

anchorage anarchy

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A Gang of Individuals Against Totality

by Jason Rodgers

All too often anarchism as a movement and a discourse is oriented towards collectivist ideology. I mean this in a literal sense of an ideology. Much of what is called anarchism seems to be more of a form of Hegelianism. Possibly it becomes a way for Marxists to smooth out the more and more obvious contradictions of their ideology. To many so-called anarchists, freedom means freedom for the megamachine, the leviathan man, the super organism they inhabit.

The emphasis of anarchism should always be individual freedom. Individualism doesn't mean nonsense like capitalism. Capitalism is a collectivist ideology as well, a structure of interlocking components. Individuality is not even the avoidance of other people. Most people want to be around others, with the exception of some hermit types. It strikes me as unreasonably misanthropic to mandate communal organization, as folks like anarcho-communists do. Organizational and meeting fetishists seem to think that if they should cease their ritual, their revolutionary ideology would collapse. And there is truth to this, the perpetual meetings of bookchinists and Occupy drones are intended to indoctrinate participants into an



insular subculture (who's the lifestyle anarchist, college boy?) This ritualistic behavior creates structures which keep the participants in line, and possibly push a leader (or two) into a position of self-aggrandizement at the expense of other participants.

I am often pessimistic about others, but this is due to the social roles we inhabit. Pushing individualism and egoist liberation functions to break down these social roles. The liberation of one is the liberation of

others. Most individuals want the presence of others. Liberated individuals will probably choose communalism. Mutual aid will take the form of a union of self-owning ones. The coming together enhances individual freedom and pleasure, becoming synergistic mutuality, where our freedom together is greater than the sum of our isolated and atomized parts.

It is difficult to determine how this individual freedom will be assured. It has been suggested that it should be formalized as a document, such as a bill of rights. I think this is the wrong way to go. As it is formalized and put into a static written form it becomes legalistic. Once it is legalistic it becomes a game of easy manipulation and can be turned on its head by any lawyer or logician. It may make sense to include it in forms such as mission statements for shared spaces and projects, but this is always a limited utility.

The only way to assure the continuation of freedom is a continual struggle. Anytime authoritarian structures begin to form they must be destroyed. This process never ends. Life becomes perpetual struggle, because perpetual war for individual freedom. This is okay, life is struggle. Insurrection never ends and civil war becomes the definition of a free society.

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Identity Fraud

The word anarchist has long been used to label various people and movements that often are and have been quite different from each other in their approaches, ideas and goals. People who have called themselves or been described by others as libertarians include individuals as diverse as Bakunin, Warren, Armand, Kropotkin, Michel, Stirner, Goldman, Mackay, Durruti, Arrigoni, Dolgoff, and Rothbard. What made all of these folks anarchists was their opposition to the state, to governments of all kinds. They all believed that the state was a pernicious force which crushed individual freedom and stood in the way of cooperation and mutual aid among equals. But their ideas about how to destroy or circumvent the state and their actions intended to accomplish their goals varied tremendously. Some were individualists who advocated private property, individual autonomy and free exchange, others social anarchists (communists, collectivists and/or syndicalists) who promoted workers' solidarity, communal action and shared decision-making. Whatever their focus, however, these anarchists all advocated individual liberty side-by-side with voluntary social interactions among free people, with an emphasis on the primacy of one over the other based on temperament, experience, and the myriad other influences that contribute to the way we all form ideas and opinions.

In the real world, however, there is a constant tension or conflict between the wants and needs of individual people and the wishes of the "community" (however one defines that) in which they find themselves. Because of this, people are sometimes forced to choose between that which allows a person the maximum freedom of action and an alternative which better meets the desires or needs of a larger social group of which they are also a part.



Anarchists who see individual liberty as the heart of anarchy and the most important thing to strive for will thus advocate or participate in social and economic relationships with others that may be quite different from those advanced or engaged in by those libertarians who see a cooperative egalitarian society as the end goal of the libertarian project. These are real differences and underlie the various debates and conflicts between individualists and social anarchists that date back to the beginning of the modern anarchist movement.

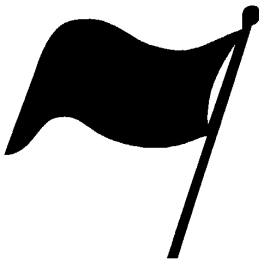
Despite the great range of opinion that continues to exist among anarchists concerning the relative importance of the individual and the group, one of the most common criticism of anarchists by those who oppose a free society is that we are all individualists, even those who identify as social anarchists. To authoritarian leftists, in particular, this (petty bourgeois) individualism of the libertarians is what makes them anathema. But, as I look around at the writings coming out of the contemporary movement, I see little factual basis for the belief that anarchists are by nature individualists. On the contrary, the libertarian movement has, over time, become more and more focused on people as

parts of groups who share some sort of physical characteristic or “lifestyle” or class or “identity,” instead of on individual persons in all their infinite variability and uniqueness.

The Masses

The embrace of group identity among many anarchists can be traced back to the very beginnings of the movement. Proudhon and Bakunin, like their contemporary Marx, were fond of referring to working and unemployed people as “the masses,” or the proletariat. They saw the world in terms of classes in contention for power, not persons striving for their freedom against others who presume to rule and control them. While they gave lip service to individual freedom as a goal, it is very clear from their writings that they saw such freedom as a means to the end of social and economic equality, as freedom for individual workers or proles to engage in social and economic relations with their fellow workers unregulated by an alien state imposed on them from the outside. There were individual workers and individual bosses, but no individual people in this conception of society. Everyone was the representative of some class.

Even in the early days of the movement, there were libertarians who rejected this view of individual persons as mere subdivisions or representatives of a larger group or whole. Egoists like Stirner and individualists like Warren saw the freedom of the individual person as an end worth striving for in and of itself. The



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individualists believed that such freedom would also produce a largely equitable society, with individuals respecting the equal freedom of others and cooperating voluntarily and fairly with others in the absence of the exploitative monopolies and privileges granted to a favored elite and protected by the state. But the liberty of individual people to choose for themselves and live their lives as they pleased, without violating the sovereignty of others, was what mattered most to the individualists.

This division among libertarians between social anarchists and individualists has continued through to the present day, with individualists remaining a minority within the larger anarchist movement. But as society has evolved and changed, so have the anarchists. No longer do the social anarchists look at people simply as members of this or that class, although many still maintain an old-fashioned workerist bias. They now also see people through the filter of modern identity politics. A person's skin color, sex, ethnicity, sexual behavior, and/or "gender" identity are seen as reasons to group individuals together with others who are seen as like them and regard them as having similar interests, desires and needs.

While this multiplies the categories into which people who are so disposed can squeeze themselves or others, it is not a step forward for individuality or for freedom. The fact that there are more groups of which one can claim membership for oneself or others in order to satisfy a longing for belonging or exclusion, does not make the

obsession with group identity any more liberatory than the old, simple prole/bourgeois binary. Despite the impression of promoting diversity, such identity politics actually push people into pre-defined templates which dictate what a woman should think, how a black person should feel, what a queer boy desires. Instead of promoting independence and autonomy, labeling oneself as this or that type of person promotes conformity with the larger group with which one has identified oneself, or been so identified by others.



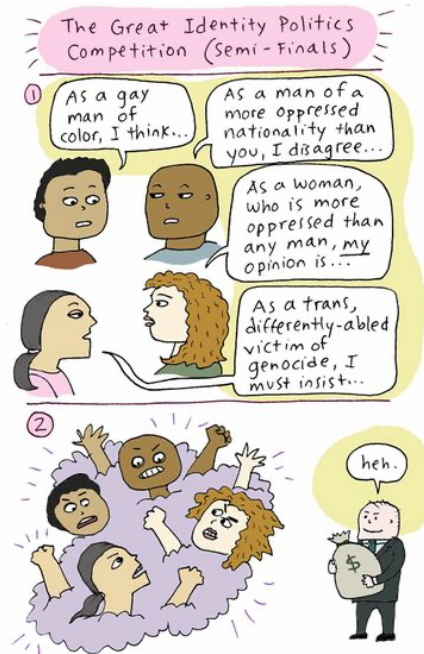
Identity politics did not originate with libertarians, of course. Anarchists simply adopted a way of thinking that over time had become more and more popular on the political left and by this point has entered the mainstream. Feminism, ethnic nationalisms, and sexual identities all came to the fore as part of the non-anarchist left in the 60s and 70s. As anarchist thought and action had a rebirth of sorts during this same period, an overlap developed between these various movements, eventually resulting in identity-

based libertarian subgroups. From anarcho-feminists to the more recent anarchist people of color groupings, libertarians have shown themselves to be no more resistant to the herd instinct than anyone else. It is unclear to this anarchist why the libertarian movement, which supposedly rejects all authority, has shown itself unwilling to reject an approach which promotes groupthink, and why a movement supposedly opposed to racism and sexism has so readily accepted separatist groupings based on sex and skin color/ethnicity. Anarchists seem dis-inclined to advocate for individualism and real diversity in the face of the current fashion for identity.

Identity Papers, Please

While the appeal of groupism is not universal, it is quite common. Even those not in the in-group will often fall into place and support those who choose to identify themselves and others by skin color, sex, ethnicity, sexual tastes, “gender,” etc. Some people say they want to be surrounded by people who look like them, others say that they feel more comfortable around those with whom they have shared experiences. And then there are those who claim that those not in or of their self-identified group are incapable of treating them fairly because they are racist, sexist, homophobic, or some combination of these. But whatever the rationale for identity politics, there is always an assumption about people made by its advocates that is based on some physical characteristics, behavior or sexual tastes. People are not seen as individuals to be

evaluated on the basis of their words and deeds, but are simply categorized as members of this or that group, and are assumed to share certain traits with others in their assigned group.



Such an approach is, at best, flawed, and at worst is simply racist or sexist itself. When people talk of wanting to be around people who look like them it is no different from the racist assumption of many that those of another color or ethnicity all look alike, which is demonstrably false. Black people or people of asian ancestry do not look like each other any more than do white people, and claiming they do, whether as a positive or a negative, is to make a statement of one's attitude towards ethnic identity, not to state a fact. In addition, there is an

obvious lack of consistency among most left and anarchist separatists who support exclusive people of color or women's organizations—such identity politicians would consider a white-only grouping fascist on its face or a (straight) men only club or event sexist, unless of course such groupings were set up as “auxiliaries” to assist a people of color or women's group in its work, something that has happened more than once on the left.

The assumption that all people of a certain ethnicity or skin color or sex have important shared experiences is just as chimerical as the idea that they all look alike. Of the millions of people in the united states, let alone the world, of various shades of color, there are rich, poor, and middle class folks in all groups. To say that there is a “black experience” as politicians and literary critics would have it is absurd. There are as many black experiences as there are black people, as is the case among non-black people. It is likely that every black person in the united states has encountered a racist white person, and every woman has at some point had to deal with some sexist shit. But not all such experiences are the same. Unkind or insensitive (“microaggressive”?) words directed at someone are not the same as a beating by police or a rape. And, needless to say, the way people react to adversity of any sort varies tremendously from one person to another. People of all shapes, sizes, sexes and colors experience ill-treatment of one sort or another as they live their lives and they all react to and deal

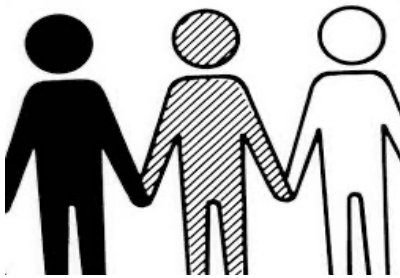
with these incidents not as women, or queers, or black people, but as individuals.



Separate but Equal?

In circumstances where people are particularly isolated and discriminated against, seeking support from and association with others who are similarly situated may be the only option they have for self-defense against threats or organization for a change in condition. But such situations are few and far between. White abolitionists such as the libertarian Garrison were an important part of the fight against slavery and the underground railroad in the united states early on, and the anti-apartheid movement long included white anti-racists. Most men are not rapists nor “potential rapists” as some would have it and men have long participated in the struggle against sexism, especially anarchists like Harman and Heywood. Despite this, identity tribalism has become the default position for many, regardless of the level of support or opposition to discrimination there is among people who are not members of the groups in question. No matter how strongly many

white people oppose racism or men reject sexism, there remain some who believe black people or women should organize themselves in exclusive clubs. For such separatists, some people (never themselves, of course) cannot transcend the circumstances into which they were born and are always considered to harbor some obvious or latent racist or sexist attitudes and cannot be trusted.



Not all devotees of identity go to the extent of organizing in separate groupings, but writings and comments about constructs like white privilege or patriarchy or cisgender privilege are commonplace both among anarchists and in the non-anarchist left. Those who believe in these concepts apparently see biology as destiny (except in the case of gender as will be discussed below), despite the ample evidence to the contrary. It is difficult to understand how, in a world of supposed white skin privilege, the president of the united states is black and there are millions of white people living in poverty and thousands of white people in prisons. Or that there are women CEOs in a number of corporations who control the (much lower) salaries and working

conditions of the men and women who work under them despite the patriarchy. And even that an athlete who has changed their sex gives the keynote address at a nationally televised sports award show to thunderous applause, while most people in this presumably transphobic society hardly blinked.

But the reality of day-to-day life is not enough to dissuade ideologues. Identity politicians think in terms of institutions and narratives and oppression and other stereotyped conceptions about the relationships between people. They don't interact with and evaluate people as they really are. They make assumptions about other people based on their color, sex, sexual tastes, etc, instead of looking at them as individuals, persons different from anyone else in the world. In other words, they judge others in exactly the same way they believe they are being judged by those they criticize and wish to avoid contact with. While the stereotypes they believe and the prejudices they hold towards others may differ in specifics from those of the people they see as their oppressors or opponents, the spirit of their outlook is the same.

Mistaken Identity

This all begs the question of what identity really is. While there have long been discussions of what truly defines a person's color or sexual preference, debate about what and who determines a person's "gender" has taken center stage in recent years. In a country (and world) where same-sex marriage has become commonplace,

transgender people and how they are to be regarded has become the issue *du jour* in the struggle for sexual freedom and choice. And the current kerfuffle about what gender is raises a number of questions about many of the premises of identity politics in general.



The subject of how one defines one's gender is interesting on a number of levels. If a person's gender is what they say it is, simply because they say it is, this raises an obvious question: Why cannot the same be true of one's skin color or ethnicity? When a white NAACP leader who identified as black was outed last year she was essentially forced out of her job, not for being white but because of her "deception." When people with both black and white ancestry choose to live their lives as white people, such as two brothers in the 1900s, one of whom was a coast guard captain in Alaska and the other a Catholic bishop, they are commonly described as "passing" for white and considered somehow cowardly or disreputable. While gender is now seen as fluid and self-chosen, people are still considered bound by their "racial" ancestry and locked by others into ethnic groups from which there is no escape.

A similar assumption is true to a large extent when it comes to sexual behavior.

People who consider themselves straight not uncommonly have sex with people of the same sex from time-to-time. When this is discovered or disclosed, there are many who believe them to be dishonest or cowardly and unwilling to come out as queer. Some may simply be afraid of the perceived consequences of being seen as gay or lesbian but others genuinely continue to identify as heterosexual and see their same-sex adventures as occasional amusements only. But whatever the reason they choose to place themselves in one sexual orientation category or another, outsiders are often not willing to accept their self-assessment and judge them according to some politically correct definition of sexuality. Having sex is something one does—it does not define who one is. And although sexual tastes are commonly perceived as inborn and outside one's control, just as is ethnicity, there is no evidence to support such an assumption in either case. No one would argue a preference for tea over coffee is determined by one's genes, yet the assumption that a preference for men or women (or both) as sexual partners is determined by hereditary has become nearly canonical among the politically correct.

Despite the determinist view of ethnicity and sexual tastes prevalent among identity politicians, if a man calls himself a woman simply because he has always wanted to be one, she is therefore to be considered a woman by everyone else. That is the new orthodoxy when the politically correct talk and write about what they call gender.

Those who disagree with this view, including some feminists, have fallen afoul of their leftist friends. What is most interesting about all this to me is the clear double standard applied to gender identity as opposed to skin color identity. The biological sex of the vast majority of people, including most transgender folk, can be clearly determined either by their genitalia or their chromosomes, while so-called “race” (for which skin color is a proxy) and sexual identity are entirely social constructs, not biological ones. Despite this, a person with black ancestry who identifies as white risks criticism as a race traitor, while a demonstrably female person is to be accepted as a man if he so desires to be seen. Curiouser and curiouser.



**All the world is queer save thee and me,
and even thou art a little queer**

None of this would matter in a world where people were seen as individuals, and evaluated based on their abilities, ideas, and actions instead of their sex, color, or sexual tastes. If public bathrooms were not segregated by sex, then the question of

gender in bathrooms would not arise. If most sports were not separated into one-sex events then the chromosomal sex of the participants would be a non-issue. If men in dresses and women in farmer jeans were seen as acceptable and non-controversial, then people would often have no clue about either the sex or gender of others with whom they were not friends, and obsession about what genitals lurk beneath people's clothes would fade away.

Societal sex roles, just like misguided assumptions about race and ethnicity, are the root of the problem when it comes to gender identity. Choosing a trans identity, whether in the case of skin color or sex, can change the opportunities available to people or allow them the option of living unremarkably in ways that would not be so easily available if they retained their cis identity. Were that not true, were people able to live how they please as long as they don't fuck with the ability of others to do likewise, freely chosen identities of any sort would just be part of the background color of our lives. Women would be free to change into men and vice versa, people could call themselves whatever color they prefer, and people would have sex with each other as they desired at the moment without regard to some defining sexual “orientation.” It ain't nobody's business if they do.

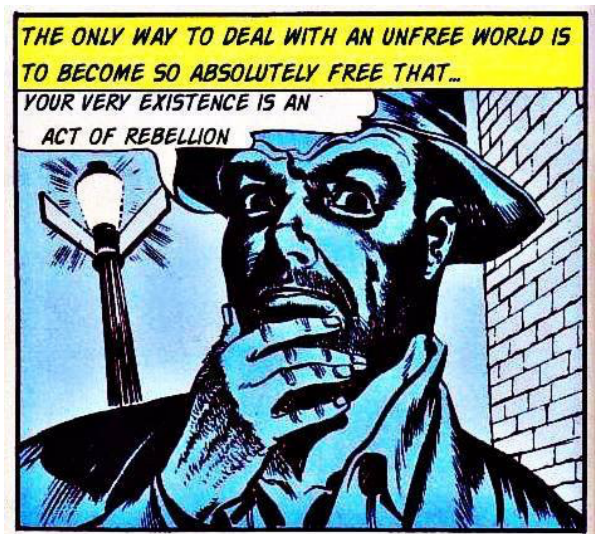
Thinking meaningfully about people as categories is a fool's errand. People of various shades of color identify and are considered by others as brown, white or

black depending on social circumstances. And LGBTQIAetc includes such a spectrum of people, sexual practices, gender identities, and so on that it is ridiculous to even attempt to say anything about people so classified that would apply to more than a mere fraction of them, or that would not also apply to some who do not label themselves that way. It covers tops and bottoms and butches and femmes and men with breasts and women with penises, of all colors and ages—the variety is endless and makes a mockery of any attempt to group all these diverse individuals together.

The attempt to classify human beings like biological species is not just foolhardy, it is also pernicious. It elevates superficial characteristics like sex, ethnicity, and sexual tastes above the individual who displays them. It encourages racism and sexism, it promotes division, and it denies the truth that we are each a unique person, with experiences only we have had, and with an infinite variety of wants and needs. People should be free to do as they will, not because they are black or white, women or men, trans or cis, but because they are people and therefore are worthy of the freedom to be who they wish to be.

It is not just the state that crushes freedom and open discussion. Bigotry and prejudice on the part of others, including those supposedly committed to social change, can squelch discussion and exclude well-meaning people from participating in oppositional movements because they don't look or think or behave as the identity police

believe they should. The fact that such exclusionary ideas and practices are widely accepted among anarchists is dismaying. Libertarians talk of abolishing classes. They need to start advocating the abolition of racial, sexual, and ethnic identities as well, groupings which continue to contribute to oppression, discrimination, and inequality just as truly as does class identity. Anarchists will never escape from the leftist swamp and become a force for real social change unless they reclaim their individualist heritage and stop viewing people as representatives of wronged groups and classes and instead start advocating for the absolute freedom of every individual to live as they wish, simply because they are human beings.



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