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Conclusion: Learning from lifestyle anarchists

The issues faced by anarchist activists are not unique to this particular group. They are experienced by all sorts of resistant subjects within contemporary society, and even have historical antecedents that predate the current social order. Certainly, theorists of the mid twentieth-century counterculture perceived some of the same issues, as when Herbert Marcuse (1972) noted in his book *Counterrevolution and Revolt* that the modes of political engagement he observed among disaffected American youth in the 1960s “raise[d] the problem of the relation between personal and political rebellion, private liberation and social revolution” (48). In the present day, other radical projects, such as queer liberation, struggle to navigate tensions between the pursuit of individual pleasure and the project of social transformation, which would bring liberatory conditions to more than just the most privileged of non-normative sexual subjects. All contemporary movements are operating in conditions where activism is fluidly defined, and where the objects one chooses to buy or not buy, the way one chooses to present oneself in public, the words one uses to refer to oneself, even the partners and practices of one’s sexual life, are understood as meaningful political acts.

Such conditions should give pause to any who would dismiss the issue of activists’ lifestyles as “merely cultural” or marginal to the realities of contemporary politics. This designation—“merely cultural”—has long been used to marginalize the concerns of certain actors within political movements, by both opponents and allies to these movements. Many of the liberationist streams arising out of, and in response to, the New Left, were belittled on just such a basis (Duggan 2003). Because their analyses included thoughtful critiques of the everyday, personal freedoms which were constricted by systems such as capitalism, patriarchy, and the white supremacist state, and because these constrictions were seen as only applying

to the personal freedoms of some (as opposed to the supposedly universal constrictions imposed on those who happened to be white, straight, and male), their projects have been understood and portrayed as “factionalizing, identitarian, and particularistic” (Butler 1997b). Like the “cultural focus of left politics” described by Butler, activism mounted at the level of lifestyle is subject to accusations that it “substitutes a self-centered and trivial form of politics that focuses on transient events, practices, and objects rather than offering a more robust, serious and comprehensive vision of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions” (34). But what one person calls “self-centered and trivial” is often an important element of “social and economic conditions” for someone else, and the presumption that one can make such a judgment for someone else is simply evidence of one’s own ideological, social, and economic biases.

It’s clearly false that movements on the Left such as feminism, anti-racism, and gay liberation have lacked “robust, serious and comprehensive vision[s] of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions,” though it may be true that some individuals, organizations, and texts from these movements have failed to effectively *articulate* their “focuses on transient events, practices, and objects” to those robust visions. A failure of articulation is probably what accounts for lifestylism’s susceptibility to similar critiques within the anarchist milieu (Slack 1996). When activists are not able to more than superficially link their lifestyle concerns to those of the broader anarchist project, when they are not able to connect the microscopic difference their actions make to the macroscopic changes that would be necessary for a real power shift in society, when they overstate the power of lifestyle to bring on the revolution—this is when lifestyle politics comes to seem like a retreat, a distraction, a delusion.

As this book has illustrated, lifestyle is inflected by politics all the way down, so to say that concerns with lifestyle are not political or are less political than other concerns is to misunderstand how politics and power work. Lifestyle is implicated in politics whether one is an anarchist or just a mainstream political subject. The measurable macrostructural impact of one’s lifestyle choices may be small to the point of insignificance in the eyes of some, but as sites of meaning making, identity constitution, and social negotiation, politicized lifestyle practices are nothing if not *significant*, in the sense that they *signify*. But, it is true that subversive lifestyle practices like the ones examined in this book are inadequate to achieve all that activists might hope they could. However, the contradictions between the hopes of lifestyle activists and their actual achievements should be evidence of the contradictions endemic to life within postmodernity and neoliberalism at large, more so than an indication of failings in their analysis or project. Instead of assuming that those who attempt lifestyle-based interventions are dupes or tools of the system, perhaps one can productively read their mode of engagement as an implicit (possibly even unconscious) critique

of what is foreclosed by neoliberalism *and* by traditional forms of activist politics, which are themselves hobbled under neoliberal conditions as well. As was demonstrated with the Occupy mobilizations of 2011, radical movements that attempt to seize physical and discursive public space for the airing of their critiques are both directly repressed by state force and minimized by unfriendly commercial media portrayals. Even mainstream, “non-resistant” subjects find themselves in positions where the things they might hope to achieve in life are ideologically portrayed as achievable while simultaneously foreclosed in reality by forces that serve the interests of political and economic elites. So, it should be no surprise that radical activists are especially disempowered to achieve their aims inside the ideological and material structures of neoliberalism. The problem, of course, is that there is not much in the way of an *outside* to those structures.

Positioning lifestyle activism within the cultural conditions of neoliberalism also helps in understanding why some functions of resistant lifestyles are achieved while others are not. It may be that the aims most effectively realized are those that are most compatible with neoliberalism. This isn't to say that every aspect of lifestyle politics is recuperated for neoliberal ends. Yet, as movements have no choice but to operate within given cultural conditions, some of the techniques they adopt will respond to or make use of those conditions. Critics of lifestylism have a point when they identify some of the trends in radical activism as being formally similar to the trends of neoliberal individualism and consumerism, but to assume that we can stop there in our understanding of lifestyle practices is to assume that identification or orientation toward radical political projects is meaningless in itself. If the people who wish to subvert neoliberalism are just as complicit in it as those who uncritically buy into the system, then is there a point to resistance at all? If the only difference between anarchist lifestylists and neoliberalist individualists is what they call themselves or how they think of themselves in relation to the dominant ideology, is this a difference that makes a difference?

This is a question that must be answered through empirical observation. If people who orient themselves toward the radical restructuring of hierarchical power relationships do not actually do anything that enacts or measurably works toward that end, then perhaps the difference does not matter much. If, for instance, a manarchist perpetuates the same conditions for women within the activist scene that women can expect to experience within the mainstream, patriarchal society, then perhaps there is no value to his identification with anarchism. But I argue that orientation to or identification with radicalism does matter, because at least it provides a starting point in the form of an ideological framework that is receptive to reflexive critique and adjustment. Anarchist scenes may reproduce problematic forms of sexism, but at least they are spaces where a critique along those lines can be mounted and not dismissed out of hand as unnecessary, since in theory at least, everyone there

has committed to recognizing and rejecting patriarchal power (even if they are still struggling to figure out how to really do it). I argue then that there is a difference between “neoliberal radicals” and “neoliberal neoliberals,” though it may lie mostly in the *ideological space* they make for critique of current systems. This is a necessary condition for projects of material social change, if not sufficient to effectively accomplish them.

Perhaps one of the most surprising sociological observations to come out of this book is the amount of discursive work that activists are involved in to make their everyday activities count as meaningful expressions of political resistance. To me, this is indicative of an absence of conditions that make the full realization of utopian alternatives possible. For radicals, daily life is a never-ending stream of ethical compromises, and at times it is only through signification that the personal experience of resistance is plausible. At some level, anarchists are aware of all the ways in which they are forced to betray their own ideals, and so they are doing the best they can to hold onto those ideals in the face of hugely daunting systems that push their bodies and minds in the direction of hegemonic power. Through the work of signification, lifestyle practices may actually be experienced as real alternatives, even if the ultimate material differences between these practices and those of the mainstream are small, and even if their adoption by radicals fails to generalize them as alternatives accessible beyond a subcultural milieu.

As much as anything then, lifestyle politics may be about the *representation* of utopian difference, the representation of a desire for a different world, in the absence of that world. Even while lifestyle practices do not make a new world in the shell of the old, they do *represent* that project as a goal. And this representation, while its limits must be acknowledged, should not be underestimated as a necessary element of political projects. The lifestyles of radical anarchists may be less important for how they prefigure a different world than for the fact that they make visible the existence of subjects who desire a different world. Though true authenticity as a pure anarchist might be impossible to achieve within present conditions, lifestyle is a way of gesturing toward a desire for different conditions, the kind that would make different kinds of subjectivities truly possible. While critics may dismiss lifestyle activism as a “self-delusion” with the central purpose of presenting a virtuous identity (Schutz 2009b), this is not sufficient grounds for the dismissal of lifestyle activism. Rather, it just points up a set of ethical concerns that will have to be addressed in specific times and places, such as whether potential allies are being excluded or relations of domination are being reproduced.

This case of anarchist lifestyle activism can also tell us something about the nature of radical identity and orientation within postmodernity. As I showed in Chapter 4, “anarchist” is a contested sign: there is no universal consensus about what that label must refer to, and everyone is aware that their identification as an anarchist is open to doubt. They may even doubt

their own authenticity as anarchists, seeing the term as something to which they can aspire but never completely measure up. Furthermore, no one can ever fully exemplify anarchy—contemporary society is so thoroughly shaped by conditions of economic exploitation, political hierarchy, and ideologies of oppression that no one is quite at liberty to step outside any of these systems. In the absence of conditions under which it would be possible to achieve a truly anarchistic existence, anarchism remains always an orientation rather than an achievable state of fixed identity. This lesson applies just as well to any radical project, since by definition, a radical project seeks a reality that is radically outside the boundaries of the currently real.

A more theoretical implication of this book, and one that I hope will be clear to those who recognize aspects of anarchist culture in their own social groups, is that, radical or not, all personal identity projects are bound to fail in one way or another. This is something postmodern theorists have been saying for quite a while.¹ As Linda Martín Alcoff (2000: 77) puts it, “Identities are not and can never be accurate representations of the real self, and thus interpellation always in a strict sense *fails* in its representational claim even while it succeeds in inciting and disciplining one’s practice.” This book has shown some of the particular reasons and conditions under which one specific identity is so problematic. But it’s not a problem unique to anarchists (though as I’ve just argued, there may be particular features of the contemporary political economic system that make anarchism particularly problematic as an identity). We are each in some ways failing to truly “be” all the things we say we are, or think we are, or are recognized as in certain times and places, because any identity is always an ideal that, when pushed up against all the conditions and interlocking forces each of us is subject to, will never be fully realized. The anxieties and tensions around anarchist identity and the manifestations of these anxieties in commitments to lifestyle practices, in conjunction with postmodern theories of identity, suggest that perhaps many or most of the social identities that define us are anxiety provoking in their ultimate unachievability and that this is itself a major engine of the contemporary preoccupation with lifestyle, both within the anarchist context and far beyond it. As the individual figures in this book show, the stakes are particularly high when the identity one is defined by is one informed by a utopian political vision—the unachievability of the anarchist ideal is not just a personal frustration but actually an addition of insult to the injury of neoliberal capitalism.

To identify with radicalism is to recognize the great power and pervasiveness of systems that are deeply flawed; if you’re a radical it’s because you seek radical change and have a radical analysis that sees the fundamental defects at the root of the present system. A radical orientation will thus necessarily introduce contradictions, inconsistencies, and “hypocrisies” between the way one lives day to day—because one lives within the defective system—and the way one wishes it were possible to live. A radical identity

that relies on personal authenticity for its verification is thus always bound to “fail,” but only if such inconsistencies are read and treated as failures, which they often are, within the “call out” culture of contemporary activist communities. The question then, is what do we do with our failures and the failures we observe in those around us? What is the appropriate response to contradiction? This is an axiological question that each community must answer for itself.

One possible response would be to embrace the risk of failure to achieve an “authentic” radical reality in the hope that something better might be achieved without any such guarantee being offered. This doesn’t mean romanticizing failure or embracing failure as a way of life. Rather, it means making a commitment to test and reassess the extent to which one’s actions have achieved something better, and even to be willing to redefine what “better” means. One would proceed with a “strategic orientation” rather than a “singular ideology” or “singular imagined goal” (Gilbert 2008: 228). Localized, specific critique also allows for the possibility that lifestyle politics does valuable cultural work for activists, despite its final effects not being determinable in advance.² This might look suspiciously like the flexible, nimble labor and assessment induced by neoliberalism itself, but it could also be a way of most effectively using some of the techniques of neoliberalism against itself. Lynn Comella (2012: 43) argues that “elements of neoliberalism, including the care of the self and the role of the marketplace in promoting technologies of empowerment, can be rearticulated and marshaled toward socially progressive ends.” Likewise, the will and capacity to be reflexive and adaptive toward the way tactics work within given nodes in a broad, connected network might be used to coordinate activist projects.

In trying to answer the question of what is at stake for those who debate the value of lifestyle politics, I’ve come to the conclusion that many things are at stake, and the stakes are not always necessarily compatible or commensurable with each other. Radical activists who attempt to put their political values into their lifestyle practices are responding to a variety of conditions: a postmodern world that casts into doubt the stability of any identity category, let alone one defined through philosophical commitments which are subject to constant, collective, and cross-contextual debate and revision; a neoliberal political climate in which personal action and responsibility are touted as the privileged form of civic participation; a commodity culture that fosters the construction of alternative ways of life while simultaneously attempting to recuperate them for profit motives; and profoundly unjust social relations that make themselves felt at the most personal levels and thus incite resistance there as well. A tactical move that responds effectively to one of these conditions may look markedly less adaptive when considered from the perspective of another condition. Lifestyle politics is thus a complex phenomenon and no easy judgments can or should be offered.

In the afterword to his study of everyday politics among working-class African Americans, Robin Kelley (1996) urges social movement critics to look at the limits and effects of any political action, in order to assess its ultimate value to a larger project. I have presented all the above issues and debates in the interest of critically interrogating the ways in which lifestyle politics constitutes a set of tactics that can be integrated into the political strategy of radical movements. The phenomenon of lifestyle politics in anarchist movements bears out Kelley's observation that "certain forms of resistance create their own limits" (231). And, as he goes on to say, they are "limits that can be understood only in specific historical and spatial context" (231). This book does not offer a final answer on whether lifestyle is effective as politics. Indeed, it argues that such a question cannot be answered at all in a final way. Rather, we must ask, in every instance, what is lifestyle politics effective *for*. Only by attending to the situational factors that affect the outcome of any particular instance of lifestyle politics can we assess its usefulness and its place in radical activist strategy. Movements and their participants will have to answer for themselves whether the effects of their lifestyle-based tactics are consistent with their philosophical ideals and pursuant to their material goals.

If what one means by activism is practices which effect material changes in systems of power, then clearly lifestyle politics are "mere" "weapons of the weak," unsuited to the necessary task of restructuring social conditions. Lifestyleism may even be read as a "false consciousness" response to the weakness of the individual engendered by the capitalist system. But neoliberalism does not only *disempower* individuals. In fact, part of its logic is to empower them, to spur them to make life decisions, to take responsibility for themselves, to stitch their daily experience into aesthetically and politically coherent—if multifaceted—narratives. By turning to lifestyle politics from this angle, we see that its practitioners are, in some respects, strong—not weak—given their demonstrated capacity to make choices far outside the dominant norms. And yet, overarching systems shape even these choices, so that resistant lifestyle practices may be differently appealing and achievable by different kinds of subjects—men, women, straight, queer, white, non-white, citizen, immigrant—each will have particular forces acting on the choices they make. Because the whole phenomenon of lifestyle politics looks so different depending on the angle from which one approaches it, the only final argument this book can make is that understanding and assessing the value of politicized lifestyle practices for radical activism must be seen as a project of "limitless critique" that constantly displaces its own assumptions, out of a recognition that they are always shaped by authority whose own legitimacy must be open to question (Foucault 1997c). The politics of lifestyle must neither be romanticized nor dismissed out of hand by radical activists and those who study political activism; rather, it must be constantly held in hand, to be wielded at appropriate moments, and with a humble commitment to learn when and where those moments are.