

In Desperate Need of Bliss: Anarchism and the Power of Pleasure

by T.M.Hoy

The ideals of anarchism share much with the daydreams of every school child, the heart's desire of freethinkers, and the wishes of poor and oppressed people everywhere. Its elements are simple: freedom from tyranny, mutual aid and support of actualization, intentional communities, relationships based on trust, not fear. A life free of rules, shorn of unhealthy power dynamics, rich in friendship and satisfaction. With such immensely attractive principles, nearly universal in their appeal, anarchists must ask themselves - why isn't everyone working to bring this vision into reality?

A cursory survey of the anarchist movement (especially in the US), shows it to be almost moribund; a fringe phenomenon involving a few old stalwarts and a small crew of fellow travelers that are scattered, persecuted, and largely ineffective.

Anarchist ideals in various forms have taken root in recent years. Some include the "radical simplicity" movement, the rise of co-ops, barter and local exchange networks, eco-villages, the "slow food" movement, and other ecologically aware efforts. But in the main, anarchism in the US is tragically impotent. It's slightly livelier European counterpart is limited to the rare act of dissent, hardly more than a nuisance to the powers that be. This is a pathetic showing for an ideology that speaks so strongly to fundamental human needs and aspirations.

Making an allowance for the large number of unfortunates who hate themselves, and whose upbringing has made them incapable of forming healthy relationships with others (which Eric Fromm revealed as the origin of cruelty and destructiveness), what other causes might be responsible for public indifference to the anarchist message?

Traditionally, anarchists tend to blame the pernicious influence of capitalism and the state repression which supports it as the primary culprits. Both of these evils spring from individuals unable to find fulfillment in the normal human activities of sharing and caring, instead seeking to inflict their own pain on others, a source of endless mischief. While these factors doubtless play a part in keeping anarchist ideas out of the mainstream media, making it a regular target of state violence, this doesn't fully account for the public's resistance to embrace the urge for freedom that's the foundation of the anarchist cause.

After all, whenever something becomes truly popular, it sweeps away every sort of opposition before it. For example, witness the abject failure of the "War on Drugs". Despite monstrous government punishments and propaganda campaigns, recreational drug use remains a common and popular pastime for tens of millions of citizens.

The cause of society's unwillingness to adopt anarchistic principles is likely the same thing that causes social pathologies in general. Namely, the modern Western antipathy toward and rejection of relationships as the most important aspect of life (both between humans, and between humans and other living beings). This was replaced with materialism/consumerism, falsely equating convenience and comfort with joy.

This abysmal perversion – substituting a love of things in place of the love of our family, friends, and nature is the essence of consumerism. Twisted versions of respect, trust, desirability, and other qualities

subvert their real counterparts. The respect of those we look up to is no longer earned through patient labor and attention to duty, but is a thing bought with wealth, undeserved. Trust ceases to be the result of years of dependability, consistent decency, and honesty, and is reduced to possessing a high limit credit card or hefty bank balance. People in and of themselves are no longer desirable; only those wearing proper fashions, owning the latest status symbols are "hot"(and in the US, carving the flesh with plastic surgery pursues this sick logic to its absurd end, with inflated breasts, lips, and other cartoonish grotesqueries). The human qualities that we rightly regard as the greatest virtues – kindness, generosity, helpfulness, those aspects of humanity that make community life desirable, are shrunk into pale shadows of their former selves.

Our inner lives are similarly mutilated. No amount of glitz and glitter can hide the grim solipsism of the future consumerism offers as an ideal – the mockery of “virtual-reality”, living in cyberspace, the Third World poisoned with toxic e-waste while First Worlders turn into isolated zombies. Real experiences in meaningful social interactions are ignored in favor of fake prepackaged replicas that require no risk, vulnerability, or effort.

This is the demonic bargain offered by materialism/consumerism; give up your humanity, and in return you'll receive a cozy life in a padded cage. No real creativity allowed(which might lead to dissent), but lots of mind deadening entertainment. No exciting experiences, but placid, predictable routine, interspersed with a few carefully planned moments of manufactured amusement and vacation.

You'll remain perpetually dissatisfied with your artificial reality, as is intended; you'll fill this gaping void with an endless stream of new, improved disposable toys and distractions. Their costs are just high enough to keep you in an endless cycle of piling up debt and working to pay it off, a wage slave gerbil on an exercise wheel of consumption. For the poor, they must suffer torment for their inability to participate in the game, trained to feel a gnawing hunger for unobtainable 'pleasures' which become more potent and enticing by their very inaccessibility.

An insane vision, superimposed on our social reality. Of course, true reality is constantly breaking through, revealing the fraudulence of consumerism. Being comfortable is not the same as being happy. Convenience is not a bringer of joy. The opposite is true. What is hard won is precious, what is gained through painful effort is prized. Our primal feelings remain unchanged, but are hidden beneath the social façade for ever cracking under the pressure of unfulfilled needs and desires.

This is what anarchism must attend to if it's to gain mainstream adherents, and a mass following – acknowledging our primal feelings, and giving them prominence and free rein. We are animals, first and foremost, and animal pleasures demand satisfaction, capable of overwhelming external controls. Sensual experience is a powerful motivator; nature's ultimate tool in promoting the behavior she desires – eating, mating, etc.

The fight to channel and chain primal feelings is an ancient one. Some of the earliest social battles were fought by elites determined to suppress the pleasure loving mystery cults. These mystery schools preached a doctrine of individual enlightenment, in which initiates learned of the immortality of the soul through direct experience, a mystical state of ecstasy brought on by hallucinogenic drugs and alcohol. The release of inhibitions during these rituals often led to sexual orgies, held in secret in wild places far from cities. Each of these elements was a slap in the face of materialism, and worked to weaken the power of elites.

The idea that each of us is an immortal being, responsible for our progress on a spiritual path runs

counter to the wishes of religious hierarchies. The powerful prefer you to submit to their authority, wanting you to receive crumbs of truth(as they see it) as a gift from religious superiors. Direct mystical experience, using drugs and alcohol must be forbidden as a dangerous practice that produces prophets, visionaries, and reformers.

The body also poses a grave danger to social order, and must be made a slave to the mind, for ever engaged in an internal war to ignore the fact we are physical beings in a physical world. Pure delight in sex must be suppressed, degraded, defiled, lest it blot out other concerns, and lead people to reject a daily grind of misery to purchase trivial baubles (in favor of fondling and pleasing each other's bodies, with brief breaks to get food).

Just as the wildness within must be caged, so too must the wild places be tamed. Our symbiotic relationship with nature must be crushed and replaced with a master-slave mentality. No awe of profound natural mysteries is permitted, no worship of sacred natural beauty is allowed; the landscape must be denuded of wildlife, brutalized and scarred for human profit. What pockets of wilderness are left are treated as parks for human enjoyment, their nonhuman inhabitants existing only by our consent, dependent on our whims.

This effort to subvert our natural desires and impulses continues to the present day. In opposition, the lifestyles and beliefs of indigenous peoples, and the revivals of mystery schools lead the way that anarchism must follow. An emphasis must be placed on live personal relationships, encouraging love and lust, pleasure and ecstasy, wildness and direct interaction with nature.

The authorities are deeply frightened by raves and musical festivals for this very reason – they awaken primal feelings, and combine many of these forbidden elements in an enticing way, as Bleu Martin reflected(in *On Behalf of the Barbarians*, Venomous Butterfly Publications), “what can bring forth the spontaneity of masses of young people?”. Whatever has the power to do this, has the power to overthrow the present order.

Anarchists can succeed in their goals, bringing their visions into reality, if they understand and apply the power of pleasure. Remind people through sensual experience that human interactions with each other and nature are the only things of lasting value. Enliven intellectual discussions with experiences that reveal social control as an illusion, and that free the spirit and body, as well as the mind. Reveal to young people via experiences how dead and horrific technical society has become, and how exhilarating and challenging a life without limits can be.

If these experiences can be widely shared, radical change – and a new social order, may at last emerge.