

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



sasha k

Dirty Mirrors and Deformed Reflections: A response to Chris Dixon's “Reflections on Privilege, Reformism, and Activism”

sasha k

Dirty Mirrors and Deformed Reflections: A response to Chris
Dixon's “Reflections on Privilege, Reformism, and Activism”

Retrieved on September 1, 2009 from www.geocities.com

Yet, I feel that this struggle over value is usually ignored by those for whom identity politics is the center of theory, practice and resistance. Unfortunately, it has been true that many who focus on struggles around value have often, to their detriment, ignored particularities in theory and practice. I don't think I have done this and I have continually tried to work in this tension.
this discussion will continue . . .

articulated as a battle between culture (usually crudely represented as national or ethnic-national culture) and capitalism.

While I have always tried to work in the tension between our particularities and our commonalities (I believe, as I have stated over and over, that this is what we must do), it seems to me — and correct me if I am wrong — that Chris sees little commonality in the various social struggles around the world. Thus Chris even objects to the use of the term “our” when discussing our present conditions. For Chris they seem to be struggles of difference and identity, and particularities never come to be understood as part of a system — a process — that binds them together. While Chris says he is against capitalism, it seems to drop out of his analysis. Processes seem to turn into things or disappear altogether. If, however, you study the social struggles around the globe — especially, *especially*, those in the third world — it is notable that most of them revolve around the issue of value. The majority of social struggles that have come to be called the “anti-globalization movement” are struggles resisting the domination and penetration of a single — but complex — regime of value called capitalism. These range from the everyday struggles in the workplace, to struggles over housing and healthcare, to the defense of nature, to attacks on corporations, to the large demonstrations against the imposition of neo-liberal economics and privatization.

One of the central reasons we started *Hot Tide* was to attack the myth that the “anti-globalization movement” was a first-world movement. We wanted to bring various analyses of struggles from around the world (from different nations, cultures, and positions in the hierarchy of nation-states) together *because we think these struggles paint a complex pattern of resistance to and attack on an ever globalizing and penetrating capitalism* (see the *Hot Tide* Anti-authoritarian/anti-capitalist Analysis Page: www.geocities.com). I am reminded of this daily here in China. Just two days ago workers and their families were being dragged off by the police for a sit-in in front of a large corporation right next to the place I live. This wasn't some racist, imperialist or even multi-national corporation, but a Chinese company, the Chinese capitalist class exploiting and impoverishing Chinese workers in order to compete within the global regime of value. And this is happening everywhere around the world.

My initial response was pointed and limited in scope. It critiqued what I view as some significant problems in Chris' original article (“Finding Hope After Seattle”). It did not state my whole perspective on the problems we face in the world and how to resist and attack capitalism. Unfortunately, this has opened the ground for Chris to imagine a whole “approach” that I “represent” and “epitomize.” Most of this is pure invention and assertion, and certainly cannot be found in my initial response nor in my other writings. So much of this response is taken up with showing how little this invention has to do with my perspective. Normally I find correcting such misreadings to be a rather pointless task, but here I believe it does clarify some significant differences in our perspectives as well as — I hope — point towards some theoretical and practical tasks that anarchists must take on under the present circumstances. Additionally, in my initial response to Chris, I did not touch on the points I agree with him on as I was trying to indicate the most problematic aspects of his original article. For example, I never said or implied that I thought anti-racist organizing was unimportant, nor did I dismiss it. I guess I feel that that should be obvious to anarchists (who have been involved in such activity for a long time, although there are plenty of other areas that anarchists need to be involved in), but perhaps it isn't. I hope that this effort at clarification is effective in dismissing some of the most blatant mischaracterizations of my perspective, so that we can develop a more useful discussion.

In my limited critique I didn't elaborate in great detail other “openings to different types of self-organization” as that would be a huge essay in itself. But in the next *Killing King Abacus* (out soon) there is a long (around 10,000 words) article that, while still limited, goes into quite a bit of detail on the matter, and I won't repeat it here.

Let's get some of the more blatant misrepresentations out of the way first:

1: Anarchists as an elite: this certainly isn't the crux. Chris somehow reads my mind, only it must be someone else's: “To sasha's mind, anarchists are an insurgent elite, valiant warriors in an eternal conflict with ‘imposed social order.’ And with only thinly veiled contempt, he pities ‘the masses’ unwilling to make the ‘not always easy choice.’” I do not in any way consider anarchists to be an elite

or to be valiant warriors: I do suggest that anarchists are a minority within the struggling multitude and should be willing to admit this; in fact, they have to admit this if they are to work with non-anarchists which is what they must do (we have gone into this in some detail in both *Hot Tide* and *Killing King Abacus*). I also have no contempt for “the masses” — a term I used sarcastically in my initial response as I don’t believe there is anything called “the masses,” which to me implies a level of homogeneity that doesn’t exist in what I usually call the multitude. It would certainly be bullshit to have contempt for those excluded, oppressed and exploited and those of them struggling to end such conditions. I do not have contempt for the excluded and exploited as I am of the excluded and exploited (this, of course, does not mean that we are all equally oppressed). There is nothing in what I have written that indicates any contempt (thinly veiled or otherwise) for the “masses.” Such contempt or pity is much more common among activists who see themselves as standing above the exploited and excluded.

2: In discussing everyday struggles and forms of resistance, Chris’ assumptions about my perspective reach an absurd level, so much so that this misunderstanding seems quite willful, or for the sake of argument. He has somehow decided that I am against everyday forms of struggle, that they don’t fit within my perspective, that I don’t “deign to discuss these all-too-pedestrian realities,” and that to me “they apparently don’t constitute a sufficient ‘critique.’” *Nowhere in my initial response do I attack, put-down, critique, or otherwise disparage such everyday forms of struggle. In fact, I have (over the years and continue to do so) spent a significant portion of time writing about such forms of struggle.* I have always acknowledged and valorized everyday forms of resistance such as slacking off, absenteeism, sabotage, and even shop floor ‘counterplanning,’ and I have taken part in such activity. More to the point, it is exactly forms of autonomous and ‘unofficial’ organizing that I find most powerful. Living in China, it is hard not to understand the value of such struggles, as there are no official forms of struggle allowed, and any attempt to organize lands one in jail. It is out of these forms of non-official and autonomous resistance that the anarchist ethic grows, and this allows anarchists to struggle within — not organize from

within a complex network of unequal power-relations. Individuals are both differentiated and homogenized, included and excluded, by such power-relations. The categories of “exploited and excluded” are indeed general, but if I was to name each individual in all their uniqueness, particularity and difference every time I wrote, my response would indeed be a little too long to read in a lifetime. This is, as can be seen from the above quotes, why I use the term multiplicity instead of mass. We all generalize in our analysis, and we must. I am no different from Chris in this matter. Chris uses general categories such as genders, races, and classes, and he should, but let’s not fool ourselves here, they are also general categories and we can’t communicate without generalizing. It has become commonplace in academic writing to attack other people for using generalities and then blindly using them oneself; let’s not repeat that pattern here.

Chris focuses on the marginalized — again a general category if there was one — but somehow he sees this as so much less general than the term “excluded,” which I have used interchangeably with “marginalized” for some years. This, of course, is not to say that there aren’t significant differences between Chris’ perspective and mine; so let’s turn back to them. Chris states that resistance is “. . . firmly situated in marginalization and difference. . .” Again, this is why certain people are authorized as legitimate representatives of the marginalized and others are excluded from speaking on the topic. For me the vast majority of humans are exploited and excluded, they form the multitude of actors from which resistance and attack grow. As anarchists we are a minority within this current — a minority which, unlike the activist who stands above the masses to organize them, is part of that current.

Humans all live under the capitalist regime of value, and while this unifies us in one sense, it doesn’t only homogenize us. Many particularities — differences, if you will — persist under the all-encompassing regime of value, and many are transformed and even produced by capitalism. Thus it is simplistic to understand capitalism as simply and only a homogenizing force. It also follows that a perspective that sees social struggle as simply difference versus sameness or heterogeneity versus homogeneity will often find itself operating in complicity with capitalism. This is most commonly

a tension in revolutionary practice between scalar levels; one cannot just choose to privilege one and ignore the other. We want to make the point that it is false to conceive of individualism and communism as a problem with a simple solution or a simple choice, and that this has important consequences for revolutionary practice. Thus we are in fact saying that it is only when the individual and class are treated separately as purely theoretical issues that a theoretical solution to the problem can be found, whereas in practice the tension will remain, it cannot be wiped out by theory. We are critiquing the use of the individual and of class as pure theoretical constructs for the very reason that we want to open the fertile space of tension that exists between them in practice.

And:

The time for thinking in terms of the ‘mass’ is long gone (if there ever was one); we need to be able to conceptualize resistance without either wiping out our differences, or denying commonality in struggle (there is only one capitalism). There is no homogeneous mass, only a multitude of participants in the struggle against capitalism. This seeming contradiction between the desires of an individual and the struggle of the multitude is indeed difficult to attend to but it is enormously important. In moments of struggle we need to make space for our differences while attacking the many headed hydra of capitalism.

Chris critiques me for generalizing about the nature of oppression: specifically he attacks my use of the terms “exploited” and “excluded” as too general and “individual” as abstract and one-dimensional. There is absolutely nothing in my initial response that indicates that I believe individuals are one-dimensional (it might be interesting to hear from Chris what he means by this). As should be clear from the above quotes I am not at all interested in wiping out or ignoring our differences; on the contrary, they are central to my analysis. To be more clear, I believe individuals are enmeshed

above — the general population of those excluded and exploited. But instead of paying attention to what I have written, Chris imagines a whole approach that I “represent” and then decides what fits into that imagined perspective and what doesn’t. From someone who claims we should listen carefully to and learn from each other, this blatant misrepresentation and fabrication is quite surprising.

3: Perhaps more damaging (and more bizarre), Chris states that I am “. . . wholly unconcerned with the consequences and dynamics of racism specifically, and of many other systems of power more generally.” And that this is “embedded in his [sasha k’s] assumptions.” Quite a shock if it was true that an anarchist was unconcerned about racism and other systems of power. Yet Chris makes no attempt to explain how it is that this is embedded in my assumptions (assumptions that he doesn’t even name). Instead, he constructs a simplistic dichotomy of two types of anti-authoritarians and then asserts that I am of the worst type of these caricatures and he is of the other. But my perspective has little relation to this caricature, and this will be more clear as this response develops. Just because I believe the state and capitalism need to be destroyed in order to end all oppression and exploitation (I thought this was the minimal definition of an anarchist) doesn’t mean I am that I believe that they are the only systems of power or hierarchies that need to be dismantled. This isn’t to suggest we have no differences in our perspectives; we have many.

Reflecting on which tactics further our goals and which don’t isn’t just a “rhetorical sleight of hand.” After I sent off my initial response I realized that the sentence in which I said calling a reformist a reformist was a “simple fact of language” was silly and simplistic — certainly a poor choice of words. Chris is right in saying “it simply isn’t a cut-and-dry issue.” But that is why we need to seriously reflect on our tactics and goals and not cut off the discussion with simplistic charges of purist anarchism and white privilege. Chris argues that I exclude discussions of race and gender: *never do I suggest that discussions of race and gender should be excluded. I never said that, nor did I imply it.* My initial response focused on the question of activism as a specialized role and as a form of organization. This limited — in scope — critique did not in any way mean that other questions would

be “excluded” from discussion. If anything it meant the opposite: A more reflexive look at tactics and goals will, of course, include an understanding of how race, gender, and class along with all unequal power-relations work together to maintain the present social order. And I never said that white privilege was merely rhetoric, that would be an absurd assertion; just because there is rhetoric surrounding an issue doesn’t mean that there is no reality to that issue. It is the rhetoric coupled up with an attack on “purist anarchism” that I critiqued as I believe it cut off important discussion on tactics and goals.

In my initial response to Chris’ article, I critiqued him for implying that just about any tactic or activity that brings about some change or other to society should be embraced by anarchists. In his response he is more clear about what counts as a reform worth fighting for and what doesn’t. However, we still have significant disagreements about this point, and I still feel that he is not reflexive enough when thinking about tactics and long range goals. (Of course, we both seem to be assuming we have the same long range goals, which might not be the case.) For most anarchists direct action has been the chosen tactic for good reason, yet Chris suggests the use of mediated action as well, and this is what I critiqued him for. The reason anarchists have chosen direct action instead of mediated action is nothing to do with trying to remain morally pure — this is what Chris argued in his initial article — but everything to do with what works. For anarchists, who want to create a world in which people act on their desires instead of being trapped by imposed decision, trapped in conditions of poverty, oppression and alienation, it is usually understood that people can’t take back their power to act through means that give that power right back to the state or some other transcendent institution (the church, the Party). We can’t use alienated means to end alienation.

The state is a form of alienated power: we have given up our power or it has been taken from us and it has been instituted in the state form. Alienated power bends back on us and forces us to act in ways we wouldn’t otherwise act or to not act in ways we wish to act. Anarchists are for the destruction of alienated power, for people taking back their power to act as they see fit instead of letting the

cares to notice particularities. The presumption [*one I most certainly never make*] is a social reality in which we are all evenly oppressed, largely undifferentiated, ‘enmeshed,’ as he says, in ‘capitalist social relations.’” Chris makes no attempt to explain how it is that I make this “presumption,” and he can’t, as I never do. Somehow from my statement that we are all enmeshed in capitalist social relations, Chris assumes that this means I believe we are all “evenly oppressed, and largely undifferentiated.” Only the most simplistic analysis of capitalist social relations would presume that we are all evenly oppressed or undifferentiated. That is an absurdity. Unfortunately, throughout his response, Chris takes me as the representative of an “approach,” then, instead of discussing what I have said, attacks that imagined approach. But I have very little in common with that approach; in fact, much of what I have written stands in opposition to just such a simplistic approach. Instead of confronting my comments, Chris resorts to creating an easily-knocked-down, cardboard-cut-out of an argument that bares not even the slightest relation to how I understand the complex pattern of our present social conditions or the complex pattern of struggle to free ourselves from them. (I use “ourselves” because it is only in solidarity with others and by joining together with others that we can liberate ourselves from such oppressive conditions, and because there are commonalities in what oppresses us!) If we are to have a discussion, we need to be better at reading each other.

This all points to the need to develop theory and practice in order to understand and attack the complex pattern of exploitation, oppression and exclusion that effects us all. This is not easy: nor can we do so and at the same time avoid the contradictions and tensions that grow out of such a process. Far from ignoring the particular, the tension between the particular and the universal has been central to my writing on anarchism and resistance for some time. Here I quote from my “The Scale of Capitalism and Resistance” from *Hot Tide 1* and a response to a letter about that article that was printed in *Hot Tide 2*:

[The] problem of the individual and society or of class versus the individual, has no simple solution; instead, there will always be

commonly used binaries are gender, race, sexual preference and class. (Although, in such perspectives class is understood as a cultural category without paying much attention to the class relations of the capitalist regime of value. Thus it is the 'middle class' that stands on the side of sameness and privilege, while if we understood the 'middle class' from a perspective of capitalist social relations we would see that most of them are working class in that they sell their time in order to survive and that surplus value is expropriated from them. But this short response is no place for a detailed class analysis.) The most dangerous effect of such a perspective is that these dichotomies can be used to claim that only those on the side of difference have the right to speak. And this is exactly what I critiqued Chris' original article for: people who question his tactics, who critique them for maintaining or preserving the systems of oppression they are supposed to be dismantling, are in advance named as standing on the wrong side of the dichotomy, and thus the content of their critique is ignored and they are told they have no authority to speak. This is dangerous and it is self-defeating. The vast majority of humans are exploited, excluded and oppressed by a complex regime of interlocking power-relations; while we certainly need to understand our position within such a system, we shouldn't authorize some to be legitimate spokespeople because of their level of suffering (or because of their activist credentials) and others as those to be ignored because they don't stand within enough categories of difference. This is similar to what happened in Maoist China. I certainly agree with Chris that all who wish to end our present nightmare need to reflect on their position in society, yet such reflection shouldn't be used to silence people.

This brings us to another misreading which, more than the others, points to how our perspectives differ; and, therefore, I discuss this misreading in much more detail as I believe it brings up some significant differences in perspective that are important for anarchists to pay attention to. Chris claims that I pay no attention to social particularities or difference. I find this critique especially strange as I usually get critiqued for just the opposite, that I stress the particular too much. Chris states: "I don't think sasha, along with the approach that he represents [that mythical approach I represent],

state act for them. This is the essence of direct action; it is the opposite of alienated power; it is acting directly on our desires. If we see something that we feel needs to be done we do it directly and don't ask the state — a form of alienated power — to do it for us. Asking or petitioning the state to act for us is mediated action. Anarchists have recognized that the use of mediated action backfires since instead of learning to act for themselves people remain dependent on the state to act for them. We will not learn to act for ourselves nor will we build power outside of state and capitalist institutions if we use mediated action instead of direct action, if we rely on alienated power to act for us instead of our own power. In fact, in most cases using mediated action only strengthens the imposition of state power and deepens our dependence.

None of this means that anarchists can't work with those who have reformist goals. As I stated before, we must work with others as we are certainly a minority within the excluded, oppressed and exploited. Nor does this mean that reforms won't come about as a result of the actions we take. Let's look at a couple of examples. The campaign against GM foods is a good example of how anarchists can work with non-anarchists. For the most part the campaign against GM foods has used direct action as its means: people have gone out and directly removed what they see as a dangerous technology. As a side effect of this campaign, some governments have instituted reforms in order to limit the use of GM foods. I would guess that these states were acting primarily out of a fear of people taking direct action; they have attempted to bring the issue back into the realm of state policy instead of uncontrollable direct action. Luckily, most of the anti-GM food campaigners haven't given in to state reform and instead have continued with direct action (the reforms will be enacted anyway, with or without our dialogue and compromise). In doing so many have come to learn to act for themselves instead of relying on the state to do it for them.

Compare this to an example of mediated action: Chris states, "[W]e need revolutionary strategy that links diverse, everyday struggles and demands to long-term radical objectives, without sacrificing either. Of course, this isn't to say that every so-called 'progressive' ballot initiative or organizing campaign is necessarily radical

or strategic.” Chris suggests that anarchists should work for certain “progressive” ballot measures, ones that enact “non-reformist or structural reforms.” First of all, let’s admit that we are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to ballot measures as we don’t have the money to spend to beat our opponents: we are playing in a game that they invented in order to beat us. Secondly, by using petitioning and mediated action we give up our power to the state: not only do we legitimate the state’s theft of our power to act, but we learn to rely on the state to act for us. This deconstructs any counter-power we have begun to build through direct action. It is through just such mediated actions that the state recuperates potentially radical movements. While diversity in struggle sounds good in the abstract, this shouldn’t come to mean that anything that brings about whatever change in society is a positive action. We need to make choices as anarchists; not all actions move us in the direction we wish to go, nor are all actions equally effective. It is even more important to be critical in our reflection on tactics considering that we are such a minority within those that are struggling to change the world we live in.

The center of our disagreement seems to be about tactics, yet as Chris correctly points out, it actually stems from our different theoretical understanding of our (as in all humans’) present conditions (in all their complexity). To be clear: Yes, I see capitalism and the state as major constitutive elements of our society. Yet I don’t think that this contradict the fact that there are “diffuse and interlocking systems of oppressive power.” In fact, capitalism and the state work with and through such diffuse systems of power. That is why we must simultaneously attempt to bring down all forms of oppression while we attack capitalism and the state. Such a task is certainly “complex, messy, and rarely straightforward.” And yes, I do see commonalities in our struggle and our circumstances (Chris critiques me for using the word “our” as if there were no commonalities). Let’s try to look at the differences in our perspectives in more detail:

To describe the context of the anti-WTO protests, Chris states, “Foremost, as Pauline Hwang notes, ‘What the media and the post-Seattle ‘movement’ are making a fuss over as ‘corporate globalization’ or ‘capitalist globalization’ are the same old imperialist, colonialist

and patriarchal and — yes racist — policies that have plagued the planet for centuries.” Such a perspective has serious implications (as do all perspectives of course). Many people within the ‘movement’ certainly are “making a fuss” over corporate globalization and others focus on a continually globalizing capitalism — a capitalism that has been a plague on the world for some 500 years. But Chris approvingly cites Hwang’s argument that instead of “making a fuss” over capitalism we should focus on imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy and racism. Hwang’s perspective in no way suggests a critique of capitalism and the state; in fact, most perspectives that focus on anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism end up defending third-world nationalism (and usually, in the process, the capitalist classes of the third world) in their attack on the racist policies of first-world nations (and they certainly are racist). Yet even if racism didn’t exist, the third world would still find itself exploited and excluded by capitalism. Here I have a serious difference with Hwang and, seemingly, with Chris. I believe that at heart capitalism will destroy the world we live in; it is doing this daily as it daily destroys the lives of those it exploits and oppresses.

A perspective that places imperialism and colonialism at its center often — as in the case of Hwang — excludes a critique of the capitalist logic which is consuming our world and of the oppressive nature of the state which maintains it. Hwang and Chris’ perspective moves us in the wrong direction as it forestalls the reflexive development of an understanding of how oppression and exploitation operate in a complex pattern across the globe; it forestalls an understanding of the totality of our present social conditions.

Again, to be very clear, this in no way implies that capitalism and the state are the cause of all of our problems, nor does it imply that we don’t need to deal with the issues of race and gender. In fact, we can’t rid our world of exploitation, exclusion, and oppression without dealing with issues such as race and gender, and I would hope this is obvious to most anarchists.

Perspectives that are organized around the simplistic binary sameness/difference construct (this does not, of course, mean that there are not real material basis for such binaries in our world) a series of binaries that are used to valorize struggle or practice. The most