

Against Half-Assed Race and Class Theory and Practice

by Ken Wong

For all the talk of race and class consciousness within the anti-authoritarian milieu, one would have expected a multi-hued, culturally diverse tsunami of the repressed ready to wash away the old world by now. Unfortunately, the North American movement has caused only a few ripples of discontent, as it were, for years. Some of the people who would immediately benefit from a total insurrection treat the movement as if it were toilet water; some of the actions/inactions of the movement seem to have been conceived in the lavatory. The urge to be scatological in this critique is tangent to the absurdity of a mainly white and middle-class scene (yes, there are exceptions but not as dominant within or "visible" to those outside the scene) inspiring the poor and non-whites to rise up together in reclaiming life and liberty.

I do not claim to be perfect myself yet my perspective isn't as common within anti-authoritarian circles. I'm neither dark-skinned nor white. I have been through experiences that overlap middle-class and working-class conditions, and I know a diversity of people which probably wouldn't associate together (if only to exchange blows). I critique not for trivial, belligerent reasons but for practical results. Let's see theory and practice fused, not confused.

Before any practicality can come forth, at least five general obstacles need to be destroyed:

- (1) The compartmentalization of these abstractions, or psychic totems, called race and class, and their oppressive uses which are separated from the totality of everyday survival, which tends to supplant life and its possibilities;
- (2) The difficulty and/or refusal of sincere reevaluation, self-analysis, constructive criticism, and political discussion about race and class among white anarchists;
- (3) The lack of creativity and provocativeness used in dealing with racism and classism;
- (4) The obscurantism or confusionism of nationalism; and
- (5) The Spectacle's influence on race and class conditioning.

Fragmented approaches to dealing with the illusionary yet consensually-lived totality come from the obvious result of the totality's fragmentation of peoples' lives. Humanity is blackmailed into survival sickness or an economizing of life. People are systematically distracted from considering other possibilities as a result of this fragmentation, this separation from control over their lives both internally and externally. The connections are no longer apparent, or never were visible to begin with. Hierarchical organization, itself fragmented, reproduces with ease among those who aren't aggressively aware and fighting the authoritarian or specialist/managerial impulses encouraged in the current world. Hierarchical organization encourages a compartmentalized, reformist approach to oppression since to do a holistic, uncompromising assault would mean the end for would-be bosses and their older, more (in)famous counterparts. It is a common practice among the left to reduce the totality's oppression to ABC's of oppression. As a matter of convenience, it strips the dynamics

of one totality aspect, say racism, making it a "side issue" or yet another single issue "-ism" so actual cumbersome practical criticism can be avoided.

Perhaps the only strong, persistent black voice in North America among the still mainly white anarchist scene, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, critiques compartmentalization as well, adding, "This is reflected in their movements--almost all-white movements against 'fascism' or what they call racism, usually crude KKK/Nazi organizing. They never deal with institutional racism or the white supremacy differential in the quality of life in this country."

It is also convenient to compartmentalize oppression for social sub-cultural reasons. Naturally, people have the right to associate with whomever they desire. However, remaining in subcultural cliques with little or no interaction with the outside world beyond economic relations isn't going to spread liberation inside and outside the movement. If whites act only on oppression that they can immediately gain from (e.g. "cool" friends, sexual partners, travel, publicity, etc.) and exclude areas not rewarding enough or those challenging to their insulated scene, then movement implosion is inevitable. Regression policy of avoiding nonwhite, class conflict dynamics (and other "unhip" areas such as age and ableism matters) worsens by not sharing excitement, pleasure, adventure, and so on with those who really could benefit from anarchy; in other words, containing any fun (if any, judging by some moralist, workerist elements still within the movement) or qualities/perspectives that engage people in ways alien to state, capital, religion, media, etc. thus encouraging them to rise above survival and fight for their subjectivity and a new world.

There are many reasons why race and class are difficult subjects to discuss amongst white anti-authoritarians. I do not claim to know about each individual's past experiences or upbringing nor do I want to get bogged down in them when a present has yet to be made, but there are some general patterns occurring that need to be checked. From personal observation and the experiences of older non-white anarchists, the following can be found in the North American movement: differing definitions or confusion over what class is, patronizing practice, fear of class backgrounds revealed, fear of revealing racism or plain indifference, dogma that whites should only deal with other whites on race and class, cultural chauvinism, and the subliminal message that the movement is itself white.

Differing Definitions or Confusion

What is class? Class is an abstract way to separate and define people according to social and economic production roles--which are themselves based on non-concrete things like numbers, laws, morals, hierarchy, etc.--reinforcing peoples' repression (limiting and misdirecting peoples' full potential or

desires and needs that authority and economized life can't satisfy) and acceptance of any oppressors/manipulators and their system of organizing and interpreting life. Class has functioned this way for thousands of years. The advent of agriculture and patriarchy within the past 10,000 years, the Industrial Revolution within the past 200 years, and the current expansion of cyberspace and information processing were all imposed upon most people with accompanying class roles. Any anti-authoritarian defining class without reference to economic and social constriction/servitude is a confusionist or a reformist at heart ready to jump projects.

Patronizing Practice

Patronizing practice is worse than obvious verbal and physical abuse. Everyone knows where a Klansman or a Nazi stands on race but those who superficially extend a friendly hand to non-whites may also secretly wish to extend a fist when other Left ideologues aren't looking. The wishy-washy liberal stereotype of yesterday still has its terrible twin in vanguardism. Some white anarchists think they know how the entire black community feels, thinks, and what is best for them. These anarchists, living outside predominantly black urban areas and/or not seeing how class distinction divides blacks (or non-whites in general) into safely monitored, competing, and non-supportive sectors (e.g. suburban middle- to upper middle-class blacks and rich business people vs. inner-city and rural working-class and poor blacks) might be as moralist and workerist as any pathetic Leninist residue. All patronizing practice serves is the archaic ideological orthodoxy of the white organizers, giving them a good image to hide behind, shielding their internalized bigotry and encouraging them not to challenge themselves further.

Classism also pops up when vanguardists want to join unions and take industrial jobs to be one with the workers and recruit among them. This is a joke not only for the ideological orthodoxy, but the logic behind it is part of the problem. I would exhibit the same naïveté by trying to move into a housing project to recruit the downtrodden by offering them membership to some anarcho-syndicalist local chapter and some Class War T-shirts. This faulty logic presupposes you are superior and there is a monolithic working class in North America. Romanticization of workers is a one-sided affair. A lot of capitalist advertising and Socialist Realism art do the same glorification of workers' images to ensure that we slave for survival. Romance for survival is a fashion to burn, not a passion to unleash.

Again the tendency for some anarchists' vanguardism is for them to say they know everything about the workers' thoughts and feelings so they become their spokesmen (after all, most unions are male-dominated). The French surrealist Benjamin Perret and early 20th century council communist Rosa Luxemburg both expressed the need to transcend the unions so real generalized class emancipation can happen without bureaucrats and labor "reforms" to stop it. Though not as strong now, unions offer little worth saving that doesn't save both work and bureaucracy.

Fear of Revealing Class Backgrounds

It's a curious and burdensome guilt trip radicals take to hide class backgrounds. Like a dysfunctional pussycat spraying or

dumping on some other area outside the litterbox, these paranoids obsessively cover up their class backgrounds wherever they go while forgetting class society makes us all stink. Before hasty judgments and personal attacks fuck up any growth within ourselves and the movement, it should be remembered most radical theory came from formerly bourgeois or upper-class people such as Prince Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, Max Stirner, William S. Burroughs, Noam Chomsky, Valerie Solanas, etc., since they had more time and chances to develop theory than, say, miners, braceros, the homeless, and so on. Eventually their ideas somehow caught on with the working and poor classes for better or worse (as in Marxist and Bakuninist ideologues for the latter). Guilt has no place among people who want to cut through religious/moral dogma, or so they claim. If someone is actively challenging authority, the Spectacle, the totality and the existing impoverished conditions through words and actions without being manipulative and careerist, then they deserve support as they seek negation of the old world. Although class background influences how one views the world, where one is now and where one wants to go is more important. We are still prostitutes after all until economics, money, and work are abolished.

Fear of Revealing Racism or Plain Indifference

Whites' fear of revealing racism or plain indifference among other white anti-authoritarians (and especially non-whites inside and outside their scenes) is another way of closing communication. This fear can and does manifest itself in silence about racism within the milieu, diverting race discussions that delve into white skin privilege to reductionist responses (i.e. there are no differences in oppression between black and white workers) and generalizing cop-outs (i.e. how violent and bigoted blacks can get, too). This dynamic creates circumstances where white radicals commit "crimes against humanity," the following of which is an incomplete list:

- Not talking about nor interacting with other people besides their neighborhood ethnic groups...
- Not socializing with non-whites who challenge them on race and class, especially older people.
- Treating all non-whites with extra politeness instead of honestly expressing themselves even if certain non-whites are really irritating and/or violating others.
- Letting nonwhite anti-authoritarians deal with other non-whites outside the milieu instead of sharing tasks or supporting them.
- Excluding and/or limiting new non-whites' movement input in social and formal discussions, merely keeping tokenism.
- Guilt about having only white and/or middle-class friends. Not wanting to learn about other races' cultures, especially the heretical, dissident movements and aspects.
- Indifference to the need to reach out for racial and cultural diversity.
- The myth that all whites have the same privileges (e.g. Appalachian poor, elderly street people, institutionalized and isolated kids and adults, the whites in dropout communities, etc.)...

Dogma that Whites Should Deal Only with Other Whites

Whites should deal with only whites if they are the only race on the planet. Unfortunately, there are still pseudo-opposition organizations acting on this Maoist influenced misconception which makes them look "correct" while avoiding actual liberating interaction and stimulating dialogue with "people of color". I mean going beyond petitioning for state reforms, recruiting for bureaucratic organizations, and not encouraging a total radical analysis and dialogue that challenges peoples' complacency and hopelessness with consensus reality under capitalism. These activists might as well be on another planet.

Class and race are multi-faceted myths demanding multi-faceted approaches; there are ways to confront race and class without condescension nor manipulation between anti-authoritarians and the social environments. Again these approaches require abandoning white guilt/class guilt as well as the following presumptions:

- that non-whites of all classes are going react hostile to sincere, consistent communication;
- that non-whites of all classes are in separate organizations or voluntary associations to deal with "their issues" and don't need white interaction;
- that listening to what others need means one must impose needs on them;
- that one can only provide for the needs the state and the churches provide already (or compensate for their deficiencies);
- and that non-whites and any lower class groups aren't interested in "impractical" desires, imagination, play, and adventure.

Cultural Chauvinism

Cultural chauvinism reflected by some white anti-authoritarians/anarchists condemns, avoids, and/or constantly ridicules other nonwhite, non-radical or "unhip" cultural expression. While we all have our tastes, it is easy to generalize about other cultures where we may be absent or not fully represented. The motor of capitalism runs on our alienation; cultural chauvinism is one exhaust byproduct.

Capitalism or economics divides expression into art, entertainment, religion, science, and education commodities, thereby recuperating what were once shared immediate experiences among all people, what once had dangerous elements threatening Control (i.e. healthy risk-taking, subversion, spontaneity, self realization, etc.), and what once was unmeasurable or free-roaming. Another deadly effect of Spectacular recuperation is market-driven mediocrity. This mediocrity reflects itself in generations of youth music subcultures factionalism, more subdivided now, which keeps any true discontent from maturing into a total revolutionary consciousness. Instead, competing subcultures divert this crucial negativity into fashion, cliques, "cutting edge" spectacles like Lollapalooza and virtual reality, confused anti-authoritarian rage sprinkled with homophobia, misogyny, nationalism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, religious reaction, etc. The '60s counterculture's greatest mistake, among many, was to play into capitalist operation modes causing the speeding up of recuperation that breeds more fragmented subcultures and the fact that anything and everyone can now be marketed as rebellious or revolutionary. Culture is something to passively consume with chauvinism acting as a sort of supermarket taste-test between Brand A and Brand B cultures. Blind cultural chauvinism among white anti-authoritarians is still the superiority of money and alienation over that of free expression and real choices.

Messages that the Movement is Itself White

Finally, there is a subliminal or unconscious message sent out of whiteness and perhaps privilege by the North American movement that isn't specifically some indifferent group's fault but involves a variety of factors. One factor is the way formal network meetings, discussions, and presentations are conducted (the dynamics, the in-references, cliques, atmosphere, etc.). Another factor finds information not accessible to nonwhite and lower-class daily experiences or culture isn't balanced out with material, classes, and so forth (e.g. eco-sabotage books are nice but irrelevant to someone poor in the city with a family to

support). Many people in general use computers today. However, the convenience of computer networking is still largely a white and/or middle-class privilege (calling for more unmediated traveling and interaction with those whose potential is being paved over by the information superhighway). Anarchist organizations seem to offer more for other anarchist organizations than the social environment at times.

The lack of creativity, the lack of provocativeness in fighting racism and classism guarantees boredom, alienation, and fear will always win even if a few bigots wise up. The typical responses to racism, for example, are Spectacular and half-assed: either cooperating with the State security forces, bureaucrats, clergy, and other moral mercenaries in anti-hate group/anti-hate crime programs and petitions which preserve state, capital, and the contradictory mass character structure at the root of racism; or beating up Nazis, Klansmen, fascist skinheads, etc. without addressing inner racism and, for example, what Lorenzo Ervin was quoted as saying at the beginning of this article. None of these approaches gives amazing incentives to the organized bigots to change (the pigs use laws and violence everyday so why should anti-authoritarians?). They also drain energy from potential radicals (including those activists who were half-assed for decades) following uptight Leftist crowd monitors and fragmented goals that conspire with the authorities to keep real insurrection and debate about the totality from erupting. Instead, bigots must be challenged to confront their own sexual and emotional dysfunctionality. The masses must in turn confront their own general fear of freedom and its responsibilities. The rewards of recovering healthy sexual expression and other pleasure, the importance of imagination, conviviality, subjectivity, and harmonized community, the end of archaic roles, etc. are better incentives. What about a sense of humor? After all, oppressed people such as blacks and Jews endured as long as they have because of their ability to laugh back at life and themselves. Ideology is a killing joke, killing ludic energy.

Nationalism and "Identity Politics"

The final word on nationalism was by Fredy Perlman, *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, which is required reading for all serious but not sober anti-authoritarians. Nationalism is still embraced by many out of desperation. The oppressed cling to nationalism's flag because other prospects become bleaker. The culture of the ancestors was destroyed, therefore by pragmatic standards its failed. Nationalism appeals to those who have lost real community and the ability to experience pleasure. Fear and alienation unite all colors and classes by giving them a false sense of community. False community is held together by the fear of "others:" foreigners, minorities, faggots, etc.

Nationalism says people should admire murderous rulers of their same ethnic group, the ancestral kings and queens that proudly built empires off forced slave labor, with few of the slaves permitted to be kings and queens. Contrary to popular belief, there are Africans, Germans, Jews, poor and working-class, Iraqis, etc. who are against this affinity with bosses. Some of these people are within the anti-authoritarian movement and others are doubting nationalism outside. Two examples: Some black youth interviewed on CNN after riots in

Bensonhurst, New York said that their riot was a matter of fighting the police, not the Jews. During the so-called Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq, a number of the Kurdish nationalist leaders were attacked. Their corruption and their effort to limit the rebellion to just "Kurdistan" earned them justified hatred.

The Spectacle robs people of radical subjectivity by selling back "lifestyles." "Identity politics" are one such consumer illusion. The awareness of complex interconnections from the past struggles within color, sexual, and gender dimensions against Control fragmented as more compromises were accepted after many '60s and early '70s radicals suffered losses, became bureaucratic, and generally became disillusioned. A respect for differences but a simultaneous awareness of how it all fits into the totality was severed, allowing ideologues, businesspeople, and specialization to latch onto discontent like fleas. In addition, many now divided and confused people end up competing for equal submission to the forces which reinforce our misery: work, moralism, police protection, censorship, etc. A glorification of victimization without encouraging self-empowerment (i.e. without ideologues) or representation in a "minority" demographic market (for example, the racial demographics of radio and TV programming and advertising) are two rewards of equal submission.

Identity politics uses the language of Control which denies that people can be in several conditions or perceived multi-dimensionally all at once thereby making all firm categories futile in the end. Whenever one makes a truth into ideology one can expect to be burdened and crushed as a routine. One can look at the ideology of patriotism for peoples' "authentic" birthlands with all the bigotry and genocide that competing patriots engage in to justify their proud ideologies for obvious evidence. Race and class stereotypes and reformist roles both serve the Spectacle through their dual loyalty; they have the appearance of being adversarial but they work together. Let's say one group of people are stereotyped as lazy and criminal by either another oppressed group or the puppets serving Control or both. The stereotyped groups will produce some or many people trying to fight this stereotype (whether or not this stereotype is "positive" or negative is irrelevant as this process cuts both ways) by assimilating roles proven useful, or loyal, to the authorities, the marketplace, the appearances of a false unity, etc.

Any definition of one's self has to be careful to avoid reinforcing the socio-political and psychological framework that most people, including many radicals, accept as true which is in fact the framework in need of creative destruction.

Improving Race and Class Theory and Practice

Despite all of the aforementioned problems, the necessity for radical currents and the rest of the population to cross-pollinate is still vital. There are no reasons why people should abandon

demanding the impossible since those demands are the only ones left worth making; there are no excuses for making conditions within our own control within the movement into impossible demands. Demands such as the abolition of work and money are what all humanity can strive for, but who would really care about a bunch of messed-up revolutionaries and their organizations? If you care enough to not spend the rest of your life living up to a bad joke marching around in circles while the rest of the world walks on by, if you really think life can be much more than survival on the installment plan, and want to change things, then begin with yourself! Realize the movement should grow with you or else it becomes part of the problem.

Here are a few ideas to run with and add to your own on improving race and class theory and practice (in no particular order):

- Develop, mass reproduce, and disseminate propaganda which challenges the myths of race and class (and other categories) among the movement and among the general population--especially the dispossessed. Neal Keating's excellent essay "What Is Race?" in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, issue 37, is a model example. Race is shown to be genetically based on skin color variation which unlike longer-lasting evolutionary changes (e.g. development of the spine) can change every generation, meaning 2 people of different color can fuck and breed, producing offspring which always destroy any attempt to contain variation as theoretical racial types. Culturally, race takes ancient differentiation and status, social desires and alienation, and filters them through market-based economics and 18th century Enlightenment theories.
- Pirate radio with accent on creative, culturally diverse and multi-racial programming. Try to broadcast into areas of mixed ethnic and class backgrounds as well as areas that are less diverse, but also allow for outside interaction (phone calls? mail?).
- "Field trips" into different areas of race and class not normally encountered by white anti-authoritarians and others with some people familiar with these areas and the people living there. Do not invade as tourists. Creative interaction is a goal. Some immediatist art projects could be adapted to these travels, such as theme potlucks and potlaches. A good chance to network but avoid vanguardism.
- If there are organized bigots coming around, then plan a festival in the grand tradition of the European Anarchist circuses to offset their grim, rigid hate-mongering. This suggestion is not to be confused with the liberal, patriotic, "ignore-them-and-they'll-go-away" approaches that pass for festivals which have occurred across town from the Klan rallies in various cities at various times. Ideally, these festivals should be pulled off in the vicinity, if not in the very presence of the bigots' own hate-fests. Show cultural diversity and general public subjective harmony (not tokenism or sexism) through conviviality, pleasure, public creation, spontaneity while disseminating information exposing all ideology, nationalism and bigotry for what they aren't. Use tactics to make organized bigots get laughed at (e.g. raid examples from the 3 Stooges, the Marx Brothers and Monty Python) when confrontation happens. Don't play into the expectations of the cops and the bigots. Get Wild. No crowd monitors.
- Study groups among white and nonwhite anti-authoritarians with emphasis on forgotten people, heretical and dissident aspects of other cultures.
- Psychic nomadism or rootless cosmopolitanism, meaning one is not confined to one culture nor one time period, as a way to avoid consensus reality conditioning including race and class ideology, cultural chauvinism, and nationalism. Living through various centuries and cultures by appropriating from them whatever suits one's desires, tastes, whims, and imagination. Avoid New Age commodity fetishism, crypto-fascism; have knowledge and respect for elements used.