Portwood-Stacer, Laura. "Bridging the chasm: The contradictions of radical lifestyle politics in neoliberal context." *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 131–154. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501306792.ch-006>>.

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Bridging the chasm: The contradictions of radical lifestyle politics in neoliberal context

Several years ago, I sent a brief message to an email list for anarchist academics. It seemed innocuous enough to me—I was just inquiring whether anyone was aware of the first appearance of the term “lifestyle anarchism” in writing, as I wanted to be sure to cite it properly. Lifestyle anarchism is a term, often used pejoratively, to refer to a mode of relating to or identifying with anarchism that involves a preoccupation with many of the practices I’ve described in this book: self-identifying, consuming, and styling oneself in particular ways that differ from the mainstream and mark one’s membership in an activist subculture. While I was aware that the discourse of lifestyle politics is a source of anxiety and tension for many anarchist activists—as I’ve demonstrated throughout this book—I did not expect the reaction that followed. While a few people attempted to answer my question, many others took the opportunity to debate the concept of lifestyle anarchism itself. Over the span of a few days, dozens of emails were exchanged in which various individuals (with varying degrees of nuance and civility) offered their own definitions of lifestyle anarchism, shared relevant personal experiences from their own involvement in anarchist activist communities, and argued for varying levels of investment in lifestyle politics, ranging from intense commitment to measured ambivalence to biting disdain for lifestyle anarchism. At times, the conversation became hostile—there was even a bit of name-calling! I was starting to see why, on another anarchist message board, the topic of lifestylism has proven so incendiary that it is explicitly forbidden to bring it up.¹ As might be expected, no unanimous conclusion

was arrived at by the email list participants about the proper role of lifestyle within contemporary anarchist movements. But what became clear to me from this episode was that, at least for the kind of people who are invested enough in the project of anarchism to participate in an email list about it, the subject of lifestyle carries high stakes. Clearly, some anarchists feel there is value in defining, defending, and debating the place of lifestyle-based tactics within their political projects.

Though I never was able to locate a definitive source for the origin of the term, it probably first came into use during the 1980s, within critiques of the tendency for some self-identified anarchists to become preoccupied with lifestyle practices to the exclusion of other activist work. At this time, anarchism was being taken up by members of punk subcultures, under the influence of politically outspoken bands such as Crass and the Dead Kennedys (Thompson 2004). Many youth in the United States and Europe were motivated by radical, anti-capitalist critique to establish communes, renounce consumerism, and vocally oppose the state and its violence. They were basically doing as their forerunners in the hippie counterculture had done, but with the hard-edged aesthetic introduced by punk music and style. Many of the practices examined in this book became explicitly imbricated with anarchism in this era. Yet, the fact that many who became involved in punk scenes lacked a deep understanding of anarchist history or political philosophy meant that their enactment of anarchist principles could, at times, be fairly limited, remaining at the “shallow” level of their individual lifestyle choices. This was what earned them the pejorative labels of lifestyle anarchist or lifestyleist. Since that time, lifestyleism has retained its connotative associations with the anarcho-punk sector of the broad anarchist movement, but the label may be extended to include anyone who attempts to resist or evade “the system” in some capacity in their everyday lives (Molyneux 2011: 55).

A central focus of this book has been the relationship between lifestyle practices and the constitution of anarchism as a political identity and activist project. While each chapter has somewhat addressed some of the internal tensions around the specific lifestyle practices discussed, these tensions must be situated amid a larger discourse within anarchist movements that questions the very legitimacy of lifestyle as an arena of activism. This discourse also questions the authenticity and sincerity of individuals who adopt lifestyle-based tactics as part of their identification with the anarchist project. This may seem contrary to what I argued in Chapter 4, where I said that engaging in particular lifestyle practices can be an index of one’s authentic and sincere commitment to anarchism. In the contrary position I am addressing here, critics of lifestyle anarchism assert that a commitment to lifestyle politics may belie a *lack* of political seriousness since it is a misguided approach to radical activism. In fact, this contradiction—that commitment to anarchist lifestyle practices is simultaneously used as a marker of sincerity

and inauthenticity—is not easily resolved, and seems to generate no end of controversy and debate among anarchist activists. It seems that there are no winners in the “anarchist realness” contest—you might seem insincere if you don’t adopt certain practices in your everyday life, but if you are seen to be too invested in those practices, your authenticity as a serious activist comes into question.

In this chapter, I examine the meta-discourse about stylism as an authentic or inauthentic mode of activist engagement among anarchists, with a particular focus on the function of the rhetorical figure of the lifestyle anarchist within this discourse. In doing so, I hope to cast light backwards over the content of the previous chapters, to help illuminate what exactly *is* at stake in activists’ practices of lifestyle politics. As I will argue, there is no clear-cut line to be drawn that would separate “real” anarchists from lifestyle anarchists, despite what some critics may claim. Drawing on the evidence marshaled by previous chapters, I reiterate a central argument of this book—that lifestyle is a major site for the constitution of radical activist identity and community in addition to being the site of many tactical interventions. An individual or group’s adoption of lifestyle tactics thus always *does* more than even its practitioners may intend or be conscious of. The multifaceted—and sometimes even self-contradictory—effects of lifestyle practices complicate any straightforward judgment about their place in the activist toolkit.

Radical lifestyle tactics are so problematic as a form of activism because they are a product of neoliberal conditions while at the same time representing resistance *against* many of the political projects of neoliberalism. The ideology of neoliberalism interpellates individuals as self-interested, self-reflexive subjects who monitor and regulate their own conduct in the pursuit of various goals (usually those of the market and/or the state). It is common sense, in this context, for the individual to be an important (even primary) unit of political participation. Because of this, an activist strategy based on lifestyle tactics can appear immanently appropriate since it mobilizes individuals to exercise power in their immediate situation and to achieve observable results in that sphere. Yet, at the same time, radicals object to the principle of possessive individualism, which goes hand in hand with neoliberalism’s capitalist logic, and to the delegitimation of collective social formations, which is inherent to neoliberal ideology. An activist strategy based on lifestyle tactics can thus appear disturbingly inadequate for the contemporary radical leftist project, which seeks broader social reorganization.

This chapter will further delineate some of the contradictions contained within and invoked by lifestyle politics within radical activist frameworks. As the presence of these contradictions should make clear, any pursuit of purity or total identity with the radical ideal through lifestyle is bound to fail. This inevitable failure suggests the necessity of a reflexive critique that takes

into account the limitations of any given tactic in any given situation, while noting the specific conditions under which certain tactics are appropriate and effective, and keeping in mind that any effects will be multiple and inflected by many intersecting factors. My concluding thoughts attempt to enlarge the scope of the discussion to consider what the contradiction-riddled case of lifestyle anarchism can illustrate about the nature of radical critique under conditions of a neoliberal postmodernity that seems both to enable and to always foreclose complete identity with the radical political project.

The discourse around lifestyle anarchism

James Purkis and Jonathan Bowen (2004: 8) use the term lifestyle anarchism to describe the “living [of] one’s life in accordance to particular principles” which grow out of anarchist critique. By this simple definition, to talk about lifestyle anarchism is to discuss the set of everyday activities, tastes, and consumption habits enacted by anarchists *qua* anarchists. Since, as one interviewee told me, “anarchism is always about how one lives one’s life,” it would seem that lifestyle anarchism would be a fairly straightforward phenomenon. Yet, the term is actually much more loaded than this. As I said above, the labels lifestyle anarchist and lifestylist are frequently invoked within the anarchist scene to deride someone who is perceived to be more interested in cultivating their own personal liberation than in achieving social transformation. Lifestylists may be seen as selfish hedonists who are interested only in their own immediate interests. Or they may be seen as activists who perhaps mean well but whose interventions are misguided and ineffective because they fail to transcend individual experience. In the words of one webpage, lifestyle anarchism refers to “apolitical hangers-on in the movement. That is, people who dress the look or living in certain ways, but who don’t really act on the basic tenets of anarchism.”² A further nuance to the way lifestylism is used is that it is the kind of thing that everyone can point out but almost no one will admit to embracing themselves. So, while the individuals I’ve mentioned in this book certainly engage in some of the lifestyle practices and have some of the motivations associated with lifestyle anarchism, almost none of them would refer to themselves as lifestylists or appreciate being perceived as such. Supporting this, the entry for lifestyle anarchism on one anarchist website reads:

Lifestyle anarchism is a term commonly used by those within the anarchist movement to criticize others who, they allege, practice anarchism as a lifestyle or fashion statement. The term is seldom used as a self-description and there are no anarchist organisations which describe themselves as lifestylist.³

Accusations of lifestylism can function rhetorically to designate a mode of activism that is less serious, or less effective, or less legitimate *than one's own*, whatever it may be. Invoking the specter of lifestylism is thus used in much the same way that lifestyle practices themselves are, as a tool for proving oneself as a serious, self-aware radical. Yet, as I pointed out above, one is pretty much damned if they do and damned if they don't when it comes to lifestyle politics. If one doesn't live the revolution in all the expected ways, one risks being illegible as holding a respectably radical critique. Yet, due to the anti-lifestylist rhetoric in some parts of the activist milieu, commitments to the anarchist lifestyle may put activists at risk of being identified with problematic expressions of privilege or subculturalism.

Murray Bookchin's (1995) essay, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgable Chasm* is probably the authoritative source on the concept of lifestyle anarchism in its pejorative sense. As the title might suggest, the essay takes a binary view of anarchist orientations. It's based on a premise that there are two kinds of anarchists—those who are interested in radical social transformation and those who are interested only in their own lives—and that the activities of the second are detrimental to the effectiveness of the authentic anarchist movement. He argues, "These trendy posturings, nearly all of which follow current yuppie fashions, are individualistic in the important sense that they are antithetical to the development of serious organizations, a radical politics, a committed social movement, theoretical coherence, and programmatic relevance" (19). Bookchin situates lifestylism as being of a piece with "postmodernist" theories of power and subjectivity, advanced by Michel Foucault for example, that locate the realm of politics and oppression beyond the institutions of the state. For Bookchin, such an analysis is dangerous because he sees it as allowing radicals to displace their critiques and efforts away from the state, which, for him, ought to be anarchists' primary target. Through this displacement, according to Bookchin, lifestyle anarchists cease to be effective anarchists and no longer have any hope of achieving an anarchist society. Bookchin believes that radicals ought to take advantage of the failure of state institutions as an opportunity to promote revolutionary social transformations, but instead they cope with their dissatisfaction by withdrawing from social action into their own personal lifestyle practices, which often revolve around consumer choices and stylistic affectations. Thus, he sees lifestylism as a distraction from more effective forms of political activism, such as "institutionalized" coalitions "of the oppressed in popular assemblies, councils, and/or confederations" (10).

It should be noted here that Bookchin's stance in this essay seems to contradict his writings elsewhere, particularly in "Post-scarcity Anarchism" (1971) where he has been read as advocating a kind of lifestyle politics. In the later work, Bookchin was writing at a time when the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s were seen to have been thoroughly co-

opted or negated by the consumer culture of the 1980s. His perspective on punks, new agers, and other lifestylists is clearly informed by the unfortunate end met by earlier radical movements. Lifestyle politics had, in some ways, been critiqued by anarchists in earlier eras⁴ but it took on new significance in the 1980s and 1990s because it was now solidly situated within consumer culture. Whereas a preoccupation with the individual could be critiqued from a strategic or philosophical point of view in earlier times, added to this critique was now a fear—based on first-hand observation and experience—that radical movements would be co-opted and defused by capitalist apparatuses.⁵ Bookchin's critique of lifestylism was perhaps a bit polemical (one website describes it as a "bitter rant"),⁶ but it did capture a real skepticism that continues to exist around lifestyle-based tactics.

In more contemporary expressions of this skepticism, a common target for accusations of lifestylism is CrimethInc., a publishing collective that puts out anarchist propaganda in the form of books, zines, pamphlets, posters, stickers, music, and videos. The CrimethInc. collective is intentionally evasive about revealing its exact makeup; its website describes it as "a decentralized anarchist collective composed of many cells which act independently in pursuit of a freer and more joyous world." By most accounts, its core consists of a small circle of individuals who publish anonymously or under pseudonyms and who oversee the production and distribution of the materials. But CrimethInc. is probably most usefully understood as the hub of a very loosely united community of readers who see their views and tastes reflected in the content of the collective's output and who may be mobized for actions and events organized under the CrimethInc. banner. Fans of CrimethInc. and those involved in the publishing collective were a recurrent target of criticism by people I interviewed in doing the research for this book. On several occasions, interviewees referred to CrimethInc. as a symbol of a concern with lifestyle, and used terms like "crimthinc kids" or "CT-ers" to stand in for the kind of people who seem to place a lot of stock in lifestyle practices. CrimethInc. has come to be associated with lifestylism because much of the content of its materials is related to practices of everyday life. An analysis of the corpus of CrimethInc.'s materials shows that these are not the only topics discussed—the books and zines also cover philosophy, social movements, international events, etc. The slick look of the materials (a combination of mass produced and DIY aesthetics) and the sophisticated distribution of them (they are ubiquitous at book fairs and radical book stores but are also available from mainstream commercial booksellers) associates them with a "branded" and "packaged" image of anarchism, to use the words of interviewee Miranda. This image and the way it makes radical ideas accessible to a broader audience of youthful consumers than might otherwise identify with anarchism reinforces the connotation that CrimethInc.'s fans are less than serious in their commitment to anarchist politics.

Some of the content of CrimethInc.'s materials supports the notion that some anarchists are more interested in their own personal experience of pleasure than in radical social transformation. For example, the writers of CrimethInc.'s most circulated book, *Days of War, Nights of Love* (2000: 39), claim to see a more socially oriented politics as futile because "it's difficult to imagine a whole different world order" and because none of us will live to experience a world without hierarchy. According to CrimethInc., "we should, rather, recognize the patterns of submission and domination in our own lives, and, to the best of our ability, break free of them. We should put the anarchist ideal—no masters, no slaves—into effect in our daily lives however we can" (39–40). Later in the same book, they argue, "we must seek first and foremost to alter the contents of our own lives in a revolutionary manner, rather than direct our struggle towards world-historical changes which we will not live to witness" (118). So, the emphasis here is less on building a collective movement that works toward a rearrangement of social power relations and more on "resurrecting anarchism as a personal approach to life" (34). Indeed, CrimethInc. proclaims in its "anarchist primer" pamphlet, *Fighting for Our Lives* (n.d.), that "the best reason to be a revolutionary is that it is simply a better way to live." Damningly, one critic asserts that "Crimethink's [sic] neo-Situationist exhortations to disentangle ourselves from commodity dependence read like lifestyle advice columns for the voluntarily poor and anticapitalist" (Kanouse 2006: 28). This critique is particularly interesting because the contemporary advice or self-help manual has been identified by many as the epitome of the neoliberal culture (Rose 1996; McGee 2005; Sender 2006; Ouellette 2004). The self-discipline exhorted by expert authorities in such manuals encapsulates the ideology of individual "responsibilization" in lieu of collective action aimed at solving social problems. This expression of neoliberal ideology maps quite well onto some of CrimethInc.'s tactical advice, as exemplified in the quotes above. Much as the underlying political ideology of neoliberalism assumes that all subjects have equal access to the law and the market, the advocacy of individualist tactics implies, erroneously, that everyone has equal access to those methods of resistance. By not taking a strong critical view of how structural conditions give some more wherewithal to pursue resistant lifestyles than others, the rhetoric of CrimethInc. may relieve the activists who subscribe to it from a feeling of collective responsibility for social welfare.

Some interviewees also expressed negative attitudes toward CrimethInc.-style activities and the anarchists who embrace them. Pritha, for instance, described (via email) lifestyle anarchists as the ones who don "black clothes, circle A tattoos etc." and said of them,

I don't think 'lifestyle' anarchists (a la CrimethInc.) are really anarchists because I believe that anarchism is about cultivating community, hope and inspiration in an otherwise unjust and difficult world where capitalism

forces people to be competitive, cut-throat and isolated. For me, the resistance against capitalism and imperialism then isn't about hopping trains, stealing, or throwing pipe bombs at Starbucks but about working with all other marginalized communities to transform our society.⁷

Other interviewees criticized lifestyle anarchists for being too out of sync with “everyday people” (Emily) and for their “disconnection from larger communities that they might work with or help” (Rita). Matthew, who was in his thirties, noted that “CrimethInc. is very popular among people ten years younger than me” and admitted to having gone through a CrimethInc. “phase” of his own. He offered a reflection via email on some of the problems of lifestylism as encapsulated in CrimethInc.:

My main beef with CrimethInc. is that it's intellectual rubbish. So far as I can make sense of it at all, the antidote to oppression is ‘quit your job and join a squat.’ CT's chief virtue is that they have some very, very talented writers and artists in their collective who make all of this seem very edgy and romantic and sophisticated, when in reality it's just adolescent self-indulgence, recycled 60s-era pseudo-revolution, etc. Most of all, it doesn't accomplish a damn thing for anybody - in the long term, not even for the CT'ers, most of whom end up getting tired of the life and going back to their parents or to school or work or whatever. Trainhopping and dumpstering and all that may be exciting and fun and so forth, but it's not anarchistic, it's not revolutionary. It's just shits and giggles. Those sorts of activities, even if pursued by a large number of people, wouldn't do much to promote the cause of anarchy or challenge the status quo.

When I asked Aaron (via online chat), who had cited Bookchin as one of his anarchist influences, what he thought of CrimethInc., he wryly remarked, “I think it's very sad that so many great resources are wasted on their (lack of) ideas. If I were in the FBI, and wanted to funnel alienated middle-class white kids away from being useful to radical movements, I would start CrimethInc.”

As is implied in Aaron's comment, one of the major perceived problems with CrimethInc. and with lifestyle anarchism in general is its apparently disproportionate appeal to youth coming from positions of structural privilege. The concern here is that lifestyles which these anarchists recognize as appropriately resistant are actually exclusionary to, for example, women, people of color, and the working class, as discussed in the previous chapters of this book. Some activists worry that, by embracing subcultural lifestyles, anarchist movements self-select participants who may not have a deep awareness of the real, ill effects of capitalist exploitation, police power, immigration policy, sexual violence, and so on. There is a fear too that, when the “downward mobility” involved with many anarchist lifestyle practices

becomes inconvenient, those who have the means to do so will just fall back on their economic, gender, and other forms of privilege, abandoning the cause of anarchist politics as well.

These are not problems that are *essential* to lifestyle activism. While specific dynamics like this may be objectionable, it's possible that there are conditions under which such negative consequences could be avoided, particularly if activists are thoughtful about doing so. For example, some of the tactics of anti-consumption described in Chapter 2 could be carefully articulated to the challenges faced by the poor and the working class. For instance, lifestylists embrace of bicycling could mobilize them to cultivate an infrastructure (such as repair collectives and safe bike lanes) that would hold value for many, even those outside the activist subculture, and could endure even if the more privileged bicyclists eventually moved on from the practice. But what makes many people uneasy about the idea of "white kids slumming it" (as Rilla put it) is the possibility that downward mobility is embraced because of a romanticization or fetishization of poverty that ignores the real, systematic struggles faced by poor people. One anonymous critique—titled "Rethinking Crimethinc" (W 2006) and circulated on various anarchist message boards—quotes a particularly disturbing sentiment found on a CrimethInc. book jacket: "Poverty, unemployment, homelessness—if you're not having fun, you're not doing it right!" The writer of the critique goes on to explain why statements like this are offensive:

Condescending, privileged, middle class crap. The only people who could think that poverty is in any way fun are wealthy kids playing at being poor for a few years, the daily reality of poverty, unemployment and homelessness for the average person is very serious and something anarchists should always organize against rather than mock.

If one's experience of poverty happens in the context of a romanticized, "intentional living" situation, it could be that the privilege that one carries into that situation causes one to be less vulnerable to the harmful effects of poverty. Having this privilege is not unethical in itself, but if it blinds one to the systemic injustices that disadvantage others who don't have one's privileges, then one's personal downward mobility will be difficult to connect to broader social struggles. As Marcuse argues, retreating from mainstream culture may be a necessary step in the development of an alternative consciousness. But, he also cautions that such a retreat may also have the ill effect of reducing one's motivation to combat the objectionable parts of mainstream culture, since one might feel that one is both immune to them and innocent of perpetuating them (Marcuse 2001). Though the effects of oppression and privilege may be temporarily relieved or obscured through individual refusal, systems of oppression and privilege are not dismantled by such tactics. One may experience the effects of hierarchy less *in one's own*

life but this doesn't necessarily mean that this benefit is shared by anyone else as a result of one's choices.

Bookchin's (1995) essay and some of the views expressed by interviewees illustrate the tension that endures among anarchists over the issue of lifestyle. The question of whether or how much lifestylism poses a threat to effective radical activist projects is one that still holds purchase. Some may believe, like Aaron, that tendencies like those represented by CrimethInc. are detrimental to radical movements because they distract bodies and resources away from more worthwhile projects. Others, like Matthew, believe that lifestylists are harmless, even if their activities don't "accomplish a damn thing for anybody." Yet, lifestyle-based tactics are widely embraced by some of the same people who are critical of lifestyle anarchism. In all my research, I didn't come across one person who thought that individual conduct was simply irrelevant to either anarchist identity or the political project of anarchism. Everyone accorded *some* importance to the way individual activists chose to live their lives, and activists who embrace practices associated with stereotypical lifestylism are, in reality, rarely motivated purely by individual self-interest. For the most part, the people I spoke with, observed, and read about, envisioned their actions as part of a larger movement and as components in a larger strategy. What this speaks to is that there may, in fact, not be any clear-cut criteria that could empirically distinguish between Bookchin's mutually exclusive categories of social anarchists and lifestyle anarchists. Lifestyle politics has traction beyond a restricted subcultural milieu of self-interested individualists. As a participant in the anarchist academics email exchange noted, "you don't have to be a CrimethInc. obsessed fuck you punk vegan bastard to think trying to live ethically is a good idea." The idea of trying to make a difference by living one's ideals has become near hegemonic, not just in activist movements, but also in consumer culture at large, as I argued in Chapter 1. Clearly, many parties feel it serves a useful purpose.

Rather than attempting to answer whether or not a commitment to lifestyle politics is a "good idea," a more appropriate pursuit would be to ascertain in what situations and for what goals is lifestyle activism an effective course of action. As the cases examined in this book have shown, it is not the case that lifestyle practices don't "accomplish a damn thing for anybody." They "accomplish" a great deal. That lifestyle choices do not immediately bring about large-scale revolution is obvious, but these choices do serve many functions within activist movements. They give expression to individual and collective identifications, they provide alternatives to hierarchical power relations on a small scale, and they symbolically prefigure larger goals. In a more negative vein, they may also serve to establish or reinforce social boundaries and hierarchies, within and beyond activist movements. Lifestyle practices may even generate money for corporate interests who are able to tap into activists' idealistic narratives. While people may disagree

about whether the particular functions served are desirable or not, such assessments must be made in context, in consideration of the situational factors involved in any given case. Questions about the worthwhileness of lifestyle politics ought to be asked on a situational basis, for the sake of developing effective activist strategies. In the next section, I offer further considerations for the development of radical activist strategy against the backdrop of neoliberal, postmodern conditions.

Individualism and collectivism

The very complicated relationship between “the personal” and “the political” is a thread that runs throughout the discussions in this book. This relationship takes on a unique form within the conditions of neoliberalism. While activists such as those seeking women’s liberation in the 1960s and 1970s were at pains to make the world acknowledge that their personal lives mattered in political ways, such an argument is, in some ways, obviated by the dominant logic of neoliberal society. It is now a hegemonic assumption that the individual is the privileged unit of political activity. Individuals are “responsibilized” into looking after not only themselves but also huge social and environmental problems, both by the state who abdicates responsibility for the welfare of its citizens and by the market which swoops in to fill the gaps, offering consumption-based “solutions” to the dilemmas individuals find themselves facing, thereby profiting off individual uncertainties and the desires they hold to do as much good as they possibly can (Rose 1999, Bauman 2001). The rise of “commodity activism” is just one indication of a shift from the conventional wisdom that political and social conditions are brought about through collective struggle to a state in which “political imaginaries and subjectivities are reshaped to fit the individualized ethos of neoliberal capitalism” (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012: 11). The logic of neoliberalism rests on assumptions that collective welfare—when collective welfare is the goal at all—can be ensured through the “invisible hand” made up of many subjects making their own individual choices about the “ethical” way to live their political values. There is, therefore, a new ideological terrain upon which radical activists must struggle to represent the connection between their personal experiences and broader relations of power, and upon which they must attempt to extend personal resistance out into the world beyond their own bodies and experiences. To claim *today* that “the personal is political” is to be met, metaphorically, with supportive nodding and a sales pitch for organic food. A radical critique will thus have to do more work to expose the workings of power and domination and to propose systemic change.

While the oppositional consciousness of radical activists such as anarchists certainly places them in an ideological position to recognize and critique the processes of neoliberalism, these activists are also caught squarely

within those processes. Anarchist fantasies of living outside of capitalism, patriarchy, and the rest are nearly always frustrated by the overarching power of these systems. To transcend these systems as a society by disinvesting in them as individuals proves impossible, since each half of this strategy is a precondition for the other. The endurance of hegemonic ideologies of domination means that provisional practices of resistance, undertaken in the name of subverting domination as best one can, are subject to a kind of creeping in of dominant ideologies and power dynamics at every turn.⁸

As the examples offered throughout this book have shown, a practice undertaken with even the best intentions is always inflected by the oppressive conditions it was meant to combat. This introduces a kind of uncanniness into the struggles of those we might term “neoliberal radicals,” a constant back and forth questioning about whether one is fighting the system or playing right into its hands. In assessing the motivations and effects of lifestyle politics, one is never quite able to decide what is authentic and what is inauthentic, what is resistance and what is recuperation.⁹ Most advocates of anarchist lifestyle activism do imagine their personal practices to have an impact beyond their own experience. The major challenge for practitioners of lifestyle activism is to connect microscopic interventions to macroscopic struggles in a non-superficial way.¹⁰ In the absence of such strong links, practices of lifestyle politics risk becoming the caricature of ineffectual individualism drawn by Bookchin. In the rest of this chapter, I want to detail further some of the ways that these traversals—from individual to collective, micro to macro—are negotiated by anarchist activists, and some of the inherent limitations that practices of lifestyle politics have in transcending the personal-political divide.

One of the most fundamental tensions highlighted by the debate around lifestyle politics is the tension between individualism and collectivism. While most anarchists agree that the preservation of individual autonomy and the collective pursuit of social justice are essential to any desirable political reality, there are disagreements as to how these two goals should be held in balance with each other and what are the best strategies for achieving them (Milstein 2010). The question of lifestyle politics within anarchist movements highlights this tension because it is a tactic that has both individualist and collectivist aspects. It seems to require the individual to take responsibility for one’s own behavior and to attempt to generate change through personal habits. This goal of generating change may become unrecognizable when activists are perceived to be motivated by personal interest without an accompanying analysis or critique of the political structures that privilege some at the expense of others. In this way, lifestyle anarchists may seem indistinguishable (in form if not in content) from other subjects of contemporary neoliberal consumer culture who seek what Bookchin (1995: 11) calls “the sanctification of the self as a refuge from the existing social malaise.” But lifestyle politics, as I’ve detailed in this

book, also calls on activist communities to generate and cultivate cultural norms that encourage collective shifts in ways of living that both align with radical ideals and establish more just relations in the here and now. To invoke an example I discussed in Chapter 5, individuals don't just start rejecting monogamy on their own—they acquire “sexual vocabularies” from peers in their communities and they build networks in which the norm of monogamy is questioned so that others may feel empowered to reject it as well. In ways like this, so-called lifestyle anarchists blur the lines between “ideal-typical distinctions” that would categorize lifestyle tactics as either individualist or collectivist.¹¹ The categories of social anarchism and lifestyle anarchism are ideal types that cannot actually be found in the real world. Seen in this light, it becomes harder to dismiss lifestyle politics out of hand as Bookchin does.

Decentralized power and resistance

It is perhaps no coincidence that Bookchin's vitriolic critique of lifestyleism goes hand in hand with his explicit dismissal of Foucaultian theories of power and resistance. Bookchin sees Foucault as advocating only disconnected acts of insurrection, and indeed sees lifestyle anarchism as a strategically untenable expression of this philosophy. Yet, there are alternative readings to be made of both Foucault and lifestyle politics. Foucault's understanding of power as decentralized and discursive need not preclude intentionality, cohesion, or the strategic mobilization of individual action. If anarchist lifestyle politics is read as a kind of *disciplined ethic*, it's possible to amend Bookchin's characterization of lifestyle anarchism as that in which “the sporadic, the unsystematic, the incoherent, the discontinuous, and the intuitive supplant the consistent, purposive, organized, and rational” (Bookchin 1995: 51). Whether such discipline is actually effective at meeting any of the strategic goals envisioned by the people who take on such lifestyle projects is hard to determine, particularly since the specific strategic goals may not be carefully staked out by activists themselves. What this book models is the utility of a contextualized analysis that examines the multiple consequences and motivations of specific tactical behaviors without assuming a “programmatic” standard for what counts as appropriate activism and what doesn't. Instead of assuming the end goals of a movement can be thoroughly determined in advance, along with which tactics are most appropriate for achieving those goals, it may make more sense to approach activism with what Jeremy Gilbert (2008) calls a “strategic *orientation*” (emphasis mine) that tends toward a common vision without claiming to know in advance how it must be achieved or what precisely it would look like once it is. Within such an approach, lifestyle activism makes sense as a space of trial and error, as a collection of moves that can be tweaked and

reassessed according to the particular conditions at hand. This is not to say that lifestyle would offer an adequate solution to every problem, only that the ongoing and iterative nature of lifestyle politics—lifestyle practices by definition must be undertaken again and again, each day—makes the strategy open to “trouble” from within, trouble that employs critique for productive ends (Butler 1990).

When taking up a Foucaultian (1990b) interpretation of lifestyle politics, one important analytical distinction is to differentiate attention to the self from preoccupation with the self. Indeed, critics of lifestyle politics usually object not to the content or existence of anarchist lifestyle practices themselves, but to the extent to which those practices *preoccupy* both individual activists and activist groups. Preoccupation is problematic both because it may serve as a distraction from other activities and because if lifestyle practices are accorded disproportionate significance, the structural differences they play upon (such as gender, race, etc.) become an obstacle to coalition building rather than inconsequential differences in taste and background among potential allies. For example, a group planning a radical event like a conference may be so committed to vegan diets that planning meetings for the gathering get bogged down in the details of providing vegan food, at the expense of other concerns. It may also mean that the actual event is alienating to meat-eaters when they feel that their own dietary choices have been judged unacceptable.¹² But there is such a thing as strategic attention to lifestyle, in contrast with a strategic preoccupation with lifestyle. If one of the goals of an event is to inform about and promote veganism and to connect it to other struggles against exploitation, paying a good bit of attention to the menu—and how it is framed for attendees—would be a worthwhile endeavor. And it's not always the case that lifestyle draws attention away that would otherwise be devoted to “serious” issues. It is fair to say that there are some anarchists who get caught up in interpersonal drama over issues of lifestyle, and it is reasonable to think that such drama takes up time and energy that might be better spent elsewhere. However, it's speculative to assume that were lifestyle practices not an issue for anarchists, they would spend all their newly found free time engaged in “serious” struggle. The idea that lifestyle is a distraction from “authentic” politics presumes that both cannot coexist and even be productively coordinated within an overall movement strategy. The question is in what instances are puristic lifestyle commitments getting in the way of other goals, and what are the relative merits of those goals in comparison with that which is accomplished by the lifestyle practices.

A strategic integration of lifestyle politics within radical activist projects requires an analysis that is able to distinguish between and accurately connect micropolitical and macropolitical tactics and outcomes. This means that activists must recognize that efficacy at transforming one's own life or even one's local situation does not necessarily imply efficacy at changing

larger structures and processes, since there are different interventions that must be made at these different scales. So, for example, choosing to seek consent before pursuing sexual contact with another individual can be an efficacious way of enacting an anarchist sexual politics in that particular situation. It does not, however, alter the larger culture in which, in very regular and patterned ways, women's consent is frequently not sought by men who interact with them sexually. When this kind of analysis is missing, disagreements about the effectiveness of lifestyle activism arise, since people have not really staked the terms of the debate—they have not established what they are arguing that lifestyle politics is effective *for* (perhaps because they have not even quite thought about it for themselves). Take for example these two views, one from an interviewee (and which began the introduction to this book), and another coming from an anarchist blogger:

... it gets abstract sometimes, because it's like, where do I attack it, where do I attack patriarchy, where do I attack capitalism? And that's why I think lifestyleism is so important, cuz I think that you do attack it by being vegan, or by not buying from Walmart, or not being subjected by the beauty standards. Like, by building those alternative communities and alternative infrastructure, we're not paying attention to them, so we're not demanding anything from them. (Raychel, interviewee)

Well, wake up people, we live in the triumphantly (and some would say late) capitalistic world of the 21st century, and, I'm sorry, but a couple of anarchist co-ops and squats, food not bombs projects and urban vegetable farms spread thinly around the world are not going to rot away the leviathan from within – regardless of what the cyberpunks say about the networking capacities of the internet. A more apt metaphor would be sprinkling water on a bonfire – if you think that the small centers of resistance [sic] we have are going cool this raging capitalist exploitation, you're underestimating the heat of the fire. (“Anarchism and Decadence” 2008)

For Raychel, political success is at least somewhat defined by being able to live without being personally dependent on the most objectionable institutions of consumer society. The blogger has something else in mind when thinking about the purpose of radical activism, asserting, probably correctly, that lifestyle tactics will be unsuccessful at actually destroying the objectionable institutions of consumer society, let alone consumer society itself. Each has something to say about the effects of lifestyle-based activism; their “disagreement” stems from implicit differences in the way they define the goals of resistant lifestyle practices.

Fantasies of individual resistance as systemic subversion are often both induced and foreclosed by the logic of neoliberalism. Neoliberal discourses

of individual autonomy promote the idea that we are each endowed with the agency to choose the best way of life and that the means to realize our choices are readily available if only we will commit to them. Yet, this sense of autonomy may obfuscate the fact that in many cases our “choices” are constrained by conservative economic, political, and cultural networks of power. To be fair, the case of anarchist lifestyles has shown that activists are not really restricted to a homogeneous set of lifestyle choices, nor are their choices fully containable by the commodity market. In many instances, anarchists’ practices and beliefs *are* qualitatively different from those of most participants in the hegemonic order. Their activism *is* distinguishable from the kind of commodity activism that involves merely choosing the lesser of many evils from among the options on offer in the marketplace. Yet, the individualist logic of neoliberalism is often implicit in anarchists’ efforts to free their minds and bodies from the grips of repressive forces by choosing a different way. Though anarchists may not exemplify the “possessive or competitive individualism” of the thoroughly integrated capitalist subject (Marcuse 2001), lifestyle practices are still fundamentally individual responses to power, and thus are not adequately equipped to, by themselves, radically rearrange power relations. They don’t, for instance, win power that was not already available within the capitalist system. They are what Scott (1985) calls, “weapons of the weak”—attempts by disenfranchised subjects to do what they can, where they can. Such tactics may lay the groundwork for further collective struggle by solidifying and sustaining radical identities and critiques and building community among those who share a vision for social change (Kelley 1996). But the turn to lifestyle may also signify the constricted scope of resistance enabled by (and ultimately potentially recuperable by) the present system.

A purely individualist anarchist politics would refer to an individual’s attempt to produce the conditions of anarchy for oneself through one’s own lifestyle choices. This would be consistent with lifestyle anarchism in the most pejorative sense. But, as I said above, most people who self-identify as anarchists assume a relationship between the individual and the collective. They wish not only to liberate themselves, but also to generate broader change through collective activities. Raychel, quoted above, may not only see herself as retreating to an alternative community free of misogyny and economic exploitation—her words insinuate that she actually sees herself as *attacking* patriarchy and capitalism through this retreat. The trouble here is then not selfish or malignant intent on the part of lifestyle activists. It may rather be a misapprehension or simple inattention to the actual mechanisms by which individual change might empirically result in collective change. In other words, lifestyle politics may seem to rest on a kind of untested *faith* in the potential of individual action to change the world in a larger sense. It may assume, without much basis, that drawing support away from troubling institutions (“not demanding anything from them” as Raychel put

it), one individual at a time, will weaken those institutions in the long run, once enough individuals have been recruited to the cause and their lifestyle choices have an aggregate effect.¹³

Mechanisms of prefiguration

Lifestyle politics leaves itself open to criticism when individual resistance is conflated with systemic subversion, or when the connection between the two is left in a black box that simply assumes one can “be the change you wish to see in the world” and the world will change as a consequence of that “being.” For one thing, the individual’s very capacity to “be the change”—to personally enact what one values—is shaped by macropolitical structures. The phenomenon of manarchism (discussed in Chapter 4) is proof of this—acknowledging that patriarchy is a problematic system that they do not want to reproduce hasn’t stopped countless anarchist men from unconsciously “cashing in” on their male privilege within activist communities. Even when these men mean well, it is no easy thing to undo a lifetime of ideological conditioning toward oppressive performances of masculinity. Much as the ideology of neoliberalism does, the ideology of lifestyle politics may overstate the power that individuals actually have to actively resist many of the social forces that, in fact, heavily shape everyday experience. In recognition of this, Jeremy, an interviewee, called it a “flawed idea that one can individualize capitalism or ‘drop out’ of it.” The fact that completely dropping out of capitalism is, in reality, an impossibility, further attests to this incommensurability between individual refusal and systemic power. Capitalism is so well integrated into every aspect of life that there is no getting away from it completely, no matter how much the individual might intend to liberate oneself from its hold. Beyond the material conditions of capitalism, the ideological conditions are always already present in our subjectivities. One doesn’t lose their influence simply because one realizes that one might like to. Radical social change, under the conditions of which radical ideological change would be possible, would be a necessary precondition for all people, not just those who have the wherewithal to choose lifestyle anarchism, to realize the experience of liberation. This is a catch-22 that is hard to reason one’s way out of.¹⁴

Even assuming that some individuals are effective at resisting the reproduction of the objectionable aspects of the dominant society in their own lives, it is questionable how alternative ways of life—even if they are demonstrably better than the dominant ones—are to become widely practicable to the point where they replace the old ways on a broad scale. The process of *how* the new world might fully emerge in the shell of the old is unclear. The immediate personal benefits of prefigurative lifestyle practices may be clear to those who undertake them, but the connection

between these prefigurations and actual broad cultural shifts is hazy, even “magical” at times (Epstein 1991: 157). One of the justifications offered for individuals making lifestyle choices in line with their political ideals is that “if enough people did this, then the system would have a real battle on its hands” (in the words of a commenter on an anarchist email list). Yes, “if enough people did this . . .” it would make a difference, but the operative word there is “if.” Rossinow (1998: 292–3) points out that prefiguration, as a tactic, seems to rest on an assumption of a “marketplace of ideas” in which people observe and adopt new ways of doing things based purely on their intrinsic merits. But without a carefully considered mechanism for disrupting hegemonic ideologies, the embrace of alternative lifestyles, even if meant to be a prefiguration for a new society, may be indistinguishable from the individualist retreat that is so characteristic of the neoliberal status quo. By merely hoping that withdrawal and leading by example will effect a cultural shift, lifestyleists may, at best, form a subcultural enclave that is no threat to hegemony whatsoever. Activists’ subcultural practices may even be successfully co-opted as the next in a never-ending series of consumer lifestyles that drive capitalist consumer culture.

Alberto Melucci (1985: 812) suggests that the kind of prefigurative forms developed by social movements constitute “new media,” meaning that they communicate about the current political system by giving a name to the “silence, violence, irrationality which is always hidden in dominant codes.” He continues, “through what they do, or rather through how they do it, movements announce to society that something ‘else’ is possible.” One of the questions people who study “new media” often ask when encountering a particular medium is, “what is the reach of this medium?” or, to put it another way, “how many people does this medium speak to, who are these people, and how effectively does it speak to them?” (Baym 2010). If we are to follow Melucci and consider anarchists’ lifestyle practices as a medium for the communication of political critique—if, in other words, we are to consider lifestyle as propaganda by deed, as discussed in Chapter 1—we will want to know the *reach* of this medium under given conditions. This question is an empirical and historical one that ought to be answerable with situational evidence, rather than assumed to have a universal answer. One then wants to know under what conditions lifestyle prefiguration has ever been an effective form of political propaganda. With this knowledge, specific conditions in the present could be assessed for their amenability to such a tactic.

The conditions under consideration must include the context in which communication between radical activists and other political subjects takes place. As I argued in Chapter 3, alternative lifestyles may not be particularly aesthetically attractive to non-participants in the subculture, nor may outsiders be able to make sense of the political appeal of the practices either. The choice by some to adopt alternative lifestyle habits has no intrinsically

persuasive function—just because a deed is done by an individual doesn't make it effective propaganda. Alternative consumer aesthetics may be just as likely to alienate potential anarchists as to recruit them. As has been pointed out before, for every person who likes punk music, there are many more who find its harsh aesthetic distasteful (Cornell 2011b: 181). Mainstream consumption patterns are powerfully sustained by deeply ingrained taste preferences (Bourdieu 1984), thus the majority of people are unlikely to be attracted to alternative lifestyles purely on the basis of their aesthetic appeal. Lifestyle alternatives are probably, in fact, *more* likely to alienate than inspire, precisely because of their implicit critique of the status quo; mainstream observers may defensively interpret subcultural lifestyle choices as a negative judgment of their own habits (Holt 2000).

If part of the logic of lifestyle politics is that it sets an example for others to follow (i.e. it prefigures an alternate way of life), there is a problem when the example is one that people don't find compelling for reasons of taste. Take for instance the Really Really Free Market as a demonstration of the viability of an alternative to commercial exchange (as described in Chapter 2). The idea of picking through a pile of someone else's discarded items on a blanket in a public park is just not appealing to many people. One could deconstruct the ideological forces that *make* the idea unappealing (e.g. consumers have been trained by capitalism to want sterile, brightly lit retail spaces full of brand new objects), but the mere presence of alternatives does not necessarily effectively combat those forces. And even if people are made aware of the political motivations behind alternative consumption practices, they may simply not *want* to consume like anarchists. This speaks to one of the nagging problems of prefigurative politics—if the conditions prefigured by radical alternatives are not desirable to observers, their propagandistic function is null. As I suggested in Chapter 3, discursive common ground and ideological symmetry must be already present, or actively forged, in order for cultural challenges to be legible and attractive to those not already involved with the movement. Careful analysis of the conditions under which some actions do succeed at winning over new supporters would be a step toward validating the implicit hopes behind prefiguration as a strategic approach.

One also wants to know to what extent prefigurative practices are defused or deformed when taken out of the context of activist communities and given (often sold) to the mainstream as lifestyle alternatives. Without the ideological underpinnings of anarchist political theory, practices such as dumpster diving, body modification, and polyamorous relationships would lose nearly all their value *as* political interventions. And not merely because people might start doing the "right" things for the "wrong" reasons. Polyamory, for example, when not undertaken with a perseverant commitment to its feminist and anti-capitalist interventions, may drift toward the sexual dynamics of mainstream patriarchal culture, as discussed in Chapter 5. The material effects of the practice thus become quite different

from what was initially prefigured by the activists who saw the practice as a radical political tactic and good in itself. This validates Bookchin's (1995: 3) fear that "the revolutionary and social goals of anarchism are suffering far-reaching erosion to a point where the word *anarchy* will become part of the chic bourgeois vocabulary of the coming century—naughty, rebellious, insouciant, but deliciously safe." This doesn't only have to refer to lifestyle practices being co-opted by the market directly. It may also simply be about "radical" lifestyle practices becoming integrated into mainstream culture or into other subcultures that lack the political analysis that anarchists were hoping to express and embody through their practices.

The degradation in meaning caused by commodification and decontextualization are what make the contemporary incarnation of lifestyle politics a characteristically postmodern problem. While the tensions between the personal and the political have been present throughout radical movements for some time, prefiguration becomes particularly shaky under conditions in which cultural practices are easily and often circulated in forms that are divorced from their original justifications and strategic orientations. It's not hard to see how the propagandistic function of prefigurative lifestyles would be even further muddled than what is already inherent within the limited capacity for representations to fully convey what their producers intend (Hall 1997). Practices, beliefs, and their representations will circulate freely among people who don't necessarily share discursive frameworks and ideological commitments, who may, in fact, hold opposite commitments. There is therefore no ensuring that the practices of lifestyle anarchism will hold the same significance across all these contexts, let alone bring about the same material effects.

Subcultures and movements

Jeremy Gilbert (2008) argues that, in fact, the most meaningful social contribution that radical movements can make is to find acceptance for their ideas and practices among people who would not necessarily identify with the movements themselves. From this point of view, the ideal outcome of co-optation and re-presentation would be that ethical lifestyle practices get collectivized and established to the extent that they become adoptable by people and movements who think of themselves as more mainstream. However, this "ideal" may not be fully commensurate with the function of lifestyle for radical activists. As I discussed in Chapter 2, lifestyle is a carrier of social meaning, in addition to being a source of personal fulfillment and potential activist change. From this angle, the diffusion or mainstreaming of anarchist subcultural practices is a big problem, as they can no longer function in the same way if they no longer mark their practitioner as a member of a specific subculture or as holding a specific set of political beliefs. We can see

here the inherent tension within lifestyle politics—the material and symbolic dimensions of it may, in fact, be working at cross-purposes. A strategy that embraces diffusion of anarchist lifestyle practices may require that activists reconcile themselves to becoming less recognizable as anarchists. The question is whether this is a cultural sacrifice that also interferes with the political work of activist groups. Do they depend on their cultural identities to be effective in achieving their goals, or are their desired outcomes independent from their ability to maintain themselves as a culturally distinct movement?

The tension just described brings up again the fact that contemporary anarchism combines elements of alternative subculture and political movement, and is, in fact, profoundly characterized by this dualism. As a subculture, diffusion and mainstreaming are a kind of cultural death. As a movement, growing in numbers and winning over new, diverse people to the cause are crucial. Subcultures struggle to preserve the space to be different; movements aim to make all spaces in society different from what they currently are. The different kinds of “work” done by political lifestyle practices highlight that the contemporary anarchist formation has features of both subculture and movement. Indeed, the case of contemporary anarchism shows that subcultures and movements are not dichotomous social formations at all—the self-identified anarchists who engage in lifestyle politics do so neither purely for stylistic reasons nor purely for practical reasons. Admitting that there are stylistic or “merely cultural” motivations and effects of lifestyle politics does not have to mean that anarchists are unserious or adolescent or not “real” activists. Recognizing that politics are personal does not make them any less political.

The tensions cannot be resolved, then, by taking sides. Activists cannot choose *not* to be a cultural formation while they are also being a political movement. They cannot choose *not* to engage with power at an individual level while they are also attempting to engage with it collectively. They cannot choose for their actions to *not* have symbolic import while they also have material effects. It's not that there is an unbridgeable chasm between lifestyle and politics; rather, their intertwinedness is only solidified by contemporary conditions. The “chasm” exists only in the minds of those who have not come to terms with the reality that social movements are always cultural formations as well. The way to resolve Bookchin's issue is not—as he seemed to advocate—to cast off the unserious subcultural arm of “the movement”. This is an untenable solution in any case, since as I have shown, many of the “serious” movement activists are engaged in lifestyle activism to some extent at least. And as multiple interviewees observed, lifestyle activities may be a precursor to further involvement in other forms of activism. What these tensions invoke is, again, the strategic necessity to acknowledge and embrace the multiple “functions” of lifestyle within the anarchist community and to commit to nuanced, situational critique that

accepts the presence of lifestyle as a site of engagement while aiming to maximize its most promising potentials.

What *can* radical activists do about lifestyle under conditions of postmodernity and neoliberalism then? As I have demonstrated in the chapters of this book, an ethical critique of lifestyle politics would balance a recognition of the positive potential of lifestyle politics under certain conditions, with a sensitivity to the specific conditions that may make them less practicable and less productive on other occasions. This means approaching political lifestyle practices as tactics rather than an overall strategy or goal, as something to be deployed when appropriate and downplayed when the situation is less amenable. It means recognizing that lifestyle practices are undertaken with multiple and varying motivations, some of which are perhaps more appropriate to certain conditions than others. As a site of political engagement, a lifestyle is not a fixed program, it is a collection of practices and is thus open to contestation and infinite tinkering and situational adaptation. In this way, lifestyles are quintessential sites of postmodern political activism. They attempt to represent, or give a face and name to a diffuse collection of political subjects. And they provide a kind of disciplinary guide for living like an “actual anarchist” amid conditions that encourage hierarchy, not anarchy, as the hegemonic norm. Yet, such strengths also give rise to special challenges and pitfalls that are not easily overcome. What the issues of individualism, privilege, taste boundaries, etc., speak to is not perhaps a weakness by anarchists in their attempts to navigate those pitfalls of lifestyle politics, but rather the intrinsicity of such pitfalls to any activist strategy that includes lifestyle-based tactics. The same conditions that give lifestyle its political potential are also those which limit it.

Does this mean that lifestyle politics is thoroughly unbridgeable to any strategy with any hope of success at transforming a deeply flawed social order? I don’t have an answer to that at this point. It’s clear that under neoliberalism, lifestyle politics will continue to exist in some form as a component of activist strategy. And as long as there are anarchists who live within non-anarchic conditions, the labels they adopt and the personal aesthetic choices they make will continue to be significant as sites for enacting and representing their political identities and visions. Lifestyle practices will do other cultural work than inciting revolution, and this work will be valuable, perhaps even necessary, to the survival of radical activist movements. At the same time, lifestyle practices will continue to bring up fundamental problems and tensions. And anarchist activists will continue to critique and debate them, in the interest of creating the other world they hope is possible.

Working through the tensions posed by present conditions forces movements to respond to the problematic features of the present in which they find themselves—which is precisely what movements exist to do.

Movements are premised on there being an identifiable difference between what is and what could be (Butler 1997b). To constitute oneself as a radical, in particular, is to question the received order or truth, to throw into question the very rules by which one has been accustomed to living and seeing the world (Butler 2004b). Radicals, anarchists, are subjects who cannot quite exist within the regime of truth in which they find themselves—present conditions will, by definition, be impossible to live with for radicals, and yet they live and must form their radical identity amid them. The potential of an anarchist movement, or any movement at all, lies in its ability to productively negotiate the obstacles thrown up by the conditions it exists to protest.

This is perhaps then a promising thing about the ongoing struggle to determine whether and how much lifestyle-based forms of resistance are politically effective as activism, the struggle I've focused on in this chapter. Though, as I've argued, there are no easy answers to whether any tactic is finally "effective" or not, perhaps what matters more is the critical stance activists are willing to take toward their own methods. For Foucault, debate and questioning of authoritative truth is an ethical practice, a good in itself. While the project of self-scrutiny has been mobilized for the aims of institutional power, such as the state (as in Foucault's [2009] account of governmentality), it may be that internal criticism could also tend toward discovering a way to be governed "otherwise" (Butler 2004b), a different set of ends that might ask or require us to conduct ourselves differently. As Foucault (1997c) argues, there is no originary or outside moral code by which a set of laws might be authorized or declared invalid. We cannot thus make any final judgment on lifestyle politics as a style of being in the world as a resistant subject. Rather, we can only endlessly critique in the interest of never letting the existing authority get away with going unquestioned. This in itself is an entirely anarchistic project, and it is fitting that contemporary anarchists would be engaged in such a thing. Yet, the critical consciousness and even preoccupation with debating the merits or drawbacks of lifestyle as a mode of political engagement is, I think, indicative or typical of the tensions all would-be activists—particularly radicals—struggle with under contemporary conditions.