



Chaos is Immanent:

Struggle, Ontology, and the Condition of Freedom

by Jason Rodgers



There is a very good anthology called Enemies of Society: An Anthology of Individualist & Egoist Thought. This anthology was anonymously put together for Ardent Press. It does a wonderful job of bringing together numerous essays, that were not easily available previously, which give an overview of the minority tradition in anarchism: Individualist Anarchism. This does a lot to correct the misconception that individualist anarchism is the same thing as anarcho-capitalism. It is not. Though many American Individualist-anarchists were concerned with creating models for mutualist markets (which they positioned in direct opposition to capitalism), the European proponents of the individualist position did not have the space to do so. Figures such as Renzo Novatore and the Bonnot Gang adopted the insurrectionary aspect of individualism and declared civil war on society.

The individualist tradition is characterized by a pessimism in regards to mass society and organization. In this sense it is an influence on later tendencies such as post-left anarchy, green anarchy/primitivism, and insurrectionary anarchy. However this pessimism can sometimes move to the point of quietism, that is believing that the best hope is to try to avoid being noticed by authorities. The anonymous editor writes an unfortunate statement in an otherwise excellent introduction "Individualist anarchists/conscious egoists preach no holy war against the State because they're reflective enough to admit that they know of no way to get rid of the state" (xiii). The problem is the implication of quietism in this statement. It moves beyond a critique of moralists who preach self sacrifice to an implied critique of those who engage in risk in struggle. I don't think this would be the conscious intentions of the editor (after all the cover is an image of a member of the Bonnot Gang pointing a gun at the camera), but it is a component of individualism and egoism, and is something that should be addressed. This is the point I intend to make in this essay, that in my conception quietism and submission are contradictory to individualism and egoism.

The statement may be partially in response to the American way of conceiving civil disobedience, the image of the non-violent protestor willingly getting arrested to win a spiritual and moral victory. This certainly wins the civil disobeyer some social justice points (and probably helps to alleviate the torment of their bad conscience), but it is easily recuperate and reinforces the idea that democracy can

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resist authority (rather than being authority itself). Evasion and escape are the cardinal sin in the social justice activist milieu. Though it may be the core feature of successful guerilla operations, it is considered cowardice by leftists to avoid capture at all costs, in order to fight again another day. Egoist S. E. Parker said "It is certainly true that Stirner thought that a conscious egoist might at times have to pretend conformity if he or she does not have enough power to assert him/herself openly against authority" (160). Some might consider this submission or a cop-out. I would consider it good tactics at times, biding time until a means to destroy authority is found. This evasion might also coincide with all sorts of secret struggles as well, "we have potentials to respond to oppression in many different ways, passively or actively" (Shahin 89). I will return to this multitude of forms of struggle later.

There is a deep pessimism to be found in certain facets of individualism. This can be a very realistic pessimism: such as the Enemies of Society editor pointing out "Political rule rests ultimately on the consent of the subject masses" (xiii). This can take the form of realism about where one should put one's efforts. For instance early egoist James Walker said "I shall begin to work for you when I see you are able to work for me. But if you are afraid to be free- stay in slavery" (5). It is not that he wanted people to stay in slavery, he just realized it is completely contradictory to try to force a person to be free. He immediately pointed out that while he was willing to accept that some may wish to submit, nonetheless "I hope better things from you" (5).

Unfortunately this pessimism can transform into a shallow, limited form of self interest. Enemies of Society ends with an essay by S.E. Parker called "Archists, Anarchists and Egoists". This was a critique of anarchists and anarchism, arguing these are merely excuse not to use power (or positive freedom, if you wish). In fact it was Parker's good bye to anarchism. Though he makes some interesting points he also employed a very problematic quote from John Beverley Robinson: "if the State does things that benefit him [the egoist], he will support it; if it attacks him and encroaches on his liberty, he will evade it by any means in his power, if he is not strong enough to withstand it" (326). In this sense egoism might provide an argument for not submitting to domination, but maybe not a strong enough argument against dominating. This is a real aspect of egoism. I will argue against it though, in an attempt to show that it is contradictory to egoism.

A reformist might seek more freedom: bigger cages, longer chains! Anarchy is seeking the condition of freedom. It is not enough to have a limited personal freedom, as might be found through

success in capitalism. The continued existence of authority in your proximity always threatens you as an individual. To assure the continuation of individual freedom it is necessary to war against societal structures in totality. The logical realization of individualism and egoism is an anti-civilization position.

Raoul Vaneigem, the member of the Situationist International who's vision of communism connected most directly with egoism, made a compelling argument against dominating others: "masters, and God himself, are weak because of the shortcomings of those whom they govern. The master knows the positive pole of alienation, the slave its negative one, but both are denied full mastery" (204). This is the selfish reason not to dominate others, it makes you dependent upon them and thus weaker. So what should be done to escape from this role? Renounce power? Again, no. Vaneigem portrayed 1967 as a time when "we have no more masters, just slaves-who-consume-power, distinguishable from one another only by reference to the relative quantity of power they consume" (207). I think this has only gotten worse since then. This world of slaves without masters may sound like a social justice wet-dream (and of course it is the realization of social justice). This is not freedom however. Instead Vaneigem promoted a radical aristocratic vision of "the master without slaves, or the aristocratic transcendence of the aristocracy" (211).

People who are cynical sometimes become hopeless, entirely throwing away any belief that a different world is possible. They can become complacent. This doesn't follow. Sometimes I wonder if these pessimists are really failed moralistic idealists. Having failed at organizing the masses into a revocable federation, and getting just too tired out from the long march through institutions and attending perpetual meetings, they are unable to admit that their ideas and strategies are wrong. Instead it's cause the world is just rotten, they say. Hope should be thrown out to begin with, and instead a joy in a life of struggle adopted. Why bother seeking easily attainable goals that are really just more banal miserabilism? Instead I'd like to seek a pataphysical objective, something so wonderful that it has never happened (or at least hasn't happened since Babylon erected ziggurats). I'd rather lose at the great work than a lifetime of success maintaining a sewer system.

People become complacent pessimists because they are stuck in a limited world view, where the only way to succeed is through direct conflict. Evasion is considered lifestyle politics, but how else will one survive to discover novel strategies of conflict? Besides these novel forms of conflict, there is the ontological condition: that there is an intrinsic value to struggle itself, even if one loses.

project. It shows that another way of being is possible. The struggle may be the most of this way of being that we get. If it is, it is still better than a life of misery. Then again, maybe that's not the closest we can get, but that possibility is mere speculation.

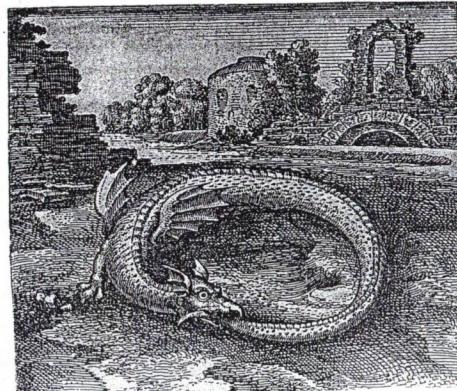
The self willing individual also draws inspiration from the mythic. This myth may not be literally true, but it is true in a different way, a poetic truth in a different paradigm. Consider the myth of Tiamat and Marduk. In Babylonian mythology Tiamat was a primordial, water dragon, an avatar of chaos. Marduk was the first god king of Babylon. He killed Tiamat and formed the cosmos with her dismembered body. Mircea Eliade saw this as a reoccurring motif in civilization: "the snake symbolizes chaos, the formless, the unmanifested. To behead it is equivalent to an act of creation, passage from the virtual and amorphous to that which has form" (55). I agree with this, but take a different interpretation. This is not

some benign taming, some original defense of safety and humanity. Instead I see it as the first domestication, when our being was first dismembered and dominated. However, it also means that we are made from the corpse of Tiamat, that our prime substance is primal chaos. Chaos is immanent, it is inside of us. It may be dead, but it can be resurrected. It can come back to life, reborn. This occurs in struggle, the chaos is resurgent, possessing and vitalizing our forms, like a shock wave of orgone energy. We may not be able to easily win, but we can ride the serpent, become avatars of chaos. Freedom is found in a perpetual civil way, a force of dynamical chaos battling order- forever. Forever free, in struggle.

recruiting adherents. This is the sense in which we become generals in the class war, not needing subordinates and certainly not wanting them" (66).

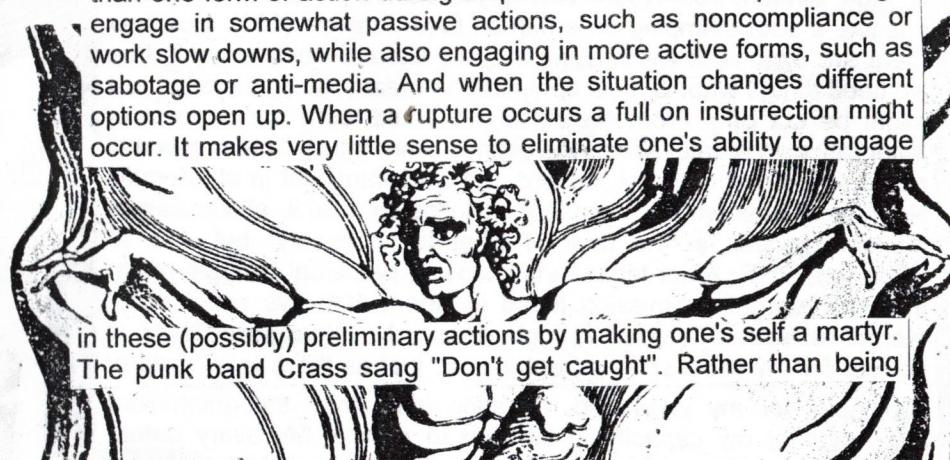
This is further visualized by Peter Lamborn Wilson: "to take Nietzsche at his word is to envision a society of free spirits devoted to art and love and the transformation of the social element, simply because they- from the superabundance of life in them- find such play to be a challenging and joyful actions" (2). It is here in which a tendency such as Primitivism is important. Primitivism is sometimes criticized for being in danger of being turned into an ideological construct. Folks like Derrick Jensen and Lierre Keith exemplify this danger of becoming ideological. There is also a very different, even inverse way, in which Primitivism can be used. It can function as an inspiration, with hunter gatherers as an example of life outside of civilization. John Moore summed up how this could work: "although primitive cultures provide imitations of the future, and that future may incorporate elements derived from those cultures, an anarcho-primitivist world would likely be quite different from previous forms of anarchy" (4). The primitive can function as nourishment for struggle, as something that can be used as a weapon. This is what Enemies of Society called "Ludic Belief": "a belief that can be modified by playing with it" (351).

This essay might seem pessimistic to some readers, as if I am merely saying that the situation is hopeless. I have grave doubts about the possibility of a revolution, and even more severe reservation of the desirability. I tend to think that most revolutions that could succeed will do so by replicating authoritarian and hierarchic forms. Even most of the schemes that anarchists concoct suffer from this problem, creating a situation in which the current state is replaced by something that is not called a state (but is) and has a lot of meetings. I find myself having to reject the revolution. I do not find reason for extreme sorrow in this. I expect to lose in the end, and choose to go forward anyways. The revolution is rejected in favor of insurrection, an overturning. The struggle itself is the source of freedom. The self willing individual finds moments in history to draw inspiration from, which is what draws me to the primitivist

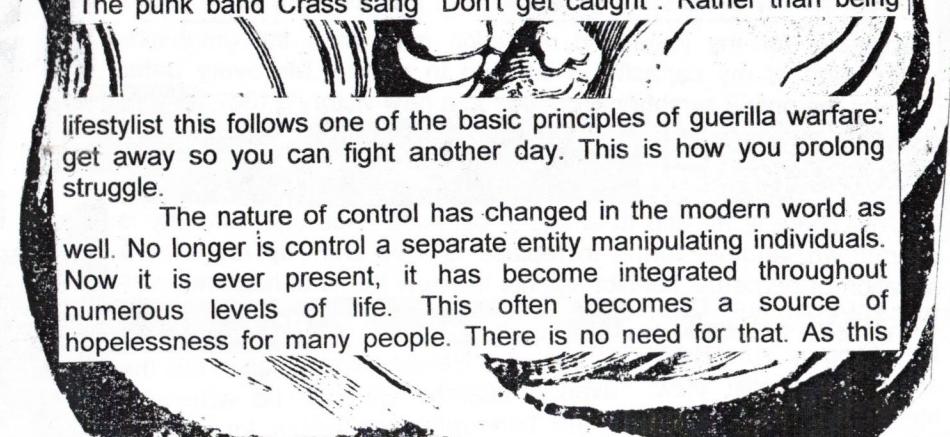


As previously mentioned S.E. Parker stated "a conscious egoist might at times pretend conformity if he or she does not have enough power to assert him/herself openly against authority" (160). To some this may sound like some sort of opportunistic tactic, the sort of thing a person might do to justify themselves morally against an accusation of conformity, selling out, etc. Certainly some might be acting in such a way. Yet there is no reason that this reasonably follows from adopting evasion tactics. People can act in a diversity of ways at the same time. Merely adopting one set of tactics for a specific purpose does not lock you into those tactics perpetually. Shahin wrote a book called Nietzsche and Anarchy, which explores how Nietzsche's ideas are relevant to anarchy and works to develop them into tactics for insurrection. "The key Nietzschean point is", according to Shahin, "that human beings (anarchist or otherwise) are complex bodies composed of a tangle of many, often contradictory, drives and passions, inherited and transformed in strange ways. And we have potentials to respond to oppression in many different ways, passively and actively" (89).

There are many ways in which a person can resist authority. It seems reasonable that not only are there a number of tactics that are effective in specific situations. There are also a number of tactics that are ineffective in other situations. A prescriptive model is not useful. It also seems reasonable that it is possible to engage in more than one form of action during a specific time frame. A person might engage in somewhat passive actions, such as noncompliance or work slow downs, while also engaging in more active forms, such as sabotage or anti-media. And when the situation changes different options open up. When a rupture occurs a full on insurrection might occur. It makes very little sense to eliminate one's ability to engage



in these (possibly) preliminary actions by making one's self a martyr. The punk band Crass sang "Don't get caught". Rather than being



lifestylist this follows one of the basic principles of guerilla warfare: get away so you can fight another day. This is how you prolong struggle.

The nature of control has changed in the modern world as well. No longer is control a separate entity manipulating individuals. Now it is ever present, it has become integrated throughout numerous levels of life. This often becomes a source of hopelessness for many people. There is no need for that. As this

control system has expanded it has also become more interdependent throughout the system. A small breakdown in one area can influence another. This leaves the option of micropolitical interventions on the level of everyday life.

Confronting the totality might be a losing proposition. No one knows if the totality can be defeated until it is defeated. This is not a cause for dismay. The struggle is intrinsically valuable. It is the point in which freedom is found. Wolfi Landstreicher called this "anarchist projectuality": "the practical recognition in one's life that anarchy is not just an aim for the distant future, an ideal that we hope to experience in a far away utopia. Much more essentially, it is a way of confronting life and struggle, a way that put us at odds with the world as it is. It is grasping our own lives as a weapon and as a stake to be played against the existence that has been imposed on us" (223).

I like to imagine that Nietzsche was right about the Eternal Recurrence, that we really are all trapped in a time loop that we will have to relive forever. Yet we have a choice. We can choose submission and assure ourselves failure. By choosing submission we would assure, even create, the reality George Orwell prophesized in 1984, straight from Room 101: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face- forever" (220). However there are options. If we imagine that the Eternal Recurrence is true we need to find what is most beneficial as means, since the ends just might be cut off. From Nietzsche we could learn the concept of amor fati: love of fate! Nietzsche defined amor fati as "that one wants noting to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it- all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary- but love it" (Nietzsche 258). Amor fati means choosing perpetual struggle rather than the eternal submission found in Room 101. We could adopt eternal resistance, eternal struggle. Renzo Novatore said "There is no rest for my rebel spirit except in war, just as there is no greater happiness for my vagabond, negating mind than the uninhibited affirmation of my capacity to life and to rejoice. My every defeat serves me only a symphonic prelude to a new victory" (138).

There is no end to struggle, because once one authority is overthrown, another forms to replace it. This ends up requiring a situation of perpetual conflict against the new forms of hegemony as

they congeal. Anarchist anthropologist Harold Barclay called this the anarcho-cynicalist view: "even if anarchy were to be achieved, eternal vigilance would be the bare minimum prices for even a

modicum of success. Despite what the international anthem of the revolutionary class might say there is no final battle. The battle is forever" (Barclay 150). Or what Renzo Novatore said "But the one who practices Anarchy is the enemy of the law and lives against society. And this war is inevitable and eternal. It is inevitable and eternal, because when the czar falls, Lenin rises; when the royal guard is abolished, the red guard comes" (226). Some might take the cynical viewpoint as an excuse to compromise, join with a reform oriented group, because after all it's better than nothing. Instead, I take it as a way to inform practice here and now, refusing to put oneself into a position of empowering the forces that are prepared to oppress you once the current order is overthrown. Preemptively these ideological powers will be rejected. Rather than seeking more freedom the goal is a condition of freedom, in which the existence of freedom for others in the vicinity will enhance one's own individual freedom.

This calls for a rejection of the ideological project of anarchism, those leftists who, as Fredy Perlman said, "differ from Marxists only in being less informed. They would supplant the state with a network of computer centers, factories and mines coordinated 'by the workers themselves' or by an Anarchist Union. They would not call this arrangement the state. The name change would exorcize the beast" (5). Rather than the anarchism of leftists, our struggle would seek anarchy. Once Bob Black suggested adopting the name of the rebel angels in Paradise Lost: Anarchs. Bob said "Let the anarchy-ists call themselves anarchs, a word whose first known appearance- in Paradise Lost!- antedates anarchist by nine years. It's better because like the corresponding distinction of monarch from monarchist, it designates not what we believe, but what we are, insofar as our power permits: Power unto ourselves" (33).

The anarch is in a conflict that has nothing to do with morality, natural laws, or the rest. This is a conflict in which the will and desires of the anarch are intrinsically in opposition to the structures of society (which is rather different than the partial contradictions our desires might have with friends and comrades we desire to build affinity with). Shahin defined this opposition as a major factor in their Nietzschean insurrection: "capitalist forms of life make me sick, they destroy me, and I seek to destroy them. Even so, I don't say that my way is true and theirs is false. I say, we are enemies, we can't live together, we are at war" (202). This war cannot be waged in ways that replicate totality. This is why mass vanguard movements are rejected immediately. Instead Anti-Authoritarians Anonymous proposed "a world without masters or slaves, managers or managed, begins with a masterful disdain for