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Publisher: Routledge

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New Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cnps20>

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Published online: 22 Aug 2007.

To cite this article: Leonard Williams (2007) Anarchism Revived, *New Political Science*, 29:3, 297-312, DOI:

[10.1080/07393140701510160](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393140701510160)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393140701510160>

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Anarchism Revived

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Abstract Long regarded as a dated school of political thought, anarchism has been rejuvenated in the last decade or so. From anarcho-punk bands putting out “noise music” to bands of young people sporting black attire and the circle-A, its cultural symbols are widely present. Self-identified “anarchists” have often taken center stage at protests directed at major political and financial institutions. My central purpose in this article is to explore the variety of ideological orientations found in the contemporary anarchist movement, as expressed by several of its theorists—from Chomsky and Bookchin, on the one hand, to Zerzan, Bey, and Black, on the other. The article highlights a few of the metaphysical issues raised by today’s anarchism—rationalism versus anti-rationalism, technology versus nature, creeds versus deeds—and concludes by identifying the fundamental principles characteristic of contemporary anarchism.

If the question of the twentieth century for Marxists was *Why was there no revolution in the West?*, it seems that the question for anarchists at the beginning of the twenty-first century is *What metaphysic should guide the revolution?* For people who have long had such phrases as “No God, No Masters” inscribed on their banners, it perhaps seems odd for them to place such an emphasis on metaphysic in their political thought. However, because of the complexity of today’s social and political context the realm of first principles—metaphysic—appears to be a singularly appropriate domain for an anarchist.

As odd as it may be to talk about metaphysic as the basis for anarchist thought, it may be odder still (at least to some political observers) that one should talk about anarchism at all. Long regarded as a dated, if not irrelevant, school of political thought, anarchism nevertheless has undergone yet another revival in the last decade or so.¹ From anarcho-punk bands putting out “noise music” to bands of young people sporting black attire and the circle-A, its cultural symbols are widely present. More importantly, self-identified “anarchists” have often taken center stage at protests directed at such institutions as the World Trade

¹ Anarchism has long been in and out of fashion. Its classical period, extending from 1860 to 1939, is associated with the working-class movements of the nineteenth century and the anti-fascist struggles of the Spanish Civil War. See Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen, “Introduction: Why Anarchism Still Matters,” in Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen (eds), *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 3. In the US context, we can point initially to the 1960s as a time of revival, prior to the more recent one discussed here. Indicative of anarchism’s vicissitudes are two collections of essays: Howard J. Ehrlich, Carol Ehrlich, David DeLeon and Glenda Morris (eds), *Reinventing Anarchy: What Are Anarchists Thinking These Days?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) and Howard J. Ehrlich (ed.), *Reinventing Anarchy, Again* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996).

Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Organization of American States.² Who are these new anarchists, what do they believe, and what do they want?³ Without extensive interviews with activists, questions regarding their social psychology would be difficult to answer. Indeed, given the limitations of this article, they primarily are questions for another day. For a political theorist, though, questions concerning beliefs and programs are both more interesting and more easily answered. My central purpose in this essay, then, is to explore the variety of ideological orientations found in the contemporary anarchist movement, as expressed by several of its theorists.

Of course, identifying the prominent theorists of this new anarchism is not an entirely straightforward matter. At present, in fact, “we have two co-existing generations within anarchism: people whose political formation took place in the 60s and 70s . . . and younger people who are much more informed, among other elements, by indigenous, feminist, ecological and culture-criticism thinking.”⁴ Today’s anarchists (particularly those profiled in mainstream media coverage of major protests) are primarily a group of young people noted more for their cultural apparatus and their penchant for direct action. Very few of them seem to refer to such theorists of anarchism as Bakunin, Proudhon, Goldman, or Rocker; even fewer perhaps have bothered to study their classic works.

Moreover, many contemporary anarchists overtly disdain abstract or academic theory. For example, Albert Meltzer asserts that anarchism should be conceived as “a creed that has been worked out in action rather than as the putting into practice of an intellectual idea.”⁵ Observers and thinkers can identify any number of variants, schools, or labels associated with anarchism—libertarian communists, anarcho-syndicalists, punks, primitivists, social ecologists, or individualists, just to name a few.⁶ What is distinctive about this list is that it reflects Andrej Grubacic’s observation that the different types of anarchists “are distinguished by what they do, and how they organize themselves to go about doing it.” The point, it seems, is not to argue about correct revolutionary theory or outline day-to-day life in utopia,

² Karen Goaman, “The Anarchist Travelling Circus: Reflections on Contemporary Anarchism, Anti-Capitalism and the International Scene,” in Purkis and Bowen, *Changing Anarchism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 163–180; David Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” *New Left Review* 13 (2002), pp. 61–73; Dimitrios Roussopoulos (ed.), *The Anarchist Papers* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2002); Jeff Shantz, “Beyond the State: The Return to Anarchy,” *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 12 (2003), pp. 87–103.

³ By locutions such as “new anarchists” or “today’s anarchists,” I mainly refer to anarchists writing in English, primarily in the United States and Canada. Given the confines of the essay format, as well as the diversity of *anarchisms* extant, any discussion of anarchist thought and action will be necessarily partial and incomplete.

⁴ Andrej Grubacic, “A Talk on Anarchism and the Left,” <<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID = 7716>> (accessed July 12, 2006). Cf. Purkis and Bowen, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*; Dave Morland, “Anti-Capitalism and Poststructuralist Anarchism,” in Purkis and Bowen, *Changing Anarchism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–38.

⁵ Albert Meltzer, *Anarchism: Arguments For and Against*, revised edition (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996), p. 18.

⁶ Andrej Grubacic, “Power and Revolution: The Anarchist Century,” <<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID = 10243>> (accessed July 12, 2006); Shantz, *op. cit.*; Nicolas Walter, *About Anarchism*, updated edition (London: Freedom Press 2002); Tom Wetzel and Michael Albert, “About Anarchism: Tom Wetzel Interviewed by Michael Albert,” <<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID = 5&ItemID = 4106>> (accessed July 12, 2006).

but rather to practice the revolutionary actions that to them will actually make a difference. Anarchism is thus more a tactical than a strategic theory.⁷

Not only is anarchism generally conceived as a practical creed, it is primarily a creed formed in the context of activism. As Grubacic observes, the new anarchism “exists only in a dialogue: it came into being by interaction with other participants in the planetary circulation of struggles. The secret of new anarchism, of its [*sic*] ‘irresistible charm,’ is its [*sic*] openness to the world of struggles.” This orientation toward practice and action naturally makes it hard to locate any particular group of theorists that every anarchist or anarchist wannabe must read. Besides, even if that were possible, one would be reminded that anarchists are not supposed to follow blindly any set of views propounded by so-called authorities. In short, as many of today’s anarchists persuasively argue, anarchism must necessarily mean different things to different people.⁸

Still, the task of identifying key theorists has been made a bit easier by the fact that many anarchists today (even anti-technology primitivists) have used the World Wide Web to reach out to potential adherents. Indeed, several websites that are devoted to informing people about anarchism do so by offering links to the writings of both classic and contemporary theorists.⁹ In studying anarchism’s current manifestations, I particularly sought references to contemporary theorists and theories of anarchism. A small number of theorists received multiple mentions by anarchist websites, and since these theorists also refer to each other (sometimes critically so), their works therefore became the focus of this study. Further, as other political observers began to comment on the revival of anarchism, the names of additional theorists relevant to the study readily emerged.

Theorists of Anarchism

The first principles of an ideology such as anarchism often appear to be an elusive quarry. Even its defenders regard anarchism as more an evolving tradition—a set of overlapping and sometimes competing traditions or aspects—than a general theory or a coherent ideology.¹⁰ Because it transforms itself to fit the vicissitudes of time, place, and circumstance, any effort to set forth a contemporary platform for anarchists is likely doomed to failure. In this regard, with its situational and relative character, anarchism appears to be rather like conservatism—at least as it was described by Samuel Huntington.¹¹ Indeed, sometimes it seems that the only thing that is constant about anarchism is its inconstancy; as John Moore observes: “Regardless of the content of its praxis during any period, the distinctive character

⁷ Grubacic, “Power and Revolution,” *op. cit.*; Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Morland, *op. cit.*

⁸ Grubacic, “A Talk on Anarchism and the Left,” *op. cit.*

⁹ Anarchist writings can be found online at Internet Anarchist University <<http://www.infoshop.org/iau.html>>, An Anarchist Reading List <<http://www.zpub.com/notes/aan-read.html>>, Spunk Library <<http://www.spunk.org/>>, and The Anarchist Library <<http://flag.blackened.net/daver/anarchism/index.html>>. Printed works by anarchists may also be obtained through AK Press <<http://www.akpress.org/>>, among other sources.

¹⁰ Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–63.

¹¹ Samuel Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” *American Political Science Review* 51:2 (1957), pp. 454–473.

of anarchism remains its continual capacity to redefine and reconfigure itself.”¹² Nevertheless, despite the absence of any universal anarchist credo, enough family resemblances among particular bodies of anarchist thought occur to make it possible for us to talk about anarchism as a discourse, if not an ideology.

At the most basic level, anarchism is fundamentally opposed to the existence of the State and the authority relations that the State codifies, legitimates, or represents.¹³ Although its origins can be traced to Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century (Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Godwin, for example) or even to Taoist thought, anarchism has been associated primarily with certain political and social movements of the nineteenth century. In recent decades, however, anarchist thought has moved beyond its central focus on the State or capital to embrace wide-ranging thinking about such matters as the environment, technology, work, and the status of women.¹⁴ Through it all, anarchism seems to retain its central character as a viewpoint opposed to the presence of coercion, hierarchy, and authority in human affairs.¹⁵

Among the theorists writing about anarchy today one can find any number of strains of thought with various labels—social ecology, primitivism, ontological anarchy, anarcho-feminism, or anarcho-syndicalism, for example. To be sure, some strains have seen greater development or have been given more attention than others. This is not the place, however, to develop an extensive catalogue of the different types of anarchist views; such a catalogue may not even be useful. Instead, let us explore the outlines of contemporary anarchism by first discussing the ideas of two theorists who have done much to keep the anarchist tradition alive in the United States—namely, Noam Chomsky and the late Murray Bookchin.

Although he is often cited as an influential figure, Chomsky initially did not claim to be an anarchist thinker. Indeed, in a 1976 interview, he chose to identify himself as little more than a “derivative fellow traveler.”¹⁶ Though he had introduced *Anarchism*, a book by Daniel Guerin published in 1970, Chomsky has long been better known for his persistent critiques of American foreign policy and the mass media than for his contributions to anarchist theory. These incisive critiques served to keep his name prominent among succeeding generations of anarchists, if only because of the continuing importance of issues related to war, globalization, and a media-saturated society. Yet, as anarchist theory and practice revived, Chomsky gradually warmed to the label and, in 1996, explicitly proclaimed that his “personal visions are fairly traditional anarchist ones, with origins in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism.”¹⁷

¹² John Moore, “Prophets of the New World: Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin, and Fredy Perlman,” <<http://www.nothingness.org/sociala/sa20/20moore.html>> (accessed June 8, 2000).

¹³ Alan Carter, “Analytical Anarchism: Some Conceptual Foundations,” *Political Theory* 28:2 (2000), pp. 230–253.

¹⁴ Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen describe this responsiveness to new social movements as reflecting a paradigm shift within anarchism. See Purkis and Bowen, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Noam Chomsky, “The Relevance of Anarcho-Syndicalism,” in Barry Pateman (ed.), *Chomsky on Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), p. 135.

¹⁷ Noam Chomsky, “Goals and Visions,” in Pateman, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

On balance, what Chomsky has written or said about anarchism amounts to this: anarchism, opposed as it is to both exploitation and domination, constitutes a libertarian variant of socialism.¹⁸ Its fundamental approach, as he noted in a 1995 interview, is “to seek out and identify structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination in every aspect of life, and to challenge them.”¹⁹ In his view, advanced industrial and technological societies “raise possibilities for self-management over a broad scale that simply didn’t exist in an earlier period.”²⁰ As a result of these views, Chomsky has been criticized for either relying upon notions of workers’ control and self-management or positing an industrial, highly organized, radically democratic society as a revolutionary goal. Indeed, so rationalist and pragmatic is Chomsky that he finds contemporary circumstances to be ones in which anarchists may need to defend, rather than simply attack, certain state institutions—while nevertheless seeking to democratize them.²¹

For the most part, though, Chomsky has remained above the fray by generally avoiding polemical disputes with other anarchists. The same cannot be said for Murray Bookchin. First coming to notoriety with the publication of *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, he has long been a central figure in the anarchist pantheon.²² Often hailed as the most significant anarchist theorist of the twentieth century, he has also been criticized for being a statist masquerading as an anarchist.²³ In some respects, perhaps, such criticism is the fate of any figure so long on the public stage; but in others, the reception that Bookchin received may be traced to the ideological factions into which anarchists have divided themselves.

Bookchin was one of the first social thinkers to link environmental and political concerns and to show the interconnections between ecology and anarchism. Labeling his approach “social ecology,” Bookchin saw each domain as marked by participatory freedom, ever-increasing differentiation, mutuality and community, and unity in diversity.²⁴ To embrace social ecology is to denounce hierarchy in the name of creative freedom and enriching diversity; it is to favor renewable energy and human-scale technology, along with decentralized economic and political structures. The goal of Bookchin’s “libertarian municipalist agenda . . . is to reopen a public sphere in flat opposition to statism, one that allows for maximum democracy in the literal sense of the term, and to create in embryonic form the institutions that can give power to a people generally.”²⁵

Bookchin’s approach to anarchism emphasizes not only a generalized respect for the environment, but also an Aristotelian conception of politics. Indeed, his preference for rational discourse and radical democracy brought Bookchin considerable criticism from younger anarchists who viewed the anarchist

¹⁸ Noam Chomsky, “Introduction,” in Daniel Guerin (ed.), *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), pp. vii–xx; “Notes on Anarchism,” in Pateman, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–132.

¹⁹ Noam Chomsky, “Anarchism, Marxism and Hope for the Future,” in Pateman, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁰ Chomsky, “The Relevance of Anarcho-Syndicalism,” *op. cit.*, p. 136.

²¹ Chomsky, “Goals and Visions,” *op. cit.*, p. 194; Chomsky, “Anarchism, Intellectuals and the State,” in Pateman, *op. cit.*, pp. 212–215.

²² Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1971).

²³ Bob Black, *Anarchy after Leftism* (Columbia, MO: Columbia Alternative Library, 1997), pp. 76–87.

²⁴ Janet Biehl (ed.), *The Murray Bookchin Reader* (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 40–41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

movement as not merely anti-state but also broadly anti-political. Bookchin initially shared their concerns with rooting out all forms of domination, declaring anarchism to be “a libidinal movement of humanity against coercion in any form, reaching back in time to the very emergence of propertied society, class rule, and the state”.²⁶ However, Bookchin later turned away from such a position of global negativity; rather than give free rein to political libido, for example, he issued a reminder that anarchism should be conceived as a “programmatically” movement. Where he once argued that anarchism could not be viewed as a uniform ideology, he later came to identify anarchism with a “commitment to four basic tenets: a confederation of decentralized municipalities; an unwavering opposition to statism; a belief in direct democracy; and a vision of a libertarian communist society.”²⁷

What marks thinkers like Chomsky and Bookchin seems to be their reliance on the rationalist tradition.²⁸ Chomsky’s work, for example, focuses primarily on scrutinizing the ideological presumptions of contemporary political decisions and discourse. He is better at taking arguments apart, showing their contradictions, than he is at discussing questions of value or outlining the features of a new society. Indeed, like Marx, Chomsky believes that one should not try to sketch those features in too much detail.²⁹ Focused as he is on the intellectual critique of what governmental leaders do and say, rationalism must clearly be at the center of his activity, even when Chomsky states his predilection and preference for anarchism.

Bookchin was even more rationalistic than Chomsky, and in some respects, more combative. For Bookchin, metaphysical issues were front and center, vital to the future of anarchism. Noting a long-standing tension between “a personalistic commitment to individual autonomy and a collectivist commitment to social freedom,” Bookchin sided with the latter as the best (if not the only) understanding of what anarchism is all about. In a 1995 essay, “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism,” he severely criticized the latter tradition for its adventurism, postmodernism, “a basically apolitical and anti-organizational commitment to imagination, desire, and ecstasy, and an intensely self-oriented enchantment of everyday life . . .”³⁰ Bookchin’s rationalism could also be seen in his support for technology (albeit locally organized and human-scale technology—using renewable energy where possible), his belief that evolution is directed toward greater complexity, his insistence that anarchism be an organized social movement, and his deliberative conception of politics.

Such leftist rationalism (which began to be challenged in the late 1970s) had seemed passé, if not retrograde, by the 1990s. In 1989, for example, the activists who published *No Picnic* in Vancouver wrote that they “strongly reject and resist the tendency to categorize and don’t believe in blueprints for ‘revolution.’”³¹ Declaring themselves “people, not ism-oids with a cause,” they preferred to

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145; Bookchin, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁷ Biehl, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁸ Purkis and Bowen, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, pp. 2, 9.

²⁹ Noam Chomsky, “Interview with Barry Pateman,” in Pateman, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

³⁰ Murray Bookchin, “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm,” <http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/soclife.html> (accessed June 4, 2000).

³¹ Allan Antliff (ed.), *Only a Beginning: An Anarchist Anthology* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), p. 51.

identify what they liked or hated about contemporary life rather than worry about sterile debates concerning theory and strategy. This point of view regards any anarchism rooted in the traditions of leftist politics as unhappily trapped in dead dogmas and boring rhetoric.

By contrast, the Toronto activists who published *Kick It Over* declared in 1985 that they were not part of an “official” anarchist movement (or even an “official left”); instead, they would embrace spontaneity—“the triumph of life over dogma.”³² Bob Black echoed their complaint, finding no better example of leftist anarchy’s sterility than Bookchin—whom Black regards as a “municipal statist.”³³ For Black, Bookchin’s preference for local government and direct democracy reflects an adherence to rationalist ideology and to politics as usual, not a commitment to thoroughgoing anarchy. The goal of these critics of rationalism has been to move anarchism beyond its leftist affiliations, to go “beyond Bookchin” and his abstract theorizing and system-building.³⁴ Instead, today’s anarchists seek inspiration and energy from whatever anti-authoritarian sources emerge in politics and culture.³⁵

Anarchist Theorists

In contrast to Bookchin and Chomsky, a more diverse group of anarchist theorists has emerged in the last two decades. Their political lives and concerns can be traced either to the New Left or to the new social movements that have come to shape politics in many countries. This group of theorists includes people like John Zerzan and David Watson (a.k.a. George Bradford), who came to anarchism from ecological activism; Hakim Bey and Bob Black, who take a postmodernist or post-structuralist approach to anarchism; and still other theorists who either propose an eclecticism or enter the debate only to take issue with particular ideas and practices. Some of these theorists have become quite well known among activist youth, while others have remained on the margins of contemporary anarchist discourse.

Several years ago, a journalistic profile of activists opposed to gentrification in the Pacific Northwest highlighted the influence that John Zerzan had acquired in the Eugene, Oregon, area. The profile identified Zerzan, rightly, as “a leading advocate of primitivism, which goes far beyond matters of how the state is or isn’t constructed, considering technology and most of what we consider civilization to be deeply pathological and needing to be eliminated.”³⁶ As a result of such profiles, it was not long before the anarchist label became associated with the ideas of primitivism.³⁷

³² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³³ Black, *op. cit.*

³⁴ David Watson, *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1998).

³⁵ This is consistent with post-structuralist views of the multifaceted nature of power and resistance. See May, *op. cit.*; Morland, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Geov Parrish, “The New Anarchists,” <<http://www.seattleweekly.com/features/9935/features-parrish.shtml>> (accessed June 4, 2000).

³⁷ Steve Millett, “Technology Is Capital: Fifth Estate’s Critique of the Megamachine,” in Purkis and Bowen, *Changing Anarchism, op. cit.*, pp. 73–98; Michael Albert, “Anarchism = Zerzan?,” <<http://www.zmag.org/zerzan.htm>> (accessed May 17, 2006).

The arguments made by primitivists often begin by identifying the ills associated with modern life—not only hierarchy and domination (racism, sexism, and the like), but also physical and mental illnesses, stress, violence, and ecological destruction.³⁸ Once these forms of unhappiness are diagnosed, their true cause is revealed to be not simply modernity but civilization itself. Defenders of civilization often suggest, as Sigmund Freud did, that some psychic and political repression may well be necessary—if only to keep us from falling back into another dark age or a Hobbesian state of nature.³⁹ Zerzan counters such a claim by noting that recent anthropological and archaeological findings indicate “that life before domestication/agriculture was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health. This was our human nature, for a couple of million years, prior to enslavement by priests, kings, and bosses.”⁴⁰

Zerzan’s argument might be seen as a sort of reverse-Weberianism, one that calls for a “re-enchantment” of the world. Re-enchantment is central to the eco-anarchist project of simultaneously building respect for nature and undermining the claims of hierarchy. For the primitivists, our disenchantment with the world has several root causes—notably, “technics” (technology), domestication and agriculture, the division of labor, urbanization, and even language itself. Each such phenomenon has worked to embed people in systems that not only stress conformity and obedience, but also produce a serious rift between human beings and nature. The only way to emerge from the chains of civilization, from the bonds of the “megamachine,” is to join together our new insights into the nature of primitive societies with the traditional anarchist analysis of power relations.⁴¹ In doing so, we will move toward the ultimate goal of creating an ecological, harmonious, anti-authoritarian society—“a world of the face-to-face, in which even names can be forgotten, a world which knows that enchantment is the opposite of ignorance.”⁴²

Enchanting the world once again (re-establishing both a respect for and a mystical union with nature) makes for an intriguing metaphysic, to be sure. Yet it need not provide any direct response to the political question of how people warped by civilization might actually cast it aside. In the minds of many people, the stereotypical anarchist response to the world’s ills might be to assassinate a politician, toss a bomb, or throw rocks either at commercial windows or at police officers in riot gear. While he certainly never advocated the most violent acts, Zerzan did seem to endorse trashing—primarily in the name of doing something (anything) that might help dismantle the system. In his view, the problems that social-change activists have faced stem from not being thoroughgoing enough in their efforts to bring about a new society: “Our biggest obstacle lies in forgetting the primacy of the negative. Hesitation, peaceful coexistence—this deficiency of desire will prove fatal if allowed to be ascendant. The truly humanitarian and

³⁸ John Zerzan, *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1998).

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961).

⁴⁰ Zerzan, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴¹ Millett, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–98; John Moore, “A Primitivist Primer,” <<http://www.eco-action.org/dt/primer.html>> (accessed June 16, 2000).

⁴² John Zerzan, “Language: Origin and Meaning,” <<http://www.primitivism.com/language.htm>> (accessed July 19, 2007).

pacific impulse is that which is committed to relentlessly destroying the malignant dynamic known as civilization, including its roots."⁴³

Forsaking the more mystical side of today's anarchism, Hakim Bey suggests that both primitivists and "extropians" (people who postulate a techno-utopia) suffer a common failing—they both presume to have *the* answer to all of society's problems. In contrast to their totalizing approaches, Bey's work presents a postmodernist brief for indeterminacy, ambiguity, and choice—in short, for a truly non-authoritarian approach to social change. Bey promotes the Temporary Autonomous Zone, the TAZ, as the revolutionary vehicle that "will release a hundred blooming flowers, a thousand, a million memes of resistance, of difference, on non-ordinary consciousness—the will to power as 'strangeness.'"⁴⁴

In a flurry of images and allusions, Bey encourages anarchists to abandon the old categories and approaches, the ideologies and movements of the past, in order to embrace an "ontological anarchism."⁴⁵ Purity and consistency are to be set aside as one liberates the imagination through spontaneous acts of Poetic Terrorism (PT) and Art Sabotage (AS). What is the difference between the concepts? Referring to an action by the Yippies in the 1960s, Bey observes that to "throw money away at the Stock Exchange was pretty decent Poetic Terrorism—but to *destroy* the money would have been good Art Sabotage."⁴⁶ Stressing play, as well as the realization of desire, this approach suggests that one should act in the here and now to create zones of freedom (TAZs) amid broader contexts of life marked by hierarchy, domination, and ugliness. For Bey,

it is the festival (with its ZeroWork and "promiscuity") that functions as the crucial insurrectionary praxis or principle of social mutability—the creation of festal space; the creation of carnival to fill the festal space—the creation of the *temporary autonomous zone* with the No Go Zone—festival as resistance and as uprising, perhaps in a single form, in a single hour of pleasure—festival as the very meaning or deep inner structure of autonomy.⁴⁷

Still, in the final analysis, no single course of action can be recommended. This is particularly true in today's post-Cold War context, wherein work for good causes appears to have no revolutionary consciousness or guiding myth, while illegal activity lacks both consciousness and results.⁴⁸ The point is to leave the question of what to do up to those who will actually do it, much as most anarchists prefer to leave the construction of the new society to those who will build it after the revolution. In such a context, Bey's approach emphasizes acts of aesthetico-political freedom—what might be called Opposition Now.

⁴³ John Zerzan, "On the Transition: Postscript to *Future Primitive*," <<http://www.primitivism.com/transit.htm>> (accessed July 19, 2007).

⁴⁴ Hakim Bey, "Primitives and Extropians," <<http://www.hermetic.com/bey/primitives.htm>> (accessed July 19, 2007).

⁴⁵ Hakim Bey, T. A. Z.: *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2003).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Hakim Bey, "Boundary Violations," <<http://www.hermetic.com/bey/boundary.html>> (accessed July 19, 2007).

⁴⁸ Hakim Bey, "Millennium," <<http://www.hermetic.com/bey/millennium/millennium.html>> (accessed July 19, 2007).

Bob Black, a theorist involved in many of the debates circulating among today's anarchists, shares Bey's preference for an "ontological" or a "lifestyle" anarchism. In fact, he believes that anarchists should move beyond the categories of right and left, even beyond their socialist roots, in order to borrow ideas and approaches from such diverse sources as primitivism, situationism, punk culture, and even "beer culture." Creating this new, "Type 3"-anarchism would also require a new vocabulary, so Black suggests that "anarchy-ists [should] call themselves *anarchs* . . . because, like the corresponding distinction of *monarch* from *monarchist*, it designates not what we believe but what we *are*, insofar as our power permits: powers unto ourselves."⁴⁹

Just what is the positive content of this anarchy-ism? For Black, it centers on something of a revival of Charles Fourier's concerns with making work pleasurable and playful. In other words, anarchism should steadfastly call for the "abolition of work." As Black puts it, "we have to take what useful work remains and transform it into a pleasing variety of game-like and craft-like pastimes, indistinguishable from other pleasurable pastimes, except that they happen to yield useful end-products."⁵⁰

Similarly, for David Watson, the new anarchism should embrace a very non-programmatic, eclectic approach to creating the new society. Watson believes that anarchism should draw on the whole of human experience—"from our primordial animist kinship with the phenomenal world, to the wisdom bequeathed to us by archaic civilizations, to modern traditions of revolution, freedom and return"—for its inspiration. Indeed, anarchists "must be both unsentimental and generous, finding ways to enhance diversity, communal responsibility and autonomy in whatever context we find ourselves."⁵¹

So far, we have seen how many of today's anarchists have rejected some of the traits associated with Western civilization. These activists have rejected—often in strong, even vulgar terms—not just what might be regarded as negative features of that civilization (namely, hierarchy, deism, or patriarchy), but also what mainstream culture typically deems as positive aspects (such as rationality, capitalism, or parliamentary democracy).⁵² In short, technology and the "domination" of nature, language and rationalism, politics and work—all of these phenomena have been criticized, if not abandoned, by today's anarchist theorists. If civilization is problematic, one must return to nature; if work no longer fulfills, try play; and if political theory and organization do not bring about the revolution, then embrace the idea that anything goes—make love, not war; make art, not politics.⁵³

As both Michael Albert and Bookchin have noted, there are limits to both primitivism and lifestyle anarchism. Albert has particularly been critical, noting that Zerzan's "mistake is to rightly notice various horrible technologies but then

⁴⁹ Bob Black, "My Anarchism Problem," <<http://www.spunk.org/library/writers/black/sp001644.html>> (accessed April 28, 2000), emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Bob Black, "The Abolition of Work," in Ehrlich, *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

⁵¹ Watson, *op. cit.*, pp. 240–241.

⁵² Antliff, *op. cit.*, pp. 64–65.

⁵³ The range of anarchist thinking reflected here is profiled in James Bowen, "Moving Targets: Rethinking Anarchist Strategies," in Purkis and Bowen, *Changing Anarchism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–128.

wrongly attribute the problem they pose not to mutable social structures and institutions which impose the bad features on the technologies and the bad technologies on us, but to the entire category of technology per se."⁵⁴ In a similar vein, Bookchin believed that these variants of anarchism have become too individualistic, too personalistic. "Lifestyle anarchism, largely because it is concerned with a 'style' rather than a society, glosses over capitalist accumulation, with its roots in the competitive marketplace, as the source of ecological devastation, and gazes as if transfixed at the alleged break of humanity's 'sacred' or 'ecstatic' unity with 'Nature' and at the 'disenchantment of the world' by science, materialism, and 'logocentricity.'"⁵⁵ For Bookchin, the approaches of Zerzan and Bey inevitably lead to an irrationalist hedonism rather than any useful, critical analysis of society.

Whether or not one accepts such critiques, an eclectic amalgam of anarchist theory and practice appears as the only alternative to taking sides in the debate between the advocates of social anarchism and those favoring lifestyle anarchism. More than anything else, it seems, today's anarchists opt for a characteristic stance of theoretical open-endedness. Thus, the typical theorist sees in today's anarchism a worthy diversity and pluralism, rather than a destructive factionalism. In other words, doctrinal differences among anarchists are assumed to be surface differences of emphasis rather than deep differences of principle.⁵⁶ Sometimes, though, a theorist will regard these differences within the anarchist family as a matter of serious concern. For instance, Tom Wetzel roots such conflicts in "different circumstances of life" (e.g., whether one is a dropout or a wage-earner), different perceptions of the tactical political situation, or even "underlying philosophical differences . . . on issues like the relation of the individual to the social collectivity, how to analyse the structure of society, how to envision the alternative to capitalism."⁵⁷

Because controversies are inescapable, it is not uncommon for a theorist to seek to unify and purify the anarchist movement, to call it back to long-standing principles. For example, once he left primitivism behind for anarcho-syndicalism, Graham Purchase sought common ground in observing that the anarchist movement "has always distrusted large-scale, wasteful industrial practices and deplored the regimentation involved in work and the factory system, and has placed its faith in the self-governing, environmentally integrated community."⁵⁸ Similarly, Chaz Bufe, somewhat affiliated with Bookchinism, called attention to the disarray among activists.⁵⁹ In his view, anarchists should recognize that what they have in common is more important than what divides them. Indeed, their widely shared and fundamental concepts—"mutual aid, noncoerciveness, voluntary cooperation rather than competition, nonhierarchical organization, decentralization, and

⁵⁴ Albert, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Bookchin, "Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism," *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ Wetzel and Albert, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Graham Purchase, "Anarcho-Syndicalism, Technology and Ecology," <<http://flag.blackened.net/daver/anarchism/aste.html>> (accessed June 10, 2000).

⁵⁹ Chaz Bufe, "A Future Worth Living!" <<http://flag.blackened.net/daver/anarchism/future.html>> (accessed June 10, 2000); "Listen, Anarchist!", <<http://flag.blackened.net/daver/anarchism/listen.html>> (accessed June 10, 2000).

individual freedom coupled with individual responsibility"—must necessarily be at the center of any viable attempt to create a new society.⁶⁰

Practical Anarchy

In many respects, though, the writings in anarchist "infoshops" and "zines" often try to avoid becoming anything resembling political treatises. Laying out the basic values and central principles of anarchism, reminding people of the prominent figures in the history of anarchism, or dispelling the still dominant stereotype of the mad bomber—these are the common expressions that often pass for theory among today's anarchists. As a worldview, anarchism thus is neither a cultural milieu nor an individual lifestyle; it is neither formal membership in an organization nor a willingness to discuss abstract ideas. Instead, anarchism "is practical activity which in whatever small way helps to increase mutual aid, destroy capitalism and bring about libertarian communism".⁶¹

Not surprisingly, then, theory often takes a back seat to the action orientation that has long characterized the anarchist tradition. For anarchists, as the first issue of the Vancouver-based *Open Road* proclaimed in 1976, "theories and abstractions must be tested in concrete practice," and therefore, anarchist journals often "are more concerned with reporting on what people and organizations are doing than what they talk about doing."⁶² It is not their values (whether decentralization, liberty, or consensus, for example) that make anarchists unique; rather, "what distinguishes anarchists from the rest of society is our emphasis on *direct action* to achieve our goals."⁶³

The concept of action here refers to everything from do-it-yourself media to neighborhood organizing, from promoting alternative energy to providing free food to the poor and homeless. For example, chapters of the group Food Not Bombs have tried to live out the spirit of mutual aid in the here and now, not in some distant post-revolutionary future. Although it focuses on promoting non-violence and vegetarianism, its other concerns with consensus decision-making and ecological sustainability have made it attractive as an example of practical anarchy.⁶⁴ For activists attracted to these groups, the message of anarchism is to take charge and directly address the immediate issues in one's community rather than work to promote some governmental solution to a problem.⁶⁵

For other activists, the messages from today's anarchists center on more explicitly political forms of direct action. Both the Ruckus Society and the Direct Action Network provided training in and support for non-violent direct action for any number of organizations. In major protests, other groups have preferred more yippie-like efforts, such as those of the Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade, the

⁶⁰ Bufe, "A Future Worth Living!", *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Meltzer, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁶² Antliff, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁶³ "What Do Anarchists Do?", <<http://www.infoshop.org/do.html>> (accessed June 11, 2000). Cf. Bowen, *op. cit.*, and Goaman, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Chris Crass, "Towards a Non-Violent Society: A Position Paper on Anarchism, Social Change and Food Not Bombs," <http://www.practicalanarchy.org/fnb_crass.html> (accessed June 8, 2000).

⁶⁵ "A Quick Guide to Anarchy for Journalists," <<http://www.zpub.com/notes/aan-QuickGuide.html>> (accessed June 4, 2000).

guerrilla gardening collective (formed to do battle with international agribusiness by reclaiming urban areas for greenspace), and even the Anarchist Marching Band. Whether in the form of street demonstrations or an urban bookstore, many of today's anarchists are more focused on getting things done and much less concerned with developing a political philosophy or taking sides in polemical disputes.⁶⁶ In some sense, Dave Neal speaks for these "inductive" anarchists when he writes that—since "no tract or manifesto can possibly cover all human dreams, hopes and aspirations"—it is patently obvious that "only two things really matter: 1) organizing solidarity among working people; 2) encouraging popular direct action."⁶⁷ Anarchy, in short, is for anybody—not just theorists and ideologues.

In such a circumstance, then, what role is there for an anarchist theorist or intellectual? An anarchist theorist committed to the movement, it seems, has to be careful to avoid what the Chinese Communists once called "commandism"—being too far in front of the people or functioning as a self-proclaimed (and self-important) leader. According to Grubacic, an anarchist intellectual "should not lecture, not dictate, not even necessarily think of oneself as a teacher, but must listen, explore and discover."⁶⁸ Yet one cannot dispense with theory altogether. To do so, again as the Chinese Communists noted, would mean falling victim to the opposite evil of "tailism"—simply following behind the people, without providing adequate guidance for them. Though there may be no universal approach to anarchism, there has to be a role for reflexive thought—if only in theorizing anarchist practice: "Even more than High Theory, what anarchism needs is what might be called low theory: a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project."⁶⁹

Explaining Anarchy

Before we conclude our examination of the new anarchism, one question that remains is *Why did the ideology of anarchism re-emerge to capture the imagination and allegiance of a new generation?* Abby Scher has identified three elements in its contemporary appeal: (1) today's anarchism stresses a practical radicalism; (2) today's younger anarchists may be attracted by the stories of anarchism's martyrs; and (3) anarchism's advocacy of direct action.⁷⁰ With the exception of the second explanation, these points seem reasonable. For a distinctly non-historical generation of activists, stories of martyrs—tales of anarchists past—are not all that likely to have played a significant role in motivating today's anarchists. It is hard to believe that an individual donning the costume and attitude of the Black Bloc imagines himself or herself as a reincarnation of a martyr from the anarchist brigades of the Spanish Civil War. Hence, it would seem that a better understanding of the attraction of anarchism today requires rephrasing and supplementing Scher's account.

⁶⁶ Abby Scher, "Anarchism Faces the '90s," *Dollars & Sense* 222 (1999), pp. 30–35.

⁶⁷ Dave Neal, "Anarchism: Ideology or Methodology?," <<http://www.spunk.org/library/intro/practice/sp001689.html>> (accessed April 23, 2000).

⁶⁸ Grubacic, "Power and Revolution," *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Scher, *op. cit.*

Anarchism appeals as an ideology partly because we now live in an age of diminished hopes and dreams. Efforts to overthrow capitalism by Marxist, Leninist, or Maoist revolutions all ended in greater tyranny, not in the onset of any promised realm of freedom.⁷¹ The fall of Communism, the failures of modern government and politics, and a growing dissatisfaction with traditional discourse have all created a political culture marked by emptiness. People no longer believe that politics is a worthwhile enterprise, one that either requires or rewards their sustained attention.⁷² If anything, people have for some time turned inward in the search for anything to believe in, some element of faith. It may be rather ironic that the decline of utopia has led youthful activists to embrace the most utopian of ideologies. "But the new themes of the New Anarchism, or, better yet, the New Anarchisms also have popular appeal—not because they pander to prevalent illusions but because they pander (and why not?) to prevalent *disillusions*."⁷³ In the absence of faith in government, faith in people—that is, faith in the like-minded souls found in neighborhoods, face-to-face communities, and interpersonal relations—seems like a natural alternative. It is no wonder, then, that today's anarchists often characterize their efforts in terms of affinity groups and a movement of movements.⁷⁴

Add to this the fact that any number of contemporary cultural trends stress the triumph of individuality and the spontaneity of action. One can point to the anti-authoritarian tendencies of post-structuralist thought—particularly with its critique of prevailing modes of discourse, but also with its stress upon the mix of aesthetic and political concerns found in the concept of performance.⁷⁵ Alternatively, one can highlight the pervasive individualism of American culture, ostensibly reaching new levels of intensity as we came to "bowl alone."⁷⁶ Yet we must not overlook the increased emphasis in our culture upon the importance of community service by volunteers, working primarily through religious and civic organizations. The prevailing spirit of the age seems to be that no one can tell us what to do—particularly no outsider—but we know we must act, act in ways that achieve tangible results for the people most immediately around us.

Above all else, it seems to me that anarchism is resurgent because, in some real sense, there is no place left for radicals to go in an age of globalization.⁷⁷ The state has been made increasingly irrelevant by ever more distant, yet ever more powerful corporations. The Old Left was discredited for promoting centralized or bureaucratic governmental solutions, while the New Left floundered on identity politics and the aging of its cadres. Even feminism may have been both

⁷¹ Grubacic, "Power and Revolution," *op. cit.*

⁷² Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13.

⁷³ Black, *Anarchy after Leftism*, *op. cit.*, p. 145, emphasis in original.

⁷⁴ "Black Bloc Interview," in Roussopoulos, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–190; Peggy Kornegger, "Anarchism: The Feminist Connection," in Ehrlich, *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, *op. cit.*, pp. 160–162.

⁷⁵ May, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁷⁷ Graeber, *op. cit.*; Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen, "Conclusion: How Anarchism Still Matters," in Purkis and Bowen, *Changing Anarchism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 213–229; Shantz, *op. cit.*

encompassed and transcended by anarchism's opposition to all relationships of power.⁷⁸ Apparently, no extant ideology can serve our need for a secular religion; nor does one seem likely to be invented in this cynical, postmodern age. With the decline of politics, there is only culture. With the decline of community, there is only oneself. In short, with the long-term tension between political and cultural radicals clearly decided in favor of the cultural ones, anarchy is indeed for anyone and everyone.⁷⁹

Certainly, anarchy is for anyone with a utopian bent, for anyone seeking to explore a realm of infinite possibility, for anyone believing "that everyone, not just a small elite, is entitled to a satisfactory life."⁸⁰ Perhaps it is this thoroughgoing radicalism that has made anarchism the most viable worldview for radicals today. Contemporary anarchism, Albert suggests, "is the widely awakening impetus to fight on the side of the oppressed in every domain of life, from family, to culture, to state, to economy, to the now very visible international arena of 'globalization,' and to do so in creative and courageous ways conceived to win improvements in people's lives now while leading toward new institutions in the future."⁸¹

An Anarchist Metaphysic

The metaphysical issues raised by today's anarchism—rationalism versus anti-rationalism, technology versus nature, creeds versus deeds—are not only where we began, they must also be where we end. At present, no single effort to call activists back to first principles or to get theorists to focus on practical actions seems ready to bridge the chasms in the anarchist movement. Anarchism today is theoretically diverse, philosophically fragmented, and practically divided. Both the allure and the frustrations of anarchism can be found in the observation that it "is more than just a political philosophy; it is a way of life that encompasses political, pragmatic, and personal aspects."⁸² Despite the revived interest in anarchism brought about by the alternative globalization movement, the sheer diversity of approaches to anarchist thought and action may well make it difficult for a unified movement to be identified, let alone built and sustained.

What, then, are the key elements of a metaphysic suitable for today's anarchists? One element that remains unquestioned is anarchism's bedrock commitment to opposing authoritarianism in almost any form. To be sure, anarchists continually struggle against tendencies toward hierarchy and authority, both in the broader society and in their own organizations. Roberto Michel's "iron law of oligarchy"—and the allied threats of expertise and bureaucracy—remains a perpetual thorn in the side of anarchist theory and practice. Still, despite the obstacles to liberation that exist, few anarchist activists

⁷⁸ L. Susan Brown, "Beyond Feminism: Anarchism and Human Freedom," in Ehrlich, *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149–155.

⁷⁹ Christopher Lasch, "The Disintegration of the New Left," in James A. Gould and Willis H. Truitt (eds), *Political Ideologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 336–346.

⁸⁰ Simon Read, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Anarchism, But Were Afraid to Ask* (London: Rebel Press, 2004), p. 12.

⁸¹ Michael Albert, "Anarchism?!" *ZNet* (2001), <<http://www.zmag.org/Sustainers/content/2001-2005/2010albert.htm>> (accessed May 17, 2006).

⁸² Liz A. Highleyman, "An Introduction to Anarchism," <<http://www.spunk.org/texts/intro/sp001550.html>> (accessed July 19, 2007).

or theorists (whether rationalist or not) could not be characterized as favoring both freedom and equality. As Grubacic observes, anarchists “believe that human freedom and happiness would be best guaranteed by a society based on principles of self-organization, voluntary association, and mutual aid, and because we reject all forms of social relations based on systemic violence, such as the state or capitalism.”⁸³ Anarchists must necessarily believe that humans can indeed pursue their own goals, can indeed live in peace and harmony with others in society. In this sense, the anarchist project is about the process of changing “our relationships with each other, institutions, technology and our environment.”⁸⁴

Another noteworthy element of the anarchist metaphysic is that anarchism can no longer be regarded as singular, let alone monolithic. Fundamentally, anarchism is plural; it is a movement of movements.⁸⁵ Today’s anarchists recognize (with radical feminists and post-structuralists) that no one nexus of oppression exists; because oppression comes from many sources, the theories and practices of liberation also have to be multifaceted and open-ended. As a result, anarchism has become a more synthetic ideology than it was in the classical period. By expanding on anarchism’s traditional focus on anti-authoritarianism, trying to comprehend the totality of domination, today’s anarchists seek “to highlight not only the state but also gender relations, and not only the economy but also cultural relations and ecology, sexuality, and freedom in every form it can be sought, and each not only through the sole prism of authority relations, but also informed by richer and more diverse concepts.”⁸⁶

Finally, contemporary anarchism, not unlike the anarchism of the past, fundamentally remains a theory of practice, a tactical theory. Propaganda of the deed, as opposed to the development of a “scientific socialism,” was a central preoccupation for the classical anarchists. That preoccupation has not dissipated among anarchists in the twenty-first century. Indeed, given that contemporary anarchists have adopted largely post-structuralist perspectives, they believe that doing what one can, wherever one can, however one can, provides the only prospect of making any headway in the battle against the machine. At present, then, anarchist practice seems to focus on building a “transfer culture”—a set of institutions, resources, skills, and experiences that delegitimize authority and induce a change in perspective, all the while insisting that there *is* an alternative to the present order.⁸⁷ Anarchism thus “is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization *are* its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy.”⁸⁸

⁸³ Andrej Grubacic, “Towards Another Anarchism,” <<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=5&ItemID=2991>> (accessed July 12, 2006).

⁸⁴ Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁸⁵ Purkis and Bowen, “Conclusion,” *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁸⁶ Grubacic, “Power and Revolution,” *op. cit.*; Michael Albert, “Anarchism Today,” <<http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2000-08/07albert.htm>> (accessed August 7, 2006).

⁸⁷ Howard J. Ehrlich, “How to Get from Here to There: Building Revolutionary Transfer Culture,” in Ehrlich, *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, *op. cit.*, pp. 331–349.

⁸⁸ Graeber, *op. cit.*, p. 70.