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“I’m not joining your world”: Performing political dissent through spectacular self-presentation

It’s February 2009, and I’m sitting in a coffee shop in Los Angeles. Across the table sits Minty, a woman I was introduced to by a mutual friend of ours. I’ve seen her before—she’s a regular presence at anarchist events in the Los Angeles area—but this is our first real conversation. Minty is in her late twenties; her appearance is conventionally feminine, with long strawberry blonde hair. She smiles a lot, and strikes me as a warm, friendly person. I’ve noticed her tattoos before—she has large, colorful ones on her back and upper arms. It’s not unusual to see anarchists sporting tattoos, since it’s actually something of a norm in the subculture,¹ but I noticed Minty’s in particular because they are somewhat similar in style to my own tattoos. Minty’s forearms are unmarked, which makes sense since she holds a professional job at a non-profit organization. People in such careers often strategically place their body modifications, such as tattoos and piercings, so that they can be hidden under clothing while at work. During our conversation, it comes up that Minty has an appointment the following weekend to get her forearms fully covered in tattoos. I ask if she is concerned about getting tattoos in such a visible place, given her need to appear professional at her job. She’s not concerned. On the contrary, she says her new tattoos will be, “a way to really make it visible, and, like, there’s nothing I can do [to cover them up], I don’t wear long sleeves ever. So it’s a really great way to communicate, ‘I’m not joining your world.’”

Minty is using the style of her self-presentation to produce for herself what subculture scholar John Clarke (2005: 54) calls “a coherent and distinctive

way of ‘being-in-the-world.’” In the case of many anarchist activists like Minty, their “way of being in the world” is actually a refusal to silently join the mainstream. This stylistic production is “spectacular” in the sense that it is meant to be looked at, to be seen by others; the styled anarchist body is a spectacle (Hebdige 1981). In fact, all bodies are “spectacular” in this sense—the ways that humans present themselves are always culturally shaped and are thus communicative of social meaning. What makes anarchist style an illustrative case is that it is often spectacular in both this technical sense and in a more colloquial sense: by styling themselves in non-mainstream ways, some anarchists make a spectacle of themselves. They seem to invite the looks of others by consciously adorning themselves in ways that stand out from the crowd of more politically moderate subjects. The non-normative appearance of some anarchists sets them apart and demands interpretation, both by outsiders and by members of their own stylistic community. A common thread among all the forms of self-presentation associated with anarchist subcultures is that they are all designed to enact what cultural studies scholar Dick Hebdige (1981: 102) calls the “communication of a significant difference” between anarchists and mainstream culture. This is, as Hebdige explains, the “‘point’ behind the style of all spectacular subcultures” (Ibid.).

Personal style is a form of representation that presents to the world information about the individuals themselves, particularly where they situate themselves socially. By situating oneself within an anarchist subculture, the individual represents many layers of meaning, including a set of political ideologies and ethical commitments associated with anarchism. For Minty, it wasn’t the content of her tattoos that would carry the most significant meaning. The important meaning for her would come from the fact that she marked herself in a way that was atypical of the mainstream, and possibly even taboo in certain settings. The mere fact of her having permanently modified her body in this way was, as she put it, “a ‘fuck you’ to society.” Upon further reflection, she mused, “How does this really say anything about me? It really doesn’t, but I guess it does, because not everybody does it.” My analysis in this chapter will echo Minty’s question, asking *how* anarchist modes of self-presentation actually say anything about anarchists themselves. The question of “how” forces us to look at the *process* of symbolic communication inherent in anarchists’ presentation of self. Minty also reminds us that the content of stylistic practice would be meaningless apart from the contexts in which these performances circulate, contexts in which the performances stand out as non-normative. This chapter is concerned with the subset of anarchist lifestyle practices related to self-presentation by activists, such as dress, adornment, and body modification. I will examine how activists perform and produce themselves as members in a subcultural community through practices of personal style; I will also discuss why some anarchists choose *not* to conform to the subcultural

norms of dress adopted by many activists. Furthermore, I will consider the strategic potential for practices of self-presentation to function as effective propaganda for radical movements. This potential is limited by the ease with which symbols of such movements are decoupled from the ethical and ideological content with which activists endow them. This implies that while subcultural lifestyle practices may serve a variety of social and identificatory functions, their communicative, activist capacity is highly constrained by the hegemonic context of mainstream media and culture.

Anarchists’ modes of self-presentation are signs which can be read and decoded. These signs are situated within communicative circuits—texts have consumers as well as producers, they live on in the world past the moment in which they are assembled and made public. Stylistic performances are the same way, and thus it’s not enough to figure out what the producer—in this case the stylist or the “wearer”—meant when they first put the look together and went out into the world wearing it. Cultural objects, texts, and practices acquire and shift meanings at their moments of production, consumption, and recirculation, and thus one must attend to each of these moments, and the power relations involved at each, in order to understand the full significance of a given cultural phenomenon.² A strategic assessment of stylistic self-presentation as an activist tactic requires attention to the way practices such as dress, adornment, and body modification circulate meaning at the subcultural level and beyond. In this regard, my discussion aims to open up a set of questions that might be asked of any given activist performance, situating it within a circuit of cultural production and consumption.

The “generic anarchist suit”

Matthew explained that when he began to identify as an anarchist, he habitually wore “the ‘generic Midwestern anarchist suit,’” which he described as consisting of, “a black hooded sweatshirt, black pants, black combat boots, a black shirt of some kind (usually a tee), a black bandana tied around the neck, and a black hat with a home-made haircut.” Although Matthew was living in Illinois and Indiana at the time of his first identification with anarchism, the “generic anarchist suit” he described transcends geographic region. Black is indeed a prominently worn color at anarchist events across the country, with many individuals dressing solely in black items. Dressing in black has historically held associations with alternative subcultures of many kinds (Garber 1992: 22), but there are several reasons for the preference for black clothing by anarchists in particular.

The first reason is symbolic: the plain black flag has been a symbol of the anarchist movement in Europe since the nineteenth century (Wehling 1995), hence adorning oneself in black is a way of wrapping oneself in the flag of

anarchism, so to speak (Sawer 2007). The second reason is a combination of symbolism and material practicality that is tied to protest techniques employed by some anarchists. Anarchists at protest events sometimes form a Black Bloc, in which a large group of individuals collectively attempts to inflict damage on corporate or government property, sabotage a political event, or physically confront law enforcement personnel. Because Black Bloc activities are generally illegal, the participants attempt to dress similarly so as to frustrate the identification of individuals by media and police. This is also the reason why bandanas and face masks are a common element of anarchist style—they can be pulled up to cover the face in case anonymity is desired.³ Anarchists don't tend to be engaged in violent, illegal altercations on an everyday basis, and many will never participate in these actions. Yet, the symbolic cachet of the Black Bloc look transcends the time, place, and bodies of actual Black Bloc protests. Dressing on an everyday basis as if one is ready for such an event is a way of indicating a kind of militant preparedness to fight—if only metaphorically or ideologically—when the need arises. The symbolism is all the more powerful when one's subcultural peers are all dressed similarly on a daily basis, with the conscious or unconscious message being something like, "together, we'll be ready for the revolution when it comes."

Another reason why anarchists prefer black clothing has to do with anarchist attitudes toward consumption. Black clothes do not show stains easily, meaning they do not have to be replaced as often as light-colored garments. This allows the wearer to reduce their overall consumption of clothing in the long term. Black garments also require less frequent washing in order to look "presentable" (though clearly presentable is a relative term when we're talking about subcultures), which is convenient if one is transient or wishes to conserve the money and water involved in doing laundry. I should point out here that having one's clothing look or actually be clean is hardly a top concern for many anarchists. In fact, there may be a kind of cache associated with wearing obviously dirty clothes, insofar as it is a material expression of one's refusal of consumption as well as "bourgeois" standards of cleanliness. For example, Matthew expressed his feeling that, among his anarchist peers, "all the clothes had to be very faded and dirty and gross."

Anarchists' consumption habits when it comes to hygiene practices and products have further impacts on the content of their self-presentation. In an essay on what he calls "radical men's fashion," anarchist blogger Adam Tinnell asserts, "Deodorant is for losers and compulsive washing a thing of the past. Always wear your hygiene as a part of your look, if it calls for dirt, then bring it on . . ." (Tinnell 2008). Greasy, matted hair, sometimes in the form of dreadlocks, may also be an indicator of infrequent bathing. What's more, anarchist spaces often smell strongly of body odor—further evidence of the occupants' rejection of soaps, deodorants, and chemical perfumes. Anti-consumption practices influence other aspects of anarchist style as well. Clothing may be tattered or patched many times over, rather than replaced

right away. The fact that clothes are sometimes thrifted or dumpstered may also account for their poor condition. The prevalence of veganism means that leather is not generally worn, while certain fashion brands that provide alternatives to leather products are commonplace. In some locales the intersection of anarchism and the bicycling culture results in certain stylistic quirks, such as short or rolled-up pants (so they won't get caught in the bicycle chain), and the staple accessories of the messenger bag and water bottle. Though these obviously serve practical functions, they also end up being stylistic markers of one's involvement in anarchist subcultures.

Probably the most straightforward practice of anarchist stylization is the adorning of one's body with traditional symbols of the anarchist movement on clothing, patches, pins, stickers, and even tattoos. The circle-A insignia (featuring a capital letter "A" inscribed within a circle, with the points of the letter often transgressing the bounds of the circle itself) is probably the most recognizable anarchist symbol, but many others are used. The colors black and red in combination carry anarchist connotations, owing to the color scheme of a flag used by anarcho-syndicalists in early twentieth-century Europe (the flag is bisected diagonally, with each half colored red and black, respectively). A modified version of this flag in the shape of a star may be worn as a button or used as a t-shirt or patch emblem. The images of famous historical anarchists, such as Emma Goldman or Sacco and Vanzetti, are often emblazoned across shirts and tote bags. One interviewee, Ahmad, commented that he tries to make his "politics more visible" through subtle symbols, such as an International Workers of the World (a labor union associated with anarchist politics) patch that he wears on his backpack. During my fieldwork, I commonly observed individuals wearing hooded sweatshirts bearing the names and insignias of other anarchist organizations, such as the anarchist publishing collective AK Press, whose logos reference historical anarchist imagery, such as the red and black flag. There's often an element of DIY ("do-it-yourself") involved too, as individuals creatively embellish their own garments with ink, buttons, and patches that depict anarchist symbols. The DIY ethos pervades other aspects of anarchist style; recall, for example, Matthew's mention of having a "home haircut" as part of his so-called "anarchist suit." DIY tattooing and piercing is even practiced; I met two women at a book fair who had done their forearm tattoos themselves using sewing machine needles and ink pens. Simply by marking themselves with recognizable anarchist symbols, individuals express their dissidence from the cultural and political mainstream. These symbols become "stigmata" which "warn the 'straight' world in advance of a sinister presence" (Hebdige 1981: 3).

Anarchism is inevitably defined in relation to dominant political ideologies; specifically, it is defined by both insiders and outsiders as *oppositional* to dominant liberal, capitalist ideology. Hence, the performance of *stylistic* difference from the mainstream is homologous with the underlying *ideological* differences espoused by anarchists, though it may not literally

depict the content of those differences. Take Miles' appearance for example: Miles is a professor in his late thirties. When I met him at an anarchist conference, he was dressed entirely in black. His head was shaved bald, and he had a long goatee, which he groomed into two braids secured with colored rubber bands. Although there was nothing explicitly anarchist about his style (there were no circle-As in sight), his dramatic appearance marked him as standing outside the mainstream. When I later asked him in an email interview if his style of self-presentation was an expression of his politics, he was hesitant to draw a direct connection:

If I were to boil down the relationship, it would be one of form not content. That is, it is not that my undying commitment to wearing black (with a smattering of white from time to time) is something I think is anarchist, nor is my ridiculous hair, etc. They are simply an aesthetic, one that I find engaging/attractive.

Yet, he went on to admit that it was not a coincidence that his personal attraction to this aesthetic ends up aligning him with others who would politically identify in similar ways. Although he didn't necessarily see his style as a direct representation of anarchism, he did see it as political because it flies in the face of what mainstream society expects him to look like, particularly as a professor at a prestigious college. This is a striking illustration of Hebdige's (1981: 89) point that subcultural style "challeng[es] at a symbolic level the 'inevitability,' the 'naturalness' of class and gender stereotypes."

A desire for personal autonomy from mainstream norms is a major reason offered by anarchists to explain their lifestyle practices. As Miles explained, "I feel like I am making aesthetic and/or consumption-based choices strictly following my own desires/interests," which are not necessarily, "those requested/expected/demanded by the mainstreams." Thus, Miles made an implicit distinction between his own choices and those of others whose tastes are determined by something other than their own autonomous will. His implication is that, while most people may be happy to go along with consumer trends and mainstream norms, he does not allow these things to dictate his decisions. Like other anarchists, Miles values the power of the individual to resist dominant, disciplining forces; as he said, "thus, in that sense, I am enacting at least some tangential element of my politics."

Style as self-construction through self-representation

The use of style as a means of performing identity is self-evident in modern societies. In cultures where sartorial options can be freely chosen from among

many alternatives, the way an individual styles oneself is a communicative act about who that person is. Among all the forms of everyday practice discussed in this book, personal style is perhaps the one most easily linked to the representation of political identity, since, as Veblen (1994: 103)—who coined the term “conspicuous consumption” in the late nineteenth century—observed, “our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at first glance.” Although we are less directly concerned with economic class (“pecuniary standing”) here, the communicative dimensions of conspicuous consumption still hold. In fact, acts of communication *about* identity, in the form of embodied performance, are constitutive *of* identity, according to some theorists of performativity (Butler 1990, 2005; Cavarero 2000). This goes beyond the idea of conspicuous consumption to say that dress does not only reflect a pre-existing subject position, it also constructs subjectivity in the moment of dress and display. By producing a narrative of the self through style and other visible performances, an individual makes oneself into the type of person whose identity can be narrativized that way. So, in the moments when an anarchist individual dresses “like an anarchist,” one makes and remakes oneself into an anarchist. Each time one taps into a shared notion of “what an anarchist looks like,” one implicitly tells oneself and those who witness her, “I am an anarchist.” One’s performance also works to shore up that common understanding of what an anarchist looks like; it’s an endless, recursive loop.⁴

Instructive parallels can be drawn between radical political identities and minority sexualities. Performance has been such an important concern for scholars of queer identity precisely because hegemonic understandings of sexuality see sexual identity as emanating from *within* the individual rather than being constituted through visible practice. Political beliefs are similar, in that they are internally held; both sexual and political identities are “invisible” until made otherwise.⁵ In a society where hegemonic identities are assumed *de facto*, visible performances of difference are a prerequisite for establishing, socially, that marginal identities even exist. In order for an oppositional identity to have any valence as a social category—to be a basis for community formation and political mobilization—it must be made visible, it must be performed. Symbolic representations of identity are the means by which individuals can recognize a shared identification between themselves and others. Embodied self-presentation is clearly an important site for the symbolic representation of identity. Thus, one can see style as an arena in which anarchists bring themselves—and their social movement—into being. Seen in this way, one can understand stylistic performances as part of what Bourdieu (1987: 8) calls the “complex historical work of construction” that goes into making a social class. As Bourdieu explains, “It is through this endless work of representation (in every sense of the term) that social agents try to impose their vision of the world or the vision of their own position in that world, and to define their social identity” (10–11).

Anarchists' distinctive modes of self-presentation operate on two levels of representation. First, they may physically enact particular lifestyle habits, which may be taken as evidence of ethical commitments based on political beliefs. So, for example, being dirty is physical evidence that, among other things, one does not hold a job that requires a certain level of cleanliness, one does not wish to expend one's personal financial resources on hygiene products, and/or one is ideologically opposed to a marketing system that creates false needs where cleanliness and hygiene are concerned. At this level, anarchist style takes a set of beliefs and makes them visible by translating them into material practices, the traces of which may be observed on the body. At the second level of representation, anarchist modes of self-presentation tap into shared discourses of social identity in which observers associate symbols with particular identity categories. Here, it doesn't matter so much whether the style corresponds in any material way to an ethical practice, just that it is widely understood as standing for "anarchism."

Along these lines, Adam Tinnell (2009), the anarchist fashion blogger quoted above, argues that, "While these [anarchist] fashion choices are often portrayed as based on necessity, more often than not, they are nothing more than a desire to fit in and feel part of a subculture." Tinnell attests to the idea that visible performances are as much about their communicative value as their material content. Anarchist activist Uri Gordon (2008: 19) concurs:

Cultural expression can serve as a shorthand designation of affiliation and connection with others. It thus plays an important role in the articulation of personal or collective identities in the anarchist movement. External appearances like styles of clothes or hair are important cultural signifiers, visible before any political conversation begins.

To put it another way, after describing the look adopted by many anarchists he knew, interviewee Orlando remarked, "if you want to meet more people who think like you—looking like that is a way to do it." The implication of this is that once individuals learn to read and write the signs of anarchist identity on the body, they can locate each other in mainstream settings and potentially grow their activist networks. None of this is to say that style is a substitute for actual political beliefs and commitment. Rather, an anarchist's style functions as a signifier for one's political identity. Thus, anarchists cultivate a sense of solidarity through their collective adoption of recognized signifiers of anarchist identity.⁶

The intrinsic problem with using stylistic representations to signify actually held political beliefs is that the chain of signification between beliefs and styles is easily disrupted. That is, there is no mechanism to ensure that all people who adopt similar practices of self-presentation actually share the same political commitments. It is precisely this fact that puts Black Blocs at risk of being easily infiltrated by *agents provocateurs* during protest actions.⁷ Since just

about anyone can adopt the symbolic markers of a subculture, the markers may eventually lose their semiotic linkage to that subculture and its political ideologies, as the "poseurs" become indistinguishable from the "authentic" members. Indeed, if a subcultural style is adopted by too many people, or even goes mainstream, it is rendered void of any symbolic value as an expression of oppositional ideology. The cultural diffusion of radical lifestyles, by proliferating the arenas of visibility and consumption, enables the disarticulation of symbolic gestures from their oppositional meanings. This, in turn, creates a potential bifurcation of anarchist identity—there are those who identify with anarchist politics and those who identify with the aesthetics of anarchist subcultures, and there is little *necessary* correspondence between the two. The utility of an individual's distinctively anarchist mode of self-presentation for communicating identity and group membership is thereby greatly reduced.

On the one hand, the constitution of political identity through stylistic performance can be democratizing, in that it makes anarchist identity available as a social position for anyone willing to take the time to understand and perform the recognized modes of self-presentation. Hypothetically, this opens up the group to anyone who wants to identify with it, which allows for a diversity of membership. Yet, on the other hand, it also introduces a new social boundary, in that personal style becomes a terrain for judgments to be made about who should be accepted and who should be excluded from the group. An interviewee named Samantha described some of the anarchists she knew as having a "punk rock aesthetic." She went on to say that, among these people, "It tends to be more of a scene where you are either in or out." Considering the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion around aesthetic practices helps us to see that subcultural tastes are more than mere preferences that happen to unite certain individuals. The tastes one is able to express publicly—what Bourdieu calls "manifested tastes"—get converted into a form of capital—"cultural capital"—that is used to establish and secure one's position in society (Bourdieu 1984: 56). And as Bourdieu has convincingly shown, individual tastes are always conditioned by social structures, which are often inflected by relations of power, hierarchy, and domination. The tastes one has the opportunity and inclination to cultivate are shaped by one's economic position, access to education, and so on. This is how taste works to "classify" individuals: one's social position can be read off the tastes one has cultivated (6). Furthermore, one can be functionally excluded from a social class if one fails to share the tastes associated with it. But there is a kind of mystification at work here: because the cultivation of taste is usually a slow process that happens over years of immersion in a particular social sphere (or "habitus"), aesthetic preferences are often experienced as natural desires. By extension, the differential levels of social power that accrue to those with different tastes are perceived as a natural hierarchy rather than a constructed one. What are the implications of these propositions for anarchist subcultures?

Style as distinction and boundary

Just as anarchism is defined by its extreme critique of the dominant political system, so anarchist tastes are defined by and valued for their extreme divergence from dominant cultural norms. As other scholars have shown, power dynamics over taste are often found within subcultures. David Chaney (2001: 82) explains that lifestyles “are ways in which members of a group can display their privileges, or, more actively, use their mastery of symbolic capital to control access to desirable status.” As noted in Chapter 2, Sarah Thornton’s (1996) concept of subcultural capital refers to the way in which people are rewarded for specific tastes within a specific subcultural milieu. As with regular cultural capital, these rewards come in the form of social acceptance, respect, and admiration from one’s peers (Bourdieu 1984). And, should particular tastes not be in evidence, the result can be non-recognition, chastisement, or even ostracism from the group. Even political subcultures that are philosophically opposed to hierarchy—such as anarchism—are not immune to such dynamics. Whereas Bourdieu’s cultural capital is mostly the product of education and upbringing and has currency within a dominant or mainstream social milieu, Thornton’s subcultural capital is developed through immersion in subcultural lifestyle and is valuable as distinction only within the relevant subcultural milieu, for it is only within the subculture that particular tastes are coded as valuable.

Comfort with dirtiness, for instance, is unlikely to bring status to an individual in mainstream society, whereas among one’s anarchist peers it can serve as valuable proof of one’s ideological commitment. Often, the tastes coded as most valuable within anarchist subcultures are in direct contradiction to mainstream norms. Joel was an interviewee who described the importance, among some of his anarchist acquaintances, of not looking like someone who “fit in” with mainstream culture. For example, the wearing of a button-down shirt, with its white-collar professional connotations, was a no-no among his anarchist peers. He also joked that he couldn’t be a member of an anarchist organization in his city because he didn’t own a black hooded sweatshirt. Since garments like black hooded sweatshirts were understood to be *de rigueur* among the anarchists in his community, Joel’s identity as an authentic adherent to the shared anarchist politics underlying the organization was questionable. Although Joel was being facetious when he said that he was barred from membership in the organization on the basis of his not owning a particular clothing item, he was gesturing toward a real feeling of alienation experienced by individuals who do not conform to subcultural norms.

Because anarchism entails a set of values or ethics, the subcultural tastes associated with anarchism take on ethical significance. Even where a direct relationship cannot be drawn (is there truly any direct ethical difference between wearing a ratty hooded sweatshirt and wearing a clean button-

down shirt?), adherence to stylistic conventions stands in, symbolically, for adherence to ethical standards (Chaney 2001: 82). Within anarchist subcultures, this assumed relationship between ethics and style provides ideological justification for the reproduction of hierarchies based on taste. In other words, individuals may feel justified in judging others based on their appearances, because appearance is thought to signify internally held values, which may be legitimately judged on the basis of their ethical validity. While it is understandable how such judgments are justifiable to the people who make them, the history of radical social movements offers many cautionary tales about the power of such taste hierarchies to breed conflict, which may threaten cohesion within the movement and ultimately drive some individuals out of it.⁸ Furthermore, taste judgments work to marginalize the uninitiated who may not have had the benefit of moving in anarchist circles—that is, have not cultivated an anarchist subcultural habitus. For those who are not determined enough to stick it out and make it beyond the learning curve, their desire to stay with the movement may be short lived. Revbaker, an interviewee who had been involved with anarchism in Denver for several years, described his initial feelings that the scene there was “closed off” and “cliquey.” It’s not hard to imagine that many people who are interested in working on anarchist political projects get scared off by such feelings early on and simply go away. Thus, judgments around taste work, almost invisibly, to maintain the insularity and homogeneity of the subculture. There is a strategically significant trade-off here, between defending a movement against the diffusion of style for the purposes of maintaining subcultural unity on the one hand and broadening a movement’s appeal and increasing the diversity of its participants on the other.

As I have noted, the stylistic boundaries around anarchist subcultures are not random. They often map onto other social boundaries such as gender and race, hence the oft-stated perception that the anarchist movement is largely populated by white males. While it’s important to challenge the assumption that most anarchists are white and male, it is quite clear that most anarchists *who are recognizable as such* through their stylistic self-presentation *are* male and white. This is an important point that I want to emphasize. It is not necessarily the case that women and people of color are less likely to identify as anarchists or to hold anarchist principles. What is evident is that, for various reasons, many having to do with the structural relations of power in society at large, women and people of color are less likely to style themselves in a way that is immediately recognizable as being associated with anarchist subcultures. Indeed, several interviewees explicitly connected the “anarchist look” to young, white men. For example, Winona commented that she had been to an anarchist book fair in Montreal, attended by what she described as “a lot of white men wearing black. It was pretty limited and not the world I personally feel connected to—macho, activist-oriented, all young.” Although she said she respected the political ideas discussed at the book

fair, she obviously felt alienated by the stylistic presentation of some of the participants.

Angela McRobbie (1991: 24) asserts that the style that defines a subculture is often the style of its male members. My own observations of the LA anarchist scene in particular support McRobbie's assertion. At many of the events I attended in Los Angeles, the men tended to dress similarly and in typical anarchist fashion—in clothing that was mostly black, tattered, and dirty—whereas the women tended to dress and style themselves in more mainstream ways—including brightly colored and clean-cut garments in their wardrobes. This was not a universal rule, but it was enough of a trend to be readily noticeable. One reason for this is that women may feel more internalized pressure than men to live up to mainstream beauty standards, and thus might be reluctant to reject conventional hygiene practices or to adopt what one interviewee described as anarchists' "aggressive" style of dress and body adornment. In many respects, anarchist style contradicts hegemonic disciplinary practices of femininity (Bartky 1990) much more strongly than it bucks dominant standards of masculinity. For some women, this is a point of attraction to anarchist subcultural style. Yet for others, the style may conflict too sharply with their other social identities. The performance of masculinity encoded in anarchist style may be particularly trepidatious for women of color, who can face extra censure for gender transgression beyond what is experienced by their white counterparts (Moore 2006: 130).

Other structural factors can further complicate an individual's desire and capacity to adopt subcultural modes of self-presentation. Ahmad was an Afghan immigrant living in San Jose, whom I interviewed via email. He observed that some of the activists in his area "wore their anarchism on their sleeves—sometimes literally" in the form of "buttons, shirts, visible tattoos and . . . other symbols from a particular subculture." While he said he admired the political work they were doing, he felt alienated from them because of their style. Part of the reason for this was that he relied on a retail job at an electronics store for his income, so his appearance had to be somewhat mainstream if he wanted to keep his job. He added, "my family also did not have a green card and our immigration status was up in the air. Especially after 9/11. So as a first generation immigrant I had some general fears about how people, the man, would perceive me."

Like Ahmad, other people of color I interviewed had concerns about the scrutiny their appearance as anarchists might draw from authority figures. Alma was also an immigrant; she had come to the United States with her family from Mexico. She expressed to me that she had been afraid that her long dreadlocks would arouse suspicion of her radical activities among the officials who interviewed her during her process of obtaining US citizenship. Gabby, a Filipina-American woman, mentioned that she attempted to look "less crusty" when engaged in shoplifting, so as not to draw more attention than she would already receive as a person of color. Each of these interviewees'

experiences speaks to the surveillance faced by people of color in white supremacist societies. It is understandable that, as individuals who are already very vulnerable to scrutiny and repression, they would be hesitant to draw even more negative attention to themselves through stylistic association with a radical political movement. When one's body is always already a spectacle in the dominant culture, as it is for women and people of color, the prospect of inviting further looks may lack a certain appeal. One consequence of this is that the reluctance of women and people of color to adopt recognizable stylistic practices may translate into their marginalization—and certainly their relatively low visibility—within anarchist subcultural scenes. The means by which individuals win recognition, authenticity, and subcultural capital may be precisely those means which are more available to subjects who are already privileged in mainstream society.

Although it is extremely unlikely that any anarchists *intend* for their scenes to be unwelcoming for women and people of color, it is clearly the case that anarchist scenes *are* often unwelcoming, and the maintaining of stylistic boundaries is a contributing factor. Some feel strongly that this must change. A few interviewees distanced themselves from anarchist style for this reason. Pritha, for instance, was careful to tell me that she avoids wearing black. Helena too, remarked, "I like not conforming to people's expectations of what an anarchist looks like." Adam Tinnell's (2009) blog, which I have quoted above, is similarly devoted to contesting norms of anarchist style, particularly where they work to discipline expressions of gender identity within anarchist scenes. He argues:

With such a diverse politic as anarchism, being interpreted and enacted in thousands of different cultures around the world, not to mention the contributions of anarcha-feminism and queer anarchism, it's totally unacceptable to let one or two subcultures dominate the look and the feel of this movement.

Tinnell believes that anarchists should make a conscious effort to cultivate a variety of anarchist looks that challenge some of the forms of privilege that have heretofore been reproduced within anarchists' stylistic norms.

An interest in evading norms—even subcultural ones—is one that speaks to many anarchists, for philosophical and tactical reasons. Matthew, the interviewee who described the "Midwestern anarchist suit" he used to wear, explained to me his reasons for eventually giving up on that look. In an email exchange with me, he said that over time he had grown "increasingly disillusioned" with Black Bloc tactics, and didn't like the symbolic associations between his wardrobe and that subset of anarchist activists. He said:

I've had enough with senseless violence, with masked anarchists all dressed up in identical uniforms like fascists! I started feeling this way in 2005

or '6 when I started putting color back in my wardrobe. It seemed like a trivial thing but it's not. All these self-proclaimed individualists wearing uniforms . . . should we be surprised that when they get together they act like a fascist horde? It bothered me, all that uniformity. I mean, I understand the symbolic cache . . . I understand what the look is trying to promote, but it hardly seems worthwhile on balance. It just carries too much negative weight. So I decided anarchism 'is something you do and not something you wear' after all.

Many anarchists struggle with the problem of how to live in opposition to dominant cultural patterns without alienating and foreclosing solidarity with people who may not understand or approve of anarchist lifestyles. Particularly because of the associations with violent protest activities, many prefer not to risk alienating outsiders with an appearance that would evoke those associations. As scholar of global anarchist movements, Jeffrey Juris (2008b: 87) observes, "the same factors that generate affective solidarity among militants may also complicate efforts to recruit more broadly." Even where associations with violence are not intentionally invoked, the mere "communication of a significant difference" involved in "looking like an anarchist" may be enough to divide individuals from those with whom they might otherwise wish to establish common ground. The sense of cohesive group identity produced through stylistic performance may thus hamper the movement's potential impact beyond its existing subcultural milieu.

Some anarchists are therefore ambivalent about using their presentations of self to construct or highlight differences between themselves and non-anarchists. Several interviewees expressed their commitment to doing political work with people who do not identify as anarchists. In their view, the adoption of a subcultural style of self-presentation could be counterproductive in that it could alienate people to whom they were interested in reaching out and partnering. Rilla was an interviewee in her late twenties who had spent many years doing what she described as "community-oriented or labor-oriented anarchist work." She had been involved in founding a community center in Los Angeles and running radical programs for local youth. Rilla had never cultivated a particularly distinctively anarchist appearance; she found this to be useful when recruiting youth to get involved in her programs. As she put it,

the kind of stuff I did didn't really mark itself as subcultural. Because a lot of the work we were doing had to integrate with the community. Actually it would be almost to our disadvantage to look in a particularly marked way. If I'm gonna go out and do work in high schools, I want the teachers to, like, want me to come into their classroom, or the parents of these kids to trust me with their kids. So it's not that I changed the way I look, but it actually is to my advantage if I look somewhat unremarkable.

Rilla's brother Mark, also an anarchist and also involved in community and labor activism, expressed a similar view. Mark was another interviewee who didn't immediately look like an anarchist. I saw him on several occasions, and his clothes were always unassuming, just t-shirts and jeans; he had buzzed blonde hair that he sometimes covered with a baseball cap. Although he confessed to owning "a whole collection" of political t-shirts, and a red and black star button he wore on his hat, he was clear on the point that, for him, "it's important to look like a fuckin' regular guy." He felt that, "You don't have to look a certain way or listen to a certain kind of music to be an anarchist, it just means you fuckin' believe in a world without boxes or borders, you know, without fucking, uh, exploitation or oppression . . ." He hoped to demonstrate through his actions and appearance that anarchism is "not something so hocus pocus." Mark's view was that by looking like a "regular guy" and simply "living by [his] principles," he could more readily win political allies. For example, he expressed an interest in forging alliances with and possibly politicizing his fellow bike messengers, who were not necessarily aware of or interested in radical activism.

In considering the perspective of activists like Rilla and Mark, one can again draw parallels to queer politics and performance tactics. Sexual geographers David Bell and Gill Valentine (1995) draw on the work of John Dollimore (1991), introducing the idea of the "passing pervert": the queer individual who does not actively signify queerness on one's body and thereby is allowed passage into straight spaces. The political power of such an individual is that, by bringing one's queer sexuality into straight space, one actually "carries the potential for disruption more meaningful – more *dangerous*" to the status quo (Bell and Valentine 1995: 153). Anarchist activists who "pass" as more mainstream political subjects can similarly insinuate themselves into settings where people may not be predisposed to look favorably on radicalism. They then have the capacity to quietly politicize their students, co-workers, neighbors, or whomever, without bearing the stigma that the label "anarchist" carries in mainstream society. Given that visibility can be "a trap," which "summons surveillance and the law," it may be a matter of strategy to be unmarked (Phelan 1993: 6; Foucault 1995). Some anarchists *can* present themselves in unmarked ways, if they wish, and those who do may find themselves less scrutinized by officers of social control (Clarke et al. 2005). Evading such scrutiny by both police officials and less official enforcers of hegemony, such as social peers, may empower activists to undertake different forms of resistance.

One can see a conflict here between two diverging activist strategies: one, to symbolically communicate difference from the mainstream and thus cultivate an alternative space of identity and community formation; the other, to draw potential philosophical sympathizers to anarchism without immediately communicating the radicalness of one's position. Historian of American radical movements Lawrence Veysey (1973: 449) notes that

this is an enduring dilemma among political dissidents: “radicals have always been torn between the desire to express themselves in an openly unconventional fashion and the opposing desire . . . to melt inconspicuously into the crowd.” As anarchist activists, practitioners of both techniques are interested in provoking critiques of dominant ideology among the people with whom they interact. The difference perhaps lies in these individuals’ implicit understanding of the capacity of self-presentation to accomplish this goal. In the following sections, I give more sustained attention to the idea that self-presentation can serve a tactical purpose beyond the mere communication of subcultural identity.

Style as tactical critique and propaganda

As I have just shown, there are merits to looking like a “regular” person and perfectly understandable reasons why a person would not want to mark herself in disruptive ways. And yet, there are those, like Minty, who see the symbolic “fuck you to society” as a worthwhile political act. Is it possible to see Minty’s refusal to conform to mainstream styles of self-presentation as having material consequences beyond a symbolic disruption? That is, can one understand the stylistic “communication of a significant difference” as constituting, in itself, a material threat to dominant power? At a strictly individual level, deviance from mainstream stylistic standards is a material expression of resistance to normative power. This is because, in itself, an act of stylistic resistance affirms the extant *incapacity* of disciplinary forces to totally control the will of the individual. By the very fact of an individual’s *not* following the norm, one can see that the norm lacks the power to dictate that individual’s behavior (Foucault 1990a). Does this act of resistance win new autonomy for the resisting subject? Or does it testify to an autonomy that already existed? The fact that stylistic resistance is sometimes described in terms of “insubordination” (Hebdige 1997: 404; Butler 1997a) is telling. Colloquially, insubordination refers to an act of talking back to someone in a position of authority. In real life, such acts rarely result in a shift in power between the authority figure and the insubordinate. If anything, the acts may bring punishment upon the insubordinate, so as to reassert the superior power of the authority. The same goes for stylistic insubordination; by bucking mainstream norms, anarchists often invite punishment in the form of social scrutiny and even police surveillance. Resistance may thus result in a reinforcement of hegemonic power, rather than a sustained disruption of it.

Consider Minty’s forearm tattoos once again. They visibly demonstrate the fact that mainstream social norms were impotent to dictate her behavior, or else she could not even have made the choice to get the tattoos. Minty was quite conscious of the social forces which *would* still be at work on

her after getting her tattoos, such as the withholding of certain forms of employment based on her appearance. This consciousness, in fact, informed her decision to get the tattoos; recall that she saw them as "a really great way to, like, communicate I'm not joining your world, you know?" Yet, though her tattoos symbolized a hostility (i.e. a "fuck you") toward the social norms which would lead others to judge her employability based on such a thing, it's unclear that she is able to do more than offer an angry gesture in response to that judgment. The fact of her getting the tattoos does not change the fact that she *will* probably become less employable as a result. It does not then challenge the systemic disciplinary power of conformity, which works precisely through such mechanisms as employment standards. Minty's refusal to conform does not deprive hegemonic forces of the power to proscribe her social opportunities based on that refusal. As Bourdieu (1989) explains, official institutions and other social elites carry immense symbolic capital, which allows them to enforce the standards of which cultural tastes will be deemed widely acceptable, status worthy, and deserving of economic and political rewards. While Minty's tattoos communicate to her anarchist peers and others that she is committed to living a different kind of life (one in which traditional status and rewards may be less important), this is, again, merely a *representation* of difference and not a material alteration to existing power relations. In other words, she holds little power to make her "vision of the world" (Bourdieu 1989: 10) more socially valued, such that anarchist beliefs or lifestyles become more attractive on a broad scale.

According to Hebdige's reading of spectacular subcultures, what anarchists like Minty and Miles *are* able to do is "contradict the myth of consensus," by showing that not everyone subscribes to the dominant definitions of the world and that it is possible to resist the forces of social conformity (Hebdige 1981: 18). This may be an important step for oppositional movements, since, in order to win broad support, hegemonic discourses of power must present themselves as simply reflecting a reality that pre-existed them (Gramsci 1971). Hebdige understands spectacular subcultures as subversive of hegemony because they expose social norms as constructed rather than natural. Furthermore, because hegemony in liberal societies is maintained by convincing everyone that a silent majority has consented to the present system, highly visible forms of dissent falsify the putatively democratic legitimacy that upholds that system. In this way, anarchists, through their visible presence, may point out that there are cracks in the façade of liberal capitalist ideology, that not everyone buys into the status quo, that alternative philosophies and lifestyles are available, and that at least some people find them preferable.

However, the question remains whether anarchists' stylistic deviations are *read* as signifying such a substantive ideological critique. In other words, if spectacular subcultural style is intended to disrupt the myth of consensus,

which specific kinds of consensus does anarchist style effectively disrupt? Do mainstream members of society actually interpret the anarchists they see as offering a critical campaign against hierarchical power structures? Is it possible, or indeed likely, that stylistic dissent is readable as dissent only against *stylistic* conformity and nothing further? Where a subculture's concern is with stylistic conformity, then contradicting a myth of consensus around fashion norms is a significant act of resistance. But anarchists are *not* primarily concerned with style—their political issues run much deeper. Recall for example that Miles maintained that his stylistic practices are only “tangentially” an enactment of his anarchist politics. It seems clear that where style is not the sole site of oppression, it cannot be the sole means of liberation. Anarchists are concerned with many expressions of power, not just those associated with stylistic conformity. They may thus find that resistance in the form of stylistic non-conformity is entirely inadequate to address the breadth of social problems that anarchists concern themselves with. As John Clarke et al. (2005) and others argue, style cannot alter political structure. Though they may symbolize a deeper commitment to political resistance, acts of stylistic resistance “‘solve’ but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete level remain unresolved” (48). Yes, Minty and Miles show us that they have been able to liberate their bodies from certain repressive standards of mainstream society, but the freedom to have tattoos and odd hairstyles is certainly not an end goal for either of them. Beyond this, the question remains whether, having effectively disrupted a myth of consensus, stylistic performances can do anything to promote the substantive political alternatives espoused by the performers.⁹

What then is at stake *politically* when anarchists adopt spectacularly non-conformist modes of self-presentation? Returning to two concepts discussed in Chapter 1, “prefigurative politics” and “propaganda by the deed” are commonly invoked by activists to make sense of their own small-scale acts of resistance (Gordon 2008). Both ideas imply that individual acts can serve as positive examples that will ideally inspire resistance among others. Yet, in my observation, there is little sustained attention given to the precise process by which resistance is inspired. That is, while a lot of attention is paid to the production side of radical spectacles, less is paid to the consumption of these spectacles by those who observe them. Something must happen *after* the act of symbolic resistance for it to gain value as a political intervention; namely, the message of resistance produced by the anarchist activist must be consumed and responded to in some way by others.

If the point of performed resistance is to inspire collective resistance at a deeper level than that of personal style, then the strategic question for anarchists is whether individual and subcultural practices of self-presentation are up to the task. As a representative form of communication, style relies on a chain of semiotic linkages between visual signifiers and more abstract concepts, in order for meaning to be conveyed. For any kind of intended

reaction to be incited in observers—including identification and political sympathy—those observers must first be able to reconstruct the chain of signification as it was intended by the creator of the message. If Person A visually presents himself as an anarchist by adopting the practices described above, Person B must be able to see “black clothing” or “tattoos” or make the connection between those symbols and anarchist identity. Person B may then react by thinking “yes, I am an anarchist too,” thus fulfilling the social identification function of anarchist style. But say Person B is not an anarchist—the more likely circumstance. In order for anarchist style to operate as a political critique, Person B must further be able to connect the signifiers of anarchist identity with the ideological content of anarchist philosophy. Beyond that, Person B must be disposed to be agreeable to the ideological content that he or she is able to associate with the stylistic presentation that he or she is witnessing, and take up the cause himself or herself. The process of communication involved in the deployment of style as political critique is largely located in the mind of Person B, although the self-presentation of Person A is the initiator of that process. The meaning that Person A intends may not be the meaning that Person B produces when making sense of Person A’s performance.

As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2006) explains, both the encoding of messages and their decoding take place within ideologically structured contexts, but these contexts may be “asymmetrical.” By asymmetry, Hall is referring to the ideological mismatch that may exist between encoders and decoders which results in audiences making a different meaning than the one intended by the producers of a text. When Person B tries to understand what Person A’s personal style means, Person B will have to fit Person A’s look into whatever discourses Person B already has at his or her disposal. Kobena Mercer (1987: 42), in his discussion of the hairstyles of radical Black activists, notes that “for ‘style’ to be socially intelligible as an expression of conflicting values, each cultural nucleus or articulation of signs must share access to a common stock or resource of signifying elements.” As an anarchist activist, Person A has likely constructed his or her look within the context of extensive and sophisticated critiques of capitalism, patriarchy, and other systems of domination. Yet, unless Person B is similarly versed in these critiques, the symbolic connections between Person A’s self-presentation and those political discourses will be unmade. As Jeffrey Juris (2008b: 89) points out in his study of theatrical anarchist activism, “although the meaning of specific actions may be evident to activists, they are often difficult to interpret for an outside audience.”

It’s not just that outside audiences don’t know what to make of anarchists’ style. Non-anarchists who don’t have the discursive resources at their disposal to interpret anarchist modes of self-presentation as substantive, valid political critiques may write anarchist activists off as weirdos, troublemakers, criminals, and so on (Morley 1983). In the parlance of J.

L. Austin's (1975) speech act theory, if one sees anarchist style as a kind of speech act of resistance, then one has to acknowledge that it is often an infelicitous one. While it may be felicitous to the extent that observers will recognize it as resistance of some form, it will often be infelicitous in that they won't understand quite what is being critiqued. Sally, an interviewee, acknowledged that people outside of anarchist subcultures can be unaware of the beliefs that underlie, for example, a freegan anarchist's choice to wear old, "grungy" clothes out of a desire not to contribute to the harmful cycle of consumption and waste. Sally bemoaned the fact that outsiders are likely to view these anarchists as "hipsters" whose style of dress is a mere "image," rather than a material manifestation of their beliefs. This misinterpretation precludes any possibility that observers might be persuaded by the performance to adopt their own critical stance toward consumer culture.

All radicals face this difficulty of asymmetry since they are, by nature, mounting a radical critique and departure from hegemonic ideological premises and the discourses that are most accessible to the mainstream. But the difficulty outsiders have in correctly interpreting the intended meaning of anarchist practices is further compounded by the "systematic distortion" (Hall 2006: 170) of radical messages within mainstream media culture. The intended meaning of any given lifestyle practice may be obscured by dominant discursive frameworks which position alternative lifestyles as unserious, immature, apolitical, or even dangerous. As radical dissenters, anarchists are working from a deficit of symbolic capital: their vision of the world is inherently at odds with that held by those whose vision is most commonly accepted; they will thus have to struggle to have their critique even receive a fair hearing, let alone be received positively as an accurate indictment of political conditions (Bourdieu 1987, 1989). As Herbert Marcuse (1972) observed of the 1960s radical counterculture, it can be hard to protest "the Establishment" and be taken seriously since the establishment is by definition mature—the politics of the establishment come off as realistic because they *are* the ideology of the existing reality. In Marcuse's analysis, "the quality of clownishness and childishness easily appears to adhere to authentic acts of protest in situations where the radical opposition is isolated and outrageously weak while the Enemy is almost everywhere and outrageously strong" (51). By this logic, any symbolic act of protest against the status quo is at a disadvantage to be received positively, precisely because it contradicts the ideological basis of the discursive framework within which the vast majority of people will interpret that act of resistance (Hall 1977). Indeed, one commenter on a *New York Times* blog article about anarchists' efforts to create visual spectacle at protest events described them as, "a bunch of 20-something children that think they understand the world, parading around so that all can see how wonderfully liberal they are. What we need are answers and solutions, not drama."¹⁰

Another problem of communication that anarchists face is that the aesthetic characteristics of their style may just as likely disgust observers as appeal to them, particularly where they violate established social norms. Dave Laing (1997), drawing on theories of avant-garde art, discusses this with respect to punk, pointing out that there may be a difficulty in communicating social criticism through radical aesthetic forms. Because the aesthetic expression is found to be distasteful, "the resistance of the audience to the music or other art-work makes it impossible for any meaning to be registered. The viewer or listener turns off" (414). This rings true with mainstream responses to anarchist style. The same commenter to the *New York Times* post quoted above said, "The costumes of some participants just confirm that their efforts are as meaningless as their message. Mardi Gras ended a few weeks ago." A freakish appearance may inspire confusion, dismissal, or distaste, rather than interest or acceptance. This is not to say that anarchists have some responsibility not to disgust people, but it should be no surprise if, having been disgusted, people are not very amenable to the underlying political message.

Marcuse (1972) also suggests that lifestyle practices that deviate from the mainstream may alienate those who (correctly) read them as a criticism of their own mainstream cultural mores. Whether anarchists intend to or not, they may give the impression that their rejection of norms is done to demonstrate their intellectual superiority to the masses who aren't sophisticated enough to have developed a political critique of mainstream popular culture. Consumption scholar Douglas Holt (2002) discusses this idea using the term "ideational difficulty," meaning that people may fetishize subcultural, ascetic lifestyles precisely because most people find them difficult to understand, access, and adopt. Here, mainstream lifestyles and popular culture are rejected not so much for their detrimental political effects, but more so on the basis that they *are* mainstream and popular. This is hardly likely to endear anarchists to those people who feel strongly attached to their own mainstream, popular cultural tastes. The challenge for anarchists is to produce a message through which people can accept a critique of mainstream culture without feeling that they themselves are being accused of willfully unethical behavior—or perhaps worse, unconsciously stupid behavior—through their adherence to some of its practices. Marcuse (1972: 79) argued in the 1970s that there was a "need for an effective *communication* of the indictment of the established reality and of the goals of liberation." The problems of communication experienced by anarchists indicate that it continues to be important to go beyond stylistic performance in order to provide a discursive context in which people can situate lifestyle practices *as* ethically motivated acts, and thus understand and perhaps empathize with why they are politically valuable.

Misinterpretation and dismissal are not the only unintended consequences incurred by anarchists' modes of self-presentation. Co-optation and

commodification loom as nearly inevitable threats to spectacular subcultures. Because the ideological dissent represented by anarchists' style is oblique and often unregistered by observers, the style can quite easily be co-opted for purposes inimical to the movement that spawned it. Images and styles of rebellion are, in fact, often fetishized in the mainstream for their "edge" and other aesthetic characteristics. This is an issue that has consistently plagued radical movements in consumer society.¹¹ In her discussion of "commodity lesbianism" (the process by which images of lesbians are taken up as edgy fashions and sold to straight consumers), Danae Clark (1991: 193) makes the point that, "Because style is a cultural construction, it is easily appropriated, reconstructed and divested of its original political or subcultural signification. Style as resistance becomes commodifiable as chic when it leaves the political realm and enters the fashion world." Commercial entities have an interest in decoupling resistant style from resistant projects—the consumer base for the aesthetic forms of a movement is always far larger than the base of strict adherents to its oppositional ideologies.

People who are intrigued by the anarchist symbol far outnumber people who subscribe to anarchist political philosophy. Thus, commodification generally involves a conscious effort to drain away the political ideas that are signified by movement symbols while retaining the surface image, as in the example of a recent line of scented personal hygiene products with the word "anarchy" splashed across its labels and advertisements.¹² One can see from this example how commodification often necessarily involves the decoupling of the symbols of radicalism from its material practices—clearly, the marketers of these products do not wish to evoke the actual scent of anarchists' bodies, which often smell of unadulterated body odor in overt protest of the personal hygiene industry. One possible consequence of commodification is that the meanings of difference and non-conformity eventually no longer attach to the subcultural images at all, thus symbols that once marked an individual as an anarchist (to those in the know) no longer serve even that function. A second consequence is that commercial entities profit through the exploitation of groups whose voices continue to be unheard while their images are circulated at will. Insult is added to injury when the voice that is silenced is one that is explicitly ideologically opposed to the capitalist system itself, as in the case of anarchism.

Indeed, as anti-capitalists, many anarchists find it particularly offensive that commercial entities might profit from consumers' aesthetic attraction to anarchist style, thus integrating anarchist lifestyle practices into the capitalist system so as to strengthen the system itself. The style and symbols of anarchism are frequently used to appeal to youth consumers who may have a vague attraction to the rebelliousness it signifies, though they may not be familiar with the deeper ideological content of anarchist philosophy. Symbolic aspects of anarchist style have been co-opted by entities who do not necessarily share the core values of anarchism. Imagine, for example, circle-A

t-shirts produced in a sweatshop and sold by a multinational corporation in a store that pays its workers minimum wage and quashes unionization. Think also of the dynamic discussed in Chapter 2, in which alternative dietary choices are folded into the marketing schemes of commercial entities and branded as hip. CrimethInc. succinctly expresses the dismay felt by anarchists when such processes occur: "Our rage against the machine is sold for the benefit of the machine! We're fucked!" (CrimethInc. 2000: 159).¹³ This process is akin to what John Clarke (2005) calls the "defusion of style." Like a bomb squad disarming an incendiary device, aestheticization—often accompanied by commodification—is seen to render nascent forms of political resistance unthreatening to its targets. It does so by tricking consumers into believing—or by exploiting their existing belief—that the symbolic expression of dissatisfaction is equivalent to or directly causal of the material subversion of the forces they oppose. Resistance thus gets enacted through forms of consumption that are in fact profitable for those forces (or their corporate allies).

The ultimate strategic question for activists is whether style can function as a rhetorical tool that can be used to win support for anarchists' projects of social change. As a communicative performance, does subcultural style have the capacity to serve as propaganda that persuades outsiders as to the correctness of the subculture's underlying philosophy? As I've shown in the previous section, there are significant factors that work against such communicative potential, as far as anarchists' self-presentation is concerned. However, there are other functions served by the stylistic practices discussed in this chapter. Style makes visible forms of identity which would otherwise be unrepresented on the body. This can be useful for political subjects who wish to make their dissident identities known, for the purposes of self-construction and social bonding. At the same time, style can work to create aesthetic boundaries, as well as to reinforce social distinctions along lines that replicate existing structural hierarchies. The question for anarchists is ultimately what they hope to achieve through stylistic performance. As with any political tactic, style can be deployed strategically. The communicative ramifications of lifestyle, as discussed in this chapter, are some, among many, of the issues that must be taken into account in the full exploration of activist practice and movement strategy.