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One of the first lessons to be learned upon entering the world of radical politics is that the craving for power is not exclusive to tribal warlords and right-wing politicians. Indeed, much of what passes for left-wing organizing today is driven by the same impulses towards tyranny, conquest, and domination that characterize the world's most odious systems of mass enslavement. This pattern is evident in the centralized, hierarchical forms adopted by many anti-capitalist sects; however, the seeds are planted on a deeper level, in a mode of self-consciousness that fosters authoritarian practices by reducing political life to a manipulative struggle for power and strategic advantage.

A cynical observer might trace this authoritarian tendency to an instinctive mechanism rooted in the biological nature of the human species – a competitive impulse, an aggressive drive, a congenital will to power. But such explanations have less to do with science than with a secret wish to absolve humanity's guilt for creating an unlivable world – while at the same time furnishing a universal excuse for our ongoing complicity in the

disaster. After all, if the will to power can be construed as an inviolable force of nature, then the need to strive for alternative forms of government can be discarded as illusory. This dead-end style of argument might be acceptable to those who yearn for reconciliation with the current order, but to the rest of us it will seem like a diagnosis with no cure. In any case, such arguments collapse under the weight of self-criticism, and by reminding ourselves that the will to power – unlike, say, gravity – is something that human beings can *decide not to exercise*, we take the first step towards bringing its operations into the sphere of collective agency.

Still, among many on the anti-capitalist left, belief in the omnipresence of power remains an unacknowledged foundation for political thought and action. Every project of social transformation, regardless of its self-declared motives, is treated as an attempt to elevate, advance, or otherwise alter the standing of a particular class of human subjects within a field of power relations. For traditional Marxists, the relevant subjects constitute the mythical *working class*, and the desired modification of power is whatever enables this class to wrest authority and wealth away from the capitalist rulers. Less orthodox theorists, by contrast, view this economic antagonism as one element within a wider constellation of struggles, in which power is contested on a multiplicity of fronts, by a multiplicity of subjects, with a multiplicity of weapons, under a multiplicity of flags and banners.

In breaking with Marxist orthodoxy, this latter tendency gains the advantages of analytical comprehensiveness and tactical flexibility. The mode of engagement called for in a particular situation might be micro-political or macro-political; it might involve acts of direct confrontation or acts of coordinated desertion; it might be carried out through individual sabotage or through periodic mass mobilization; it might unfold on the battleground of discursive control or on the plane of regimented bodily discipline. However, these strengths do

in cooperative networks of mutual aid and solidarity, we gain the ability to cultivate a revolutionary way of life without fear of repression, starvation, or despair.

Within the soul of the individual, the culture of self-creation begins with a spirit of *radical critique* – a spirit in which the individual relates to herself, and takes possession of herself, through the act of differentiating her own nature from the nature of everything around her. By engaging her inalienable power to think, she enacts and refines the autonomous force of her own unique character and negates those aspects of the world that do not pass its test. She constitutes herself as an autonomous being – a being whose value is determined only from the inside, only through the exercise of her own creative capacities. As she proceeds in this way, she cultivates an attitude of *engaged openness to the world* – to its meanings, its lessons, and its possibilities – and thereby ensures that her life will be determined by no force outside her own path of self-creation. By maintaining this critical self-possession she arms herself against any tyrannical gods or masters that would bind her to an extrinsic authority. She is thus able to maintain absolute freedom in the face of violence, conformity, and domination – all in such a way, and with such an intensity, that when she associates with other individuals on the basis of these common practices, an ungovernable revolutionary culture is born.

ready present in the individual's ability to find a path, to step back from her habitual involvement in the world and ask herself where she is, how she got there, and where she is going. The alternative to this self-critical attitude is a life of quiet desperation – a life in which we carry on without taking an interest in our own characters, the characters of our neighbors, or the character of the world in general. A person who lives without taking responsibility for what is his own, without caring for himself or making himself at home in the world, becomes nothing more than a slave to false authorities and false values. If such a person goes to work and receives a paycheck, then, sheep-like, he accepts the payment as a measure of his individual worth. If he is asked by the President to drop bombs on faraway nations, or pay taxes that will subsidize those bombs, he pounds his chest and immediately complies. If he receives orders not to cross the state-boundary, or transgress the official police barricade, he obeys cheerfully and without question. All of us are reduced to this condition of slavery at some time, but the condition cannot be enforced without our voluntary or unconscious submission. We can put an end to our enslavement by inventing practices in which our refusal to obey becomes the vehicle for our own diverse projects of creative self-valorization. A practice of self-valorization can be simple or sophisticated; it can be a spontaneous form of counter-conduct or counter-discipline that affirms our indomitable singularity in the face of power and exploitation; it can be an unpremeditated spiritual exercise in which the individual resists the material forces of self-dispossession and actively constitutes himself as the sovereign ruler of his own destiny. Workers' self-management, general strikes, self-sustaining local technology, community skill-sharing, military desertion, civil disobedience, creation of autonomous zones, renunciation of citizenship, experiments in absolute democracy: all of these practices can be undertaken in the spirit of radical self-mastery, self-valorization, and self-creation. When these practices are rooted

not immunize post-Marxist politics against the same insidious power-fetishism that afflicts traditional Marxism – in which the human capacity for critical thought is diverted from its essential calling as a vehicle of spiritual self-orientation and reduced to a mere instrument of classification and conquest. The result is a theoretical choice between a passive, eschatological pseudo-science (or a passive, 'critical' pseudo-science; the implications are the same) in which the ultimate meaning of History is deciphered by a vanguard of heroic intellectuals, and a panoptic mode of analysis in which the fissured totality of power is mapped from the standpoint of a dislocated spectator.

Both of these enterprises are infected with a paralyzing logic of reification, in which *the established order of power* is treated as a solid, independent reality, while all political agency is displaced onto an objectified class of revolutionary subjects. This fosters a dissociated condition in which theory is fundamentally estranged from the living experience of political struggle. Thought no longer springs from the individual's ecstatic need to "question while she walks," but is reduced to an exercise of frozen simulation in which walking is impossible. Meanwhile, spontaneous attempts to create common values, or common arts of living, are ignored or thrown by the wayside.[1] Anyone who recognizes the need for *a self-conscious commitment to human freedom* in forging a path of *collective praxis* is dismissed as dreadfully utopian or hopelessly naïve. As a matter of unspoken consensus, the prophetic labor of experimental self-creation is banished from the realm of politics in favor of a warlike geography of power, in which self-ordained Generals plot strategic moves within a hypostatized field of power-relations.

It would be easy, and certainly in line with the current fashion for intellectual hero-worship, to accuse these fetishistic thinkers of betraying the wisdom of their masters, most no-

[1]Here sectarian fulminations against so-called "lifestyle anarchism" only

tably Marx and Foucault; but, alas, the much greater indignity lies in their debasement of the revolutionary life itself, and in their attempts to obscure the relationship between ethical commitment and the everyday practice of political experimentation. An old anarchist dictum reminds us that in giving birth to a new world our success will depend on keeping our chosen means commensurate with the desired ends. This ground-level teaching is an apposite starting-point for our attempt to think beyond the contemporary obsession with power. For as long as our professed moral "ends" are regarded as distant goals to be reached through a manipulation of the established order of reality, an incongruous variety of "means" can be deployed under the guise of bringing those goals nearer to realization. At no point in this process is there an honest confrontation with the essential meaning of political life. At no point do we take up the radical project of determining our own nature as human beings, our own character as a "we." The anarchist's instinctive distrust of this warlike style of thinking arises not from a beautiful-souled wish to conserve the purity of abstract moral ideals, but from the commonsense realization that human ends which are continually deferred to a mythic future cannot be actualized as part of a common way of life in the present.

One way to realize the full wisdom of this anarchist teaching is to contemplate the phrase "desired ends." The philosopher John Stuart Mill, in the context of his own ethical reflections, wrote that "the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it."[2] Mill's academic interpreters still wring their hands over the logical niceties of this statement, but in doing so they lose their grip

serve to conceal what is at stake in the question of common values. Reasoned contempt for neo-dandyist campaigns to reduce politics to subcultural style does not justify abandoning the Bakunian standpoint of absolute liberty. Unconventional sartorial habit is one thing; creating the values that will determine the direction of our common life is quite another.

[2] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Hackett, 1979, p. 34.

dom. The very idea of a state-instituted, corporate-managed framework for public discussion is alien to the possibility of free and open experimentation among self-governing individuals. The historical attempt to confine this practice of experimentation to the realm of "civil society" is itself rooted in the violent enforcement of private property and the surrender of decision-making power into the hands of centralized bureaucracies. Now the question inevitably arises: How can any society pursue a project of radical self-criticism when its central institutions are built on the foundations of economic exploitation, political specialization, and social hierarchy? How can any of us speak of "consensus" and "recognition" when the very form of subjectivity that defines public life is infected with false authority and false value at every level of its constitution? These are questions for which the bourgeois tradition of political philosophy – with its authoritarian belief in *rationality* as the basis for *rule* – can provide no answer.

A culture of anarchic self-creation would begin by putting an end to all of this – not only through the invention of radically self-governing political and economic forms, but through techniques of communal experimentation, arts of individual self-expression, and pursuits of democratic beauty as the animus for a collective art of living. To say that a *culture of the self* is essential to overcoming the dominant cult of power is to say that our everyday submission to false authority and false value is inseparable from our spiritual tendency towards *self-renunciation*. The ultimate nihilistic expression of this tendency is a generalized condition of self-dispossession – dispossession of individual desires, dispossession of individual creative powers, dispossession of responsibility for deciding who we are – and this condition is the starting point of "politics" as practiced by the heirs of modern political theory.

Conversion to a path of self-valorization begins with the suppressed possibilities contained within our existing way of life; the initial movement towards an *examination of the self* is al-

not yet understand, and whose grip on our souls we have not yet overcome.

Freeing ourselves from this misery is neither an easy nor an instantaneous task, but the necessary starting point is clear enough. Instead of serving power through a mindless renunciation of our creative capacities, we should stand up for ourselves and *think*: Who am I? What are my cares and desires? What is the measure of my value as an individual? To what extent does the world depend on my thoughts and actions? Critical thinking is our sharpest weapon in the struggle to imagine the world anew – for it is the only weapon that enables us *to be born again without first being destroyed.*

This brings us back to the need for a utopian culture of the self – and to the demand for a fundamental break with the norms of bourgeois civil society. Traditional bourgeois notions of consensus and mutual recognition can be useful when backed up by unconstrained democratic practice, but their ideological function is to presuppose as already-constituted a political community that exists only in the experimental process of creating itself. At each step in this process, it is necessary to ask oneself *who it is* that is willing to consent, *who it is* that presents herself as recognizable; it cannot be assumed that this 'someone' is the obedient subject of modern political theory, a "rational," law-abiding citizen endowed by tacit contract with inalienable rights and liberties. Neither can it be assumed that the established political institutions of rich industrialized "democracies" – with their borders, laws, and regimes of police discipline – will accommodate a globalized culture of radical self-creation. As long as institutionalized mechanisms of hierarchy, theft, and militarization are allowed to intervene in the process of democratic self-creation, there can be no genuine autonomy in the "public sphere." This is not simply a reminder of the billions of subjugated people who have been systematically excluded from public life over the years; they do not need to bow before any Constitution in order to claim their free-

on a profound insight into the nature of ethical commitment. Committing ourselves to a moral ideal is not a matter of professing belief in the validity of an abstract rule or principle, but of spontaneously enacting and embodying that ideal in our engagement with the concrete situations of life. Our standards are valuable only insofar as we *stand up* for them, take possession of them, convert them into the materials for our self-critical experiment in living. Only through this endless practice of valuing, choosing, and desiring is our vision of human perfection transformed into reality; only through our continual striving and affirmation does the highest ethical ideal become the ground upon which we forge our path to a truly ethical society.

This infinite labor of willing, imagining, and desiring is the *spiritual praxis* through which the community of revolutionary agents creates itself in the flesh. The starting-point for this labor is not a determinate empirical class whose boundaries could be demarcated through an analysis of objective social conditions. It is a not-yet community whose engagement springs from a common desire to create and re-create itself experimentally through the self-critical participation of its members. It is a community that has no fixed identity, because it reveals itself only *from the inside*, through its own work of autonomous self-creation. It is a community that has no ideology, because its only law is a passionate love of liberty, and its only authority is the boundless emancipatory power of the human imagination. It is a community that has no past or present, because it is by nature *a movement*, an experiential work-in-progress. It is a community that has no limits, because it travels the path of absolute freedom, and dissolves all barriers by walking steadfastly into the horizons of the unknown.

All of this might sound rather romantic, and the idea of a not-yet community might seem no better than a vaguely prophetic abstraction. But in fact this spirit of democratic self-imagination marks a fundamental departure from the prevail-

ing schools of revolutionary thought, and its implications are far-reaching. It is difficult to grasp the magnitude of these implications, burdened as we are by the ossifying assumptions of modern political ideology. But the need for a fundamental shift in our orientation to revolutionary practice becomes clear when we examine the Marxist-Leninist notion of communist revolution. To begin with, this conception of revolution is the picture of an *isolated event in time*.[3] Various strategic steps must be taken in preparation for the event; others will be called for when it has finally come to pass. Yet what matters above all is the single dramatic moment of revolutionary upheaval: the expropriation of the means of production by the working class and the transfer of property into the hands of the proletarian state. And of course, this dialectical drama will be carried out at the designated time by the objectively determinable working class, acting under the enlightened guidance of a cadre of party intellectuals.

Simply put, it is the duty of the revolutionary party to tell the working class what to do, and when. The intellectuals who comprise the leadership of the party are uniquely qualified for this job, for they alone have ascended to the privileged standpoint of total knowledge.[4] They alone are equipped to know

[3] I will not address the claim, which still echoes in certain circles, that "Marxist science" has discovered strict socio-economic laws and is therefore capable of predicting the future development of capitalist civilization. Any theory that claims advance-knowledge of what a society of human beings will do ignores the capacity of those human beings to determine the conditions of their own future. Even if knowledge of social and economic systems is bound to play a part in shaping our path of self-determination (as is undoubtedly the case), the work of *politics* begins when we ask ourselves how this, or any other knowledge we might possess, will help us constitute ourselves as a self-creating political community. Any perspective on human life that ignores the necessary priority of human freedom to all the results of scientific knowledge is more akin to fortune-telling than to political theory.

[4] Perhaps the most sophisticated version of this idea comes from Lukács (*History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA, 1971, p. 27): "It is not

immigrants, or children who encounter low-intensity, banalized violence in every aspect of their daily lives. They may be poor inhabitants of rich countries who are thrown into constant struggle against the indignities of capitalism and imperial power. Or, they may be corporate executives and white privileged sons of senators whose quest for supremacy transforms them into monsters and reduces their life to an anonymous rank within the commodified global system. All of these experiences are characteristic of a world in which the individual human being relates to herself not as the self-imagining practitioner of freedom, but as a docile creature submerged within a *reified order of mass authority and classification*. Even where a direct confrontation with suffering is *least* in evidence – even in those harmonious regions of life where a critical attitude seems *least* appropriate – the reifying logic of power threatens to impose itself in the form of linguistic tropes, patterns of attention, and habits of valuation that breed human misery by subordinating the individual to a false order of identity and normalization.

Meanwhile, this estrangement and mystification of our souls blinds us to possibilities that exceed the dominant spectrum of human experience. Our desperate will for survival – inverted and expressed as a vertiginous fear of freedom – keeps us locked into ritualized cycles of behavior that reinforce our condition of enslavement, in part by hiding the sources of our acquiescence in this miserable condition. Our dormancy amidst the destructiveness of everyday life leaves us imprisoned in a counterfeit world that does not reflect our own authorship. We sacrifice our freedom on the altar of power, relinquish our sovereignty to the idol of reification. Our lives degenerate into patterns of mindless submission; our creative energies give way to paroxysms of dislocation and despair. And yet these circumstances are not simply imposed on us from the outside; they come from within us, from a part of ourselves that we do

in addressing the problems of power and exploitation, is not only a certain way of relating to the external world, or of interacting with one's fellow human beings, but also and especially *a certain way of relating to oneself*.

Seen in this light, the *creative nexus* of power lies not in the material-symbolic space constituted by the practical relations among human beings – not in the realm traditionally conceived as the stage or herding-ground of political action – but in the alienated, disoriented self-consciousness of the individual agent. More specifically, it is in the individual's anxious, semi-conscious experience of himself as *an other*, as an objectified value or commodity, that the operations of power are expressed through the medium of his individual subjectivity. In his condition of self-estrangement and self-projection, he becomes a classifiable possession of the externalized power-image. He is no longer an intrinsic possession of his own imagining self, no longer the movement of his own self-creation, the boundless opening of his freedom-to-live – for he is imprisoned within a fetishized world that is alien to his own spontaneous thoughts and desires.

Such an individual experiences himself as subjugated or incapacitated – but this does not mean that his body is shackled in iron chains, or that he has lost all ability to lead a healthy and satisfied existence. The most horrifying manifestations of power are indeed those in which extreme human suffering is at stake – outright torture and imprisonment, militaristic violence, mass poverty and starvation, death by preventable disease – but in general the effects of our incapacitation are obscure to us, hygienically removed from the scenes of our domesticated life-world. The barbaric mechanisms of selection and exploitation in which we are constantly implicated, the cruelty and predation concealed within our everyday routines – all of these horrors are perceived only dimly, through a phantasmagoric membrane of idle chatter and spectacular mediation. The faceless individuals we pass on the street may be women,

which social conditions are to blame for human servitude and alienation, which classes must contribute to the struggle for liberation, when the capitalist system will reach the point of irreparable crisis, how that crisis will be overcome through the emergence of a workers' state, how that state will eventually whither away, etc. In short, the party holds complete knowledge of the strategic landscape of History; it knows which practical measures the revolution will require, how those measures should be carried out, by whom, why, and when.

This "revolutionary" formula is a recipe for disaster, and no individual with a spark of liberty in her bones would ever dream of taking it seriously. Yet it is typical of the bureaucratic-authoritarian outlook that pervades modern political institutions, and its logic is replicated in the managerial, power-building ethic that defines "revolution" for many on the Left today. The 'authoritarianism' exemplified in this ethic is not reducible to the belief that the revolutionary party must seize state-power and establish a "dictatorship of the proletariat." Much like the absurd image of the party-intellectual, the ambition to rule and discipline the masses through the state-apparatus is *merely symptomatic* of a perverted relation between *revolutionary theory* and *revolutionary practice* – and, more generally, between *theoretical thought* and the *determination of human destiny*. The impulse that leads the Marxist intellectual to posit an Absolute point of view is *the same impulse* that leads him to claim a unique authority in deciding how the political order should be constituted. It is this conception of theoretical thought as a source of *absolute knowledge about what must be done* that threatens to cut off radical experimentation and reduce political inquiry to a conversation about how society should be governed, and by whom.

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the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between bourgeois and Marxist thought, but the point of view of totality."

It is essential for those who aspire to this position of God-like authority to propagate the belief that human relations are saturated with power. Otherwise, how would the rest of us know that the protection of the rulers is necessary for our survival? The fantasy of an Absolute point of view aids in this manipulation by fostering the illusion that hierarchical power is a function of superior vision and understanding, thereby legitimizing the formation of a specialized class of political experts. At the level of the modern bureaucratic nation-state, this legitimation takes the form of a ruling-managerial elite whose wisdom is seen as indispensable to the flourishing of the helpless population; on the smaller scale of the Marxist sect, it is the authority of the spokesperson or intellectual leader that is viewed as essential. Both of these forms of organization are based on the assumption that *the imposition of political power is inevitable*, that we must find somebody to decide our fate, and so it had better be the leader who possesses sacred knowledge about which social order is the right one.[5]

Of course, there is no such thing as the "standpoint of the whole" – or rather, if there is such a thing, nobody enjoys greater access to it than anybody else. Most importantly, it is not through the authorization of a knowing subject that a political way of life is *proven to be desirable* – as if by ascending to the mountaintop of knowledge one could obtain a list of supreme commandments about how society must be constituted. No – it is only through the common desiring of individuals that a political experiment proves itself to be valuable, and the ultimate challenge of revolution is to give birth to a community that lives and sustains itself by the authority of this democratic desire. This means that what is desirable for "us" will always be an open question, a question for endless

[5] A similar logic is found in the growing sector of non-profit organizations, where the intense professionalization and managerial training of activists endows them with specialized coordinator status.

experimentation, and that no theoretical judgment will determine the correct blueprint for collective action. Keeping the question of how to live perpetually open means maintaining a constant vigilance over any authority that would impose its will on the self-determining freedom of the individual. The exercise of this self-determination involves a ruthless criticism of every manifestation of power, a transvaluation of every false standard, a sabotage of every system of exploitation – together with a value-creating practice of freedom in which each individual puts herself forward as a law and currency unto herself.

Such a critical-affirmative way of living can be developed only through the growth of a *spontaneous culture of individual self-mastery and self-creation.* Without the cultivation of concrete practices of self-mastery, the impulse to wield mastery over others, or to imprison oneself in a state of voluntary servitude, becomes an imminent threat. This might seem an odd starting point for a path that seeks to overcome collective enslavement. Domination and exploitation are usually described in terms of systems of social organization and regimes of social practice; the very concept of *power* refers to a process that is intrinsically relational, whose operations become fully explicit only at the level of socially constituted forms of behavior. But in fact it is the *individual agent*, the human being as both *subject of power* and *subject of freedom*, who must bear all responsibility for the ill-constitution of the social order – for only the individual is called upon, in each situation, to determine the ultimate meaning of the world he inhabits. Diagnosing the sicknesses of power through an analysis of *forms of social mediation* is thus a worthwhile exercise only insofar as it bears directly on the world-transforming capabilities of free individuals. And yet it is these very individuals – no longer in their capacity as thinking agents, but in their *incapacity* as subjects conditioned by power – *through* whom these deranged social forms are constituted, and *within* whom their implicit logic of domination is inscribed. What must be understood, therefore,