’s not like it happens much the other way around.⁶

⁶ Take for example Todorov’s famous essay on Cortez, who, he argues, was an amateur ethnographer who sought to understand the Aztecs in order to conquer them. It is rarely noted that Cortez tried to understand the

Of course, ethnography is ideally a little more than that. Ideally, ethnography is about teasing out the hidden symbolic, moral, or pragmatic logics that underlie certain types of social action; the way people's habits and actions make sense in ways in which they are not themselves completely aware. But it seems to me this provides a potential role for the radical, non-vanguardist intellectual. The first thing we need to do is to look at those who are creating viable alternatives for the group, and try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing.

Obviously what I am proposing would only work if it was, ultimately, a form of auto-ethnography – in the sense of examining movements to which one has, in fact, made some kind of commitment, in which one feels oneself a part. It would also have to be combined with a certain degree of utopian extrapolation: a matter of teasing out the tacit logic or principles underlying certain forms of radical practice, and then, not only offering the analysis back to those communities, but using them to formulate new visions. These visions would have to be offered as potential gifts, not definitive analyses or impositions. Here too there are suggestive parallels in the history of radical artistic movements, which became movements precisely as they became their own critics;⁷ there are also intellectuals already trying to do precisely this sort of auto-ethnographic work. But I say all this not so much to provide models as to open up a field for discussion, by emphasizing that even the notion of vanguardism itself is far more rich in its history and full of alternative possibilities than most of us would ever be given to expect. And it provides at least one possible answer to the question of what is an anarchist anthropologist to do.

No doubt there are many others.

Aztecs precisely as long as their army outnumbered his something like 100 to 1; the moment he defeated them, his ethnographic curiosity appears to have vanished.

⁷ Of course the idea of self-criticism took on a very different, and more ominous, tone within Marxist politics.

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