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Communal Living: Making Community

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Dedicated to the Memory of David Thoreau Wieck, 1921-1997

The role of principle in anarchist thought and action, as I understand it, is to liberate the positive ethical life of human beings. Thus the principle of power-negation is rather a constitutive principle of the desired society than a rule for life within that society. Put more correctly: an authentic relationship between persons, as understood by anarchists, presupposes the absence of power of some over others, but 'absence of power' says nothing positive about the content of that relationship, and that content will be the creation of those persons.

David Thoreau Wieck (1975, p. 42.)

We are currently socialized into misunderstanding the origin of community. We tend to live and act at a distance from each other: we do not *make* community. Only anarchism can help us retrieve this making, the ground of communal living. I wish briefly to explain this point, through examples in science, law, and politics.

In Bruno Latour's *Science in Action* (1987), one helpful example turns on a 1787 mission to sail far away from home and bring back what one finds. The most basic thing to bring home is a record of one's travels so that the next person will know what lies ahead. Today we think nothing of indicating where certain events have taken place by putting the appropriate map on a wall and sticking pins in it. But the captain of the 1787 mission had to be disciplined enough to find a way to indicate where an event took place without any map at all to put on the wall.

Latour speaks of this as a process of "making" what will later become "ready-made." The captain's work begins a long process of various ships bringing things back to their home center until they accumulate enough to act at a distance: they become aware of what is far away without having to move there so that they can take it

into account in their thinking at home. Notice that it is not even that they can take it into account as well as they could have were they there: they do "better," because what they do is not tied to that place. The native people are "just there," seemingly disadvantaged in the light of this action at a distance, which Latour rightly sees as a kind of domination.

Moreover, as a kind of domination, the action at a distance is all the more tricky as it becomes ready-made: the making of the ability to act at a distance is forgotten, and the action at a distance is put in a black box. Right from the start of his book, Latour makes it clear that he is going in the back door of science, the door of science in the making, at a point when context and content are still unmistakably fused together: in Latour's opening examples, Watson and Crick are straining in their laboratory in 1951 to uncover the structure of DNA, and then 34 years later another scientist is working with a "nice picture" of DNA on a computer screen so that the underlying program can relate that picture to other structures—here, of course, there is no question of opening the black box of the structure of DNA itself.

But no matter how much context and content seem not to be fused together, no matter how tight a black box is sealed, it *can* be opened. Suppose that we need to do so because local people have access to data not available to scientists? Immediately upon asking such a question we understand how action at a distance inevitably involves a hierarchy. The whole point of making action at a distance is to eliminate the need to consult local people: if they claim to have access to data not available to scientists, then the data must be either irrelevant to the issues in question—not really data at all—or else simply not *yet* taken into account at a distance, still open to confirmation or disconfirmation by science.

On good example of how local data is relevant in its own right is "popular epidemiology." As described in Phil Brown's *No Safe Place* (1997), people who live next to each other in a neighborhood that has endured a toxic insult because of an industrial practice

Put otherwise: nothing secures an anarchist society, whether of large extent or of commune-size or consisting of two persons, except *continuous realization* of the human potential for free engagement and disagreement, always in recognition of the personhood of the other. (Wieck, 1975, p. 43, my emphasis.)

The making is never over—the making *is* community—and as such cannot constitute action at a distance, final authority, whether or not it is put in a black box or ready-made, though certainly, if we are going to allow final authority, it must never be allowed to be ready-made—a lesson for social democrats, not anarchists.

Again, community cannot be made or conferred at a distance, let alone from a black box, as ready-made. We need to retrieve the making from centers of accumulation so that it cannot lift away from us and turn back on us as action at a distance or final authority. No doubt this will also require us to learn the arts of consensus decision making, in which, as Caroline Estes (1985) puts it, "each person has some part of the truth and no one has all of it." But this, again, is just the heart of anarchism. Only anarchism can explain why we find ourselves making community in order to undermine the hegemonies of Truth, Justice, and Law in our lives.

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were conferred on us from outside of our lives. We just find ourselves in it, from birth—the ready-made space of jurisdiction over our lives. It is no wonder we vote less and less, as we are led to forget more and more of the making of our lives together: we need to be raised, not just grow up; we need to be taught, not just learn; we need to be governed (including, for example, to be married), not just live together. And we must still all be making this space of our jurisdiction too, no matter how tacit and lost it is to us.

David Wieck was fond of saying that, as an idea, anarchism is a negativity, because it can tell us what we need to unlearn in order to be free, but it cannot tell us how to use that freedom: anarchism does not impose a certain life on us, it challenges us to make a decent life together, to rid ourselves of all vestiges of final authority or *power*.

Thus anarchism can be seen as proceeding from the hypothesis that there is a negative task to be accomplished before we can genuinely experience ourselves as human beings and grasp our relationships to one another. Throughout, therefore, anarchism is, ideationally, essentially negative. Whereas with respect to particular social problems this would be a gross defect, anarchism is concerned with a far more fundamental kind of question, and from its vision of the potentialities residing in our actual human situation, its thoroughgoing negativity would seem to follow and to be the foundation of creation. (Wieck, 1975, p. 55.)

To understand the mutual aid of our own authority of competence, David liked us to picture two sawyers, at either end of a two-person saw, cutting through a tree. For the work we need to do together, David had a special gift of description.

The heart of anarchism is that we need to *make* community and to *keep* making community, without end.

slowly realize what science later seems unable to confirm: their health is being undermined by the practice. In the process of fighting to stop the practice they inevitably *make* a community out of their neighborhood—the crucial point that I will return to below.

Often they turn to the law. We have witnessed a number of highly publicized trials recently, in some cases to the extent that all of us could be in the audience of the courtroom without leaving our homes. Jonathan Harr's best seller *A Civil Action* (1995) focuses on a case that, though not as widely broadcast as others, arose from the toxic insult in Woburn, Massachusetts, that is discussed by Brown. In general in these cases, a trial takes place, and the jury reaches a verdict: the verdict is read and suddenly, at a distance, a certain status is conferred directly on the defendants and plaintiffs, and indirectly on everyone else in the proceedings.

We can regard the jury itself as residing at a Latourian center of accumulation of things brought back to them. (The Supreme Court serves as the ultimate such center in our society, and when they decide a case a status is often conferred on each and every one of us at a distance.) The jurors also do not have to "earn" what comes along with their residence at this center, namely, their domination of everyone else in the proceedings. Their actions constitute ready-made justice, and though we know that there are problems with trial by jury, we rarely if ever open this black box. Harr's book is so devastating precisely because he opens the black box as a vivid story, allowing us to see exactly how, because of the actual making that goes on in the black box, a jury's action at a distance is arbitrary, that is, has nothing necessarily to do with who the defendants and plaintiffs actually are.

To understand action at a distance better we can imagine a courtroom situation in which everyone in attendance, save the jury, actually acts on their sense that the jury's verdict is arbitrary. They ignore, let us imagine, the guilty verdict, as all of them, including the defendant and the court officers, simply proceed to go about their daily lives. Unless some of them act on the verdict (and in actual

situations, of course, the enforcers could arrive from outside of the courtroom), even a justified verdict will not be action at a distance. We could see the verdict as a kind of awareness at a distance that becomes action at a distance, actually conferring a certain status on the defendant, only when everyone present defers to it (though they could still, for example, appeal it). Moreover, it is by becoming ready-made, in a black box, that the jury's verdict achieves the full status of action at a distance, as everyone *automatically* defers to it. (It is always worth remembering the price "local" people have to pay as they come to defer to action at a distance: in Latour's case of map making, for example, the price is called "colonization.")

Exactly as the limits of normal science inspire the popular epidemiology movement, the limits of normal law inspire the restorative justice movement to advocate the kind of justice that turns on eliminating, rather than featuring, action at a distance throughout the justice process. Instead of gathering evidence and deliberating at a distance about defendants, plaintiffs, and so on, restorative justice workers act as facilitators of the actual relationships of these people, the "local" people, until there is no longer any role for action at a distance, let alone for deference to it. The recent movie *Dead Man Walking* focuses on the work of Sister Helen Prejean to heal the relationships between a guilty defendant and the families of his victims, and in the process—here is the crucial point again—they *make* community. (See Prejean, 1993, and Sullivan, 1998, an introduction to the movement as a whole.)

The framework in which a group of scientists or a jury acts at a distance is a *space of jurisdiction*, the jurisdiction of a certain authority. (We can note that the space of jurisdiction of science is the universe!) To be acted upon at a distance is to be subject to a *final authority*—on which one is expected simply and immediately to defer to that authority, to do or believe what one is told *just because* one is told—all the more tricky, again, once the authority is in a black box or ready-made. Indeed, it is precisely by leading us all

into taking this space of jurisdiction as ready-made that the final authority is *constituted*.

The fundamental space of jurisdiction in our lives is a state. Many years ago an original political process had to close, in a state constitution: New York was here, Massachusetts there. We can imagine all the acts of accumulation at some center that went into this decision, and all the subsequent acts of settling border disputes and so on that went after it. But we cannot imagine the people who made this decision looking out from their veranda as it was finalized and watching New York move away from them like a wave. No, for as far as the eye could see and further, all at once, at a distance, all would be New York, *the space of jurisdiction of New York*. These days we *simply assume* that we are *in* New York, which is thereby ready-made, bringing along with it our automatic deference to all sorts of arbitrary statutes at a distance, such as who can vote, serve on a jury, *not* pay taxes, and so on (or who can determine what constitutes data—popular epidemiologists know only too well that the coincidence of the spaces of jurisdiction of state and science is no accident).

Whereas at one point our representatives in Washington DC might have been like the first captain in Latour's example, fully aware, as part of their responsibility, of making whatever actions they took at a distance, now they are just like scientists or jurors at centers of accumulation: without needing to open the lids of their black boxes at all—for example, consider the current status of campaign finance reform—they act at a distance on our lives. Exactly as the verdicts of scientists and jurors can be arbitrary, having nothing to do who we are or how we live, so too can the verdicts of legislators. But here the trickiness is more worrisome: if we put this action at a distance into a black box, we eliminate the making of the state itself.

If we try to understand community as we are led to do by our normal practices of truth, justice, and law, we will feel as if we live *in* one, the making of which will be entirely lost to us, as if it