
THE TWILIGHT OF VANGUARDISM

David Graeber

For most of a century now, revolutionary thinkers have been saying that the age of vanguardism is over. Outside of a handful of tiny sectarian groups, it is almost impossible to find radical intellectuals who seriously believe that their role should be to determine the correct historical analysis of the world situation, so as to lead the masses along in the one true revolutionary direction. But (rather like the idea of progress, to which it is obviously connected), it seems much easier to renounce the principle than to shake the accompanying habits of thought. Vanguardist, even sectarian, attitudes have become so ingrained in academic radicalism it is hard to say what it would mean to think outside them.

The depth of the problem first really struck me when I first became acquainted with the consensus modes of decision-making employed in North American anarchist and anarchist-inspired political movements. This, I realised, bore a lot of similarities to the style of political decision-making current where I had done my anthropological fieldwork in rural Madagascar. 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 organised in conscious opposition to the style of organisation and debate typical of classical sectarian Marxist groups. These groups invariably organise around some master theoretician, who offers a comprehensive analysis of the world situation and, often, of human history as a whole, but very little theoretical reflection on more immediate questions of organisation and practice. Anarchist-inspired groups, by contrast, 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 anarchist 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 emerges from the style of debate encouraged by consensus decision-making : where voting

encourages one to reduce 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.

Why so Few Anarchists in the Academy ?

As I have learned from experience, established academic practices are largely the opposite of these anarchist practices. And while I still believe that the growing prevalence of these new, and to my mind far healthier, modes of discourse among activists will have its effects on the academy, it is hard to deny that so far the change has been very slow in coming. Why so few anarchists in the academy ?

One might argue this is because anarchism itself has made such small inroads into the academy. As a political philosophy, anarchism is going through a veritable explosion in recent years. Anarchist or anarchist-inspired movements are growing everywhere; anarchist principles — autonomy, voluntary association, self-organisation, mutual aid, direct democracy — have become the basis for organising within the globalisation movement and beyond, taking the place Marxism had in the social movements of the sixties. As the core revolutionary ideology, it is the source of ideas and inspiration; even those who do not consider themselves anarchists feel they have to define themselves in relation to it. Yet this has found almost no reflection in academic discourse. Most academics seem to have only the vaguest idea what anarchism is even about; or dismiss it with the crudest stereotypes (“anarchist *organisation* ! but is that not a contradiction in terms ?”) In the US — and I do not think it is all that different elsewhere — there are thousands of academic Marxists of one sort or another, but hardly anyone who is willing to openly call herself an anarchist.

I do not think this is just because the academy is behind the times. Marxism has always had an affinity with the academy that anarchism never will. Anarchism was never really invented by anyone. True, historians usually treat it as if it were, constructing the history of anarchism as if it is basically a creature identical to Marxism : it was created by specific 19th century thinkers, perhaps Godwin or Stirner, but definitely Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin; it inspired working-class organisations, and became enmeshed in political struggles. But, in fact, the analogy is rather strained. First of all, the 19th century thinkers generally credited with inventing anarchism did not think of themselves as having invented anything particularly new. The basic principles of anarchism — self-organisation, voluntary association, mutual aid — are as old as humanity. Similarly, the rejection of the State and of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination (anarchism literally means ‘without rulers’), even the assumption that all these forms are somehow related and reinforce each other, was hardly some startlingly new 19th century doctrine; one can find evidence of people making similar arguments throughout history. We are talking less about a body of theory than about an *attitude*, or perhaps even a faith : a rejection of certain types of social relation, a confidence that certain others are much better ones on which to build a decent or humane society, a faith that it would be possible to do so.

One need only compare the historical schools of Marxism and anarchism, then, to see 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. Note how the list starts with heads of state and grades almost seamlessly into French professors. Pierre Bourdieu 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 academic game that intellectuals insist on continuing to employ Great Man theories. Yet, for instance, 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 cafes, classrooms, bedrooms, barber shops, involving thousands of people inside and outside the academy (or Party), but always as if they arose from a single man's genius. It is not quite that Marxist politics organised itself like an academic discipline or became a model for how radical intellectuals treated one another; rather, the two developed somewhat in tandem.

Schools of anarchism, in contrast, emerged from some kind of organisational principle or form of practice : Anarcho-Syndicalists and Anarcho-Communists, Insurrectionists and Platformists, Co-operativists, Individualists, and so on. (Significantly, those few Marxist tendencies that are not named after individuals, like Autonomism or Council Communism, are the closest to anarchism). Anarchists are distinguished by what they do, and how they organise 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 ? (which anarchists consider something for the 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, or at what point organisation stops 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 ? When is it okay to break a window ?

One might sum it up like this : 1) Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy; 2) Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice.

Now, this does imply that there are a lot of potential complementarities between the two, and indeed there have been. One could easily imagine a systematic division of labour in which Marxists critique the political economy, but stay out of organising, and anarchists handle the day-to-day organising, but defer to Marxists on questions of abstract theory; ie., in which Marxists explain why the economic crash in Argentina occurred and the anarchists deal with what to do about it. (I also should point out that I am aware I am being a bit hypocritical here by indulging in some of the same sort of sectarian reasoning I am otherwise critiquing : there are schools of Marxism which are far more open-minded and tolerant, and democratically organised, as there are anarchist

groups which are insanely sectarian.) This also makes it easier to understand why there are so few anarchists in the academy. Anarchism is primarily an ethics of practice; and it insists, before anything else, that ones means must be consonant with ones ends; one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means; that as much as possible, one must embody the society one wishes to create. This does not square very well with operating within universities that still have an essentially medieval social structure, presenting papers at conferences in expensive hotels, and doing intellectual battle in language no one who has not spent at least two or three years in grad school would ever hope to be able to understand.

All this does not, of course, mean that anarchist theory is impossible — though it does suggest that a *single* Anarchist High Theory in the style of university radicalism might be a contradiction in terms. One could imagine a body of theory that presumes and indeed values a diversity of sometimes incommensurable perspectives in much the same way that anarchist decision-making process does, but which nonetheless organises them around a presumption of shared commitments. But clearly, it would also have to self-consciously reject any trace of vanguardism; which leads to the question : if the role of revolutionary intellectuals is not to form an elite that can arrive at the correct strategic analyses and then lead the masses, what precisely is it ? This is an area where I think anthropology is particularly well positioned to help. And not only because most actual, self-governing communities, non-market economies, and other radical alternatives have been mainly studied by anthropologists; also, because the practice of ethnography provides at least something of a model, an incipient model, of how non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice might work. 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 makes sense in ways that they are not themselves completely aware of. One obvious role for a radical intellectual is precisely to look at those who are creating viable collective alternatives, and try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing.

History of the Idea of Vanguardism

Untwining social theory from vanguardist habits might seem a difficult task because modern social theory and the idea of the vanguard were born more or less together. On the other hand, so was the idea of an artistic avant garde, and the relation between the three might itself suggest some unexpected possibilities.

Henri de Saint-Simon coined the term 'avant-garde' in a series of essays he wrote at the very end of his life. Like his onetime secretary and disciple (and later, bitter rival, Auguste Comte), Saint-Simon was writing in the wake of the French revolution and was essentially asking what had gone wrong : why the transition from a medieval, feudal Catholic society to a modern, industrial democratic one seemed to create such enormous violence and social dislocation. The problem, he concluded, was that modern society lacked any force of ideological cohesion that could play the same role as the medieval church, which gave everyone the sense of having a meaningful place in the overall social order. Towards the end of their lives, Saint-Simon and Comte ended up

creating their own religion : Saint-Simon called his the ‘New Christianity’, Comte, the ‘New Catholicism’. In the first, artists were to play the role of the ultimate spiritual leaders; in an imaginary dialogue with a scientist, Saint-Simon has an artist explaining that in their role of imagining possible futures and inspiring the public, they can play the role of an avant garde, a “truly priestly function”, as he put it. In his ideal future, artists would hatch the ideas that they would then pass on to scientists and industrialists to put into effect. Saint-Simon was 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 function.

Comte, of course, is most famous as the founder of sociology; 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 far more authoritarian approach, ultimately proposing the regulation and control of almost all aspects of human life according to scientific principles, with the role of high priests in his New Catholicism being played by sociologists themselves.

It is a particularly fascinating opposition because in the early 20th century, the positions were effectively reversed. Instead of the left-wing Saint-Simonians looking to artists for leadership, while the right-wing Comtians fancied themselves scientists, we had fascist leaders like Hitler and Mussolini who imagined themselves as great artists inspiring the masses, and sculpting society according to their grandiose imaginings, and the Marxist vanguard which claimed the role of scientists.

At any rate, the Saint Simonians 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 19th century artists with anarchist sympathies is staggering, ranging from Pissaro to Tolstoy or Oscar Wilde, not to mention most early 20th 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 19th 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, un-alienated 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.

The idea of the political vanguard was used very widely and very loosely in the 19th century for anyone seen as exploring the path to a future free society. Radical newspapers for example, often called themselves ‘avant garde’. It was Marx though, 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 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 possibilities 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 organising 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 1902 in 'What Is to Be Done' ? and has been echoed endlessly ever since. All this had a curious effect on the artistic avant garde who increasingly started to organise 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. The ultimate fusion came with the Surrealists and then finally the Situationist International, which on the one hand was the most systematic group 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; at the same time, however and on the other hand, in its own internal organisation, it 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 actually ended up happening.)

Non-Alienated Production

Why is it that artists have so often been so drawn to revolutionary politics ? 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, on the one hand — (that is, the experience of certain forms of un-alienated production) — and the ability to imagine social alternatives, on the other, particularly the possibility of a society premised on less alienated forms of creativity. This might allow us to perceive in a new light the historical shift between seeing the vanguard as the relatively un-alienated artists (or perhaps intellectuals) and seeing them as the representatives of the 'most oppressed'. In fact, I would suggest, revolutionary coalitions always tend to consist of an alliance between a society's least alienated and its most oppressed. This is less elitist a formulation than it might sound because it seems that actual revolutions tend to occur when these two categories overlap. That would at any rate explain why it almost always seems to be peasants and craftspeople — or alternately, newly proletarianised former peasants and craftspeople — who actually rise up and overthrow capitalist regimes, and not those inured by generations of wage labour. Finally, I suspect this would also help explain the extraordinary importance of indigenous people's struggles in that planetary uprising usually referred to as the 'anti-globalisation' 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, in turn, leads us back to the role of ethnography as a possible model for the would-be non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual — as well as some of its potential pitfalls. Obviously what I am proposing would only work if it was, ultimately, a form of auto-ethnography, combined, perhaps, with a certain 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 (“if one applied the same principles as you are applying to political organisation to economics, might it not look something like this ?”) Here too, there are suggestive parallels in the history of radical artistic movements, which became movements precisely as they became their own critics; 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, first of all, by emphasising 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.

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David Graeber is an anthropologist at Yale University, USA. He has worked with the Direct Action Network, People’s Global Action, and the Planetary Alternatives Network. He is currently writing ethnography of direct action, and is author of Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value : The False Coin of Our Own Dreams (Palgrave 2001). Forthcoming are Catastrophe : Magic and History in Rural Madagascar, and a Prickly Paradigm pamphlet called Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology (due April 2004), also a book called Reinventing Revolution and Direct Action : An Ethnography.
