

Differentiationist anarchism

culture, meaning making, and post-capitalist labor

juniper cameryn

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popular topic of discourse among anti-capitalists, particularly anarchist anti-capitalists, is how a society could function without the coercive control of hierarchical structures of power.

A common argument one might encounter here is that human productivity and contribution to the collective is not solely reliant on monetary gain. People are called to contribute to intimate relationships, community, and greater society because of an internal drive, personal interest, or benefit. And while this is largely true, there is also a significant amount of hand waving done to dismiss the question of who would do the dirty work. Who would do the work that minds rotted by a class based frame of reference considers to be degrading, or which is just difficult and unpleasant?

I believe the cultural component here is one of great significance, and not one to be discounted. For the way we regard types of labor is highly classed and thusly associated with status and prestige, which is also deeply tied to ones sense of self and place within a community and society.

It is one thing to say and even to understand how the innate drives of individual humans coupled with a vast and diverse population would just statistically lead to *someone* getting these jobs done. It is something else to grapple with a reality in which coercive control would no longer a driving force, and yet the vestiges of a hierarchical capitalist society remain within our psyche, continuing to define our way of seeing ourselves, relating to the world, and giving shape to the inherent drive that propels us towards our contributions to greater society.

This connection between culture and psyche and the role it plays in the creation of a freer world was one of my underlying motivations for writing my manifesto, for articulating a branch of anarchism that concerns itself with the creation of culture: one that surpasses a dichotomy between individualism and collectivism to embrace both connection and service to the collective along with the needs of the individual to define oneself even as it may run in contrast to others. Fundamentally, the successful prefiguration of a world without hierarchy rests upon our ability to create a culture that balances the needs of the self with the needs of relationship to others- intimately in our close relationships, and more broadly as members of communities on the smallest scale of home and neighborhood to the largest scale of society.

Labor in our modern capitalist economy is deeply gendered, raced, and classed. One's ability to imagine oneself voluntarily taking on a task is tied to one's sense of self and place in society.

As a woman-socialized individual, one currently employed in the vocation of domestic and reproductive labor, I have found myself repeatedly astounded at my own internalized assumptions of how much I am responsible for the day to day maintenance of the most fundamental necessities of life. Coming from a childhood that floated through poverty, working class, and brief flirts with the middle class, there are ways this understanding has been shaped by those experiences. Namely, an understanding that in the ways that a higher class position allows, certain tasks can be outsourced, and conversely in lower positions, these tasks are simply things that must get done without much thought or question.

I have been frequently astounded by the lack of responsibility that man-socialized individuals, primarily cis men, have towards these domestic tasks. These revelations have further lead me to understand that there are ways that labor is raced that as a white person I will never fully see, or see at all without intentional probing and education into the experiences of communities of color, or as a non-immigrant the experiences of immigrant communities, etc.

The psychological impact that enculturation and positionality have upon our sense of responsibility, willingness to engage in certain modes of work, or even the ability to imagine ourselves performing such tasks is deeper than most of us can truly grapple with in ways that aren't shallow and artificial. To undo such enculturation takes months, years, decades, lifetimes and generations even. Perhaps most significantly, it requires a willingness to opt in to a new way of being, which as we are currently witnessing among the massive political gender divide of gen z, is a very serious matter with a strong undercurrent of violence, with a dangerous potential to breed fascistic sympathies.

I am an optimist however, and I believe that the human drive towards sovereignty will push us towards a fight at all costs for our freedom. I also believe that we are entering an age where old theories may no longer serve us to the same degree they once did, and it is more important than ever to observe the landscape and strategize accordingly. While I make no claims to having the best, most informed, or most effective strategy, I do know that influence and culture are some of the most crucial realms within which we must focus our fight if our goal is the complete eradication of all hierarchy.

One of the core concepts of Schnarchian theory of differentiation of self is meaningful endurance. It is the resilience one cultivates to tolerate pain and discomfort for a greater purpose. It is a process by which we create greater meaning out of life events. It contributes to a sense of purpose, identity, and self-esteem.

In the cultivation of a differentiation-based society, a cultural emphasis on the cultivation of meaningful endurance is a core pillar. This challenges what is, from my observation, a popular and naive regard in anarchist thought towards consent and it's implications. Namely, the popular feminist framing of consent as nothing less than an enthusiastic yes, the regard towards negotiation as an act of coercion.

This may be an unpopular sentiment or seemingly contradictory thing for an anarchist to express, but it is my belief that power negotiation is an inherent aspect of life in a world with finite resources and decisions that contain mutually exclusive end points. On the interpersonal level, this may mean one person desires a relationship with greater levels of intimacy, while the other feels more comfortable keeping a quiet distance. Perhaps a more practical real world scenario is a community with limited options for the generation of electricity that wishes to build a dam for hydropower, but it is on a river that is a water source for another community downstream.

Power is the capacity to act, to have an effect on the world, and power is something that is in constant negotiation in ways big and small, sometimes in ways so big they result in the infliction of violence for it's resolution, sometimes in ways so small we don't even notice it. For instance, even a casual and mundane agreement such as what to eat for dinner, how it will be prepared and paid for, is a power negotiation. You may not notice it for it's relative insignificance and amicable resolution, but the potential for conflict, the potential for demands of resources and energy remain as underlying components of such an interaction.

The necessary result of understanding the nature of power and inherent power negotiation on all levels of social life is a pretty radical shift in the understandings of both consent and coercion.

A feel-good, surface level analysis of a world without coercive control imagines a world of "if I don't want to, I won't." But the true realization of a world without coercive control imagines a world of "I may not want to, but a deeper current runs beneath this, and it demands a level of engagement that matches that depth." That is, we must create the cultural frameworks to be inherent within every one of us that can grapple with high stakes, that can withstand discomfort, that intentionally cultivates meaningful endurance.

We must, every one of us, understand that life itself by its very nature presents us with major challenges, and our navigation of these challenges must be among the most highly valued aspects of selfhood and place in society. For it is in the navigation of these challenges that we come to greater and greater definition of self, and greater and greater levels of differentiated connection, both of which are the building blocks of a free world and sustainable collaborations.

In this, we begin to break down those vestiges of hierarchical society within our psyche, in the intentional engagement with power negotiation from a place of differentiation. From a place where the personal integrity of the individual is the core unit of reference, and the personal integrity of the individual is shaped by a culture that deeply understands the importance of the balance between the defined, autonomous self, and a sense of connection to other, as they are both primal, inherent human needs.

One's ability to imagine oneself at all is stretched in such a context. We ask the question: who will do the dirty work? And we dissolve the idea that "if I don't want to I won't," in favor of "maybe I don't want to, maybe I am not driven to, but here I have the option to exercise meaningful endurance in this very concrete way." A spirit of collaboration and humility becomes a valuable avenue of growth and character building, and made all the more meaningful in thoughtful and thorough examination through the lens of differentiation – it is a choice made freely, outside of the context of coercive control. It is an exercise in the building and maintenance of self-esteem. We do not "have to," yet we choose to because we respect ourselves enough to have the integrity to choose the things we don't want because we have a higher intention in mind.

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