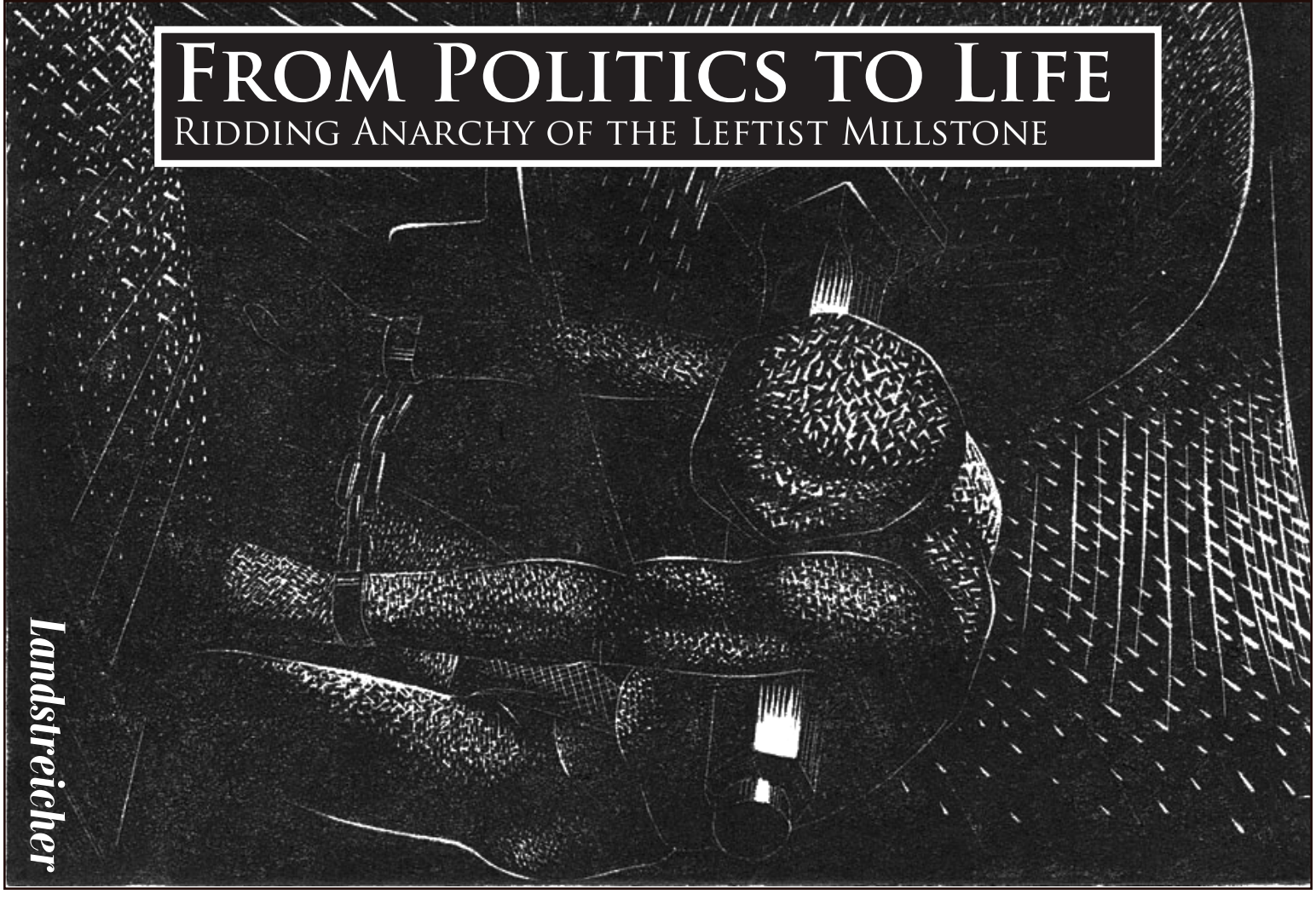
From Politics to Life

Ridding Anarchy of the Leftist Millstone



Landstreicher

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Ridding Anarchy of the Leftist Millstone

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From the time anarchism was first defined as a distinct radical movement it has been associated with the left, but the association has always been uneasy. Leftists who were in a position of authority (including those who called themselves anarchists, like the leaders of the CNT and the FAI in Spain in 1936–37) found the anarchist aim of the total transformation of life and the consequent principle that the ends should already exist in the means of struggle to be a hindrance to their political programs. Real insurgence always burst far beyond any political program, and the most coherent anarchists saw the realization of their dreams precisely in this unknown place beyond. Yet, time after time, when the fires of insurrection cooled (and even occasionally, as in Spain in 1936–37, while they still burnt brightly), leading anarchists would take their place again as "the conscience of the left". But if the expansiveness of anarchist dreams and the principles that it implies have been a hindrance to the political schemes of the left, these schemes have been a far greater millstone around the neck of the anarchist movement, weighing it down with the "realism" that cannot dream.

For the left, the social struggle against exploitation and oppression is essentially a political program to be realized by whatever means are expedient. Such a conception obviously requires a political methodology of struggle, and such a methodology is bound to contradict some basic anarchist

principles. First of all, politics as a distinct category of social existence is the separation of the decisions that determine our lives from the execution of those decisions. This separation resides in institutions that make and impose those decisions. It matters little how democratic or consensual those institutions are; the separation and institutionalization inherent in politics always constitute an imposition simply because they require that decisions be made before the circumstances to which they apply arise. This makes it necessary that they take on the form of general rules that are always to be applied in certain types of situations regardless of the specific circumstances. The seeds of ideological thinking—in which ideas rule the activities of individuals rather than serving individuals in developing their own projects—are found here, but I will go into that later. Of equal importance from an anarchist perspective is the fact that power lies in these decision-making and enforcing institutions. And the leftist conception of social struggle is precisely one of influencing, taking over or creating alternative versions of these institutions. In other words, it is a struggle to change, not to destroy institutionalized power relationships.

This conception of struggle, with its programmatic basis requires an organization as the means for carrying out the struggle. The organization represents the struggle, because it is the concrete expression of its program. If those involved define that program as revolutionary and anarchist, then the organization comes to represent revolution and anarchy for them, and the strength of the organization is equated with the strength of revolutionary and anarchist struggle. A clear example of this is found in the Spanish revolution where the leadership of the CNT, after inspiring the workers and peasants of Catalonia to expropriate the

means of production (as well as arms with which they formed their free militias), did not dissolve the organization and allow the workers to explore the recreation of social life on their own terms, but rather took over management of production.

This confusion of management by the union for workers' self-management had results that can be studied by anyone willing to look at those events critically. When the struggle against the ruling order is thus separated from the individuals carrying it out and placed into the hands of the organization, it ceases to be the self-determined project of those individuals and instead becomes a external cause to which they adhere. Because this cause is equated with the organization, the primary activity of the individuals who adhere to it is the maintenance and expansion of the organization.

In fact, the leftist organization is the means through which the left intends to transform institutionalized power relationships. Whether this is done through appeal to the current rulers and the exercise of democratic rights, through the electoral or violent conquest of state power, through the institutional expropriation of the means of production or through a combination of these means is of little importance. To accomplish this, the organization tries to make itself into an alternative power or a counter-power. This is why it must embrace the current ideology of power, i.e., democracy. Democracy is that system of separated and institutionalized decision-making that requires the creation of social consensus for programs put forward. Although power always resides in coercion, in the democratic framework, it is justified through the consent it can win. This is why it is necessary for the left to seek as many adherents as possible, numbers to tally in support of its programs. Thus, in its adherence to democracy, the left must embrace the quantitative illusion.

The attempt to win adherents requires the appeal to the lowest common denominator. So instead of carrying on a vital theoretical exploration, the left develops a set of simplistic doctrines through which to view the world and a litany of moral outrages perpetrated by the current rulers, which leftists hope will have mass appeal. Any questioning or exploration outside of this ideological framework is vehemently condemned or

viewed with incomprehension. The incapacity for serious theoretical exploration is the cost of accepting the quantitative illusion according to which numbers of adherents, regardless of their passivity and ignorance, are considered the reflection of a strong movement rather than the quality and coherence of ideas and practice.

The political necessity of appealing to "the masses" also moves the left to use the method of making piece-meal demands to the current rulers. This method is certainly quite consistent with a project of transforming power relationships, precisely because it does not challenge those relationships at their roots. In fact, by making demands of those in power, it implies that simple (though possibly extreme) adjustments of the current relationships are sufficient for the realization of the leftist program. What is not put into question in this method is the ruling order itself, because this would threaten the political framework of the left.

Implicit in this piece-meal approach to change is the doctrine of progressivism (in fact, one of the more popular labels among leftists and liberals nowadays—who would rather leave behind these other sullied labels—is precisely "progressive"). Progressivism is the idea that the current order of things is the result of an ongoing (though possibly "dialectical") process of improvement and that if we put in the effort (whether through voting, petition, litigation, civil disobedience, political violence or even the conquest of power—anything other than its destruction), we can take this process further. The concept of progress and the piece-meal approach that is its practical expression point to another quantitative aspect of the leftist conception of social transformation. This transformation is simply a matter of degrees, of one's position along an ongoing trajectory. The right amount of adjustment will get us "there" (wherever "there" is). Reform and revolution are simply different levels of the same activity. Such are the absurdities of leftism which remains blind to the overwhelming evidence that

the only trajectory that we have been on at least since the rise of capitalism and industrialism is the increasing impoverishment of existence, and this cannot be reformed away.

The piece-meal approach and the political need for categorization also leads the left to valorize people in terms of their membership in various oppressed and exploited groups, such as "workers", "women", "people of color", "gays and lesbians" and so on. This categorization is the basis of identity politics. Identity politics is the particular form of false opposition in which oppressed people choose to identify with a particular social category through which their oppression is reinforced as a supposed act of defiance against their oppression. In fact, the continued identification with this social role limits the capacity of those who practice identity politics to analyze their situation in this society deeply and to act as individuals against their oppression. It thus guarantees the continuation of the social relationships that cause their oppression. But only as members of categories are these people useful as pawns in the political maneuverings of the left, because such social categories take on the role of pressure groups and power blocs within the democratic framework.

The political logic of the left, with its organizational requirements, its embrace of democracy and the quantitative illusion and its valorization of people as mere members of social categories, is inherently collectivist, suppressing the individual as such. This expresses itself in the call for individuals to sacrifice themselves to the various causes, programs and organizations of the left. Behind these calls one finds the manipulative ideologies of collective identity, collective responsibility and collective guilt. Individuals who are defined as being part of a "privileged" group—"straight", "white", "male", "first-world", "middle class" —are held responsible for all the oppression attributed to that group. They are then manipulated into acting to expiate these "crimes", giving uncritical support to the movements of those more oppressed than they are. Individuals who are defined

as being part of an oppressed group are manipulated into accepting collective identity in this group out of a mandatory "solidarity"—sisterhood, black nationalism, queer identity, etc. If they reject or even deeply and radically criticize this group identity, this is equated with acceptance of their own oppression. In fact, the individual who acts on their own (or only with those with whom they have developed real affinity) against their oppression and exploitation as they experiences it in their life, is accused of "bourgeois individualism", in spite of the fact that they struggle precisely against the alienation, separation and atomization that is the inherent result of the collective alienated social activity that the state and capital—so-called "bourgeois society"—impose upon us.

Because leftism is the active perception of social struggle as a political program, it is ideological from top to bottom. The struggle of the left does not grow out of the desires, needs and dreams of the living individuals exploited, oppressed, dominated and dispossessed by this society. It is not the activity of people striving to reappropriate their own lives and seeking the tools necessary for doing so. Rather it is a program formulated in the minds of leftist leaders or in organizational meetings that exists above and before people's individual struggles and to which these latter are to subordinate themselves. Whatever the slogan of this program—socialism, communism, anarchism, sisterhood, the African people, animal rights, earth liberation, primitivism, workers' self-management, etc., etc.—it does not provide a tool for individuals to use in their own struggles against domination, but rather demands individuals to exchange the domination of the ruling order for the domination of the leftist program. In other words, it demands that individuals continue to give up their capacity to determine their own existence.

At its best, the anarchist endeavor has always been the total transformation of existence based on the reappropriation of life by each and every individual, acting in free association with others of their choosing. This vision can be found in the most

poetic writings of nearly every well-known anarchist, and it is what made anarchism "the conscience of the left". But of what use is it to be the conscience of a movement that does not and cannot share the breadth and depth of one's dreams, if one desires to realize those dreams? In the history of the anarchist movement, those perspectives and practices closest to the left, such as anarcho-syndicalism and platformism, have always had far less of the dream and far more of the program about them. Now that leftism has ceased to be a significant force in any way distinguishable from the rest of the political sphere at least in the West of the world, there is certainly no reason to continue carrying this millstone around our necks. The realization of anarchist dreams, of the dreams of every individual still capable of dreaming and desiring independently to be the autonomous creators of their own existence, requires a conscious and rigorous break with the left. At minimum, this break would mean:

1. The rejection of a political perception of social struggle; a recognition that revolutionary struggle is not a program, but is rather the struggle for the individual and social reappropriation of the totality of life. As such it is inherently anti-political. In other words,it is opposed to any form of social organization—and any method of struggle—in which the decisions about how to live and struggle are separated from the execution of those decisions regardless of how democratic and participatory this separated decision-making process may be.

2. The rejection of organizationalism, meaning by this the rejection of the idea that any organization can represent exploited individuals or groups, social struggle, revolution or anarchy. Therefore also the rejection of all formal organizations—parties, unions, federations and their like —which, due to their programmatic nature, take on such a representative role. This does not mean the rejection of the capacity to organize

the specific activities necessary to the revolutionary struggle, but rather the rejection of the subjection of the organization of tasks and projects to the formalism of an organizational program. The only task that has ever been shown to require formal organization is the development and maintenance of a formal organization.

3. The rejection of democracy and the quantitative illusion. The rejection of the view that the number of adherents to a cause, idea or program is what determines the strength of the struggle, rather than the qualitative value of the practice of struggle as an attack against the institutions of domination and as a reappropriation of life. The rejection of every institutionalization or formalization of decision-making, and indeed of every conception of decision-making as a moment separated from life and practice. The rejection, as well, of the evangelistic method that strives to win over the masses. Such a method assumes that theoretical exploration is at an end, that one has the answer to which all are to adhere and that therefore every method is acceptable for getting the message out even if that method contradicts what we are saying. It leads one to seek followers who accept one's position rather than comrades and accomplices with which to carry on one's explorations. The practice instead of striving to carry out one's projects, as best one can, in a way consistent with one's ideas, dreams and desires, thus attracting potential accomplices with whom to develop relationships of affinity and expand the practice of revolt.

4. The rejection of making demands to those in power, choosing rather a practice of direct action and attack. The rejection of the idea that we can realize our desire for self-determination through piece-meal demands which, at best, only offer a temporary amelioration of the harmfulness of the social order of capital. Recognition

of the necessity to attack this society in its totality, to achieve a practical and theoretical awareness in each partial struggle of the totality that must be destroyed. Thus, as well, the capacity to see what is potentially revolutionary—what has moved beyond the logic of demands and of piece-meal changes—in partial social struggles, since, after all, every radical, insurrectionary rupture has been sparked by a struggle that started as an attempt to gain partial demands, but that moved in practice from demanding what was desired to seizing it and more.

5. The rejection of the idea of progress, of the idea that the current order of things is the result of an ongoing process of improvement that we can take further, possibly even to its apotheosis, if we put in the effort. The recognition that the current trajectory—which the rulers and their loyal reformist and "revolutionary" opposition call "progress"—is inherently harmful to individual freedom, free association, healthy human relations, the totality of life and the planet itself. The recognition that this trajectory must be brought to an end and new ways of living and relating developed if we are to achieve full autonomy and freedom. (This does not necessarily lead to an absolute rejection of technology and civilization, and such a rejection does not constitute the bottom line of a break with the left, but the rejection of progress most certainly means a willingness to seriously and critically examine and question civilization and technology, and particularly industrialism. Those who are not willing to raise such questions most likely continue to hold to the myth of progress.)

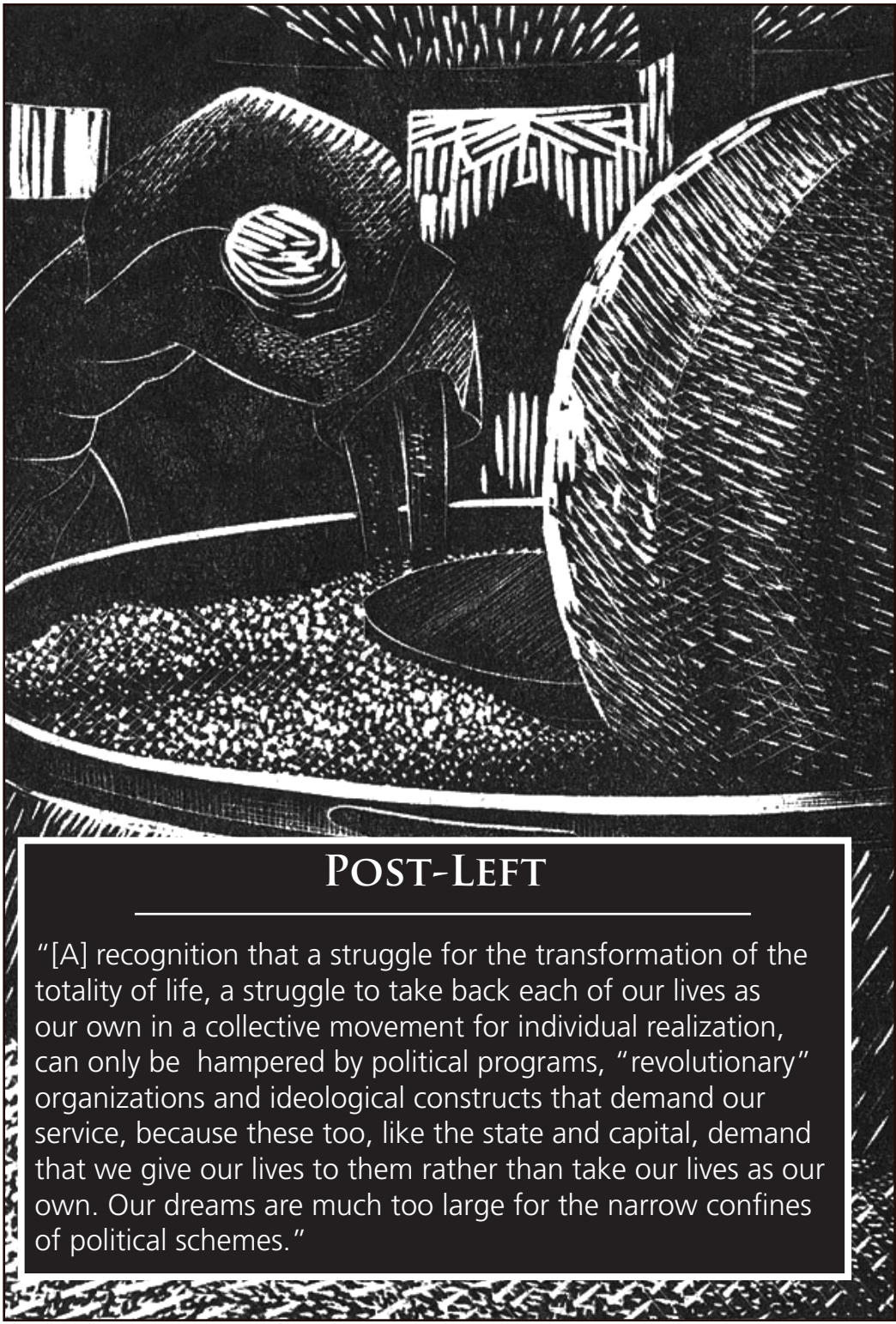
6. The rejection of identity politics. The recognition that, while various oppressed groups experience their dispossession in ways specific to their oppression and analysis of these specificities is necessary in order to

get a full understanding of how domination functions, nonetheless, dispossession is fundamentally the stealing away of the capacity of each of us as individuals to create our lives on our own terms in free association with others. The reappropriation of life on the social level, as well as its full reappropriation on the individual level, can only occur when we stop identifying ourselves essentially in terms of our social identities.

7. The rejection of collectivism, of the subordination of the individual to the group. The rejection of the ideology of collective responsibility (a rejection that does not mean the refusal of social or class analysis, but rather that removes the moral judgment from such analysis, and refuses the dangerous practice of blaming individuals for activities that have been done in the name of, or that have been attributed to, a social category of which they are said to be a part, but about which they had no choice—e.g., "Jew", "gypsy", "male", "white", etc.). The rejection of the idea that anyone, either due to "privilege" or due to supposed membership in a particular oppressed group, owes uncritical solidarity to any struggle or movement, and the recognition that such a conception is a major obstruction in any serious revolutionary process. The creation of collective projects and activities to serve the needs and desires of the individuals involved, and not vice versa. The recognition that the fundamental alienation imposed by capital is not based in any hyper-individualist ideology that it may promote, but rather stems from the collective project of production that it imposes, which expropriates our individual creative capacities to fulfill its aims. The recognition of the liberation of each and every individual to be able to determine the conditions of her or his existence in free association with others of her or his choosing—i.e., the individual and social reappropriation of life—as the primary aim of revolution.

8. The rejection of ideology, that is to say, the rejection of every program, idea, abstraction, ideal or theory that is placed above life and individuals as a construct to be served. The rejection, therefore, of God, the State, the Nation, the Race, etc., but also of Anarchism, Primitivism, Communism, Freedom, Reason, the Individual, etc. when these become ideals to which one is to sacrifice oneself, one's desires, one's aspirations, one's dreams. The use of ideas, theoretical analysis and the capacity to reason and think abstractly and critically as tools for realizing one's aims, for reappropriating life and acting against everything that stands in the way of this reappropriation. The rejection of easy answers that come to act as blinders to one's attempts to examine the reality one is facing in favor of ongoing questioning and theoretical exploration.

As I see it, these are what constitute a real break with the left. Where any of these rejections are lacking—whether in theory or practice—vestiges of the left remain, and this is a hindrance to our project of liberation. Since this break with the left is based in the necessity to free the practice of anarchy from the confines of politics, it is certainly not an embrace of the right or any other part of the political spectrum. It is rather a recognition that a struggle for the transformation of the totality of life, a struggle to take back each of our lives as our own in a collective movement for individual realization, can only be hampered by political programs, "revolutionary" organizations and ideological constructs that demand our service, because these too, like the state and capital, demand that we give our lives to them rather than take our lives as our own. Our dreams are much too large for the narrow confines of political schemes. It is long past time that we leave the left behind and go on our merry way toward the unknown of insurrection and the creation of full and self-determined lives.



Post-Left

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