

On the radical virtues of being left alone; deconstructing Staudenmaier

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The Unoriginality Argument

The first thing a critic does who can't deal with the content of what s/he is criticizing is to try to show that it isn't original. Like the argument that worker's self-management is more efficient at production than private ownership, this argument relies exclusively on capitalist criteria (innovation being seen as the sure road to success). So like most critics who show little desire to understand their targets, Peter Staudenmaier (PS) first attacks post-left anarchy (PLA) by asserting that it isn't original — even though nobody says it is. In fact, like anarchism itself, it can be seen as an attempt to provide a (more or less) coherent theoretical framework for, and a description of, a tendency already being expressed. The neo-Platformists are fond of quoting the authors of the Platform when the latter said that anarchism didn't spring forth from the minds of great thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin, but rather was their objective analysis of contemporary class struggles. Clearly the anarchic impulse can be seen in many rebellions and writings that predate the moment when Proudhon proudly proclaimed himself an anarchist. So too it is with the discussions that make up PLA. We are merely trying to make the argument that this impulse against conformity, polarized dualities, centralization, bureaucratism, nationalism, the cult of personality (etc.), have been a part of anarchist theory and practice from the beginning (and probably existed before as well). The urge to distance anarchism from the authoritarian nature of leftism was already strong by the time Marx and Engels were able to design and execute the expulsion of Bakunin and most of his fans from the First International.

The Bad Faith Argument

PS's proof for the unoriginality of PLA is that it resembles the critiques of — horror of horrors — leftists! Camatte, Castoriadis, and the various theorists attached to the Frankfurt School are cited as major (perhaps he would have preferred to say exclusive) influences on what he sees as the core components of PLA. But since he has only a rudimentary and bad faith understanding of PLA (in that he isn't really interested in debating its proponents — as can be seen by his insulting and evasive allegations), he cannot hope to have a comprehensive grasp on its influences. He links these leftists to PLA as if this were some secret he has discovered and can therefore proudly expose, hoping that the whole PLA house of cards will come tumbling down. PS smugly points out the leftist pedigree of this constellation of thinkers as if PLAs wanted to remove any possible connection with any leftist at any time, as if the PLA discourse were called "anti-left" or "non-left" anarchism (another bad faith, and I would go so far as to say dishonest, slur intended to prove that PLA is actually a right-wing phenomenon — more about that below). The "post" in PLA clearly means that leftists have influenced PLAs, and that we recognize that anarchism has an undisputed leftist genealogy — but it is the aim of PLA to move anarchist theory and practice beyond those limits.

I would venture to guess that most who consider themselves PLAs or who are interested in PLA have at least heard of or know something about Camatte, Castoriadis, Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno, et al. I have read some of their works, just as I have read material by lots of other non-anarchists (like Reich, Foucault, Debord, Memmi among others), who have influenced me, and whose writings have spurred me on to deeper analyses of various topics. I would say that the aspects of leftist thought and practice that bothered most or all of those authors enough to critique them from the inside (as it were) are the same kinds of things that (do and should) bother PLAs as well. Is PS trying to say that since PLAs have been influenced to different degrees by leftist thinkers, that therefore PLAs cannot declare themselves “post” left?

The Straw Man Argument

The next ploy is to fabricate positions not held by any of his targets. To be generous to PS, perhaps some of his allegations are true; but we’d never know it because he never says who holds such positions, denying everyone the possibility of either agreeing with or refuting him.

The first allegation is that “post-leftism adamantly rejects any accommodation with what it takes to be ‘the left.’” Not to be too much of a smart-ass, but “post-leftism” doesn’t do anything — post-leftists do. In any case, which post-leftists reject “any accommodation” with the left? What does “accommodation” look like, and then, what does its rejection look like?

PS is unsatisfied with the configuration of the left that has been offered by post-leftists, complaining that the term “itself seems to expand or contract to fit the circumstances.” This is a neat rhetorical trick, perhaps, but one that remains unconvincing. Here’s what I have said in two different places:

“...the Left includes council communism, Leninism, social democracy, certain kinds of liberalism, and various other aspects of reined-in capitalism”
(from a letter sent to the British periodical *Total Liberty*, and published in *Black Badger* #4, 2000)

“The Left has consistently been identified with the international labor movement from the time of the First International; with the shift of focus from western Europe toward Russia beginning in 1917 and continuing into the 1960s, leftists have identified themselves in relation to events that occurred in the workers’ paradise... The leftist agenda is predicated on the use of legislation, representative government and all of its coercive institutions, centralized economic planning by technocrats and other experts, and a commitment to hierarchical social relations.”

(from “Don’t Let the Left(overs) Ruin Your Appetite,” *Anarchy* magazine #48 Fall/Winter 1999–2000)

While PS can't be held responsible for not reading the first (Black Badger has only limited distribution), the second excerpt comes from the issue of Anarchy that tried to initiate this discussion; the words on the cover — in big red letters — say "Post-Left Anarchy!" One might think that PS, as an aspiring critic of the trend, might have wanted to read the four essays that started this whole thing. Sadly, we'll never know if he did, since he never cites any of those authors, let alone their essays.

PS further complains: "Many anarchists drawn to the post-left label appear to live in a world in which all leftists are Leninists, except when they're liberals, and where the left as a whole is an ominous iceberg of power-worship threatening to sink a virtually Titanic-sized anarchist movement." Who says that all leftists are Leninists? Not me, as can be seen from the two quotes above (and since, as will be seen later, PS knows who I am, he can hardly be let off the hook for overlooking what I've written in places besides the internet). Leninists are a subset of leftism, as are (left) liberals. Who remains? Social democrats? Who else? PS never tells us.

PLAs can perhaps be faulted for tending to ignore the full spectrum of what usually gets called the left but why should the champions of the left avoid it? Maybe PS should tell us what the left is, so we can determine if we agree with his determination.

The left is certainly larger than all the anarchists (of whatever tendency) put together. Where does PS get the idea that PLAs think of the anarchist movement as huge? Regardless of the relative sizes of each tendency, however, leftists have proven over the past hundred years (in places as diverse as Mexico, Russia, China, Spain, Cuba) their homicidal predisposition when dealing with anarchists. "Ominous"? "Power-worship[ing]"? Indeed. Given the historical facts, why shouldn't they be so considered?

PS then avers, "the anarchist movement is...a current that still has much to learn from other radical tendencies and social movements." Who says anything different? As already mentioned, I have learned plenty from non-anarchist radical thinkers, and I expect to do more of that in the future. But I know where I won't be looking: in the history and theories of Leninism and liberalism and social democracy. Education is a process of learning what is useful as well as what is pernicious; what I have learned from mainstream leftism I consider not useful for promoting any kind of anarchy. This is my educated opinion and analysis. PS offers nothing to dissuade me from these conclusions.

Other straw man slurs include the following: "A few post-left anarchists go so far as to extol the right-wing tendencies within anarchism as a healthy corrective..." Just who these post-left anarchists might be, or what right-wing tendencies they extol, remains a complete mystery. Then there's the old stand-by of the right-wing canard: "Post-left anarchists would do well to examine the history of this foolish slogan before adopting it into their repertoire." What slogan? "Neither left nor right," which is yet another example of PS's fake concerns. No post-left anarchist I know of uses this slogan for the simple reason that this tendency is called "post-left," not "post-right" (the only place that I've seen it is in the subscription ad for this journal — and it's an ad, not

a manifesto.) In fact, there's nothing in the post-left anarchist discussions that can be put within the realm of right-wing politics.

As I wrote to a comrade in Black Badger #5 (2002):

"I have a few things to say about this Beyond Left and Right bullshit. The reason that post-left anarchists (at least some of my pals and me) say that we're post-left is that we acknowledge that anarchism has been historically considered part of the revolutionary left. No serious anarchist would ever say that anarchism has to be post-right... Anarchists are not 'beyond the right' because we've never been part of it. Those 'third position' nitwits are trying to be clever and shrewd, and their success among anarchists is only an indication of how desperately weak the 'third position' is and how stupid anarchists can be."

Mixed in with these straw man attacks, however, PS does include one tantalizing sentence, but unfortunately he follows it up with as little evidence as anywhere else in his tirade. He says: "...there are important libertarian and anti-statist strands within the left." I've heard that too, and I even know some people who call themselves anti-state or left communists who are easy to get along with, and with whom I have begun to collaborate on a more serious basis. But what strands and which theorists are PS talking about? We'll never know.

Getting Personal with a Straw Man

PS writes, "some of these post-leftists carry the ideal of rugged individualism to the point of self-parody, declaring that in the liberated future, nobody will ever have to associate with people they don't personally like. One of them summed up the post-left stance by saying simply 'I want to be left alone,' free of all annoying attachments of social life, without other people interjecting their own opinions or offering critical comments on each other's behavior." Talk about a straw man — and I should know, because he's talking about me!

First of all, I don't call myself an individualist (rugged or not) because for most people both within and outside the anarchist scene, "individualist" is usually taken to mean someone who is in favor of private property, which I am not. Being suspicious of conformity masquerading behind calls for unity, I do tend to favor the individual in relation to groups — but not necessarily at the expense of the group. I also recognize that there are plenty of times when there's no tension at all. If my preferences put me within the generally understood category of "individualist" I won't deny it, but this usage is ahistorical.

Second, what (if anything) does not wanting to associate with people whom one may not like have to do with individualism? Can PS not conceive of any left anarchist whose opinions are substantially similar to his own, but whose personality is so obnoxious that

he would prefer never to have to be in the same room with her/him? Finding others unappealing may have something to do with individual taste, but it has precious little to do with any historically accurate understanding of individualism.

I suppose a quick reminder of a basic anarchist principle is on order here: voluntary association. PS's invocation of "free association," which "encourages exploration and mutual recognition, including critical contestation of what other people say and do" is quite a nice explanation of it. But, as usual, there's something missing. Not only does voluntary association mean that people have the ability to collaborate with others in a freely chosen manner, but it also means that people have the ability not to associate with others. Is PS implying that anarchists should be compelled to associate with anyone and everyone who wants to associate with them?

Next, we come to the issue of quotations. I did in fact say that part of my political vision could be summed up with the phrase "I want to be left alone." But PS puts my quote in a bizarre context. I wasn't trying to sum up "the post-left stance," but merely my personal preference in terms of not wanting to be told by some committee or other group what I must or mustn't do, and with whom (I seem to remember that my statement came quickly after the issue of not wanting to be forced to associate with someone I didn't like). This has nothing to do with whether or not my vision is post-leftist or not. I consider such a sentiment to be a corollary of voluntary association. If PS's left anarchist vision includes a mandate not to leave me alone (what ever happened to the ability of a minority to secede?), then what makes his vision different from other non-anarchist leftist visions?

In terms of criticizing certain behavior, that depends. If some behavior is being engaged in by a self-proclaimed anarchist and goes against anarchist principles, then I'd consider it an anarchist responsibility to call that behavior into question. But that certainly doesn't — and shouldn't — apply to all behavior. Frivolous criticism is both unwanted and unwarranted; criticism from people one respects looks and sounds a lot different from criticism from people who are nosy and annoying. Is PS implying that anarchists have an open-ended imperative to interfere in the lives of others?

Finally we come to the really interesting part of his allegation, which is that "being left alone" really means that I want to be free of all social interactions. Thankfully for PS, he didn't put that part in quotation marks — because I have never said anything even remotely similar. This is his fantasy about what "being left alone" means to me. Being left alone is not the same as being isolated or disconnected, as just about anyone who understands English should understand. "Being left alone" does not equal being alone.

Rejecting Subjectivity or, The Straw Man Disappears in a Puff of Smoke

“Though the promoters of these notions strenuously deny it...” PS here asserts that what he’s about to allege is denied by his targets. Not only does he dismiss these denials out of hand, he also doesn’t care that they are made in the first place. Either way, PS is asserting that he knows best what’s really going on, regardless of the fact that his targets (the promoters — whoever they are — and their notions) are fantasies. The refusal and rejection of what others say about themselves is one of the defining characteristics of authoritarians of all stripes. By stating that he knows what is objectively true for others, PS puts himself in league with other leftists, to be sure, but he also has thrown in his lot with just about every arrogant authoritarian know-it-all who ever imposed their power and ideology on anyone else.

I will say it clearly: my attitude does not reject “the very possibility of communal existence.” I live with my partner and our dog; I co-facilitate a weekly anarchist study group; I co-organize an annual anarchist theory conference; I collaborate on the editorial decisions of this journal; I have had (and plan to continue to have) occupations where I have to engage regularly with plenty of people — almost none of them anarchists or radicals of any kind. And I almost always enjoy these diverse communal interactions. Unless PS wishes to alter the definition of “communal” to fit his other fantasies, my life is overflowing with such things. I will also gladly declare the following: I do not believe that “all social structures are inherently oppressive.” I don’t know any anarchist who actually says or believes that. Does PS know of any anarchist who believes it — let alone anyone who has written it? We won’t know because, once again, he doesn’t tell us.

“[S]haring the world with other people means that sometimes we can’t do exactly what we want to do, and sometimes we will need to cooperate with people we don’t like very much.” This is certainly true, and I would never deny it. But acknowledging that this is true and demanding that we must cooperate with people we don’t like, or celebrating that we can’t always do exactly what we would prefer, is two different things. PS, in his condemnation of my desire to be left alone, clearly implies that I should be forced to interact with people I dislike, and that I should also be forced to submit to the will of others. Negotiation is the key, based on respect and solidarity — neither of which can be imposed if they are to have any authentic meaning. There have been plenty of times in my life when I have interacted with people who annoy me, and there have been plenty of occasions when I have submitted to others’ desires, but I’ll be damned if I will allow myself to be forced to do so by PS and people like him.

What PS refers to as a “false promise” I would call a “false position.” Who proclaims the desire for “absolute individual autonomy”? Nobody I know among anarchists. PS is correct that such a strange concoction is “indebted to those classical liberal principles

that underwrite capitalist society...” What anarchist says anything else? Who are these phantoms who continue to swirl in and around the mind of PS?

He then touts “a positive conception of social freedom, a kind of freedom that flourishes in cooperation with others and demands equality as its necessary counterpart, a kind of freedom that is embodied in anti-authoritarian social structures and cooperative social practices.” Sounds great; I don’t deny the possibility for such things to occur. I have my own imagination to draw from to fill in the gaps in this scenario, but since they come out of my imagination, I can’t be certain about any of them or about their effectiveness in promoting freedom or equality. Maybe PS knows of some positive examples. But just as he never gives us any examples of people who hold the alleged positions he complains about, he also never gives us any hint about what these particular structures might be or look like, or what these particular practices might entail. We have nothing by which to assess the accuracy of his claims. This, like much of the rest of his complaint, is a dodge built on smoke and mirrors. Not only does he refuse to provide examples, but he also doesn’t bother to explain how such structures can be kept free of bureaucratism or coercive force to compel individuals and groups to accept them or cooperate with them. Nobody, apparently, is allowed to question any of the assumptions that lead him to these conclusions — he says it, he believes it, it is self-evident, and that’s it. Arguments based on common sense and self-evident conclusions aren’t — and shouldn’t be — convincing.

Guilt by (False) Association

In one of PS’s lowest moments, he slanders PLA as a haven for potential right-wingers. “...anarchist militants have sometimes found a comfortable home on the extreme right end of the spectrum. Although post-left anarchists often dismiss such cases as either isolated or irrelevant, the record of anarchist crossover into far right terrain is in fact remarkably long.” In all the reading and writing I’ve done on post-left anarchy, I have never mentioned this phenomenon, let alone tried to dismiss it. I have remarked on the unfortunate tendency of some Italian syndicalists in the 1920s and ‘30s to dive into fascist politics, but not within the context of talking about the virtues of having a post-left analysis. The people he trots out (and it’s not even clear that Sorel or White were ever actually any kind of anarchist — I can’t say anything about Bartsch or Southgate since I’ve never heard of either of them) as examples of this unfortunate trend obviously found something lacking in anarchism, and I would argue that when they veered off into reactionary politics, they just as quickly stopped being anarchists. Is PS saying that these right-wingers retained their anarchist credentials after abandoning anarchism? What have their anarchist contemporaries said about that? Once again, we’ll never know.

What could be more interesting for the purposes of assessing the relevance of a post-left analysis would be tracking the “crossover” of anarchists into Leninism and

Stalinism. We could begin with Robert Minor, Mao, Arshinov, Serge, and countless others — and I would wager that this list is at least equal to PS’s anarchist-to-rightist list. What would we learn from examining that particular phenomenon? About as much as from examining the right-wing “crossovers”: not much. People change; we cannot necessarily draw any conclusions about the strength or weakness of their later convictions by looking at those they held earlier. And it would definitely be odd to draw any conclusions at all about the political philosophies themselves based on the twists and turns of the allegiances of individual anarchists through time. If the majority of anarchists became either fascists or Leninists, then there might be something to say, but my sense is that the majority of anarchists remain self-identified anarchists — even if their understanding of anarchism changes. Perhaps the only realistic conclusion that can be made is that those anarchists who “crossed over” were always more authoritarian than either they or their erstwhile comrades were aware. And that, of course, has nothing to do with any kind of anarchism at all.

On Spots, Both Tight and Blind

“The project of creating such a society [of solidarity and self-management] will require cooperation with a broad range of oppositional movements, many of whom have solid grounds for refraining from a wholehearted embrace of anarchist doctrine.” I’m all for cooperation with anyone who promotes and supports anti-statist and non-hierarchical self-organization. Some who do are certainly not anarchists; why should anarchists expect otherwise, since anarchists can claim neither the invention nor sole proprietorship of such ideas. But the difficult questions to answer about “cooperation” (much like the similarly thorny issue of organization) are what kind? and with whom? If PS’s “cooperation” with (presumably leftist) non-anarchists looks like it has all through the troubled history of the interactions between leftists and anarchists, then I will remain steadfastly suspicious of it, if not outright opposed to it. This century and a half of “cooperation” has looked almost exclusively like the complete political subordination and active marginalization of anarchists, often with the requirement of the abandonment of anarchist principles, and occasionally including the dispensing of murderous rage. Such “cooperation” has definitely put anarchists in tight spots historically. PS complains about “the blind spots in the anarchist tradition”; his own particular blind spots have to do with this history of real anarchists.

In a revolutionary situation (if the history of such events is any indication), it will be necessary for people from many varieties of political traditions to collaborate with each other. If anarchists are interested in propelling revolutionary actions into the realm of authentic liberation and freedom, we must remain dedicated to our principles, come what may. This includes a refusal to cooperate with any state or government. Too often, politicians (that is, those who are interested in exercising some kind of power) disguised as revolutionaries or anarchists have managed to hoodwink other anarchists

into abandoning our principles with the excuses of efficiency and/or expediency. Too often, these same people have steered anarchists into the most unlikely collaborations with statist of all leftist varieties in the name of Unity or fighting The Greater Enemy. Has the anarchist project of liberation and freedom come any closer to fruition as a result of these notable examples of cooperation? I am forced to wonder: are any of the 20th century examples cited earlier considered by PS to be among “the blind spots” that must be overcome or “the mistakes of the past” that anarchists must leave behind?

PS not only refuses to acknowledge any of these troubling aspects of his calls for “cooperation,” but he also refuses to acknowledge that post-left anarchy “is not a single entity.” He’s sad that PLAs don’t acknowledge the “extremely heterogeneous spectrum” of leftism, but he never offers any corrective examples — he only repeats that it exists. He never offers any convincing arguments for why anarchists should remain within the historically bankrupt tradition of state capitalism, welfare statism, and other forms of tinkering with the state.

This Is What Cooperation Looks Like

“Anarchists are working toward a society where everyone who wants to can participate in social affairs on an equal footing.” This statement might be more convincing if this “equal footing” were accepted by left anarchists who maintain that all anarchists — in order to be considered anarchists in the first place — must be leftists; those of us who identify to one degree or another with the PLA discourse should be approached on this “equal footing” or it’s just a slogan with no meaning. Further, it might be more convincing if left anarchists were to demand that this equality be put into practice when cooperating with (or sucking up to) authoritarians instead of being content to be the utopian (and therefore easily dismissible) conscience of the left.

Cooperation between anarchists and non-anarchists might be more attractive to anarchists of all tendencies if the non-anarchists were to adapt themselves and their methods to some of our principles for a change. Some typically anarchist tactics have been introduced to non-anarchists over the years, and have even been used by them on occasion. Non-hierarchical decision-making, mutual aid, direct action, collaborative groups based on political affinity — all these things have been discussed and used by various activists, from the anti-nuclear movement of the ‘70s to the contemporary anti-globalization movement. Many of these activists might be surprised — even horrified — to learn about the origins of these tactics within anarchist theory and practice. These tactics are used because they work well in many circumstances, but non-anarchists would certainly abandon them quickly whenever it appears that the success of an action or a campaign is at stake.

I, for one, would demand a stubborn adherence to, and thorough application of, these principles as a pre-condition for cooperation with anyone, including other anarchists; if leftists or other non-anarchists wish to join in a project with these parameters,

then I'm happy to cooperate with them. In that case, radical, even revolutionary, cooperation will finally be implemented on anarchist terms. The history of the unfortunate attempts at unity between leftists and anarchists is littered with the corpses of anarchists. Plenty of anarchists have thought the false promises of unity were worth dying for — I'm more interested in the possibilities of non-hierarchical cooperation based on genuine solidarity. That's a future worth living for.

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