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“You gotta check yourself”: Lifestyle as a site of identification and discipline

I've been looking forward to my interview with Josef. He's a regular fixture in the Southern California anarchist scene—I've seen him around at events for years. He looks the part, with his black combat boots and keffiyeh wrapped around his neck. He's well connected, it seems like everyone I've interviewed in Los Angeles knows him. When we sit down to chat in February 2009, it's on the large porch of a communal house where the Downtown LA Food Not Bombs group prepares food every Sunday, to transport on bicycles to Skid Row, to feed the homeless there. We talk for a long time about his history in the punk and activist communities, and about what anarchism means to him. He speaks in exclamations and vivid language, at one point describing himself as an “anarchist Los Angeles pirate” because he chooses not to have a stable home and to navigate the city only on his bicycle. For Josef, as for many of the individuals I spoke with, anarchism is more than an abstract set of political philosophies; it provides direction for his behavior, and even his thoughts:

As an anarchist I struggle for a better self. It's like I want my thoughts to be golden, I want my thoughts to be pure, like free of hate, full of love, you know, that as an anarchist . . . I don't want to think patriarchy, I don't wanna think racism, I don't wanna think consumer[ism], you know, I wanna live autonomy.

Josef's use of the word “struggle” is telling: conscious effort is involved in keeping one's self and behavior in line with anarchist norms. Recall too Josef's imperative, as quoted in Chapter 2, “if you're an anarchist but you're like, gonna go eat at McDonalds, you gotta check yourself right there,

you know?” The language Josef uses here alludes to the productive power of anarchist identity—the capacity for anarchist identity, as a discursive concept, to get subjects to think and act in ways other than they might have done, to “check” themselves and adjust their behavior if necessary. It also shows the difficulty of resisting the hegemonic systems that every individual, even an anarchist like Josef, is also implicated in: patriarchy, racism, consumerism, and so on.

There’s a commonly expressed sentiment that a “real” anarchist behaves in particular ways. This might include “not pulling authoritarian shit,” as Josef’s friend Tina said. It also frequently includes lifestyle practices. For example, Josef bluntly told me, “I’m vegan because I think that’s what real anarchists should be, you know.” Orlando was another interviewee who had adopted many lifestyle practices that might be identifiable as anarchist—he biked everywhere, only wore second-hand clothing, and lived in a group house with other activists. He acknowledged to me that it was difficult, if not impossible, to live wholly according to anarchist principles, but that he was trying to become an “actual” anarchist despite the obstacles. I also heard the inverse of statements like this—individuals apologetically saying that because they drive a car or eat dairy, for example, that they aren’t really anarchists. Miranda said that “I can’t really consider myself a total anarcho-cyclist because in fact I have a car.” Emily confessed, “I gotta admit, I’m a bad anarchist. I watch a lot of TV.” I then asked her, “does that make you a bad anarchist, to watch TV?” She explained, “It does, it makes me a perfectly impure anarchist to be as addicted to television as I am.”

One is quite clearly not “born” an anarchist. No, one must construct oneself as one, drawing on the symbolic tools available. Despite its constructed character, “anarchist” is a powerful identity around which many kinds of individuals can mobilize to become “collective agents of social change” (Castells 2003: 70). The subjectivity of a political radical may be shaped in part by a personal experience of oppression, but more crucially it involves interpretation of experience—one’s own *or* that of others—which recognizes and strongly critiques an existing system of power. Because its political philosophy does not specify a “minoritarian subject”—a particular kind of person on whose behalf it claims to struggle (Warner 1993)—the “anarchist” would seem to be an identity open to all to adopt. In other words, they are explicitly united on the basis of shared ideas and goals instead of a pre-existing shared condition such as geographical location, class status, gender, or ethnicity (Gemie 1994; Curran 2007; Williams 2007). In this way, contemporary anarchism would seem to be “a politics of articulation,” in which individuals who unite under the sign “anarchist” bring various investments and backgrounds to an activist community whose values and projects are continually contested, negotiated, and always in process (Hall 1993; Reed 2005: 127).

On the other hand, the identity “anarchist” may not be as open in reality as it is in the hypothetical. Identification with anarchism in the contemporary United States is often strongly associated with maleness, whiteness, straightness, and middle classness.¹ By not being connected to a *specific* experience of social oppression, anarchism perhaps disproportionately attracts those whose political critique is not grounded in their own personal experiences of oppression. This is not intrinsically undesirable—radical political causes need as many participants as they can get; however, one of the consequences is that forms of their own privilege to which individuals are not attuned may follow them into the activist spaces they form and join. The result may be that the movement feels as closed to “outsiders” as conventional identity-based movements do. And in the case of contemporary anarchism, the “outsiders” just may be people of color, women, queer people, and people who are poor or working class. The exclusion of such people is a problem for a movement committed to combating hierarchy and oppression.

How is lifestyle implicated in these questions of political identity and movement belongingness? Historically, radical political movements have cultivated particular pictures of the proper or normative activist subject; often, these pictures include certain lifestyle practices which are coded as political, such as diet, self-presentation, and so on.² These pictures serve to discipline participants’ behaviors. Individuals internalize these pictures, drawing on them in disciplining themselves, both consciously and unconsciously. Furthermore, ideals of the proper activist lifestyle are, at times, used as grounds for boundary policing around the borders of the group: individuals are sometimes literally “called out” or ostracized when they are perceived as not upholding the ideals of the movement. In this way, even activist identities that are not tied to a minoritarian subject position evince some the features of “identity politics” associated with more conventionally identity-based social movements, including endless infighting about who has the right to claim membership in identity categories and who has the right to speak on behalf of the oppressed. As a result, identity can prove to be as troubling within anarchist movements as anywhere else. Identities and subcultural cultural norms can be productive, but also limiting, for political activists. In this chapter, I subject the idea of anarchist identification itself to scrutiny, in order to expose how it is achieved, how it is understood by individual activists, and what effects it has within their everyday lives.

In a way, anarchism is a frustrating case for thinking about identity and authenticity since one can’t really *be* an anarchist all the way. Given that present conditions prevent any of us from stepping outside of hierarchical relations of power—both materially and ideologically—it’s hard to say how one could genuinely and completely “live” anarchy. Indeed, this is a vexing problem for anarchist activists themselves, who sometimes evince anxiety about really living their beliefs, proving to themselves and others

that they truly *are* anarchists. But that's what makes this a terrifically fruitful case to explore. Post-structuralists suggest that all identities are, in fact, always fictions that are forever threatening to be undone, exposed as not being fixed or natural (Hall 1996b). And so, perhaps the ways anarchists cope with that fiction (i.e. turning to lifestyle practices in their attempts to authenticate identity) can shed light on why and how lifestyle and authenticity become significant for many contemporary subjects, not just radical activists.

Defining and performing anarchist identity

Few of the individuals I interviewed felt that the identity "anarchist" was straightforward to define. Like so many identity labels, "anarchist" is a floating signifier, in that it means different things to different people in different contexts. Yet, there must be some value in the label, since most of the individuals I interviewed used the word to describe their political identity, at one time or another.³ When I asked interviewees to explain what anarchism meant to them, I got a variety of answers. An anarchist would seem to be someone who believes that anarchy—or a lack of hierarchy—is the ideal organizational relationship among social beings and institutions, and that collective cooperation can ensure individual well-being while preserving personal autonomy. But an individual's definition can also entail many nuanced facets. Take Emily's response when I asked if she had a working definition of anarchism:

Well, what I like about anarchism and the way that I envision anarchism is that we sort of live in this big kind of constantly shifting power matrix and there's all different kinds of powers and all different kinds of oppressions. And what I think is good about anarchism is anarchism really looks at the way those structures and occurrences and all manifestations kind of interact with one another for the benefit of some and to the detriment of many many more. And so, um, the way that I look at anarchism is that it's a way of, like, you want to have the kind of economic equality that you would get from sort of a socialism, of course, but you want to have it through mutually cooperative groups of people coming together to solve through consensus their own community problems and issues and find collaborative means towards that kind of equality as opposed to having it be imposed by a government institution. And then also having also an understanding that, you know, economic equality isn't just the only thing, wanting to have respect and equality for people, for all races, genders, ethnicities, sexualities, and I think it's also about kind of having a love for that kind of diversity too

Emily’s definition (which actually went on for several more minutes) is emblematic because of its complexity. For her, rejecting hierarchy involves very specific, intentional analyses and tactics, each of which must be enumerated to capture what anarchism means to her. Joel remarked that the number of positions with which anarchists may find themselves in solidarity means that “you can’t have a political platform . . . and so that makes the term ambiguous.” While Jeremy acknowledged that “there’s certainly some semblance of a discernible, geographically-dispersed group of people who self-identity as anarchists,” and he ventured to guess that “they all define anarchism as the interrogation and transformation of hierarchical social relations,” he was in agreement with Joel that “there’s not really a coherent ethical trajectory to be found, there; even where relatively consistent aesthetics can be located across geographies.” Jeremy was quick to add that he didn’t think this incoherence was “necessarily a bad thing” but he wondered if anarchism as an identity was really the most accurate way of describing the realities of anarchist communities and practices.

Why do some activists retain the label then? For many, the identity “anarchist” is not just a descriptor of abstract *principles* held—it is a predictive signifier that indicates the type of *behavior* a person can be expected to exhibit. As Matthew put it, “Anarchist . . . describes my attitude toward other people, what I want for them and for myself.” Raychel explained that when she “actually learned what anarchism really was,” she realized, “it wasn’t just something that you call yourself to be rebellious and then just sit down and not do anything. I learned that, you know, anarchism was a lifestyle, it was changing things through the way that you lived alternatively to what, you know, what this society is.” Tina also felt that a person’s using the label anarchist for themselves would indicate something about the way they lived their lives. She said, “I like it when people call themselves anarchist,” because she felt that meant she could trust them “not to pull, like, authoritarian, like, shit . . . I feel like I don’t have to have my guard up for someone’s say[ing] things that are probably ignorant or authoritarian which happens a lot.” In situations like the ones Tina alludes to, identification as an anarchist serves as a symbol that facilitates social interaction, in that it provides a set of expectations about how one will behave.

Joel said that his identity as an anarchist indicates the ideological principles he currently espouses *and* the material practices he *would like* to embrace. So, while Joel often explicitly identifies himself as an anarchist, he thinks of anarchism as something to be aspired to through his daily activity, rather than a fixed characteristic of himself or other individuals. Picking up on a performative understanding of identity, Joel felt that merely agreeing with “all the tenets of anarchism” was not enough to make him or anyone else an anarchist. He felt that, similarly to how within post-structuralist philosophy language is thought to construct the subject (a theory he

referenced explicitly), “practice constructs the anarchist. And so, like, you become more anarchist, if you want to even call it that, or you become more of a political being who identifies as anarchist, legitimately anarchist, as you work in the frames that promote the ethics that anarchism entails.”

“Identity work” is a concept sometimes used to refer to the self-reflexive project in which an individual seeks “to achieve congruence between their emergent social identity” and “their subjective sense of self” (Stein 1999). The ongoing practice of “checking oneself” (as Josef put it) in order to make sure that one’s behaviors are in line with one’s political beliefs is a kind of labor undertaken by the individual subject. In Foucaultian terms, this is the labor of self-care, calling on the subject to apply “attention, knowledge, and technique” to one’s everyday activities (Foucault 1984a: 360). When individuals adopt a set of lifestyle practices, they don’t just decide “how to act but who to be,” as Anthony Giddens puts it (1991: 81). In a striking example of this, interviewee Emily told me that when she was younger and imagined the “kind of person that [she] wanted to be,” she “kind of figured that the kind of person [she] wanted to be would be a vegetarian.” She elaborated, “I guess I just sort of figured it went along with the lifestyle so I actually just started telling everybody that I was a vegetarian.” Although Emily didn’t yet identify as an anarchist at this time in her life, she was already shaping her lifestyle in such a way that it ended up being compatible with a typical narrative of anarchist self-identity. Not only did she adopt vegetarianism, but she also chose to avoid driving a car and embraced a non-conformist style of self-presentation. When she became acquainted with an anarchist community during college, it was a smooth transition to fit in with that scene based on the lifestyle narrative she had already constructed for herself.

Even seemingly innocuous settings such as potlucks or workshops can bring up occasions on which anarchist individuals are called upon, either implicitly or explicitly, to account for their identities and practices. I attended more than one event in which everyone in attendance was asked to introduce themselves and more or less offer an account of what anarchism meant to them. This usually involved everyone sitting in a circle, and going around the circle saying our names and briefly saying “why I’m an anarchist” or “what I find valuable about anarchism.” Instances such as this are clear incitements to do what Butler (2005) calls “giving an account of oneself” as an anarchist-identified individual. For Butler, when one gives an account of oneself, one accomplishes three things: (1) one relates the content of one’s life to another person; (2) one makes oneself into the kind of person who would give that account; and (3) one establishes a relationship between oneself and the others to whom one gives the account. This relationship is one of power, in which the one giving the account feels bound to do so in the face of the other’s expectation. It may not be a power relationship in the sense of one person dominating another, but it is a form of animating power

in that it motivates the subject to act and respond in particular ways that they might not do otherwise.

The answers given during these go-around-the-circle activities seemed to indicate the implicit pressure the participants felt to give a satisfactory performance of anarchist identity. People often named historical activists, movements, and theorists they identified with, and listed the current organizations and projects with which they were active. I myself felt anxiety on these occasions, as I attempted to formulate an introduction for myself that would satisfy the group and prove my legitimacy as an attendee. While my situation (as a researcher and a participant) may have been unique in that there were different stakes in my presence being accepted by the group, I do think that the feeling that the introduction was a compulsory “opportunity” to prove myself could have been a common one.

The lifestyle practices associated with authentic anarchist identity do not emerge in a vacuum; there are no pure, ideal expressions of anarchist political philosophy. Rather, what is deemed appropriate for anarchists to do in their everyday lives is entirely a product of context and culture. This poses a problem for the use of “anarchist” as a descriptive signifier of identity, since what constitutes an authentic performance of anarchist identity may vary across social contexts. As we will see in Chapter 5 for example, a practice like polyamory may be taken for granted as an element of anarchist lifestyle in one community, whereas in another, monogamy would be the default. Someone identifying as an anarchist in the first community would be expected to perform a commitment to polyamory, and not doing so would jeopardize one’s claim to an authentic anarchist identity, whereas in the second this would be less of an issue. “Scripts” of identity are so complex that it may be impractical or impossible for any single individual to keep up an authentic performance of anarchist identity at every turn, with every action (Appiah 1996: 99). As sincere as one’s own commitment to anarchy might be,⁴ one might find oneself not measuring up to someone else’s assumptions about what it means to be a real anarchist.

Despite people’s seeming awareness that anarchist identity is hard to define, the social dynamics of anarchist scenes often operate as if sincerity can be readily observed through an individual’s behaviors, including lifestyle practices. Lifestyle is seen to be a place where one demonstrates the degree to which one has sincerely disidentified with capitalism, patriarchy, and all the other oppressive systems that characterize mainstream culture. Sometimes this can mean that the more “normal” or “bourgeois” one’s lifestyle is, the less sincere an anarchist one is taken to be. I’ll give more concrete examples of this shortly.

Miranda, the one interviewee I spoke to who does not self-identify as an anarchist, observed, “I don’t know anyone who identifies as an anarchist. It’s a funny term because you feel like it’s an impossibility . . . You feel like there’s a bar that’s set really super high and you can never really be that

so why even bother identifying yourself that way.” In fact, identity labels may be particularly significant in contexts where one’s beliefs are radically incompatible with the constraints of one’s material situation. That is, under circumstances where anarchism is difficult to put into one’s lifestyle practice, it may become even more important to call oneself an anarchist. In other words, the structural conditions of capitalist, statist, patriarchal culture work to prohibit the complete enactment of anarchist values, as much as one might wish to live like an “actual” anarchist (to quote Orlando, an interviewee). If you are simply unable to materially perform your anarchist beliefs, it may become all the more important to use symbolic representations—like identity labels—to communicate those beliefs.

Minty offered a defense for the usefulness of identity to convey ethical orientations, even if they don’t fully correspond to material reality: “that’s kind of like the funny thing about identity categories, they really don’t capture who you are but right now they kind of are the only language that we have to speak to, like, our beliefs.” We live in conditions that, for a variety of reasons, make it truly impossible to perform perfectly authentic anarchism. In such circumstances, sincerity has to stand in for authenticity; there is no other choice. This may explain why anarchists place such investments in lifestyle practices, since those are the indices of sincerity. The present impossibility of a truly anarchist society on a broad scale may account for individuals investing heavily in their microscopic everyday lifestyle practices, since it may only be in this limited capacity that they are able to achieve the realization of anarchist principles. When even this realization is difficult, symbolic representations of identity may come to the fore, above or alongside material enactments, as a way of demonstrating one’s sincere commitment to the cause.

Disclaiming anarchist identity

People may just back off claiming the label of “anarchist” entirely, in part to avoid being called out for inauthenticity. Miranda—the one interviewee who emphatically rejected the label anarchist for herself—said “I’m probably ideologically like these people, but I like to shower.” When I followed up by asking, “so you don’t identify with anarchism?” She said, “I definitely identify with it but I would never consider myself an anarchist.” While Miranda’s affinity for anarchist philosophical principles may well be sincere, the fact that she adopts certain “bourgeois” lifestyle habits such as showering every day, owning a home, and having a legal marriage calls the extent of her commitment to anarchism into question, for herself, and potentially for others. In Miranda’s case, the label comes to represent a division, based not on abstract political beliefs but on material performances of authenticity.

For some, this dualism is a needless “construction of boundaries around an anarchist identity [which] excludes people based on their status, rather than their (potential) political views” (Heckert 2004: 114). Anarchist scholar and activist Jamie Heckert does not like the idea that people may choose not to work together based on whether they identify as anarchists, rather than on the compatibility of their political projects. Uri Gordon also observes that “an explicit reference to anarchism might be seen as exclusive, one which does not admit many of the individuals and movements that activists cooperate with and with whom they have solidarity” (Gordon 2008: 40). Indeed, several interviewees expressed wariness about the potential for their identification as anarchists to alienate potential activist allies, particularly those who are unfamiliar with the discourse of anarchism or hold negative conceptions about it. To deal with this situation, several interviewees remarked that they would identify as an anarchist or not depending on whom they were talking with. For example, Pritha said that she calls herself an anarchist, but that she is less likely to do so when working with activists of color, like herself, who have historically felt unwelcome in anarchist movements (more on this issue below). Mark explained that when he was younger and less experienced with political organizing he had been “a lot more quick to . . . let people know, ‘hey, I’m an anarchist,’” but he had since changed his approach:

I don’t find myself jumping to let them know that I’m an anarchist like right off the bat . . . I think more[so] I try to . . . develop relationships, like have a practice, principles, and politics, and then at a point that it might be relevant, talk to people in specific terms about anarchism. But it’s not like a first priority for me as far as organizing is concerned.

Alma also related that, in her experience with community organizations which were not explicitly anarchist-identified, “there was a fear of calling yourself an anarchist because then you would be alienated or sort of laughed at or something.” Joel, too, said that in situations where he felt the term anarchist was likely to be misunderstood, it would be disadvantageous to identify himself that way. He said that he had observed people in his activist communities turning away from calling themselves anarchists because it can be seen as “affronting” or “combative” even to identify in this way. Especially since anarchist philosophy is commonly mischaracterized and misunderstood, there is a danger that the label could turn people away before they even had a chance to establish common political ground.

Even among themselves, anarchists may not know what their peers mean when they use the label to categorize themselves. Leo recognized that an “excess” of connotations meant that the signifier “anarchist” was associated with a multiplicity of signified meanings, saying “I don’t even sometimes call myself an anarchist because it’s such a, such an excessive word.” In

other words, different anarchists may define the identity label in many different ways, even though they use the same word to refer to themselves. There is always an inherent slippage between a representation and its intended material content, thus it is not always accurate to judge someone's commitments based on the label they use for themselves. As Branch put it, "whenever someone's labeled an anarchist you shouldn't just automatically assume their politics are agreeable." This separation between anarchist as identity label and anarchist as political philosophy is vexing for some. Sally was hesitant to identify herself as an anarchist because she didn't "know what in particular [she]d be advocating" by categorizing herself that way. Others said that it was more important to look at people's material practices than the terms they used to identify themselves. As Jerome put it, "I don't care what people call themselves as long as they're doing good stuff in life that effects change."

Alyssa observed that the looseness of the identity means that there are "various sorts of people" whom she would recognize as anarchists but whose political theories and practices she doesn't particularly like. Aaron noted in an online chat, "the thing about anarchism is that it's a really big tent, b/c a central concept [of anarchism] is that there isn't one authority on what it is. Which is unfortunate, b/c it means some anarchists are literally almost so different as to be enemies. So in some ways, it means very little. For me." Emily took a similar view, saying, "There's probably so many people out there who identify as anarchists that I couldn't even have any hope of identifying [with]." She felt that,

That's the joy and the curse of anarchism as a concept because you can almost define it in any way, along with a few basic tenets you can almost make it anything. I think that's really great but then it also can take something that is really, like, charged and sort of de-charge it, if the problem is everything, of, you know, I can see how people could be focusing on completely different things and thinking about the world in completely different ways.

The diversity of beliefs and practices that fall under the "big tent" of anarchism is probably also what accounts for the seemingly endless list of sub-identities within anarchism: there are anarcha-feminists, anarcho-communists, green anarchists, primitivist anarchists, and so on. Branch pointed out "there's so many different kinds of anarchism or concepts or takes on anarchism—the classics still get debated to this day—same with Marxism, same with socialism, communism, any isms. [And] um you know it depends if you're an anarcho-syndicalist, what era you're from, if you're theoretically-based. . . ." Tom noted, with bemusement, "it's really hard to define a word like anarchism because, like, so man, people have their own, like, 'Well, I'm a nihilistic anarchist,' or 'I'm an anarcho capitalist, anarcho-fascist, anarcho-

anarchist.’ You can just make up all this shit.” These subdivisions of identity play out socially too: as Emily pointed out, even within the same geographical location, such as Phoenix where she was from, “there’ll be whole different groups of anarchism that don’t even interact . . . they could be working on totally different things or having totally different ideas.” This was why Branch felt that “a large majority of today’s activists don’t have a definition” and why he “take[s] it differently at different times It’s not a closed, defined thing as far as I’m concerned.” One interviewee, Tom, expressed his belief that “all categories of identification . . . are kind of silly,” but he also conceded, “I will identify as an anarchist if it’s necessary for certain means.” Tom was similar to many of the other individuals I interviewed, in that the degree to which they claimed and performed anarchist identity depended on the context in which they found themselves at any particular moment.

According to Stuart Hall (1996b), the absence of definitive claims about the content of identities is what may characterize effective political movements in postmodern society. Hall offers the notion of “arbitrary closure” to describe the way in which social groups temporarily accept particular meanings as defining themselves and motivating political actions. Because meaning is open to endless shift and contestation, individuals’ self-definitions of identity and politics are contingent and “necessarily fictional” (Ibid.). This resonates with the way Branch conceptualized his identification with anarchism:

It’s a constant learning process that you develop over time, your living conditions change, your understanding of the world changes, and so for me I see anarchism as, like, an ongoing thing that grows with me and my understanding of it grows and my conception of how it should operate or what it means changes and grows.

A political identity constituted through everyday practice is inherently contingent; it is repetitively reconstituted through performance. The fact that it must be continually performed leaves room for the evolution of the performance as anarchist politics are discursively struggled over and thus transformed and tailored to specific times and locations. Political identities like anarchism can be seen as signs, which carry meaningful content but are still open to “play” (Butler 1993). Identity signs can be strategically deployed for the purposes of collective struggle, but the “signifiers” and “signifieds” of those identities do not have to remain fixed for all time (Butler 1997a; Spivak 1987). Though the interviewees quoted here recognize that the meaning of the identity anarchist shifts across individuals and contexts, they can unite under the sign when expedient.

However, some individuals may also be morally opposed to the very notion of anarchism as a unitary identity, even for strategic purposes. As anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2002: 62) succinctly puts it, “there are some

who take anarchist principles of anti-sectarianism and open-endedness so seriously that they are sometimes reluctant to call themselves ‘anarchists’ for that very reason.” In this view, even to identify as an anarchist is to contradict anarchist philosophy. Tom seemed to agree with this, “Like to me, words are bullshit. . . words could be used as like a box to define your identity and a lot of people do that and that’s what makes me sad, like, in a lot of the anarchist scenes I’ve been a part of you always get the people that are like kind of scared to just let themselves actually be free” Miranda extended this skepticism of identity to other forms of self-representation: “I don’t like the idea of anarchism in terms of uniform, in terms of, like, you have to be a certain way and, like ‘this is cool’ and ‘this is not cool.’ It’s like, I thought this was all supposed to be about blowing up these ideas of what’s cool, like even when I went to the anarchist book fair in LA it’s like, ok, there’s uniforms [because everyone was dressed alike]. Like what kind of anarchists are you, you know?” She felt that the uniformity of appearance among anarchists at this particular event exposed a misunderstanding of anarchist philosophy among the participants. Opinions like Miranda and Tom’s are ultimately at odds with the notion of there being an “authentic” anarchist identity. Yet, dressing in a particular way, along with the adoption of other lifestyle habits, may be important for expressing the sincerity of one’s identification with a defined community. Without drawing on performative markers of political identity, those who wish to communicate to others that they are committed to the principles of anarchy may find themselves in a tough spot.

Social identities, discipline, and accountability

As implied by the examples given above, identity performances are constituted socially rather than purely individually. To say that you identify as something is to recognize that this something exists in a larger discursive sense that is available to others as well (Spivak 1997). The labor of self-care may be experienced as the effort of an individual subject, but it always involves others who serve as witnesses, interlocutors, and supporters. This network of others is both real—in that one may attend events where one comes face to face with others who ask one to account for oneself—and imagined, as when the discourse of “authentic anarchism” is activated in the mind of the individual. Josef’s struggle for “a better self,” one that resists patriarchy, racism, and consumerism, is a prime example of the power of normative discourse to bring ethical practices and subjects into being. The identity “anarchist” has disciplinary power, in that individuals who claim the label are subject to the norms associated with it; they feel compelled to take personal responsibility for conducting themselves in a way that will be deemed appropriate. In Foucault’s model of disciplinary power, the subjectifying capacity of discourse works precisely through

getting individuals to take personal responsibility for their own conduct; subjection is recognizing the ethically correct thing to do and attempting to do it (Foucault 1990b: 92). The anarchist-identified subject is created and recreated in the moments of ethical discipline along the imagined journey to “a better self.”

The capacity of radical movement discourses to win allegiance and direct individual behavior can be understood through Stuart Hall’s (1996a, 1996b) reading and reworking of both Foucault’s theory of subjection and Louis Althusser’s (2006) theory of interpellation. Hall offers an analysis that can incorporate the active investment in oppositional ideologies by resistant subjects. Hall argues that the “suturing of the subject to a subject-position” is a two-sided process, involving not only the hailing of the subject by discourse but also the recognition by the subject of a shared ideal in common between themselves and the content of the discourse (Hall 1996b: 6, 2). In line with Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony as being built on “the consent of the governed” through the appeal of “common sense,” Hall believes that identification, solidarity, and allegiance are established on the foundation of a felt affinity between subject and discourse (Hall 1996a, 1996b). Radical movements can thus constitute their own hegemonic spheres, in which subjects come to identify themselves with a particular resistant political ideology (such as anarchism). As Jorge Larraín (1996: 49) puts it, “individuals are not necessarily recruited and constituted as subjects obedient to the ruling class, the same mechanism of interpellation operates when individuals are recruited by revolutionary ideologies.” Historian Michael Denning (1997: 63) argues that the culture of radical movements constitutes an “alternative hegemony,” through which “political sentiments and opinions are transformed into ways of living and ways of seeing.”

The “ethically correct” behaviors set forth by cultural discourses of anarchist identity—what anarchists have collectively decided on as the markers of authentic anarchism—will become necessary for the subject to adopt, in order to make oneself recognizable as an anarchist. Examples of these behaviors include: having a vegan diet, getting around by bicycle, resisting mainstream norms of hygiene and self-presentation, and being sexually non-monogamous, just to name a few. Individuals may well feel as if they are making autonomous choices in how to behave—but the way lifestyle gets communicated about within anarchist movements also works to produce regular patterns of behavior. Participants in movement cultures may even take pleasure in the practices through which they constitute themselves as authentic members. Rather than feeling as if their natural desires have been constrained or violated by the group, they are in relationships of “consensual discipline,” not domination (Foucault 1984b: 380).

Discourses that circulate within and across anarchist movements—in the form of written documents, formal presentations, and informal conversations—establish what is accepted as “normal” behavior for

individuals who identify as anarchists (Foucault 1990a; Haenfler 2006: 197). Norms may not be explicitly stated: they work by recommending themselves as natural and reflective of a desirable state of affairs. Certain confluences of disciplinary power work to produce a coherent, *resistant* subject, one who consciously and consistently positions oneself against dominant institutions such as the state and conducts one's behavior accordingly.⁵ Within political movements, norms can often be justified on the basis that they are expedient for the goals of the movement (though the nature of a norm is that it may never actually require justification). One might "optimize" one's lifestyle so as to be most "useful" to an activist project.⁶ Behavior according to movement norms may even be seen as being ethically mandated. By conforming to these group norms, or "ethical repertoires" (Rose 1999: 265), on an everyday basis, individuals win acceptance within the community. Failing to adhere to norms, however, can bring shame upon the individual, and even draw explicit rebuke from their peers. If an individual commits a large enough transgression of movement norms, they face social ostracism and may even be formally banned from participating in political organizing activities.

Aaron spoke of this in terms of "accountable community," saying that living and organizing closely with other anarchists works to bolster one's adherence to shared lifestyle practices:

You literally live with other people who call themselves anarchists, who have a similar frugal punk-y lifestyle, and you put a lot of time into creative projects, and into discussions about what it means to live out your politics, etc. You're in close proximity, and if anybody suddenly stops being vegan it's a big deal. And I think the same is true as far as political identity. It's easier to maintain a very abstract identity like 'anarchist' when you have other people to orient yourself around, other compass points.

In Aaron's experience, it's not just a matter of having other people present "to orient yourself around" although this is part of it. It's also about people actively holding others in their community "accountable," expecting one's peers to answer for their personal practices, even in such matters as diet. One anarchist will often tell another when they witness them do or say something that they deem to be inconsistent with anarchist ethical principles; this is known colloquially as "calling someone out." The ostensible purpose of this is to raise consciousness among one's fellow anarchists and to encourage each other to stay committed to their shared political project.

Revbaker, in describing his experience with the anarchist scene in Denver, said that, "Political correctness was followed to a T. If you dared express any characteristics of 'dominant' culture through actions or words, it would be quickly pointed out." Even if an individual never personally experiences being called out, the expectations for normative anarchist behavior work to

incite such behavior before the fact of any direct communicative exchange about it. After enough time and exposure to the social norms of anarchists, habits are reified to the point where they become naturalized ways of life for the individuals who claim identification with anarchism. The anarchist lifestyle or “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984) eventually appears to be second nature to those who have adopted it. The extensive discipline involved fades from notice for those who most easily pull off the performance, though newcomers, outsiders, and people who are less readily able to adopt the accepted lifestyle practices may be more cognizant of the substantial effort that goes into fulfilling the standards of authentic anarchist identity.

Alternative communities of activists can feel like “home” for those who are accustomed to and experience a desire for alternative ways of life. Emily felt that the anarchist scene was a place that welcomed her and made it possible for her to sustain her identity and lifestyle in communion with others:

I think that a lot of the anarchist cultures that exist are almost like support cultures. They’re great social networks, they’re great for feeling like you have a place in the world and it can help to alleviate some of that kind of pain that comes with being an anarchist, and frustration.

Branch articulated a similar feeling:

It’s always like anything, it’s harder when you’re on your own; as soon as you start finding like-minded people or a community it becomes a support base . . . and mak[es] it feel maybe like a bit more of a norm when you’re surrounded by a culture that says it’s not the norm—that’s always incredibly helpful.

There are clear parallels here to Chandra Mohanty’s (2003) discussion of the “politics of struggle.” In the politics of struggle, individuals unite with others on the basis of common ideologies and goals, without making claims to any essential traits or even shared experiences. In political struggle, individuals may find an epistemic and emotional “home,” which Mohanty explains is “home, not as a comfortable, stable, inherited, and familiar space but instead as an imaginative, politically charged space in which the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment lay in shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation” (128). In Mohanty’s view, solidarity and shared struggle need not come from shared identity. However, it is the case that anarchism is a sign that invites identification from many individuals, who then act and form community in its name. Branch and Emily’s comments speak to the particular importance of community support within movements whose ideals and practices are marginal within society at large. Opportunities for collective enactment of

anarchist lifestyles are especially important for the production of radical subcultural identities because of the lack of validation by the narrative resources available in mainstream popular culture. With other anarchists around, one is reminded that one's lifestyle choices are envisioned as part of a shared political struggle. The anarchist lifestyle thus connects one to a collective activist identity that is reiteratively constituted on a daily basis. When the efforts and pressure of living like a real anarchist are noticed at all, they may seem like a small price to pay for membership in an idealistic community of activists.

Policing the boundaries of anarchist identity

The notion of authenticity is often marshaled as the premise upon which anarchists actively call each other to account for their lifestyle practices. At times, it seems to matter less what the practices are and what material outcome they may have in a given particular situation, than it does that those practices have been symbolically equated with "real" anarchism. Jeremy described this as "a current toward indulging the widely-held truisms of the 'anarchist community,' usually eschewing evidence or critical examination altogether, in favor of policing a particular ideological or aesthetic line." In other words, while people could be called out because their actions can be shown to have a detrimental impact upon others, they are called out for not doing what "real" anarchists do. One of the problems introduced by this, which I will discuss more below, is that there may be competing ideas about what real anarchists do. Without a critical interrogation of what defines "real" anarchism, and why any given definition is ideologically and strategically sound, holding people accountable can easily be mistaken for (or actually devolve into) self-righteous moralism and arbitrary boundary policing.

For indications of some of the specific operations of normative, disciplinary power among anarchists, take for example the way interviewees spoke of the standards of dress they had encountered in anarchist communities. Matthew, in describing the "anarchist suit" he wore at one time said, "All the clothes had to be very faded and dirty and gross and vaguely militaristic." His wording here is crucial—it was not that his aesthetic style just happened to match a uniform look adopted by others in his community—his feeling was that his clothing "had to" conform to a particular style. Joel used a similar turn of phrase in describing the pressure he felt to look a certain way among members of his local Food Not Bombs group in Washington, DC. As he put it, "you always had to kind of signify yourself in a way that was appropriate . . . you had to kind of follow the norms." He went on to explain, "you couldn't fit in [with the mainstream]—you couldn't wear like a button shirt. Not that you couldn't, but people didn't." His final comment is important;

people didn't necessarily feel directly *prohibited* from dressing in certain ways, but the outcome of the social norms was that they *didn't* dress in those ways. By getting called out oneself, or even just witnessing others get called out or refused entry into the community on the basis of performances like these (a phenomenon I will discuss more below), individuals learn which lifestyle practices are accepted as authentically anarchist and which are likely to call into question their identification as an anarchist. While occasions on which one is called to perform or narrativize self-identity may be seen by some as positive opportunities for self-fashioning, social discourses of normativity also create a context in which one is always at risk of being judged and rejected when one's performances fail to measure up to cultural norms.

Recall Emily's comment that the amount of television she watched made her an “impure” anarchist in the eyes of others. When I asked if people called her out on her taste for television, she said, “People look a little weird when I say how much TV I watch.” I don't think Emily genuinely believed that she was unethical or a “bad anarchist” despite those being the words she used; she was just extremely conscious of the fact that she could be perceived as such by others in her circles. Emily explained it in the following terms:

I think anarchists, there is sort of like . . . there's a judgment about how you live your lifestyle, like what you consume, how you consume, how you interact with media, what your, you know, to a much lesser extent what your sexual practices are, what kind of music you listen to.

Similarly, when Revbaker talked about the enforcement of political correctness within the anarchist scene, he observed that the movement could seem “closed off, cliquey, dogmatic or even elitist—at least it was to a wide-eyed, naive and socially awkward 19 year old” like himself. Mark, too, noticed what he called a “sectarian attitude” among anarchists he'd tried to organize with, “like this notion of, like, what we're trying to do is the authentic [anarchism] and what other anarchists are doing is like a waste of time or something.”

Although Mark was speaking in terms of organizing tactics, this attitude can also extend to lifestyle “tactics” as well. Alyssa perceived that some of the anarchists she knew in Santa Cruz held the attitude that they were “better than other people” due to their adoption of certain lifestyle habits, such as, “being vegan/being freegan; living in the woods; having a ‘purer’ form of anarchism than anyone with a job; riding bikes.” Miles too described becoming disillusioned with some people's “holier-than-thouism against other anarchists.” Such dynamics are cause for concern for some anarchists, who are frustrated by what they perceive to be “an arms race to the bottom of who can be more radical, and who can ‘out’ other ‘anarchists’ as not really living up to their principles” (“Anarchism and Decadence” 2008).

When I asked Aaron what he thought it meant to identify as an anarchist, he replied flippily, “to unnecessarily subject yourself to a lot of judgment.”⁷

The judgment of people’s political sincerity based on how closely their expressed tastes match an accepted image of authentic anarchist identity can have real consequences for who is welcomed in the movement and who is actively excluded. Rilla recalled the experience of a woman she had met while doing labor organizing in Los Angeles, who came from a wealthy family and dressed “preppy” (“she actually tied her sweater around her shoulders and stuff”) but became politicized through her work with the labor union. When the woman moved to Philadelphia, Rilla put her in contact with some anarchists she knew there, but when the woman tried to attend one of their organizing meetings, Rilla had heard that they “wouldn’t let her in and said that they thought she was like a cop or something. The group wouldn’t let her join and turned her away at the door.” The preppy woman’s taste and appearance signaled that she didn’t truly belong, and thus that she must have had an ulterior, inauthentic motive for wanting to get involved in anarchist organizing. Given that radical organizations are regularly targeted and infiltrated by law enforcement personnel, it’s not entirely irrational to be suspicious of those who don’t signal their belonging through the common signifiers of anarchist identity. Although the way someone is dressed may seem like a superficial basis for assessing their legitimacy, it can be a giveaway that someone doesn’t even know enough about the scene to realize that they will mark themselves as not belonging by dressing in particular ways. Dressing “like an anarchist,” with all the subtle stylistic cues that might involve, can communicate that one has spent a significant enough amount of time in the scene to cultivate what Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 66) calls “competence” through “slow familiarization,” and thus has proven their commitment to its political project through this sustained involvement.

It is possible that someone could be in solidarity with anarchist politics and have valuable contributions to make without being aware of or wanting to adopt the particular tastes of anarchist subcultures. Matthew, via email, related his experience of trying to get involved with anarchist organizing in Philadelphia while he was attending graduate school there: “The Philly anarchists were suspicious of me because I was a graduate student at Penn. They said I was ‘bourgeois.’ One said I could ‘work with them’ but that I couldn’t ‘BE one of them’ (!!).” Even though Matthew had spent several years in the anarchist scene in Chicago and could presumably establish his credibility as an experienced political organizer, his choice (and ability) to pursue graduate education at a prestigious private university jeopardized his perceived legitimacy as a true anarchist. Minty also said that she had gotten “shit” from some anarchists about her job at a non-profit organization, which often involves her working with state agencies and on electoral campaigns. She said that people had called her a “professional activist,”

and a “tool” of the system for doing paid work of this nature. Anarchists often position themselves in opposition to “liberals,” “reformists,” and other political orientations which are seen as less radical. To partake in lifestyle practices—like going to graduate school or holding a job in the non-profit sector—which are seen as “bourgeois” may signify (accurately or not) that a person’s beliefs more closely align them with such undesirables than with authentic anarchists.

It is important to point out here that sectarian divisions are not seen as arbitrary or petty or unnecessary by those who attempt to enforce them. On the contrary, they are understood as real and meaningful differences in political philosophy and goals. This is why sectarian divisions are generally positioned as having moral justifications, or as being about political “correctness.” There is an implicit assumption that the level of an individual’s sincerity of commitment to anarchist politics can be rather straightforwardly read in one’s personal habits. An attribution made in passing by a participant in a discussion session at a conference I attended was quite telling on this point—a woman was posing a question to a roomful of people about how they, as anarchists, could productively work with “people who don’t share our values.” She used the term “SUV drivers” as shorthand for the people who don’t share anarchists’ values; the implication was that driving an SUV is antithetical to anarchist ethics and detrimental to anarchist projects, and thus this speaker assumed a shared perception that anyone who drives an SUV does not hold anarchist values. It could be that all anarchists truly find SUVs to be ethically objectionable, or that all anarchists realize that if they want to be accepted as a true anarchist they had better not be seen driving an SUV. Either way, it clearly made sense to the woman speaking to assume that SUV ownership is not likely to correlate with aspirations to anarchist identification.

But another participant in the discussion pressed the point, responding to the first comment, asking whether SUV drivers do not “share our values” or do they just “live a lifestyle that we don’t think of as *expressing* our values?” Along these lines, one blog post argues that anarchists ought to “take revolution seriously and realize that people who take to the streets are our allies, even if they wear nike shoes, eat meat, and drive SUVs” (“Anarchism and Decadence” 2008). Certainly, people may share political philosophies while their personal ethics play out differently in their tastes and lifestyles. There is a tension to be worked through here, between the need for anarchists to be able to recognize and connect with each other through performances of identity, and the desire not to fetishize lifestyle practices to the point that they are reified as the only legitimate manifestation of anarchist sincerity.

The fact that anarchist is fundamentally a constructed identity could be a point of possibility for activist communities. The borders of the community are endlessly permeable, since what anarchism is can grow and change with the conditions and problems at hand. That there is no

final definition of what it is to be a true anarchist allows for productive fluidity, which might respond to situational specificity in the deployment of lifestyle-based tactics and the enforcement of lifestyle norms among claimants to community membership. If the contextually specific character of all anarchist lifestyle practices could be more fully exposed and embraced, there might be less of a tendency among anarchists to enforce particular tastes and habits as the be-all and end-all of authentic anarchism. The fact remains though that the many contextual factors that enter into an individual's performance of anarchist identity are often invisible, particularly to those whose structural privilege enables them to easily adopt the accepted trappings of anarchist authenticity. Despite the lack of "necessary or essential correspondence" (Hall 1996b) of anarchist identity and ethics with other identity categories such as age, gender, or race, it is the case that actually existing constructions of anarchist authenticity may favor, or at least be perceived to favor, some subjects over others. The question to ask in any particular context is, do the lifestyle practices most strongly associated with authentic anarchist identity inherently exclude certain types of individuals from achieving a convincing claim to anarchist identity? The next section addresses this question, and in the process offers a sociological explanation for why anarchism has earned a reputation for being a movement of the privileged.

Lifestyle and the re-centering of privileged subjects

Anarchist *philosophy* does not favor the structurally privileged; in fact, it aims to dismantle structures of power and privilege. Yet, a major external (and internal) critique of contemporary anarchist movements is that they are homogeneous and unwelcoming to the marginalized subjects they claim to best serve. Lifestyle politics may contribute to the conditions that this critique responds to. Lifestyle practices, especially consumption habits, are widely perceived as being open to personal choice. This perception is aided by the mythologies of neoliberalism that posit a completely autonomous subject unconstrained by discrimination and acting purely in the interest of creatively cultivating a desired narrative of the self. Under this assumption, it may seem quite logical to judge the sincerity of a person's anarchist politics by looking at one's lifestyle choices. For instance, to some extent, the woman who made the comment about SUV drivers was not completely out of line; in my observation, anarchists do not tend to drive SUVs. Yet, is it possible that there are anarchists who *do* drive SUVs, but go unrecognized as anarchists due to the assumption that an authentic anarchist *wouldn't* drive an SUV? Furthermore, might SUV drivers be more easily viewed as

potential allies in activism if it was not assumed ahead of time that they could not possibly have a sincere investment in anarchist principles?

The decision to not drive an SUV is a fairly autonomous one—there is little in the way of an economic barrier or cultural bias to prevent someone from choosing to live a non-SUV-driving lifestyle. Insofar as “not driving an SUV” is a mark of authentic anarchism, it’s a lifestyle choice available to pretty much anyone. But let’s take another typical lifestyle practice that is used as a mark of authenticity, one that is commonly debated in anarchist communities for precisely the reasons I’m concerned with here: veganism. Does the fact that veganism is strongly associated with anarchist lifestyles make the anarchist community always already unwelcoming to people from particular cultural backgrounds in which meat is central to the cuisine? For example, there is a commonly voiced assumption that people of color are less likely to find veganism appealing as a lifestyle practice (this is not to say that such an assumption is empirically validated, but it’s one that comes up often). If veganism is used as a measure of someone’s sincerity and authenticity as an anarchist, are non-vegans then marginalized within anarchist movements? And *if* people of color are unlikely to be vegans and vegans are more valued as members of anarchist movements, then are people of color less likely to be valued as anarchists? We could substitute any lifestyle practice for “veganism” here, asking whether the regular practices of anarchism are more or less accessible to people of different races, ethnicities, genders, ages, class backgrounds, disability statuses, etc. Bicycling as a preferred mode of transportation, for example, excludes people with certain disabilities from performing that expression of anarchist sincerity.

An intersectional analysis that considers anarchist lifestyle practices in light of other categories of identity can help to assess the regular ways in which the normativity of anarchist subcultures exerts its disciplinary force on different kinds of subjects. It can also help to show why many critics of lifestyle anarchism assert that the accessibility and appeal of some anarchist lifestyle practices is disproportionately skewed toward young, white, middle-class males. I argue that this perception grows out of the fact that some of the practices that are most recognized as authentic or legitimate expressions of anarchist identity may also be perceived as being most accessible to those coming from the most privileged social positions. In other words, the lines of exclusion around anarchist identity often, in fact, mirror mainstream patterns of social division and domination. There is a fear that this cultivates homogeneity within anarchist movements, which limits the scope of both its analysis and its reach.

In Bourdieu’s (1984) study of lifestyle and taste, he showed that distinction tends to break down along lines of class status and educational background: the most cultural capital accrues to those from affluent backgrounds and who have had advanced education. Thus, social privilege begets further social privilege when certain choices are made, and hierarchical social divisions are

reinforced. The subcultural capital associated with certain anarchist lifestyle practices can work in a similar way. Some subcultural lifestyle practices—and by extension the winning of subcultural capital associated with them—are more practicable for some participants than others (Carrington and Wilson 2004). Being that authentic anarchist identity is constituted through some of these practices, this has consequences for who is most likely to be recognized (including *by themselves*) as *being* an authentic anarchist. Individuals with certain forms of privilege in mainstream society may be best equipped to conform to some of the norms of anarchist culture as well. Emily, who is white and in her twenties, observed that anarchists' awarding of cultural capital to certain lifestyle practices could work to exclude many potential allies:

It limits anarchism and what is considered legitimate within some anarchist circles, to this one mold of being like a hippie vegan. Like, people don't buy new clothes, people don't watch TV, that stuff isn't, most people in society aren't necessarily like that, and I don't think it's, like, the best means of, like, attracting people that aren't already in that kind of subculture you know . . . I think a lot of ways anarchists present themselves is not necessarily positive in terms of having a diverse anarchism, and I think a lot of the lifestyle constraints are sort of, can be kind of exclusionary.

Though Emily admitted to sharing many of the stereotypical lifestyle practices of anarchists, such as being vegetarian and not owning a car, she reflected, "you're not necessarily inclusive of all communities if you're this strict on what your affectations are." Like all forms of disciplinarity, anarchist norms are repressive as well as productive, and may be particularly so at different times for different people. Norms that are productive and empowering for some people may prove unduly restrictive for others (Butler 2004a: 8). When I asked Aaron, a white man in his twenties, if he felt there was a community of people who would identify themselves as anarchists, he speculated that "I think if you did a survey, the folks who respond 'yes' without caveats to that question are younger, middle class, white men." Note that Aaron was not making a claim about the anarchist community actually being comprised only of younger, middle-class white men; rather he was pointing out that such individuals would be the most likely to unreflexively or unproblematically use the term anarchist to refer to themselves and the political communities of which they count themselves a part.

Interviewees like Aaron also felt that anarchist identity could be problematic in that people may "hide behind" the label "anarchist" in order to avoid the "stickier work" of actively confronting their own role in perpetuating systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and class hierarchy. This dynamic works to obscure real structural

inequalities that are carried over from mainstream culture into anarchist subcultures. When white men who identify as anarchists hold their own lifestyle practices as the ideal expression of anarchist sincerity, and don't have a critical analysis that recognizes the privileges they bring to their implementation of anarchist lifestyle practices, they (perhaps unwittingly) perpetuate subcultural norms that make others feel excluded. This creates a vicious cycle in which already marginal subjects, particularly women and people of color, feel both unprepared to adopt anarchist lifestyle practices and disinclined to see the appeal of doing so. The response to this lack of participation by marginal subjects is often “how can we get more women and people of color involved in our activist community?” rather than, “what about the subcultural norms of our community may be failing to appeal to women and people of color?” and “are our norms worth rethinking?”

As with many other subcultures, age is a central factor affecting the nature of individuals' participation in anarchist lifestyles practices. Many of the older (over age 30) people I interviewed had at one time engaged in the typical anarchist lifestyle practices but had since abandoned them. One reason for this is simple burn out—years of living under certain conditions can take their physical and emotional toll. Lifestyles characterized by extreme precarity, such as squatting, traveling, dumpstering, and shoplifting, may prove unsustainable in the long term, particularly when more stable options are available. Also, the tightness of anarchist communities, which may involve living in close-quarters in group houses, and sometimes distancing oneself from one's non-anarchist family and community, can take an emotional toll after years of living that way. The departure of older people from the scene ends up being self-reinforcing. Although Jeremy cited several reasons why he had distanced himself from anarchist communities, based on carefully considered ideological and strategic concerns, he also added, “it often feels creepy being the only person over 30 in the room.”

Several interviewees expressed frustration with what Minty called the “fucked up misogynist ideas and practices” that result in women feeling silenced and therefore unwelcome within anarchist scenes. Mark traced the “posturing” that goes on within anarchist communities (both at events and in online forums) to a “certain kind of macho, like, way of relating to politics” which he said was characterized by “shooting everything else down and then propping yourself up.” Tina noted that women feel hesitant to speak at meetings or to take on leadership roles in the movement because they are insecure about “sound[ing] smart enough” or being accepted as a “really true anarchist.” Adam Tinnell (2008) notes that this dynamic is due to “a big problem with the way radical men conceptualize their masculinity,” implying that what many men see as an ideal performance of anarchist identity is troublingly characterized by behaviors that may be alienating to women. Leo pointed out that women are not the only ones alienated by these performances; he observed that expressions of “machismo” in

activist communities also work against men who aren't comfortable with a stereotypically masculine gender performance for themselves.

Manarchism is a term used within anarchist circles to identify the tendency for some individuals and scenes to make women feel marginalized or excluded. So-called manarchists are not necessarily intentional in their marginalization of women, but rather they perpetuate sexist dynamics through their failure to examine and challenge their own male privilege. Minty said that some women still feel that they are treated like "accessories" to men within activist communities. The imposition of this role is reinforced by their fellow activists hitting on them or holding them to dominant beauty standards—reminding women that despite their radical activist identities, they can still be implicated in patriarchal gender dynamics. Pritha explained manarchism to me this way:

I guess what I meant by 'manarchist' (and the context in which we use it here in DC) is men who claim to have radical politics but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, are often patriarchal and heavily assert their male privilege. You know when you're in a meeting for an anarchist org[anization], and there's that one guy who dominates the conversation, never lets anyone (much less a woman) get her say nor does he listen—he's a manarchist. Full of dude-lieness that he never bothered to unpack though he thought he did.

Manarchism may perpetuate male privilege in multiple ways. One is by valorizing lifestyle practices that are, for whatever reason, more appealing or practicable by men than by women. Aggressive styles of dress and sexual promiscuity are typical anarchist lifestyle practices that may carry graver consequences for women than men. It's not that men are essentially more able to dress aggressively or engage in polyamorous relationships, but there are real social factors that might disproportionately deter women from these practices.

Another way manarchists perpetuate their privilege is by failing to acknowledge women's participation in subcultural lifestyle practices, often because these men assume that women are less knowledgeable or skilled than men are in particular areas. For example, Sally, an experienced cyclist, expressed frustration with male friends who assumed that she wouldn't know how to repair her bicycle or that she would be uncomfortable riding on busy streets. Though she herself had never let this frustration deter her from cycling, she wondered if it had affected other women in the scene. Tinnell (2009) expresses a similar frustration with the bike culture in Denver, lamenting that "there is nothing radical about the way bike culture is performed right now," since "everywhere you look, women are either being objectified to sell some bike event or product or are being put down through misogynistic language or posturing." Tinnell goes on to observe

that within this scene which is supposedly aligned with a radical political critique of mainstream culture, “all of a sudden it is okay to reenact the type of dominant patriarchal culture that you might find in [a] frat house.”

Rilla described a conflict within an anarchist collective house she had lived in, in which a male resident was upset about one of the female roommate’s public displays of affection with other women on the front porch and her occupation as a sex worker. He argued that she should be kicked out of the collective house due to her not being enough of an activist. The woman was, in fact, part of a sex worker’s union, and thus was involved in her own form of activism, though it may not have taken a form preferred by the male resident. Rilla suspected that his discomfort stemmed more from her wardrobe and sexuality than her activist credentials. The discomfort experienced by the male resident—which mirrored mainstream attitudes toward women’s sexuality—was expressed by minimizing the female resident’s activist practice as less authentic and thus she was portrayed as less deserving of membership in the anarchist community.

The demands of family may also disproportionately affect the capacities of certain people, especially women, to devote time to anarchist projects and leisure activities. During a discussion at an anarcha-feminist picnic I attended, one woman said that it was hard for her to get away from home to attend such social gatherings unless her husband was available to watch their child. Alma, who does not have children but lives in close proximity to her parents and grandparents, said that she feels the stresses of trying to live up to the demands of organizing and activism while looking after her family’s needs. Compounding her feeling of responsibility to her family was the fact that they are all immigrants from Mexico who rely on her to help them navigate life in the United States. Alma expressed a bit of resentment toward fellow activists who are more easily able to conform to the “more than human” norms of political organization cultures:

You’re always expected to produce to a certain degree, to a certain level, and I think it’s irrational to try to push people to be more than human and of course if you don’t live up to that expectation then you’re lazy or you’re a flake and it’s like no. Like I mean some people might detach entirely from their families, I know plenty of student organizers at UCLA whose parents live in New York City and they don’t have to get called by their grandma to like, translate [between Spanish and English].

Alma recognized that her position as a woman and an immigrant put her at a disadvantage for proving her commitment, compared to others who may not have to balance the demands of family with their activist identities. These are just a few examples to illustrate how privileges in the mainstream are carried through to anarchist subcultures—there is no shortage of similar incidents to be found in nearly every activist community.

Anarcha-feminists have struggled to bring these gendered dynamics to the attention of their comrades, and indeed many organizations have tried to actively address conditions which marginalize women in the scene. For example, the Bicycle Kitchen in Los Angeles has devoted one evening a week to a woman/trans-only night in its workshop, in order to provide an environment where women won't feel intimidated to learn about bicycle repair. By helping women to build skills and gain confidence in this setting, the Bike Kitchen may alleviate some of the apprehension that women feel about getting involved in the often male-dominated anarcho-cyclist community. An anarcha-feminist organization that Tina, Minty, and other interviewees were involved with, has made it a priority to create a welcoming atmosphere for people with children in the Southern California anarchist community. For example, they spearheaded an effort to organize free childcare at the Southern California Anarchist Conference in order to facilitate parents' participation in conference sessions.

Yet, these kinds of efforts by organizations can only go so far toward changing the social dynamics of the subculture. With regard to the childcare issue, Emily commented that, while people in the anarchist scene in Phoenix were quite accepting of parents being involved, the social heart of the scene was the parties that occurred after organizing meetings. Because people really got to know each other and form bonds at these late-night parties where drinking and drug use were common, parents could be unintentionally excluded from building collegial relationships. Leo related that he had been "shocked" by the outpouring of interest when the anarchist-feminist collective was started in Los Angeles. He saw this as an indication that while there may have been "rhetoric and words" of support for feminist perspectives within the anarchist scene up until that point, people weren't "really dealing with the complexities of what it means." Without proactive, structural efforts to make the movement welcoming and attractive to people who may not be able to seamlessly reconcile their lifestyles with those of most anarchists, such people will be effectively excluded, though that may not be anyone's desire or intention. Also, without an active redefinition of what it means to perform "authentic" anarchist identity, the norms may still systematically favor those more comfortable behaving and relating in masculine ways.

Just as anarcha-feminists have made critiques of male privilege within anarchist scenes, anarchist people of color (APOC) have voiced frustration with white anarchists' perpetuation of systemic racism and ethnocentricity. As an article written by two APOC asserts, "There is this idea that once someone pronounces themselves 'anti-racist' then they assume that they are an ally of people without their privileges, immune from critique. Even if they take criticism in a positive guilt-free manner, they too often neglect to see that they are part of a whole racist system" (Musuta and Hickey 2008). One concern often raised is white anarchists' seeming ignorance of and subsequent disregard for issues that disproportionately affect people of

color. For example, several typical anarchist practices put their practitioners in the position of drawing police scrutiny and possibly harassment. Given the established pattern of police violence against and over-criminalization of people of color in the United States, these individuals have more to lose by adopting even mildly rebellious practices than do their white counterparts. For example, shoplifting may be much more easily adopted as a lifestyle practice when one isn't automatically targeted by security staff, a daily occurrence for people of color. A zine called *Shoplifting: The Art and the Science* (n.d.) recognizes this limitation, urging readers, “Because you shoplift, or can shoplift, [it] doesn't mean you are radder or a better anti-capitalist than the rest of us. It may just mean you have privileges which play into everything you do including stealing.”

People of color who are potentially interested in anarchist politics may also be deterred by the common perception that the movement is a white scene, and thus the perception may become self-fulfilling. Minty, who identifies as white but whose job involves doing organizing work with many people of color, struggles with trying to reach out to different communities so that “you're not just having the same white kids come to your events.” Though it is probably not ever the intention of event organizers to actively exclude non-white participants, racial homogeneity in the scene can be self-perpetuating. For example, Minty said that she invited her co-workers to an anarchist event she helped organize, and that “they came out and it was like all white kids [*laughs*] and they were like ‘ummmm,’ so they stayed for like five minutes and left, you know” The supposed lack of connection that people of color feel with certain “subcultural” aspects of anarchism is also frequently cited as the reason for the putative whiteness of anarchist movements. As one APOC writer summarizes, “Many people of color in the U.S. today do not wish to be associated with what has become the stereotypical white North American anarchist movement that is less about community and more about creating a lifestyle out of anarchism” (Stepp 2008). Another APOC echoes the concern, saying, “a significant part of the problem lies in the subcultural lifestyle of many anarchists, including myself” (Nomous 2007). This writer, going by the pseudonym Otto Nomous (sounds like “autonomous”), asserts that the association between anarchism and “‘punk’ or other ‘alternative’ persuasions” is alienating rather than inviting for most people. He points out the fact that,

the general tendencies of most white/punk anarchists tend to be to settle for the symbolic, and fail to support the real struggles of people to change the world precisely because they have a choice as opposed to people who have to struggle for their livelihood.

In this view, the identities and interests of people of color are assumed to be at odds with the taste preferences associated with anarchist subcultural identities, since these are merely symbolic.

While it is crucial to be alert to the ways in which subcultural tastes may draw unofficial boundaries around activist scenes, it is also important to be careful when making assumptions about who feels excluded and why. Rilla pointed out that, in Los Angeles, both the punk and the anarchist scenes regularly included people of color, particularly immigrants or children of immigrants from Central America. Yet, due to dominant assumptions about the whiteness of those scenes (which may be more accurate in other regions of the United States), this involvement by people of color was sometimes overlooked even in narratives that were specifically about the Los Angeles context. Rilla explained that such oversights were aided by assumptions that, when people of color were involved in activism around immigration issues, for example, they were doing so from some essentialized racial position and not from an anarchist analysis. To give one example from my research that illustrates Rilla's point, Josef traced his political radicalization to two different sources—the punk scene on the one hand, and his experience of oppression as an immigrant from Nicaragua on the other. Yet, if one were looking at Josef with the assumption that punk anarchism is a white thing, it would be easy to read his political identity as being more tied to his ethnicity than to his subcultural tastes. On the other hand, a white anarchist who was involved in the punk scene would receive a less ambiguous reading, tracing his political identity directly to his subcultural practices. Over time, one can see how this could reproduce the stereotype that the subcultural aspects of anarchist identity are a “white thing.”

Rilla's point was that, if one assumed that people of color were not likely to be anarchists, one could easily make one's observations about their activist causes fit with one's preconceived notions about what anarchist activism entails. The same goes for people's subcultural tastes. I interviewed multiple women and people of color who had been exposed to anarchist politics through their participation in punk scenes, for example, so I am wary of too quickly assuming that such tastes necessarily make women and people of color feel excluded from identifying with anarchism. It is more responsible to try to recognize the ways that all of these scenes can reproduce the misogyny and racism of the dominant culture, rather than to conflate involvement in those scenes with particular essentialized subject positions. While it is important to consider the ways in which taste-based markers of authenticity may work in advance to exclude people of particular structural locations, it is also important to consider the specifics of context and to examine the lived experience of the participants in that context. Without doing so, one may reproduce certain strands of conventional wisdom about subcultural tastes that play into essentialist understandings of identity categories.

But, regardless of whether the lines are as neatly drawn as some critics would claim, it is quite clear that performing an authentic anarchist identity is never as simple as just believing in anarchist philosophical principles and then automatically adopting all the attendant lifestyle practices. For various

reasons outlined in this chapter, the label anarchist may be problematic to identify with. The responsible move by a critic would be to examine the specific ways in which people experience conflicts between their different social identities and anarchist subcultural practices and to be attentive to how the collective experience of participants in any given context may be reproducing larger patterns of oppression such as sexism or racism.

Irony sincerity

Anarchists are not naïve about any of the issues I described above. As should be clear from several of the quotations included in this chapter, self-identified anarchists are, in fact, engaged in a great deal of reflection and self-criticism about many aspects of their movements and culture. The way many approach their identity as anarchists is self-reflexive and cognizant of the very issues discussed above, resulting in a sort of ambivalent identification with the category itself. Jeremy, for example, offered the thoughtful critique that, “anarchism as a way of representing experience allows and disallows certain things; it’s more pliable for some than others. I don’t think it’s terribly helpful to hold people’s experience up to one particular vocabulary.” Yet, moments later, when I asked him “do you call yourself an anarchist?” Jeremy answered with a resounding “Absolutely.” There was both irony and sincerity in this response. Since he had just finished offering a sophisticated reflection on the shortcomings of identity categories, he was clearly aware that his own commitment to such a category would be ironic, yet he embraced the label for himself anyway. Other interviewees conveyed similarly ambivalent attitudes. When I asked Alma whether it was important to her that she call herself an anarchist, she replied, laughing, “Not at all. Sometimes.” Like Jeremy, she was aware of the limitations introduced by identifying as an anarchist, but was still committed to the utility of the term—and she was able to find humor in the contradictions therein.

We might say then that some anarchists deploy a kind of “ironic sincerity” in their use of the term as a descriptor of identity and a motivator for action. The irony stems from an awareness—based in self-reflexive critique—that the term “anarchist” has no fixed or “authentic” referent. This lack of fixity comes from several sources: the impossibility of truly achieving anarchy within the context of long-standing structures of hierarchy and oppression; the many ways of defining and practicing anarchism; and contextual factors that shape how different kinds of people put their anarchist beliefs into practice. Despite the ironic self-awareness of the limitations of authenticity for anarchist identity, many anarchists hold a commitment to sincerity when evaluating their own or others’ identification with anarchism. This investment in sincerity results in discourses of “accountability” which attempt to motivate individuals toward those lifestyle practices that are

seen as indicative of anarchist sincerity. At times, accountability is perceived as boundary policing, which, for many, seems to be at odds with the anti-hierarchy ethos of anarchist philosophy. For anarchists, the question remains then, whether lifestyle norms are politically and ethically defensible, or whether “authenticity” should be redefined away from lifestyle in order to achieve an effective anarchist movement.

These questions have resonance beyond the anarchist context. In many circles, the labels people use for themselves and the habits they take up in their everyday lives are seen as important. Labels of identity, and to some extent even material practices, are important for what they *represent*, not necessarily for what they *are*. For the activists discussed here, the identity anarchist may be incidental; the key thing is that individuals are able to come together and recognize in each other the collective analyses, ethics, and interests that will allow them to struggle together for a political project. Recognition of the “incidentalness” of identity labels could be helpful in that it could relieve activists—and others—of the obligation to police each other’s labels and lifestyle practices. This is not to minimize the ethical significance of some lifestyle practices. To the extent that they have some material effects, they may continue to serve as useful indicators of political commitment. However, there are contextual factors that shape what counts as a legitimate expression of commitment and who has the capacity to express themselves in that way. To deploy the discipline of lifestyle norms productively, rather than oppressively, requires endless critique and redefinition—a static image of anarchist authenticity could not respond to all of the intersecting forces in any given context, as we have seen. But while the content of anarchist authenticity might change, the sign of “anarchist” could remain as an identity under which to unite with sincere commitment. This potential is what many activists understand as being useful about retaining an identification with anarchism, even while they recognize some of the problems it poses.