ANARCHISM, ACADEMIA, & THE AVANT-GARDE

AN ESSAY BY DAVID GRAEBER

WITH COMMENTARY FROM RADICAL SUNDAY SCHOOL

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An Introduction

A member of Radical Sunday School

The essay presented in this zine was very influential for at least one of the members of our collective. In their comments, you'll be able to see how they connect the ideas expressed to our practices at Radical Sunday School.

As someone who had a rosy, almost ridiculously naive view of academia, reality hit me pretty hard. Little by little, the pressures in my degree program got to me: first, there was the imposter syndrome, then came the future job insecurity and intense atmosphere of competition, and even after all of that, the part that really started to gnaw at me was the sinking feeling that something was very deeply wrong with the kind of learning I was supposed to be doing in the academy. The people around me were completely absorbed in little academic fights, and all the while, the real world outside was burning all around us, and no one said a word.

Even before I officially dropped out, I had already fallen in with a bit of the activist scene in Amsterdam, and got a first glimpse of anarchist politics in practice. The leftist scene here, like plenty of leftist scenes, really does revolve around university life. Students living in squats experiment with avant-garde art, everyone seems to be either working through a degree in political science, or English literature, or anthropology, or else they're one of those PhD students who've mastered the art of pretending to work, all the while spending their university paycheck on political refugees and vokus.

I don't remember when I first read "Anarchism, Academia, and the Avant-garde", but as you can imagine, as soon as I saw the name, I knew I needed to take a look at this essay (maybe you found it the same way?). I've rarely had an essay so easily put a name to my experiences, and in doing so, AAA helped me to make sense of what was wrong with this strange world I got into when I started my degree. As I got more and more involved with RSS, I found that AAA just kept giving, and many of the perspectives and arguments David brings up fit perfectly with the kinds of problems we've all been recognizing from our time not only in "higher education", but in all the communities that academia touches.

The essay, in typical David-Graeber-is-exploring-some-ideas fashion, drifts around across a number of different social settings, making interesting connections all the while. Probably the most useful contribution David makes here is the connection he sees between decision-making and learning practices: academic environments often tend to work just like Marxist sectarian fights, where people holding different ideas try to beat their opponents in intellectual combat in order to gain legitimacy. Both of these cultures structure their intellectual practices in this way, he argues, because both are interested in "winning the game", of seizing a kind of power. This leads him to explain why there aren't many anarchists working in academia: anarchist practices, like consensus-based decision-making, are fundamentally not interested in gaining power, but instead sharing it.

It's a shame the essay isn't longer, because he only briefly begins to ask what I think is the more interesting question: if the dominant academic practice is authoritarian, then what would anarchist learning practices look like? In many ways, this is the kind of question we've been trying to answer at Radical Sunday School every week.

About the essay, and the RSS commentary

Like any other zine, article, or book you pick up, this one comes from a specific context, and it's worth reminding ourselves of that. It didn't fall, fully formed and perfect, out of the sky.

First, we need to remember that this is just one version of the essay. David Graeber published a number of different essays with more or less the same content over the course of many years:
1) "Twilight of Vanguardism", published after a lecture in 2003
2) "The Twilight of Vanguardism" in "Possbilities", published in 2007
3) "Anarchism, Academia, and the Avant-garde", the version we've printed, published in 2009

Whichever version you pick, you're only getting part of an evolving story, with all the incomplete thoughts, unfinished fights with the editor, and author biases that were at play in that moment. It's only after it's written down that everything starts to look like it was intentional all along. I'm sure that if David Graeber were here, a decade and a half later, he'd say that he now disagrees with parts of this essay.

It's in that same spirit of "this is a work in progress" that I've written my own ideas throughout the essay. These do not represent the views of every member of Radical Sunday School, because nothing should presume to do that. Hell, by the time you read this, the ideas written down probably don't even represent me anymore!

Keeping all that in mind, I've tried to treat this zine like a conversation between me (highlighted in red), David Graeber, and whoever is reading this. I've pointed out parts of the essay that I think have influenced RSS the most, and if they can be helpful to anyone else trying to do anarchist education, then I'm happy. At the same time, the whole essay is great on its own. If you want to maybe read through it without our notes first, then go back a second time, go ahead. Or just read along with us. Whatever works for you.

As a final note, don't let this zine be just some interesting paper you read. There's enough of those floating around. We're not interested in clever conversations, we're interested in changing the world, which in part means letting ourselves be changed by the experiences we have. So let this essay be an invitation to change the person you are, so that you can go out and change the communities, the cultures, and the world you live in.

Anarchism, Academia, & the Avant-Garde

David Graeber

   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. 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.

> A few times at RSS, we've said that "leftists don't notice hierarchy when it's wearing tweed", but when you start to notice how big of a blindspot that is, it's shocking. We leftists will criticize everything from the concept of restaurants to the use of particular words, but you can count on one hand the public figures calling for the abolition of universities. It seems to me that the process David is describing here might give us a partial explanation of why this blindspot exists. Just as the rich are in an awful position to understand the lives of the poor, those who've "won" academic life tend to be awful at recognizing its structural issues. Without leftist intellectuals outside of the university system, we shouldn't expect to see too many useful critiques of academia floating around. And given how intellectualism has become more and more professionalized and concentrated in universities, the problem is only getting worse. (1)
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> Maybe a second cause for this blindspot is the way that dominant scientific practices still encourage us to view ourselves as completely disconnected from what we study. Graeber's idea of a "critical auto-ethnography" aside, if you study politics in a university you'll usually be encouraged to treat it like every other object of study: as something far away from you that you write papers about, rather than as part of your actual lived experience. Given how many people get into leftist politics by reading about it in university, the result isn't surprising: As we've seen in our own sessions, even quite politically-active university people often don't recognize themselves to be members of the working class.

(1) The book The Last Intellectuals by Russell Jacoby (though it certainly isn't perfect) looks at how this process took place in the US. I'd love to find a similar history about other countries.

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 anthropologists, 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.

> I think for many of us at Radical Sunday School, the description David gives here is uncomfortably familiar. At the beginning of every session, we try to remind ourselves and our visitors that if we want to take the project of anarchist learning seriously, we need to engage in a certain kind of "unlearning" as well: the societies we've all grown up in, and especially the kinds of educational environments that have so far defined us as learners, have taught us some pretty harmful behaviors. We've all been conditioned to see learning as a competitive sport, not a "common enterprise in pursuit of truth". Instead of trying to help each other grow, we often default to tearing each other down by pointing out little inaccuracies and "ways to be wrong". If for some reason you're having trouble imagining this, think about what tone of voice you hear when you read the words "um, actually..." out loud.
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> Within the collective, we've spent a lot of time and effort thinking about how we can try to nurture a healthier, more compassionate, and (we'd argue), more constructive approach to learning. In the end, we run our classes in a way that's similar to how anarchist-inspired activists run consensus-based decision-making meetings (2). While we don't attempt to reach consensus about the topics of our sessions, we do try to use a lot of the anti-hierarchical practices of consensus in our learning space. By insisting on practices like sitting in a circle, providing everyone equal time to speak (or not speak, if they choose), and actively encouraging everyone to connect our discussions to their own lived experience, we are trying to create the kind of intellectualism we want to see in the world.

(2) Take a look at Peter Gelderloos's Consensus for a good general discussion of these kinds of processes: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-gelderloos-consensus

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.

> In case you wanted a quote to back this up, here's Peter Kropotkin himself: "if some of us have contributed to some extent to the work of liberation of exploited mankind, it is because our ideas have been more or less the expression of the ideas that are germinating in the very depths of the masses of the people. The more I live, the more I am convinced that no truthful and useful social science, and no useful and truthful social action, is possible but the science which bases its conclusions, and the action which bases its acts, upon the thoughts and inspirations of the masses. All sociological classes and all social actions which do not do that must remain sterile" (3)

(3) Quoted in Christie & Meltzer's "The Floodgates of Anarchy", available at:
https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/stuart-christie-albert-meltzer-the-floodgates-of-anarchy

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.

This idea feels to me like a kind of organizing principle for Radical Sunday School. Despite what you might have come to believe growing up in our individualistic society, knowledge is something that communities develop together, not the kind of thing individuals create by themselves (4). I believe that by bringing people together in a space where they can learn from each other as equals (rather than competitors), we not only empower each individual in that space to better live their life as they wish, but as a group, we can create more (and more useful) knowledge than we ever would have been able to separately. Together, as the saying goes, we become greater than the sum of our parts.

But does this mean that as good anarchists, we need to stop referring to specific authors and instead say ridiculous things like "as the intellectual environment surrounding Michel Foucault once collectively influenced him to write..." --- Of course not!

I can think of at least one useful suggestion for making sense of the handful of individuals who happen to spend their time writing down their community's knowledge. Throughout the essay so far, David Graeber has been drawing a parallel between decision-making processes and knowledge-creating activities. If making a proposal in a decision-making meeting is kind of like proposing an idea in a research setting, then the problem is that we're treating people like Michel Foucault as *representatives* who can gain power by speaking for others. We can flip the script a little here if we instead try to think of people like Foucault (and David Graeber!) as *delegates*...

(4)   We talk a bit about this in our zine "How to Teach like an Anarchist" (available at radicalsundayschool.noblogs.org) but if you'd like to read more about "communities that know", we can recommend Sandra Harding's book on feminist philosophy of science, "Objectivity and Diversity". The whole book is good, but pages 169-174 talk about some of these ideas in more depth. The connection to anarchism is our contribution.

Many anarchists argue that if we have to engage in large-scale activities (like organizing an anarcho-syndicalist union or pulling off the massive city-wide actions of the alter-globalization movement), we need to find a useful balance between having everyone participate in every discussion (which would make for impractically large meetings) and having only a few people making decisions for everyone else (which is just how the world currently works!). One solution that's been proposed is "delegation" (5).

Collectives are made up of individuals who come together as equals to do some kind of activity. If a number of collectives want to come together as equals for some kind of larger activity, then each collective can choose one of their members as a "delegate" to talk with other delegates in a "delegate assembly". Importantly, delegates are not "representing" the collectives they come from, and they don't get any special decision-making power. The position of delegate is rotated between collective members, and delegates can be removed from their position as soon as their collective feels they are no longer behaving in their interests. They're only there to explain the views of the collective they come from, and later to report back the discussions of the assembly to their own group.

If we think of it this way, Michel Foucault wasn't some kind of superhero, brilliantly coming up with clever ideas about society, and more to the point, neither is David Graeber. In reality, both were people who spent a good deal of time in interesting environments (Foucault comes out of post-war leftist French academia, and Graeber learned a lot from being involved in the alter-globalization movement of the 90s and 00s). As a result, they have a lot to "report to us" about the views of the people they worked with, but none of this makes them deserving of extra power. Anyone put into the same environments and given the right kind of support could come to (more or less) the same conclusions.

As anarchists, it's important we don't fall into the habit of treating people we agree with as somehow uniquely better than the rest of us. Living in freedom, equality, and solidarity means focusing on providing *everyone* with the means to reach their fullest potential, because that's the only thing that separates us from the "heroes" we look up to. In the words of Ella Baker (look her up!): "You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders."

(5) If you want to read more about delegation, you can check out:
- Chapter 11 of Tom Wetzel's Overcoming Capitalism, where he talks about "delegate democracy" within the context of an anarcho-syndicalist strategy for revolution.
- "Making Decisions Amongst Assemblies" by James Herod gives a more critical view of the dangers of delegation: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/james-herod-making-decisions-amongst-assemblies

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 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 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."

Because most of us at Radical Sunday School are already too familiar with the practices of "academic warriors", we try our best to avoid these kinds of debate by asking everyone to focus on:

- how the topics we're discussing relate to everyone's lived experiences (often as well as what emotional impacts they have). If what we're talking about isn't able to connect to anyone's actual lives, then it's easy for it to turn into a game of "who can show they've read all the right books quicker?".
- how to make the knowledge we're producing actionable. If a particular discussion doesn't help us do anything to improve our lives, then we should take a second to ask ourselves why we're spending time on it in a session.

More than anything, the "odd knightly tournaments" of intellectual combat that David describes here look to me as just another expression of the impulse to dominate each other that hierarchical society has trained us in from an early age. Part of pulling off a social revolution means finding a way to unlearn the idea of learning as a battle, and replace it with the joy of growing together.

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.

Whenever we run a session of Radical Sunday School at some big event, like an anarchist bookfair or activism conference, we always get one or two people coming up to ask about when we'll be publishing our grand societal analysis, or if we're interested in becoming the propaganda arm of this or that organization. In a similar way, people who come to one of our sessions for the first time often seem to expect that we'll be able to give them definitive answers about the world, or worse, some kind of directions to follow!

We try to remind people (and ourselves) that learning is a long-term process, and the role of RSS is to raise questions, not to give answers. We're not experts, and we don't want to be experts. What we want is to create a place where all of us can come together to build our own knowledge, as we need it, in order to liberate ourselves and our communities.

As far as I'm concerned, we should follow that old anarchist slogan:
"No Gods, No Masters" has to also mean, "No Vanguard".

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 nineteenth 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.) .

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]

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.

Maybe projects like Radical Sunday School can be one place for people involved in various movements to try out the kind of auto-enthographical work David is talking about here. Certainly, a good number of the people who have seemed most interested in our collective are activists who want a place to reflect on the movements they're a part of. The constant feeling of emergency brought on by "fire brigade politics" can make taking time to reflect on strategy and tactics extremely difficult, so if we can provide a space for people in our movement to touch base with each other, we're happy to do so.

But this isn't the only role a free skool like RSS can play, and in fact, I think it shouldn't be. If all we ever do is reflect on ourselves as activists, we risk cutting ourselves off from the rest of society. I hope that by building actual, lasting ties to our local communities, supporting our neighbors in mutual aid, and becoming a part of local life, free skools can seriously contribute to the social revolution. If we can network with other social organizations (I'm thinking of trade unions, community centers, solidarity networks, etc), educationally-minded anarchists can build an alternative to the dominant educational system that's relevant to ordinary people's lives. Why should learning only happen in institutions that look like universities?

In the working-class neighborhoods of pre-revolutionary Spain, ordinary people could go to an *ateneo*, where they could learn from each other, get to know their neighbors, see a play or a musical performance, or just grab a drink (6).

The Nishnaabeg people of so-called Canada have a tradition of teaching each other through stories of non-human understandings of nature, and their own connection to the land. (7)

There's countless other examples of the many ways we can learn together. So why not start your own experiment in your own neighborhood? We're happy to help you, so send us an email. Together, we can all show people that learning doesn't have to mean "school", and the dominant educational system isn't the only way things can be. We can create in the here and now the kind of learning that we think reflects the kind of world we want to live in.

(6) If you want to read more about *ateneos*, you can check out:
• "Anarchist Counter Culture in Spain", by Zoe Baker, available at:
https://anarchozoe.com/2022/12/01/anarchist-counter-culture-in-spain/
• *Los ateneos libertarios en Espana (1931-1939)*, by Javier Navarro Navarro
(7) "Land as Pedagogy" by Leanne Simpson, available at:
https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22170/17985

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Notes

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

[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.

[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.

[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.

[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 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.

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 **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.."**   - DAVID GRAEBER