

Carnival against capital: a comparison of Bakhtin, Vaneigem and Bey

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid 1990s, many anarchists and Marxists, drawing on the writings of Hakim Bey, the Situationist International and Mikhail Bakhtin, have increasingly articulated the concept of ‘carnival’ as a valuable form of resistance that merges the political and the aesthetic. This essay looks at these writings and the cases they make, and examines the extent to which they form a coherent body of thought. The central texts under discussion will be Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* and Hakim Bey’s *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*.

It’s a sunny afternoon, and I find myself between two uniformed groups of people, pressed nose to nose (or rather helmet to helmet) against each other, neither side apparently much willing to move.

On one side are the police, equipped with the latest in riot gear. Pushing against them are a group of men and women dressed in white overalls, equipped with cycle helmets, rubber rings, bubblewrap and stuffed toys sellotaped together into what seems a surprisingly effective parody of the officers’ protective clothing.

Behind them, in the space they’re keeping the police from entering, are a crowd made up of dancing punks, fairies, stilt-walkers, ravers, feminists, anarchists and Marxists of every hue, people in fancy dress, people completely undressed, and a noisy meeting of street drummers, samba bands, and a pedal-powered sound system. There is an equal cacophony of ideologies in this space; black flags, red flags, green flags, flags with stars, multi-coloured gay pride flags and banners demanding liberation for diverse human and animal groups. This is a carnival against capitalism, as if thousands of people had decided to take Emma Goldman’s famous attributed proclamation that ‘if I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution’ quite literally. It is a cultural and political phenomenon that has been growing rapidly since its conception in the early 1990s.

This phenomenon has a modern lineage stretching back to the ‘No M11 Link Road’ campaign and the carnivalesque occupation of Claremont Road in London in 1993.¹ After Claremont Road, carnival appeared as a conscious form of action

throughout the 1990s, most noticeably with Reclaim the Streets, a group who drew heavily on the ideas put forward in Hakim Bey's *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. These events coalesced into the first 'global street party' held in cities across the world on 16 May 1998 - the day of a G8 summit meeting in Birmingham. These 'parties' in turn developed into the more general 'carnivals against capitalism' which have marked the form of protest against globalisation and neoliberalism (amongst other things) since.

Between the works of Bakhtin, the Situationist International and modern anarchist theory, particularly the writing of Hakim Bey, there is a continual return to a shared constellation of ideas, which makes a comparative analysis of their ideas productive. Each theorises joy and desire as the basis of a culturally and politically radical event which they variously term as a 'carnival', 'festival', 'situation' or a 'temporary autonomous zone'. In each case this event embodies a number of related qualities.² It is seen as a politically radical fusion of life and art, a realisation of joy and desire in the form of a broadly anarchistic micro-society. The activists behind carnivals against capitalism seem well aware of these theoretical precedents when they make reference to:

The enormous popular festivals of the Bastille, the Paris Commune, Paris '68. From the Middle Ages onwards the carnival has offered glimpses of a world turned upside down, a topsy-turvy universe free of toil, suffering and inequality. Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.³

This historical lineage, as much as the theoretical one between Bakhtin and the Situationists, has been constructed in retrospect to serve the interests of this contemporary radical project, much after the style of Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces*, which also, tentatively, makes this connection. In sketching out a 'tradition' of carnival as a liberatory insurrection, this project synthesises the ideas of Bakhtin and the Situationists, and assumes a serendipitous theoretical link between them, based upon the apparent similarities and possibilities of their writings on carnival. However, despite the claims above, such a synthesis is far from straightforward.

Mikhail Bakhtin was an unconventional Russian scholar, whose work on language, literature and philosophy in the 1930s and 40s suffered because of the hostility of Soviet governments to unorthodox intellectuals, and his thesis on Rabelais of 1940 was not widely published until the late 1960s, after which his ideas concerning - amongst other things - carnival became increasingly popular. His discussion of Rabelais's use of the folk culture of medieval festivals is often read as a criticism of the strict hegemony of the Soviet Union, and the implications of his concepts were quickly extended far beyond the realm of literary analysis by subsequent theorists. It is in this spirit that they are treated here. 1968, the year Bakhtin's work was translated into English, was coincidentally the same year as

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the artistic avant-garde group *cum* revolutionary organisation, the Situationist International, rose to prominence with the events in France of that year. Alongside Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem was one of the leading lights of the Situationists. He published his *Revolution of Everyday Life* in 1967.

Bakhtin and the Situationists have a similar vision of carnival. Carnival was for both a unitary 'world' of social relations that were independent and distinct from those of everyday life. These relations were characterised by the inversion of hierarchical relationships where the low mocked the high, and all dogmas and hierarchies were suspended. This was accompanied by a suspension of division and separation in social life, particularly in the often high and distant realm of aesthetics. Qualities usually attributed to the realm of aesthetic appreciation were realized in everyday life, and the divisions between life and art, performer and spectator, collapsed. The anarchistic implications of such a world are obvious, but the key to this abolition of boundaries of class and ideology is that joy, festivity, laughter and desire are understood as the revolutionary impetus that brings such a world about.

The use of joy and desire as key concepts in their thinking about liberation from authority sets Bakhtin and the Situationists apart from the traditional left. It allows moments of a utopian world to occur here and now, rather than after some distant revolution. Both of them see joy and laughter as the essential component of carnival's undogmatic suspension of normal social relations. Vaneigem uses the terms 'festival' and 'carnival' interchangeably.⁴ The emphasis for him is on joy and festivity as the root of carnival, as it is for Bakhtin, who prefaces his discussion of Rabelais by placing him in 'the history of laughter'.⁵ Realized joy for the Situationists was found in play, rather than laughter. But in either case, the principle of joy is the basis of a social experience that is unitary, self-contained and separate from the usual world. People live alternately in the world of carnival or the official world. Bakhtin describe the rituals of this world of laughter:

They were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonies. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom.⁶

Vaneigem attempts to describe the human relations of this second world. Its joy is expressed in the replacement of exchange relations by those of gift giving. This forms a world separate from the official world of the 'spectacle', which was the Situationists' term for the totality of capitalist social relations in the late twentieth century, because the spectacle only extends as far as the official world of commodity relations.

Vaneigem gives the example of the potlatch economy as evidence for the viability of a social system based around gift-giving rather than exchange. Gift-

giving also embodies the carnival's qualities of love, friendship, equality and participation that are lost under exchange. Bakhtin similarly observes of play that 'games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated them from the usual laws and regulations'.⁷ Vaneigem also argues that play involves fluidity and an anarchic lack of dogma, 'the praxis of play involves the refusal of leaders, of sacrifice, of roles, freedom for everyone to realise himself'.⁸ However, Vaneigem continues by making far stronger claims for the potential of these activities: 'The growing passion for stealing books, clothes, food, weapons or jewellery simply for the pleasure of giving them away, offers a glimpse of what the will to live has in store for consumer society'.⁹ This alignment of gift giving with joy and carnival is a part of his redefinition of revolution. To give gifts is to abandon commodity exchange relations and to act creatively outside of the spectacle, which like Bakhtin's laughing critical perspective, offers the participants a 'reversal of perspective',¹⁰ which Vaneigem sees as both a launching pad for revolutionary activity, and as intimately bound up with revolution itself: 'The total construction of everyday life, the reversal of perspective - in short, the revolution - are imminent possibilities'.¹¹ For Vaneigem, the reversal of perspective will not only reveal the true nature of the old world but will embody and realize the relations of the new one.

The realisation of an alternative, carnivalesque world, is not synonymous with revolution for Bakhtin, as it is for Vaneigem, but despite this he makes suggestive connections between carnival forms and the change from one world to another: 'The dual image combining praise and abuse seeks to grasp the very moment of this change, the transfer from the old to the new, from death to life'.¹² What is a subtext in Bakhtin is explicit in Vaneigem. Rather than grasping to represent change, carnival for Vaneigem by definition fuses perspective and practice (lest it be spectacular), and so what is only a reversal of perspective for Bakhtin is also *actually* 'the world turned upside down'¹³ for Vaneigem. The Situationists' revolution was to be an everyday realisation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. They claimed that:

Free creativity in the construction of all moments and events of life is the only *poetry* it [the first conscious critique of everyday life] can acknowledge, the poetry made by all, the beginning of the revolutionary festival. Proletarian revolutions will be *festivals* or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce. *Play* is the ultimate principle of this festival, and the only rules it can recognise are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints.¹⁴

This difference may be seen in terms of disciplinary perspectives. For Bakhtin, working as a Marxist literary critic, laughter permits carnival as a critical perspective. For Vaneigem, influenced as much by Surrealism as by Marxism, suppressed desire realises itself as carnival. Bakhtin's and Vaneigem's different perspectives affect

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their assessment of the revolutionary content and potential of carnival. Vaneigem's psychological categories have the effect of 'naturalising' his revolutionary ones. His psychological spin on alienation is a good example. Joy is the opposite of the 'survival sickness' which is the psychological and physical result of the official world of work and exchange under capitalism, of life reduced to its bare, abstract essentials. For Vaneigem, this joyless existence, and the system that enforces it, is against man's will to joy and pleasure, and so against what makes humanity more than automatons. The transfer from death to life is inevitable - the desire to play and create will always out.

It appears that Bakhtin and the Situationists differ strongly when it comes to the relation between carnival and the official world. The Situationists, seeing the qualities of carnival in an act they termed 'the creation of situations', supposed it would be the primary occupation of people after the revolution that the creation of situations itself could bring about. Bakhtin, although he equally described the carnival spirit as irrepressible and opposed to hierarchy, did not explicitly state that it was therefore revolutionary.

Bakhtin certainly saw carnival laughter as subversive. However, he argued that in the medieval period official culture, with its seriousness allied to power and authority, was too strong for medieval man to resist it. Against the ideological and physical force of the medieval state, carnival's 'consciousness of freedom... could be only limited and utopian'.¹⁵ Is this even more true of the spectacular society, which is more capable of surreptitiously recuperating and controlling dissent than any before it? Tony Blair's comments on the 2001 protests in Genoa that 'this effectively is an anarchist travelling circus that goes from summit to summit with the sole purpose of causing as much mayhem as possible'¹⁶ would seem to indicate that official culture's seriousness still supposes carnival has no meaningful or participatory place in history. Indeed, Shields observes that 'carnival is strongest today in those societies least integrated into the modalities of capitalism'.¹⁷ But as the protests in Genoa at the meeting of the eight greatest world powers demonstrate, contemporary activists have sought provocatively and disruptively to bring carnival to the heart of the official world, regardless of that world's attitude towards it.

In doing so they follow the Situationists, who clearly set a more aggressive case for the revolutionary content of carnival than Bakhtin ever did. However, many have argued against the Situationists that carnival does not have such revolutionary potential, but is in fact a sort of social 'safety valve' that allows the official world to operate unhindered the rest of the time, and is in this sense complicit with that which it superficially opposes. Bakhtin himself observes that as early as 1444 in a circular letter of the Paris School of Theology, the feast of fools was described as such a safety valve. Such a gay diversion is necessary 'so that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man might freely spend itself at least once as year. Wine barrels burst from time to time if we do not open them and let in some air'.¹⁸

Eagleton claims carnival is 'a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible

rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art'.¹⁹ However, the Dutch group Provos, contemporaries of the Situationists, did not see things this way. Their 1965 manifesto asserts the power of increasingly bold carnivalesque ruptures of hegemony to provoke authority to shed its veil of tolerance and reveal its serious, violent and intolerant nature, in turn provoking revolution against it. The keynote these two analyses share is their focus on tolerance and the permissible. Tellingly, Bakhtin notes of the medieval tradition of carnivals that 'forms of pure laughter were created parallel to the official forms'.²⁰ This is a relation to the official world very different from Vaneigem's separate world generated in reaction and opposition to the official one. This is an important difference between Situationist carnivals and these traditional medieval carnivals, which were tolerated by the church, if not wholeheartedly endorsed. It is a distinction that the judge presiding over the case of the rebellious students of Strasbourg University, after the events of 1968, made clear in his summing up, albeit not in Vaneigem's glowing terms: 'These cynics do not hesitate to commend... a world-wide proletarian revolution with *'unlicensed pleasure'* as its only goal' (my italics).²¹

The 1994 Criminal Justice Bill made carnivalesque pleasure in the form of rave culture illegal in the UK. Reclaim the Streets' unlicensed carnival then quickly became allied with rave culture groups. This simplified and literalised Vaneigem's politics of pleasure - perhaps explaining the popular resurgence of these theories in the 1990s. Taking pleasure became a defiance of the law, and carnival occupied a more provocative status. Vaneigem's conception of any snatched moment of joy as a revolutionary act against the official order must have seemed particularly relevant in the light of legislation which clamped down simultaneously on both partying and protest. Had an illegal street party become indistinguishable from preparing for a general insurrection? What this does tell us is that whether a carnival is a revolutionary provocation or merely a social safety valve depends, at least in part, on the status of carnival laughter in the historical period in question. The crucial difference here is that the medieval carnival was at least tolerated by the state and church, whereas this was not the case for 1990s rave culture.

Bourdieu observes that this issue of legal transgression in cultural events gives carnival a class location, as well as a potentially insurrectionary political one. Social rank is constituted for Bourdieu partly by 'cultural capital' - the knowledge of the forms and rules of certain cultural practices. A lack of this capital in the form of the transgression of these rules is associated with the working class and often takes the form of an active disrespect for cultural capital 'using obscenity or scatology to turn arsy-versy, head over heels, all the 'values' in which the dominant groups project and recognise their sublimity'.²²

However, without popular support, unlicensed carnivals are not revolutions so much as provocations to outrage the official order, and which the mass of people value. A comparison between two similar carnivalesque events is revealing here. Firstly, the proto-Situationist 'assault on Notre Dame', in which Michel Mourre,

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dressed as a Dominican priest, took to the altar of Notre Dame cathedral during High Mass on the 9th April 1950 and declared:

Verily I say unto you: God is dead...

We proclaim the death of the Christ-god, so that Man may live at last.²³

The cathedral guards rushed the false Dominican and his conspirators with swords drawn and attempted to kill them. By contrast, Bakhtin describes a similar parodical attack upon the sacredness of the Church and its rituals, 'the feast of the ass', which was tolerated by the church, even carried out by its officials, and despite its similar form, was not the provocation to outrage that the actions of Mourre were.

Special 'asinine masses' were celebrated. Each part of the mass was accompanied by the comic braying, 'hinham!' At the end of the service, instead of the usual blessing, the priest repeated the braying three times, and the final Amen was replaced by the same cry.²⁴

However, assessing whether a carnival is licensed by the state should not be our only consideration when deciding whether carnival represents a social safety valve. A focus on the qualities and power of carnival in itself in fact sidesteps the above argument in suggesting that the idea of a social safety valve is entirely invalid. Cleaver argues that orthodox Marxism often neglects this kind of focus and as a result the working class appear in its models 'usually as a victim fighting defensive battles',²⁵ whilst social changes and developments are understood as developing purely from those competing within capitalism. 'The working class is only a spectator to the global waltz of capital's autonomous self-activating development'.²⁶ In fact, capital's movements are often better understood as tactical responses to the autonomous actions of the working class against it. The safety valve theory necessarily understands society as a functional, closed system. This is not only misleading, but denies the working class their proper role in the battle against capital. It is useful to understand this difference 'tactically', from both sides. As Cleaver puts it: 'What it is vital to see is that capital's response has more often resembled a desperate search for a new tactic than the smoothly orchestrated process of assimilation visualized by the prophets of "bourgeois cultural hegemony"'.²⁷

This would of course put the discussion of carnivalesque subversion not in terms of ruling class hegemony and conditions determining the revolutionary potential of carnival, but in terms of two opposed, active parties and their tactical responses towards each other. Thus any analysis should not only focus upon the power of the official world, and whether it 'licenses' carnival, but also on the power and methods of carnival in the period in question. The central difference above is that the feast of the ass was a carnival that was part of a shared popular culture, whereas the assault on Notre Dame was a carnivalesque attack upon a shared popular culture. To not see popular support and organisation set against

official licence as cards played by competing class interests in an unstable system is to accept the totalising ideological assumptions of capital.

Debord makes a similar accusation of false totalisation towards the spectacle. To see society as a functional unity, of which superficially dissenting carnivals are a part, is to accept the spectacle's own self-definition. The Situationists saw carnivalesque manifestations not as 'safety valves' but as moments of crisis in capitalism, and as spaces that gave expression to relations that were to some extent 'outside' those of capital and the spectacle. This unitary externality offered the Situationists a point from which to critique the spectacle. This was important as it allowed them to avoid a tricky theoretical knot: attempts to understand society as a totality of relations rooted in capital which cause a complex matrix of divisions and separations are themselves susceptible to those very divisions if their critique is based in or dependent on that matrix. This may lead such critiques into divided or inconsistent perspectives, holding only partial knowledge of the totality.

It appears there are problems with the 'safety valve' theory that supposes society to be a functional unity, and which sees carnival as internally divided between art and action. However, supposing a divided society set against the essential unitary quality of carnival is also a highly problematic undertaking. This is particularly the case when it is used as a validation of the revolutionary potential of carnival. The paradox is that the construction of situations creates a pocket of the carnivalesque post-revolutionary world as a point of unassailable unitary critique, before the revolution, which then is intended to bring that revolution about. However these pockets of resistance can only be truly unitary and validated after that revolution. As Plant puts it, 'the revolution demands a consciousness which only the revolution can produce'.²⁸

Jean Barrott also sees this as an untenable position in his critique of the Situationist International, denying that a carnival can be coherently realised anywhere before the revolution, identifying their embrace of carnival as failure of the Situationists to 'know exactly whether it was a matter of living differently from now on or only *heading that way*'.²⁹ He claims Vaneigem's book literally demands the impossible. Of Vaneigem's outline of a carnivalesque revolution of everyday life he claims '*it cannot be lived...either one huddles in the crevices of bourgeoisie society, or one ceaselessly opposes it to a different life which is impotent because only the revolution can make it a reality*'.³⁰

It is productive at this point to turn again to an autonomist perspective. Like these theorisations of revolutionary joy, the tradition of autonomist Marxism is not that of a homogenous movement or consistent lineage, but the collection of a set of voices in the wilderness that at different times and in different places have put forward an analysis that focuses on the autonomy of the working class over the operations of capital. This tradition is generally seen as crystallised around the Italian Autonomia movement, which was roughly contemporary with that of the French Situationists.

An autonomist Marxist perspective in fact shares many similarities to the

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Situationist approach. For example, the analysis put forward by the most widely-read member of the *autonomia*, Antonio Negri, of the 'social factory', where economic relations have become socially all pervasive, parallels in several ways Debord's description of the society of the spectacle, where commodified images have shaped our perspective on the world, even affecting our concepts of space and time. Both schools of thought also place an emphasis on the autonomous activity of workers - with the Situationists specifically endorsing council Communism. Both are in this respect concerned with possibility from below rather than determinism from above. Autonomist Marxist analysis is sometimes termed 'open' Marxism, though the Situationists typically went a little further in this direction in suggesting that we 'demand the impossible'. There is also a shared focus in the analysis of the basis of this possibility. Like Vaneigem, Negri theorises the importance of the irrecoverable kernel of human creativity that fosters resistance to capital, and sees it manifest in the form of appropriations and 'misuses' of the apparatus of production, much like that which the Situationists termed *détournement*. There is also a shared tactical approach in that both schools of thought emphasise non-engagement with capital and the abandonment of the roles assigned by it, seeing the abolition of work itself as the primary end of the class war and seeing the actions of individuals resisting work outside of official political organisation as a valid part of this war: 'Where we have self-valorisation [abandonment of engagement with capital], we not only have class struggle but also the emergence, however fleeting or durable, of new worlds, and new kinds of people'.³¹

This seems to be a Marxism better suited to an analysis of carnival in its own terms than the theoretical framework employed by Barrot. Cleaver defines the working class simply as those whom capital forces to work. This definition means that the status of 'bourgeois crevices' as having been the product of the work of others is less important than their exploitation as a point of contradiction in capitalist relations. Divisions like this in these 'new worlds' may serve to undermine them at points, but it is the working out of these divisions and the movement towards a universal unitary status by these pockets of autonomy that is the very substance of the class struggle against work. This division between more or less privileged sections of the working class is just one of a myriad of divisions to be overcome such as that between husband and housewife or black and white. Seeing a flaw of circular argument in the fact that this end has not yet been achieved suggests that Barrot's framework leads him to confuse the ends and the means.

It is only through a circulation of struggles, in which those of various sectors of the class interlink to become complementary, that real unity against capital is achieved. Without such complementarity, 'class consciousness' is only an ideological gloss; with it, 'class consciousness' is superfluous.³²

This argument abandons notions of class consciousness which might invalidate

these new worlds within the old, and sees working-class self-awareness and self-valorisation arise within the contradictions of capital, rather than being a unitary granted by 'the revolution' or any other external party.

This brings us to a postmodern theorist who sees himself as continuous with the lineage of Situationism and autonomist Marxism - Hakim Bey. Bey, the pseudonym of Peter Lamborn Wilson, is best known for his influential essay *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. This argues for the creation of spaces that step outside capital and embody anarchist social relationships. These spaces are also characterised by the carnivalesque inversion of cultural values and a blurring of the boundaries between art and life. Despite the great influence of this essay upon activist practice, it has received little in the way of direct theoretical analysis.

Bey, amongst others, has noted that the carnivalesque has many similarities with the postmodern. Both appeal to play, dialogism, collage and an opposition to modernism's fixed hierarchies and elitism. Bakhtin claims that carnival 'was a political drama without footlights, in which it was difficult to trace any clear dividing line between symbol and reality'.³³ However carnival achieves this effect by the supercession of culture, abolishing its alienated relation to life and thus making distinctions between sign and reality difficult. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is a nihilistic opposite to this process, denying and suppressing life in order to privilege the sign. This may be explained by the fact that the postmodern may be seen to have a basis, in commodity relations that are opposed to the ends of Bakhtin or Vaneigem's carnival. Indeed, Plant argues in *The Situationist International in the Postmodern Age* that postmodernism is a perverted product of Situationist theories of the spectacle that turns many Situationist categories on their heads. When Leotard undermines the truth claims of any discourse, or when Baudrillard argues that the symbol has usurped reality, the notion of the recuperation of the true or real by the spectacle becomes meaningless. Separation is truly perfected in the postmodern, as fragmentation appears as the natural and primary state of things. Debord described the spectacle's definition of the world, and itself, thus: 'The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than, "that which appears is good; that which is good appears"'.³⁴

As we have seen above, the spectacle is not as absolute as it might assume, but can be seen from the perspective of cultural and material territory outside of itself. That territory is most clearly defined by the proliferation of the practice that is the basis of the spectacle - commodity capitalism. Debord says as much himself, though his wording complicates the issue of a simple base-superstructure relationship: 'The spectacle is nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation'.³⁵

However, Hakim Bey, inheriting the Situationist tradition, does not see it this way. He theorises carnivals under the name of 'Temporary Autonomous Zones', referencing both Bakhtin and the Situationists, and has been extraordinarily influential in radical activism. His name is mentioned often when attempting to explain the activity of Reclaim the Streets and Carnivals Against Capitalism. A

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Temporary Autonomous Zone 'is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the state, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the state can crush it'.³⁶ As his examples show, Temporary Autonomous Zones are also carnivalesque and based on desire as a motivating principle: 'The only force significant enough to facilitate our act of creation seems to be desire... hence the only viable government is that of love, or "attraction"'.³⁷

However, Bey openly declares that we live in a 'post-spectacular society of simulation'.³⁸ His admittance of the logic of commodity relations into a critique of life under such relations leads him to reproduce the divisions and contradictions of a spectacular society in his critique of that society. Specifically, his acceptance of Baudrillard's assertions about the simulated nature of reality leads Bey to negate certain historical, material and social realities concerning both carnival and life under capitalism. Bookchin's critique of Bey, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, is based around a central division between the social and the individual. He argues that much contemporary anarchist theory is individualist to the extent of complicity with the relations it superficially opposes, and he renames this 'second wave' anarchist tradition disparagingly as 'lifestyle anarchism'. He opposes more traditional, social forms of revolutionary organisation to the lifestyle anarchists' pursuit of 'a decadent personalism in the name of their sovereign "autonomy"'.³⁹

Unfortunately Bookchin throws the baby out with the bathwater. The root theoretical distinction is not between social anarchism and carnival as part of a modern individualist tradition. In fact the most important distinction between Bakhtin, the Situationists and Bey would actually appear to be between the - admittedly unorthodox - Marxism of the former two and Bey's stitching together of contrary concepts into a common stream under the auspices of the postmodern's 'suspicion towards meta-narratives'.

However, the divisive influence of late capitalism can be seen even in Vaneigem's writing. This becomes clearer when we compare the individual and social bases of Vaneigem and Bakhtin's conceptions of joy and laughter. Joy and realised desire are the subjective psychological basis of Vaneigem's carnival, and have an associated relativising power in Bakhtin's work. However, Bakhtin's laughter is always that of the marketplace crowd, and belongs to a mass folk culture, whereas Vaneigem sees any isolated, individual moment of joy as at least potentially a revolution. This is a symptom of the different contexts these writers worked with. Bakhtin was writing of a situation where mass culture was often carnivalesque and set in opposition to a high, official culture of the minority, whilst Vaneigem dealt with mass, consumer culture as the oppressive official culture which was nonetheless the shared culture of the people it oppressed. As the examples above show, his carnivalesque inversions, taking place on the subjective plane, are a provocation from the margins rather than an inclusive social renewal.

Vaneigem's concept of radical subjectivity is intended to give his concepts of realised joy a social, and thus a more coherently revolutionary, basis. Radical

subjectivity is the realisation of our (revolutionary) creative desires and dreams, usually only allowed expression in the narrow field of 'art': 'Every individual is constantly building an ideal world within himself, even as his external motions bend to the requirements of soulless routine'.⁴⁰ It may be objected that isolated individuals seeking joy and realized desire need not be revolutionary and liberating for all. But Vaneigem argues that:

All people have the same will to authentic self-realisation, and...their subjectivity is strengthened by the perception of this subjective will in others. This way of getting out of oneself and radiating out, not so much towards others as towards that part of oneself that is to be found in others, is what gives creative spontaneity the strategic importance of a launching pad.⁴¹

Radical subjectivity, as a theory of social organisation born of individualist self-interest, here appears to bear a disturbing resemblance to neoliberal laissez-faire theories, the very ideological foundation of the world Vaneigem is attempting to oppose. Where Vaneigem attempts to stave off the individualist conclusions his argument often seems to lead to, Bey openly embraces them, eschewing even the social overtones of Vaneigem's use of the word 'revolution': 'The vision comes to life in the moment of uprising - but as soon as 'the revolution' triumphs and the state returns, the dream and the ideal are already betrayed... I distrust the word revolution'.⁴²

Bey prefers clandestine territorial occupations, insurrections and disappearance as an understanding of carnival's tactics, emphasizing their impermanence, 'Like festivals, uprisings cannot happen everyday'.⁴³ Bookchin sees this dislocation between insurrection and revolution as a symptom of Bey's dislocation between isolated, individual acts and socially motivated and orientated acts. However, this division is just one of many that appear in Bey's text. Bey mixes revolutionary ideology, myth and mysticism with no real regard for coherence, accepting ideas into his bricolage-styled text on the basis of superficial similarities that aid his declamatory, Situationist-style rhetoric. He calls for 'anarcho-monarchism and anarcho-mysticism' and for 'black magic as revolutionary action'.⁴⁴

This radical bricolage of concepts and disciplines is as postmodern as it is spectacular. Debord observed that the spectacle, like many postmodern theoretical and artistic works, makes use of such a technique. He also observes that in doing so, the spectacle inevitably disregards the historical and the material: 'The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be re-established ... The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living'.⁴⁵ Bey's acceptance of the world of the autonomous image results in his calls for action that are only cultural, though he supposes they are political, and thus reproduces a spectacular division that carnival was intended to surmount. He goes as far as to suggest that power itself is but a simulation: 'The impossibility of "The State" ... Why bother to confront a power that has lost all meaning and become sheer simulation?'⁴⁶

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Bookchin's response is crude but effective: 'if what is happening in Bosnia with firepower is a mere "simulation", we are living in very safe times indeed!'⁴⁷

Carnival, in Bey's writing, has been fully recuperated by the spectacle as a safety valve. Bey's carnival is shorn of its social, historical and material aspects, and therefore of its revolutionary potential. This has happened through Bey's acceptance of the postmodern's logic of commodity relations into a doctrine intended to oppose them. Armitage recognises the crucial theoretical switch that has occurred here:

I would suggest that Bey's work is, for the most part, not much more than Situationism and Autonomist Marxism shorn of their Marxian heritage. Surely there can be few doubts in the mind of anyone who has actually read ... Debord, Negri or Vaneigem ... that Marx's conception of class struggle is central to their various programmes. But given our 'postmodern' times, fewer and fewer people seem to be aware of this.⁴⁸

Bookchin denies carnival any revolutionary potential from a more traditional anarchist position. However, his rejection of the postmodern in favour of enlightenment anarchism belies more than just a rejection not only of the often reactionary theories of postmodernism. As Bookchin rages against the scandal of 'a restaurant with linen-covered tables, fairly expensive menus, and a yuppie clientele on St. Mark's Place in the Lower East Side - a battleground of the 1960s ... named Anarchy'⁴⁹ and harks back to 'the left that was', it is difficult to avoid the feeling that Bookchin also rejects the new postmodern social terrain that these theories are a product of. As his theoretical categories do not directly correlate to the new social relations of post-industrial capital, he is often led to argue against the very substance of postmodernism. Bookchin accuses Bey of being secretly reactionary. But railing against the fact of a postmodern aesthetic, or rejecting not just theory but the postmodern age in its entirety, is also a clandestinely reactionary position.

Bookchin refuses to acknowledge carnival's radicalism in even Bakhtin's muted terms. Bookchin claims that the carnival Rabelais writes of at the Abbey of Theleme could not be realised without servants working and preparing food to create the leisure that the carnival's 'aristocrats' enjoy. He claims that an anarchist carnival is thus incoherent, as it depends upon the hierarchy that it opposes. However, it is worth noting that Bakhtin claims that the class division evident in this piece of Rabelais's work means that the Theleme episode is an invalid example of carnival proper:

In reality, Theleme is characteristic neither of Rabelais's philosophy nor of his system of images, nor of his style. Though this episode does present a popular utopian element, it is fundamentally linked with the aristocratic movements of the Renaissance. This is not a popular-festive mood but a court and humanist utopia... In this respect, Theleme is not in line with Rabelais's imagery and style.⁵⁰

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It appears that this new social and theoretical terrain offers a particular set of problems to the conception of carnivals against capitalism which remain mostly unaddressed despite the opposition of carnivalesque heterology to the apparent heterology of the postmodern culture of global capital. The autonomist perspective on the theorisation of these moments of liberation is useful in that it allows us to see them in terms of a course charted between the extreme positions often adopted regarding carnival. It is not either an instant and irrepressible revolution, or a recuperative simulacra of revolution. Rejecting it out of hand or embracing it unequivocally is a less productive approach than examining it as a heterogeneous set of theories that at the very least offer a valuable cultural approach to the prefigurative societies that are so common in contemporary anarchist thinking.

NOTES

1. See Welsh and McLeish, *Anarchist Studies* 4:1 1996, pp.27-44.
2. In the interests of brevity in this essay I will use the terms 'carnival' or 'carnavalesque' to refer to the common qualities of the socio-cultural event that each writer theorises.
3. Anon, *Agitprop no. 1* (Reclaim the Streets flyer, 1996).
4. Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London, Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994), pp.76 and 110.
5. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1984) p.59.
6. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, *ibid*, pp.5-6.
7. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, *op cit*, p.235.
8. Vaneigem, *Revolution*, *op cit*, p.256.
9. Vaneigem, *Revolution*, *op cit*, p.81.
10. Vaneigem, *Revolution*, *op cit*, p.185.
11. Vaneigem, *Revolution*, *op cit*, p.197.
12. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, *op cit*, p.166.
13. Raoul Vaneigem, *The Book of Pleasures* (London, Pending Press, 1983), p.7.
14. *Situationist International*, 'On The Poverty of Student Life', <http://www.slip.net/~knabb/SI/poverty.htm>.
15. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, *op cit*, p.95.
16. Tony Blair, from 'Blair: Anarchists will not stop us', *BBC News Online* 16 June, 2001 http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk_politics/newsid_1392000/1392004.stm.
17. Robert Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London, Routledge, 1991), pp.90-91.
18. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, *op cit*, p.75.
19. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London, NLB 1981), p.148.
20. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, *op cit*, p.74.
21. 'Summation of the Judge', footnote to *Situationist International*, 'On The Poverty of

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- Student Life', <http://www.efn.org/~jamesd/StudentLife.html>.
22. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.491.
 23. Serge Berna, speech documented in Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (New York, Harvard Press, 1989), p.279.
 24. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, op cit, p.78.
 25. Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Edinburgh, AK Press 2001), p.44.
 26. Cleaver, *Reading Capital*, ibid, p.44.
 27. Cleaver, *Reading Capital*, op cit, p.124.
 28. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London, Routledge, 1992), p.89.
 29. Jean Barrott, 'Critique of the Situationist International', *What Is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh, AK Press, 1996), p.34.
 30. Barrott, 'Critique of the Situationist International', ibid, p.35.
 31. Cleaver, *Reading Capital*, op cit, p.18.
 32. Cleaver, *Reading Capital*, op cit, p.58.
 33. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, op cit, p.245.
 34. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London, Rebel Press, 1985), p.12.
 35. Debord, *Society*, ibid, p.11.
 36. Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York, Autonomedia, 1985), p.101.
 37. Hakim Bey, *Immediatism: Essays* (Edinburgh, AK Press, 1994), p.2.
 38. Bey, *TAZ*, op cit, p.104.
 39. Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm?* (Edinburgh, AK Press 1995), p.2.
 40. Vaneigem, *Revolution*, op cit, p.191.
 41. Vaneigem, *Revolution*, op cit, p.198.
 42. Bey, *TAZ*, op cit, p.100.
 43. Bey, *TAZ*, op cit, p.100.
 44. Bey, *TAZ*, op cit, pp.64 and 56.
 45. Debord, *Society*, op cit, p.2.
 46. Bey, *TAZ*, op cit, p.128.
 47. Bookchin, *Social Anarchism*, op cit, p.20.
 48. J. Armitage, 'Ontological Anarchy, the Temporary Autonomous Zone, and the Politics of Cyberculture. A Critique of Hakim Bey', *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 4:2 (2001), p.121.
 49. Bookchin, *Social Anarchism*, op cit, p.35.
 50. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, op cit, pp.138-9.