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**The Incredible Lameness  
of Left-Anarchism**

2003

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When I was asked to contribute an updated essay on the post-left anarchist critique to the Institute for Anarchist Studies monthly web column, "Theory & Politics," I gladly accepted, even though the time I have available for writing is short these days. I accepted because I was surprised, but pleased, to learn that the heretofore rather ideologically narrow Institute for Anarchist Studies seemed to be opening itself up a bit more to the broader anarchist milieu by making such an invitation. I accepted because I have always been genuinely interested in communicating with a diverse audience, and welcomed the opportunity to present a quick critique of left-anarchism through the web publication of an organization which often seems to identify quite closely with the subject of my critique. And, finally, I accepted because I was told that immediately following my contribution Peter Staudenmaier would be writing in response "against post-left anarchism and for an anarchism that does not shed the left," and I have always been a partisan of intelligent, rational debate within the anarchist milieu. Anarchists are desperately in need of such debate-since intelligent and rational discussion has been incredibly short in supply-and I looked forward to having some of the important points in my essay carefully evaluated and rationally criticized.

## **An Evasion of Discussion**

Unfortunately, the response that has appeared may be "against post-left anarchism," but careful evaluation and rational criticism play little part. Instead, readers of Staudenmaier's essay, "Anarchists in Wonderland," are presented with a strange combination of evasion, mystification, insinuation and petty complaints or smears. The straightforward engagement with my own and others' post-left arguments-the clear statement and explanation of differences I had hoped to read-is absent. Instead, the title of my editorial in the new Fall/Winter issue (#56) of Anarchy magazine, "The Evasion of Discussion in the Radical Milieu," now seems prescient, as if I knew beforehand the lack of response I would actually get in this particular debate.

One might expect that Staudenmaier would critically evaluate the most important aspects of the post-left anarchist critique in his essay, citing quotations from the most important essays on the subject, questioning their arguments and counterpoising his own. Instead he ignores most of what has been said and fails to address the most prominent post-left anarchist writers. Instead, he makes insinuations that are never backed up with evidence. He snipes at non-essential points as though they had some important meaning. He deliberately mystifies what has been clearly stated, whether through lack of ability to counter the arguments, or through an understanding that there are no convincing ways to counter them.

And nowhere is he able to define what is positive about leftism and therefore worth preserving.

## Vague Accusations with No Documentation

Staudenmaier opens his essay by calling the post-left anarchist critique “vague,” despite the fact that several very clear statements (summarizing it from different perspectives) have appeared in *Anarchy* magazine. These statements include Lawrence Jarach’s “Don’t let the Left(overs) Ruin your Appetite,” Wolfi Landstreicher’s “From Politics to Life,” and my own “Rejecting the Reification of Revolt.” Perhaps Staudenmaier hasn’t read these essays, though they are easy enough to find. Perhaps he’s only read the updated version of my “Rejecting the Reification of Revolt” that appeared in “Theory & Politics” last month under the title “Leaving the Left Behind.” To give him the benefit of any doubt here I won’t mention the arguments in other essays and I’ll concentrate on his evasion of the very clear (and non-vague) arguments made in my own essay, since he can hardly claim to have missed it.

Staudenmaier goes on to allege that post-left anarchist critiques have “generated considerable debate among practically and theoretically engaged anarchists. In the course of these discussions, anarchists from a variety of backgrounds have posed a wide range of critical questions to the promoters of the post-left idea. Most of these questions have gone unanswered.” What questions? Who didn’t answer them? Why not? None of this is explained or it would become quite clear that this is just a gambit to mislead while making an unfounded accusation that most readers will never realize is absurd. Does it matter to Staudenmaier that every critical question posed to *Anarchy* magazine editors about post-left anarchy has been published and answered in its pages? Not at all. Aside from the few public presentations I’ve made about post-left anarchy in New Orleans, San Francisco and Lawrence, Kansas, the only other (semi-) public “discussions” I’ve come across on the subject have been on the web, where “free-for-all” would most often be a better description than “discussion.” Are these what Staudenmaier is talking about? We don’t know because he doesn’t say. Instead he continues by alleging that “not a few (questions) have provoked a remarkable level of vituperation from those who find the new post-left label appealing.” What questions? What kind of responses did they receive? Was all the vituperation from one side? Was the vituperation even from anarchists? No hints at all are given. Just another empty, unverifiable accusation. If Staudenmaier won’t tell us what the questions were and who made the allegedly “vituperative” remarks we’ll remain forever in the dark about whatever it is he’s talking about-as he apparently wants us to.

This isn't an argument; it's just an attempted petty smear and it's not the most auspicious way to begin an essay. Would it be too much for Staudenmaier to publicly address his questions to Anarchy magazine? It wouldn't be hard, and Anarchy editors would certainly answer them!

Staudenmaier next jumps to a further unexplained allegation: "when the post-leftists cannot agree among themselves on even the most basic conceptual matters, such as what they mean by 'the left,' it is difficult for the rest of us to know exactly what it is we are being asked to believe." Who doesn't agree about what? Which post-leftists don't agree? About what basic conceptual matters? The only hint we get is that Staudenmaier thinks some anarchists making a post-left critique don't agree on a definition of "the left." Is this so important? Leftists talk about the left every day; do they all agree on what it is? Of course not. Does this make them necessarily incoherent? Is Staudenmaier incoherent if other leftists don't agree with his definition of "the left"-if he has one? Is it the duty of post-leftists to provide leftists with a definition of the left? This isn't an argument; it's just another lame excuse for evading discussion, akin to authoritarians complaining that they don't need to answer anarchist criticisms because not all anarchists agree on definitions of the state and government.

## Muddling the Dispute

Staudenmaier next actually does mention, in passing, some of the critiques which I argue together constitute the core of the post-left critique. But rather than addressing them and criticizing them, as might be expected if there was really going to be a debate, he merely sidesteps them. Amazingly, he argues that "What all this might have to do with rejecting 'the left'<sup>1</sup> as such, however, remains

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<sup>1</sup> According to the New Oxford American Dictionary "left wing" is defined as "the liberal, socialist, or radical section of a political party or system. [with reference to the National Assembly in France (1789–91), where the nobles sat to the president's right and the commons to the left]." "Left" or "the left" is similarly defined as "a group or party favoring liberal, socialist, or radical views." In common usage in North America the left includes liberals, socialists, communists and a few other lesser movements (or remnants of movements, like the Single-Taxers, Distributivists or Mutualists). Anarchists are sometimes included and sometimes not, when they are acknowledged by people to exist at all.

For an interesting diagram representing the U.S. left from the perspective of U.S. social democrats see the "Left-Wing Lingo, Ideologies and History" web site: [www.uhuh.com](http://www.uhuh.com) Notably, on this web site anarchists are almost entirely absent from the picture, with only minor references to "the anarchist wing of the Left Green Network (LGN), which is the moribund, left wing of the Greens USA, associated with Murray Bookchin and the Institute for Social Ecology," and the Fifth Estate (described as "eco-anarchist").

rather obscure.” To him, maybe, but I doubt to anyone else who actually reads my essay. He goes on to argue that “many of the core ideas of post-leftism trace their genealogy to left traditions themselves”! Duh! It’s POST-left anarchy. Would it make more sense for post-left anarchist critiques to trace their genealogy somewhere else? Is it so strange that many critiques of the left should originate from people who at one time identified with it? I guess it is to Staudenmaier, since he wants to make a big deal of this. He goes on to actually cite one specific example and a couple oblique examples. He cites “The critique of organization” as being “deeply indebted to the work of Jacques Camatte.” Well, yes, Camatte has made some important contributions to this critique (which began long ago amongst anarchists) and he was once a leftist. But just as clearly his critique of leftist organizations as “gangs” instantly made him a post-leftist in this respect. This proves nothing except the irrelevance of this tack of Staudenmaier’s attempted argument. Staudenmaier goes on to argue that “the insistence on linking subjective psychological factors with broader social forces” — a strangely broad statement — “is presaged in the thinking of Cornelius Castoriadis.” Maybe, but it is also presaged in the thinking of a lot of other people, including many anarchists! No one ever claimed that every leftist has no clue about anything! This is just another irrelevant pronouncement. The funniest citation, however, is the final one of the paragraph, in which Staudenmaier claims that “the whole re-orientation toward domination as our central critical term was theorized by the Frankfurt School and by Social Ecology long before it gained currency in the pages of *Anarchy*.” While the Frankfurt School was an important influence on many *Anarchy* magazine contributors and editors (and though critiques of domination have been a commonplace of anarchist theory since Proudhon and Bakunin), “domination” is hardly the “central critical term” of the post-left critique, which makes the first part of this statement curious, to say the least. The more hilarious part is the attempt to put Bookchin’s Social Ecology ideology in the same universe, much less the same league, as the Frankfurt School in this anyway irrelevant comment!

Next Staudenmaier says that “post-leftism adamantly rejects any accommodation with what it takes to be ‘the left’.” This (rejecting accommodation) could be said of any critique. What is being criticized is obviously not being “accommodated” but rejected in some important sense. Post-left anarchist critiques argue that anarchists can be most effective by standing up for ourselves as anarchists, and that it makes much more sense for anarchists to resist identification with leftism than to identify with it as a minor partner (for several crucial reasons that Staudenmaier is apparently incapable of criticizing directly). He goes on to complain that post-leftists don’t speak about only one type of leftist, but all of them, including “sectarian splinter groups and authoritarian demagogues,” as well as “everybody from Bukharin to Bookchin.” Guilty. The left is made up of a

whole range of liberals, social democrats, socialists and communists of various self-descriptions. Sometimes post-leftists (just like leftists) will speak of liberal leftists, sometimes social democratic leftists, sometimes communist leftists, and sometimes all leftists together. There's no mystery about this. Staudenmaier goes on to say that he sees "the left as an extraordinarily variegated continuum of conflicting participants and perspectives." Once again, everyone making a post-left critique of whom I'm aware would agree with this, though Staudenmaier insinuates otherwise with no evidence. He continues by saying that the left is "not a monolithic entity that can be reduced to a few neat premises," even though nobody has ever argued that the left is a monolithic entity, nor that it can be reduced to any number of premises. Post-left critiques argue that all leftists share a certain (range of) approach to theory and practice that fundamentally differs from the anarchist approach. Staudenmaier's entire essay is an attempt to continuously avoid dealing with these differences.

Instead Staudenmaier's strategy seems to be an attempt to confuse readers as much as possible about what might ever constitute post-left critiques, and substitute a stream of undocumented accusations and petty insinuations for straightforward and rational criticism. For example, he alleges that "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 are these "anarchists drawn to the post-left label" that he's speaking of? Once again, we'll never know if they exist anywhere besides Staudenmaier's imagination because he never even gives us a hint about who they are. Of course, many leftists are liberals, and many others are Leninists, and many leftists have worshipped power (think of the mass adulation for Lenin, Stalin and Mao, for just a few instances). But I have to say that I've never heard of any anarchists, even the most deluded, speak of a "Titanic-sized anarchist movement" currently existing. Where does Staudenmaier come up with these "many" alleged nutcases when none of us have ever heard from them? It's understandable that many leftists will feel extreme discomfort when their leftism is questioned and criticized. But that doesn't relieve leftists of the responsibility to confront the actual post-left anarchist critiques that have been made, rather than attempting to dodge them by making wild, unsubstantiated accusations.

## **The Internet Makes People Crazy**

To further evade a direct debate over anything at all substantive in my essay (or other essays appearing in *Anarchy* magazine), Staudenmaier cites a web

“debate” on “Anarchy after Leftism” accessible on [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org) (more of an incoherent free-for-all in my opinion) as including, he says, “Perhaps the most telling instances of post-left zeal.” That sounds at least potentially correct; if you want to find some relatively incoherent, but zealous argumentation, the first place to look would be discussion sites on the internet! However, if you’re honest about what you find you’ll generally have to acknowledge that the incoherence and zealotry almost always go both ways. Peter claims (once again, without citing anyone so there’s no way to prove it or disprove it without wading through dozens upon dozens of pages in an attempt to figure out what he’s speaking about) that somewhere in this book-length free-for-all “debate” people sympathizing with at least some sorts of post-left anarchist critiques disagree on what is included under the concept of the left.

Just checking out the first few defenders of the left in the first fifty exchanges in this web discussion, I come across plenty of incoherent anarcho-leftism and plenty of irrational leftist zealotry, though I’m afraid to say that I don’t find much of anything that could be called post-left anarchist incoherence or zealotry amidst these posts. First, in a silly self-contradiction, self-proclaimed anarchist and leftist Shawn Ewald says, “Being anarchists, we all agree that anarchism . . . is superior to any other ideology or methodology . . . Therefore, to imply that anarchism is beyond or outside ‘leftism’ leads to a danger where anarchists might think, by being anarchists, that they ‘themselves’ are not only outside of ‘leftism’ but more evolved and more enlightened than the left as a whole—a la Marxist revolutionary vanguards.” Apparently, for Shawn it’s okay for anarchists to think anarchism is superior if it’s conceived as a part of the left, but it’s vanguardist for anarchists to think anarchism is superior if anarchism is conceived as being outside the left! Go figure. Score one for anarcho-leftist incoherence. But that’s not all. Unfortunately, his posts are full of this kind of bizarre stuff. He next argues with regard to post-left anarchist criticism of the left (specifically from my editorial on the subject in *Anarchy* magazine) that “These are very classic leftist arguments, it should be pointed out. Many a newly formed Trot splinter group have made similar justifications for their actions. The implications are not pleasant to think about.” Of course, he doesn’t give a single example of any Trotskyist splinter group ever in history that has actually made the same (or even roughly similar) arguments because none ever have! Anyone ever hear of post-left Trotskyism? Of course not. It doesn’t exist. Score another point for left-anarchist irrationalism. It would be easy to continue in this vein, but I for one would rather not. What would it prove? The main point is not that there is a vast supply of incoherent arguments made by left-anarchists. The point is that if we are going to debate we need to face the strongest arguments of our opponents head-on and not run from the field of debate like Staudenmaier does looking for weak links in the realms of



hearsay or internet comments from anonymous or pseudonymous posters whose identities may never be known for sure. Peter Staudenmaier, if there are coherent arguments for post-left critiques and you're afraid to face these arguments and offer arguments for alternative positions. Guess what? You've already lost the debate, because you've fled the field. If you want to win arguments, you need to quit running.

## Nebulous Leftism

Staudenmaier complains again about post-leftist characterizations of leftists. As per his by now standard operating procedure, he makes numerous little allegations while never citing any particular sources. All we have is his not very convincing word that despite the supposedly “nebulous notion of ‘the left’ that animates the post-left critique,” there are some very particular “extravagant denunciations” made by some unnamed people that annoy him very much. Looking at these claims we find that Staudenmaier alleges that some post-left anarchist somewhere in the world has argued that leftists “are all simultaneously totalitarian and reformists”! Not that there is anything unusual about totalitarian leftists reforming capitalism in various anti-revolutionary ways. (Just think about the Stalinists, Maoists and all the followers of the petty Communist Party dictators of the last half century or so.) But who in the world would say that all leftists are totalitarian reformists? Nobody I know. Probably nobody you know. Possibly nobody anyone knows, since Staudenmaier never deigns to enlighten us about who this person might be.

Next he complains that some post-leftist somewhere has argued that leftist “movements are disintegrating, trapped in inevitable decline.” Does any anarchist besides Staudenmaier think differently since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Maoist ideological facade in China, the capitulation of social democratic regimes in the face of neo-liberal imperatives, etc.? I'd be surprised to hear it! Staudenmaier further complains that another-or possibly the same-hapless post-left anarchist (whose name he won't reveal) has said that leftists' “mere presence threatens to overwhelm those anarchists foolish enough to ignore the urgent danger.” This certainly sounds a bit exaggerated, though whether it is the allegedly post-left anarchist or Staudenmaier himself doing the exaggerating is impossible to tell given Staudenmaier's continuing refusal to document his sources. Be that as it may, the tens of thousands of anarchists imprisoned or murdered by leftists over the last ninety years might have nonetheless appreciated such an exaggerated warning if they had received one in time.

Finally, Staudenmaier actually addresses something I've said in my latest essay on the post-left anarchist critique. Well, sort of. He actually complains that I use the words "all" and "every," "always" and "everywhere," not to mention "the vast majority," and that using these words indicates a "lack of nuance"! Pardon me, but it only indicates a lack of nuance if the words in context exaggerate. Each of these words can also indicate the precisely correct nuance of argument as well. It depends upon the entire statements of which the words are merely parts, and it depends upon the contexts in which these entire statements appear. I've rarely seen a more bizarre argument than this one. Ignore the actual statements you want to criticize and instead attack the use of particular isolated words used in the statements! This is a brilliant innovation in evasion! Bravo! It's meaningless, but certainly it will be effective in distracting at least some readers' attentions from its absolute logical poverty.

Oops! Staudenmaier actually does follow this meaningless exercise in diversion with a quotation of an entire sentence from my essay addressing the difference between the strictly anarchist emphasis on self-organization and the leftist emphasis on integrating radicals into leftist political organizations: "For leftists, the emphasis is always on recruiting to their organizations, so that you can adopt the role of a cadre<sup>2</sup> serving their goals." But then he for some reason neglects to mention any of the many, many exceptions to this statement that he surely thinks must exist. Let's see, surely we can come up with one or two? Of course, we'll have to eliminate all of the leftist political parties whose goals are precisely to convert independent radical activists into party cadre. Then we'll have to eliminate all of the leftist pre-party organizations, whose goals are really the same, though they don't have full-fledged party organizations yet. And then there are the leftist front groups, the party youth groups, the single-issue campaign groups and even the small splinter groups. Well, maybe it isn't so easy to come up with an example of leftists whose emphasis is at least sometimes on encouraging genuine self-organization they have no intention of managing or dominating. I really can't

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<sup>2</sup> According to the New Oxford American Dictionary "cadre" is defined as "a small group of people specially trained for a particular purpose or profession" or "a group of activists in a communist or other revolutionary organization." And similarly, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary "cadre" is defined as "a nucleus or core group especially of trained personnel able to assume control and to train others," or, "a cell of indoctrinated leaders active in promoting the interests of a revolutionary party." I use the word "cadre" in the sense of a person or people assimilated into organizations whose ideologies they have learned and reproduce, and to whose goals they subordinate their own thinking and activities. Cadre organizations are quite different from anarchist organizations, which are based upon critical self-theory, self-activity and self-organization-preserving individual and small group autonomy and refusing to surrender sovereignty to any group, leadership or temporary majority.

think of any. Can you? But what about anarcho-leftists? Maybe we can come up with some anarcho-leftists who sometimes encourage self-organization? But then is the encouragement of self-organization the result of the anarcho- or the leftist influence? I think we can all guess the real answer to that question. So maybe the reason that Staudenmaier doesn't provide us with a counterexample to disprove the statement of mine he quotes is that there really aren't any. Let's give him another chance, though. Peter Staudenmaier, please give us all an example of a self-defined leftist group that consistently emphasizes genuine self-organization with no attempts at manipulation, no attempts to infiltrate or control, no hidden leaderships, no ideological agendas, etc. If you can come up with even one, I promise to amend my statement above to read: "For leftists, the emphasis is almost always on recruiting to their organizations, so that you can adopt the role of a cadre serving their goals."

## Staudenmaier's Leftist Fantasies

Staudenmaier claims that "the post-left image of the left . . . is frequently wrong on particulars," citing as an example my mention that "the critique of everyday life' is 'largely incompatible' with 'most of the New Left of the 60s and 70s.'" Amazingly enough, Staudenmaier rousingly claims that "In Germany, France, and North America, at the very least, large segments of the New Left enthusiastically embraced the critique of everyday life . . ." Of course, he once again gives zero examples. Do I detect a pattern developing? Who were these "large segments of the New Left"? I sure don't recall any New Left socialist or communist groups, Trotskyist splinter groups, or Maoist groupuscles that "enthusiastically embraced the critique of everyday life." The Situationist International, of course, encouraged this critique, but its members were contemptuous of the left, so it can't count here. In the U.S. the SDS, the Progressive Labor Party, the Weatherman organization, the Socialist Workers Party, the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords and other major New Left groups would have rejected the critique of everyday life, if they had ever heard of it. Sure, there were amorphous anti-authoritarian currents throughout the New Left, including a few which heeded the S.I.'s call for a critique of everyday life. But the vast majority of the New Left groups had no use for this essentially anarchistic turn of critique away from the exploitation of labor. (Or, for the more liberal and pacifist New Leftists, away from the confrontation of moral conscience with the establishment; and for the feminists, civil rights groups and black nationalists, away from the reifications of identity politics.)

Staudenmaier clarifies his claim by adding that: "the profoundly anti-authoritarian upsurge of that era . . . owed much of its vigor and inclusiveness to this

re-orientation toward everyday relationships.” However, while it may be true that there was a sort of generalized New Left “re-orientation towards everyday relationships,” this hardly constituted any sort of genuine critique of everyday life. Most of the “re-orientation towards everyday relationships” during the time was fraught with ideological baggage that precisely prevented the development of such a critique. There were all kinds of incoherent amalgamations floating around, including aspects of drug culture, feminism, Maoism, anarchism, sexual liberation, drop-out culture, etc. But they were just that-incoherent amalgamations-and not coherent critiques of everyday life in any way comparable to that of Raoul Vaneigem’s critique in his *Revolution of Everyday Life*. This type of coherent critique would have immediately called into question the rampant incoherence involved in the reformism, moralism, identity politics, workerism and authoritarianism of New Left organizations at the time. As for Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* series, it was almost unknown and simply irrelevant in North America at the time (where it was yet to be translated, anyway), while Richard Gombin’s otherwise interesting book remains most remarkable for its highly idiosyncratic and bizarre definition of leftism, under which the Situationist International was categorized as leftist despite its public disdain for the left in its own terms (for just one example, speaking of “the hierarchical ideology of leftism” in “Theses on the Situationist International and its Time” by Guy Debord & Gianfranco Sanguinetti).<sup>3</sup>

Staudenmaier goes on to argue that: “the concrete practice of countless New Leftists was explicitly predicated on a forceful rejection of precisely those values which McQuinn takes to be constitutive of the left as such.” As usual he provides no examples. Funny, I never noticed these “countless” post-left anarchists at the time. Where were these “countless” people? Why don’t they appear in any history of the New Left, except, possibly, in cases of a few tiny groups like the Diggers or the Motherfuckers? The New Left I lived through was thoroughly

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<sup>3</sup> The fact that Richard Gombin employs an idiosyncratic definition of “leftism” doesn’t, however, lessen the importance of his book as a study of some of the most important French currents which attempted to transcend leftism as it is more commonly defined, which is why C.A.L. Press has long distributed it. In his book Gombin defines “. . . leftism as that segment of the revolutionary movement which offers, or hopes to offer, a radical alternative to Marxism-Leninism as a theory of the labour movement and its development.” (*The Origins of Modern Leftism*, p.17) This extremely narrow definition (Gombin is aware it is unusual, and calls it a “technical” definition as opposed to what he calls “the generally accepted, journalist’s” definition) would leave out most of what is commonly considered the left in North America, and is obviously not what either post-left anarchists or Staudenmaier have in mind in use of the term. Staudenmaier’s reference to this book and to Gombin’s analysis is obviously meant to mystify, since he expects that most people reading his essay will not be familiar with it, and he certainly has no intention of putting it in any sort of intelligent context.

leftist. The anarchists were almost completely invisible. Almost nobody at the time ever talked about the critique of organizational fetishism, the critique of everyday life, the critique of the state, the critique of ideology (except in the least perceptive Marxist senses), the critique of technological fetishism (beyond superficial environmentalist concerns), or the critique of civilization. Even the few anarchists were oblivious to most of this. If Staudenmaier can provide any evidence I'd be happy to concede that the times were far more radical than I realized. But in the complete absence of any evidence for his amazing fantasies, I'll have to stick with the 60s and 70s I saw with my own eyes.

Staudenmaier further claims that: "The actual history of the left includes numerous instances when such innovative critical approaches emerged to contest the conformism and repressiveness of the cadre model." I bet you can guess by now that he doesn't give even one example of what he's talking about. What "numerous . . . innovative and critical approaches" advanced the model of anti-authoritarian, anti-statist self-organization outside of the anarchist milieu? Looking at the historical record there's not much evidence for any. Of course, if Staudenmaier actually means that there were really a few timid criticisms made of the excesses of leftist organizational fetishism (let's not be quite so rigid, let's allow the common people to contribute ideas once in awhile, let's vote on our party policies) this isn't the same thing at all as what post-left anarchists argue, and it would be absurd to think it was.

Staudenmaier does make one good, though entirely irrelevant, point in all this. He argues: "some leftists have been thoughtful and resolute allies of anarchism at crucial junctures in our history." But nobody has claimed otherwise. A few exceptional leftists-like George Orwell-had some anarchist sympathies, despite their abhorrence for anarchist indiscipline, subversion and bad manners. Daniel Guerin is another example. Nobody has claimed that all leftists are incapable of working with anarchists, just that non-anarchist leftists have a significantly different theory and practice than anarchists that is basically incompatible with anarchy. This should really be no surprise. They're just not anarchists.

## **Individualist Delusions and Myopic Autonomy**

We get to the heart of one of the biggest differences between anarchism and leftism when we assess the place of individuals in communities and in social change. Anarchists (at least, those anarchists whose anarchism is stronger than their leftism) generally argue that free individuals and free communities cannot be coerced into existence. Leftists argue otherwise. Anarchists contend that individuals and communities should be autonomous (self-governing, self-directing) rather

than dependent upon government and the forced imposition of heteronomous decisions. Leftists, for the most part, can hardly conceive that people free to make their own decisions might ever be socially-conscious, much less able to carry out a social revolution in the right situation. (This attitude is exemplified by the infamous Leninist insistence that workers are only capable of “trade-union consciousness,” and the corresponding delusion that only the Leninist party can be consistently revolutionary.) In fact, for most socialist and communist leftists (and, unfortunately, also for many left-anarchists) individualism seems to be nothing but a dirty word.

The difference between anarchism and leftism here is the difference between a specific meaning of the word “individualism”<sup>4</sup> and a specific meaning of the word “collectivism.”<sup>5</sup> Anarchists are all individualists in the narrow and specific sense of “. . . favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.” (New Oxford American Dictionary) Leftists are collectivists in the specific and narrow sense of favoring “. . . social organization in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity such as a state, a nation, a race, or a social class.” (Encyclopedia Britannica) Left anarchists of various types make a range of uneasy compromises between these two positions—some closer to anarchism, some closer to leftism.<sup>6</sup> This particular difference between anarchism and leftism has nothing to do with the various ideologies of individualism or of individualist

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<sup>4</sup> According to the New Oxford American Dictionary “individualism” is defined as “the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant.” While the secondary definition is “a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines “individualism” as “1a. Belief in the primary importance of the individual and in the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence. b. Acts or an act based on this belief. 2a. A doctrine advocating freedom from government regulation in the pursuit of a person’s economic goals. b. A doctrine holding that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the interests of the state or social group. 3a. The quality of being an individual; individuality.” And according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “individualism” is “political and social philosophy that places high value on the freedom of the individual and generally stresses the self-directed, self-contained, and comparatively unrestrained individual.”

<sup>5</sup> According to the New Oxford American Dictionary “collectivism” is defined as “the practice or principle of giving a group priority over each individual in it.” This is the way most people in the U.S. will understand the term. The secondary definition given, one not used in this essay (nor in “Leaving the Left Behind”), is “the theory and practice of the ownership of land and the means of production by the people or the state.” According to the Encyclopedia Britannica “collectivism” is “any of several types of social organization in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity such as a state, a nation, a race, or a social class.”

<sup>6</sup> Every major anarchist theorist — Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Guillaume, Kropotkin, Faure, Malatesta — has strongly defended the goals of individual freedom and self-realization in ways both absent from and incompatible with (non-anarchist) leftism. Only the most rabidly leftist of anarchists agree with the bulk of left opinion that even Bakunin or Kropotkin or Malatesta must be denounced for their lapses into excessive “individualism.”

anarchism, none of which have a significant presence within the contemporary anarchist milieu, anyway. Yet Staudenmaier objects to my claim that “The anarchist idea has an indelibly individualist foundation,” by bringing up the largely irrelevant history of individualist anarchists despite the fact that in “Leaving the Left Behind” I nowhere refer to this history and nowhere defend any ideological individualism in any form.<sup>7</sup> This is another diversionary tactic. Specifically, it is a straightforward use of the straw-man fallacy, in which Staudenmaier argues with a position he’s constructed out of thin air, rather than arguing with the position that’s actually been put forth. To be overly fair, this is a fairly common tactic used by all sorts of unscrupulous leftists to attack anyone interested in individual freedom, which is seen by most leftists as at best only a bourgeois conceit. This is why almost all leftists with any remaining semblance of opposition to capitalism repeatedly denounce anarchism as merely a form of “bourgeois individualism” or “petty-bourgeois individualism” or “lumpen individualism.” But no matter how common it is the construction of straw-man arguments serves primarily to reveal the extreme weakness of the positions of those making them. Straw men are attacked precisely because leftists are unable to counter the actual arguments.

At this point Staudenmaier explains to dubious readers that the “insistence on individual autonomy” is “myopic.” Presumably this means that more far-seeing anarchists will renounce their individual autonomy (self-direction) in favor of an organizational ideology and/or organizational directives and/or democratic majority decisions made somewhere. If there is another explanation I’d really like to hear it. After this his argument reverts to the [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org) “Anarchy after Leftism” web discussion. He complains that “several spokespeople for post-left positions emphatically declared their opposition to egalitarianism.” No context or

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps I should have made it absolutely clear that not only does the anarchist idea have an indelibly individualist foundation, but that the actual history of anarchist milieus and movements has been overwhelmingly socialist or communist as well. I have to admit that this seems so incredibly self-evident to me that I never would have imagined Staudenmaier might in his wildest imagination attempt to claim or imply I thought otherwise! As anyone who has read *Anarchy* magazine for the last twenty years might realize, I’ve never propounded an ideology of individualist anarchism, though I have consistently championed the importance of Max Stirner’s (widely misunderstood) phenomenological analyses of subjectivity and ideology for social revolutionary anarchist theory and practice. (Stirner, by the way, would have been the first to deny the label of “individualist anarchist” that so many wish to pin on him.) I’ve long considered myself an anti-ideological anarchist first and foremost—which means that I am both an individualist and communist in the nonideological meanings of these terms. Anyone attempting to construct my anti-political theoretical and practical positions as being exclusively (not to mention, ideologically) “individualist” must first selectively ignore, obscure or deny at least nine-tenths of what I have written over the last twenty years or so, and then explain how the other decontextualized ten percent still can make any sense. In other words, this would be a task of blatant falsification (not that other Social Ecologists haven’t already proven their adeptness at this kind of task).

definitions are given by Staudenmaier, though there is a long history of anarchist critiques of egalitarian ideologies which aim to level society by force. (Bakunin's eloquent dictum, "socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality" comes quickly to mind.) Staudenmaier further claims that "a number" of these people "claimed to reject social institutions per se" though once again refusing to explain or contextualize these comments. Who are these "spokespeople" and what did they actually say? Staudenmaier uses these alleged comments to argue that "Though the promoters of these notions strenuously deny it, what this attitude amounts to is a rejection of the very possibility of communal existence." But if they so "strenuously deny" this, couldn't it be that Staudenmaier either misunderstands their positions, or is taking liberties with his description of them? We don't know since he once again refuses to quote or at least cite the precise location of these alleged comments.

But, again, what is the point of all this? Staudenmaier continues to evade the careful critiques that have appeared in *Anarchy* magazine and in the IAS "Theory & Politics" web column by running away to caricature and denounce some very likely off-hand comments that most people will never see, that nobody can check, and whose importance to anything is far less than clear.

## **Abstract and Indeterminate Evasions**

Staudenmaier gets even more clever in his tactics of evasion when he actually does finally quote a very short, direct comment from the infoshop.org "Anarchy after Leftism" web discussion site: "I want to be left alone." Although he doesn't indicate where in the vast discussion this comment was made or who has made it, I actually recall reading it, and the fact that he quotes it allows anyone with access to the internet to search the infoshop.org discussion site for the comment . . . and discover immediately that it is taken out of context and completely falsified by Staudenmaier's deliberate misinterpretation of it to mean "free of all the annoying attachments of social life, without other people interjecting their own opinions or offering critical comments on each other's behavior." But this complete falsification doesn't keep Staudenmaier from sermonizing about things nobody would disagree with in the first place. He actually condescends to argue that "liberatory forms of social interaction sometimes require us to challenge each other's opinions and actions rather than just accepting them . . . [blah, blah, blah.]" Oh my, please tell us it's not so!

But this insipidly intentional misunderstanding by Staudenmaier gets even worse. As with any effective sermonizing a devil must be produced, which in this case is a devious serpent he calls "post-left repressive tolerance," whose "deeper



implications” he divines to be “an invitation to intolerance and parochialism.” My, my, my. So much to divine from so little (manufactured) evidence! Let’s be crystal clear. Post-left anarchist critiques are based upon the careful study of world history, including the history of the left. They are critiques of well over a hundred years of the whole range of actual, sustained leftist theories and practices, with all their gory, too-often totalitarian or just-plain brutal results. Post-left anarchist critiques do not call for refusing to learn from history or from the vast experiences of peoples around the world in revolt. On the contrary, post-left critiques call for examining and seeking to understand every significant form of contestation in which people engage around the world, in every level of society and in every sphere of life. Constructing a mythical “post-left repressive tolerance” from an out-of-context quote that “I want to be left alone” is simply a breathtaking exercise in bad faith.

Moving on from this, Staudenmaier hesitates for not even a second before launching a different-but nearly as breathtaking-evasion, this time seeking to minimize into nonexistence the criticisms of leftism (most of which it is now clear he dare not ever explicitly acknowledge in any detail) that I make in “Leaving the Left Behind.” He alleges that I focus my attention “on the manifold shortcomings of contemporary radical politics.” (Who would have guessed?) And that I charge that “leftists have incomplete, self-contradictory theories about capitalism and social change.” But he acknowledges this focus and this charge only in order to dismiss them absolutely from either importance or consideration by saying simply, “But we all have these.” Okay! We all have incomplete, self-contradictory theories. Who cares if some lead to dictatorship and others lead to incoherence, if some lead to support for repression and others lead to support for all forms of contestation? We’re all in the same leftist boat according to Staudenmaier, and I shouldn’t be rocking it. No matter that I have made detailed and highly specific criticisms of leftism in my essay. He argues that “Capitalism is a contradictory system. Revolutionary social change is an incomplete process. Working through these contradictions requires close attention to the concrete determinants of currently prevalent modes of domination and hierarchy, so that we can create forms of resistance adequate to the particular demands of our specific historical and social situation.” Wow. I guess that means as long as we don’t raise any criticisms of the left, then, everything will be hunky-dory! As long as we don’t do anything rash like speaking of “a commitment to ‘general social revolt,’” which according to Staudenmaier would “promote the kind of false generalism that is already rife in North American anarchist circles,” we’ll weather the storm and all will be well. Staudenmaier says it’s alright if we “learn from the civil rights struggle . . . or the strategies pioneered by peasant revolts in the global south” as long as we don’t generalize too much or criticize the role of the left in these contestations. Worst of

all, anarchists should never even think it is possible that the anarchist milieu could “stand on its own and bow to no other movements.” The direct implication is that unless it subordinates itself to the left the anarchist movement “will be ill equipped to engage in this sort of learning process.” The only thing never explained is what the hell subordinating anarchism to leftism has to do with any of this at all—except in his own mind? In this case, too much abstract and indeterminate evasiveness makes for absolute incoherence.

## The Obligatory Fascist Smear

Given the history of Staudenmaier’s concerns with the likelihood that any forms of critical theory and practice except his own are liable to be co-opted by fascism, it is unsurprising that he raises the specter of an alleged post-left anarchist susceptibility to the allures of this bogeyman. His evidence? He claims that “A few post-left anarchists go so far as to extol the right wing tendencies within anarchism as a healthy corrective to the grave dangers of social equality and the dastardly connivance of anarchists and power-mad leftists.” Wow. I’d love to see the names of these “post-left anarchists,” along with the wild quotations in prominent places that must have led to Staudenmaier’s unconstrained paraphrasing! Oh, I almost forgot, that’s not how Staudenmaier operates. But couldn’t we at least see some sort of citations allowing us to find the origin of his accusations? Not likely. Classified leftist information, I suppose. Not that it’s impossible for people to say such things (one assumes on the anonymous internet . . . since they wouldn’t likely get into print anywhere). But given a lack of citation or direct quotation we’re once again left entirely in the dark, just as Staudenmaier apparently wants us to be. Were these real comments? If so were they actually made by anarchists or by people posing as post-leftists? (The latter is always possible in the almost completely anonymous and pseudonymous world of internet discussion free-for-alls where it’s impossible to know who is really speaking, and where it’s fully possible to see people post the most insane comments under your own name.)

What these nasty, unverifiable allegations by Staudenmaier evade is the incredibly huge, dirty secret that in historical actuality (as opposed to leftist fantasy), it was ex-leftists in immense numbers who helped populate the fascist movements (which, of course, is not to belittle the many leftists who never abandoned the anti-fascist struggle during this time). It certainly wasn’t a few insignificant anarchist critics of the left who helped push fascism into power. And the reason for the easy conversion of masses of leftists to fascist and Nazi causes was that leftism and fascism are similar in so many more ways than anarchism and fascism are. National socialism (one form of fascism) substitutes the nation as the collectivist

focus, while class-struggle socialism and syndicalism center on class as the collectivist focus around which life is to be subordinated. Red Fascism (Bolshevism) is a form of national socialism paradoxically built on an ideology of class struggle. Left anarchists must deal with this dirty history of the left straightforwardly if they want to be taken seriously. Making smears based on unverifiable allegations, while ignoring the bulk of actual history, does nothing to enhance the reputation of left anarchism.

## **For a Rational Discussion of Anarchism and the Left**

Seldom have I seen a less direct and more evasive response to anything in the anarchist milieu than Staudenmaier's "Anarchists in Wonderland." But putting it behind us, where does that leave us? Certainly no wiser about any intelligent, rational arguments against post-left critiques, though I, for one, am certain that such arguments can be made and would welcome them. To repeat the recommendations in the editorial of the new *Anarchy* magazine issue might be the best place to start. (See [www.anarchymag.org](http://www.anarchymag.org) for the entire editorial.)

1. Always attack the comments made rather than the author(s). This is accomplished by avoiding a number of things, and by accomplishing one simple goal. Avoid making spurious, irrelevant, or patently false accusations by sticking resolutely to actual points made in the words and context in which the author(s) you want to criticize has actually made them! If you can't quote the author(s) (without distorting the context) and address your criticisms directly to the quoted words, then simply don't comment! (Here I guess I should add that citations of some sort should be made when referencing lengthy source documents so that readers can find what you are talking about to check on its context and meaning themselves.)
2. Refuse straw man arguments. Challenge the actual meaning of the words you quote by either accepting the definitions used by the author you want to criticize, or by making it clear why you think the author's definitions are so inadequate as to require different definitions. If you can't find any place where an author actually has said something you want to criticize, don't argue that she or he has said it, or would agree with it, or secretly believes it. If one person makes a particular statement, this does not mean that all people you may want to group with that person agree with that statement. If you want to draw some logical conclusions from the author's statements in order to criticize them (or to show that the statements lead to absurd conclusions), then first run your alleged logical conclusions by several people to make sure

that your conclusions are more solid than idiosyncratic, and then be sure to acknowledge that it is your conclusions that are absurd, and not the author's.

Above all, read any texts you want to criticize with extreme care. Avoid superficial readings and always make a conscientiousness effort to understand what is at stake. If there is something you don't understand, then simply ask about it before you criticize it."

Beyond these points we can also learn from Staudenmaier's peculiar odyssey into his own little wonderland:

1. Argue with your opponents strongest positions. If you want to criticize Marxism, for example, don't focus primarily on the words of Stalin's barber. If you want to criticize anarchism, don't settle for a criticism of Proudhon's patriarchal attitudes. Going after irrelevant targets of opportunity is a show of weakness, never strength.
2. Try a little turnabout. Would your arguments make sense to you if someone else turned them on you in some form? If not, don't use them.
3. Keep your abstractions grounded with convincing details, examples, quotations and documentation. Anyone can construct abstract platitudes. It's what the abstractions mean for everyday practice that makes any real difference to people.

# Post-Script: Response from Peter Staudenmaier

## Challenge Accepted: Post-Leftism's Rejection of the Left as a Whole

Critique is a difficult thing to engage in, whether you're in the role of the critic or of the criticized. Part of the challenge involves trying to sort out which ideas are promising enough that they can be worked on and refined in a rewarding way, and then figuring out how to make these ideas more sensible and useful for our practical efforts. That sort of immanent critique is what I tried to offer with my skeptical appraisal of post-left anarchism. In my original response to Jason McQuinn's article "Post-Left Anarchy: Leaving the Left Behind," I wrote that this much-needed process of theoretical and practical refinement would be more effective if post-left adherents could bring themselves to engage with the criticisms put forward by other anarchists. McQuinn's intemperate reply indicates that these words went unheeded. Complaining that my criticisms of his argument were not the criticisms he hoped for rather misses the point.

In some respects, the ugly tone this debate always seems to take may have to do with fundamentally contrary assumptions about the function of critique itself. Much of McQuinn's indignation appears to stem from disappointment that I failed to write another essay altogether. Thus rather than responding to the criticisms I did offer, he presents a litany of themes I did not address. This strikes me as an odd way to approach the issue; the list of topics on which I have nothing to say is quite long, and it is difficult to see how such a method will clarify the core issues at stake. Perhaps it is all based on a misunderstanding: my essay was not a comprehensive review of McQuinn's various beliefs, or of the last several volumes of *Anarchy Magazine*; it was a direct response to McQuinn's article, particularly the parts of that article that I found unpersuasive and flawed. There is nothing evasive about this form of critique.

At times McQuinn's musings on "The Incredible Lameness of Left Anarchism" read like an supplement to my own essay. After I pointed out the chronic levels of vagueness and vituperation that so frequently afflict post-left arguments, McQuinn provides yet more vagueness and amplified vituperation. After I scolded post-leftists for pointless caricatures of the history of the left, McQuinn offers another reductionist parody of the New Left, which in his eyes apparently consisted primarily of Old Left cadre parties. Perhaps the oddest aspect of McQuinn's

reply is his insistence that I neglected to provide any source for the views of other post-left enthusiasts. I did, of course, provide this source, along with a link to it, and explained this procedure clearly in my essay. The tension between these vernacular expressions of post-leftism and McQuinn's own more theoretical variety forms a major component of my analysis.

All in all, the post-left perspective seems even less cogent in the wake of McQuinn's splenetic recapitulation. Anarchists who are wondering what all the fuss is about have yet to receive clear answers, much less compelling ones. Aside from veering between casual disavowal and vehement re-affirmation of the same positions he staked out in his initial article, McQuinn still hasn't faced the basic logical conundrum at the heart of his stance: Why would the sordid record of some parts of the left require an undifferentiated rejection of the left as a whole? Answering this straightforward question would go a long way toward making our disagreements less frenzied and more relevant to anarchist practice today.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright  
May 21, 2012



Jason McQuinn  
The Incredible Lameness of Left-Anarchism  
2003

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