

*Feral Faun*

**Radical Theory: A Wrecking  
Ball for Ivory Towers**

1993

It seems to have become a given among many anti-authoritarians that radical theory is an academic pursuit. On the one hand, there are the ideological activists who accuse anyone who attempts to critically analyze society or their own activities in a way that goes beyond the latest hip anarchist sloganeering of being armchair intellectuals or academics. On the other hand, there are those who supplement the income of their academic/intellectual professions by writing tracts criticizing society, the left or even their own professions, but in such abstract and insubstantial terms as to be meaningless in relation to their lives. These intellectuals “radicals” and anti-intellectual activists remain equally enslaved to society’s discourse. Radical theory is elsewhere.

Radical theory springs from the energy of insurgent desire first as a basic recognition that the social context in which we find ourselves impoverishes our lives. Because we have been educated not to *think*, but rather to *have thoughts*, it is very easy to fall from this basic recognition into accepting one or another “radical” ideology, mouthing the appropriate slogans and participating in mindless activism (better called reactivism) which jumps and dances for every cause and issue, but never attacks society at its root. I’ve heard “class war” anarchists (many of them from upper middle class backgrounds) justify such stupidity by declaring any attempts at more precise and critical thinking to be an expression of classist privilege — even when those making the attempts are high school dropout lumpen. But there is nothing radical about stupidity or “thinking” in slogans even when they’re anarchist slogans.

Radical theory is the attempt to understand the complex system of relationships which is society, how it reproduces itself and the individual as a part of itself, and how one can begin to undermine its control and take back one’s life in order to become a self-creative individual. It has no place in either the ivory tower of the academy or that of the mindless ideological (re)activism. It is rather an integral part of an active insurgence against society.

Having recognized that society impoverishes our lives, it is a very small step to realize that the simplistic sloganeering that is frequently passed off as radical thought is part of this impoverishment. It belittles us as individuals by substituting itself for thinking and imagination. “Smash authority” is a wonderful sentiment, but that’s all it is. It tells us nothing about the nature of authority, our relationship to it, its trajectories and tendencies or how we can go about destroying it. This is why those for whom this slogan is an adequate analysis of authority continues to repeat the same futile and insipid actions over and over again as signs of their resistance to authority, actions which have long since proven only to reinforce authority by creating easily confined rituals of pseudo-opposition which keep rebellion domesticated.

The small step which opens the possibility of thinking beyond slogans is an about-face, a reversal of perspective. If society impoverishes our lives, if it offers nothing worth having, then there is no reason for any of us to let this absurd system of relationships into which we have been integrated continue to determine how we view the world either by acceptance of its perspective or by reaction to it. Instead our attempts to create our lives as fully and intensely as possible, which will bring us into conflict with society, can be the basis for an ongoing analysis of society and our relationship to it that challenges and enhances our thinking and imaginations and stimulates an active insurgency against authority as it exists in the interactions that create our daily lives. This analysis can not be a static set of ideas and principles, because it is an integral part of a dialectic of thinking and living as an insurgent, self-creating individual. As such, it is an integral part of action, not a separate specialization. Written expressions of this analysis (which should not be mistaken for the analysis itself) require the development of a language that is very precise *and* very fluid, very pointed *and* very playful. I am very far from attaining this, but am trying to develop it. The language of the situationists (particularly Debord and Vaneigem in his SI days) was aiming for this. But those who prefer slogans to intensive analysis frequently accuse those attempting to develop such language of “intellectualism,” yet only by developing such a language can the expression of theory be wrested from intellectual specialists and made into an integral part of an active insurgency.

Radical theory is an aspect of a way of living which smashes all ivory towers. It exposes the theories that spill from the academic ivory towers as lifeless shams. It exposes the actions of the ideologues of *activism* as mindless *reaction*. To put it another way, theorists who aren't living insurgent life say nothing that's worth saying, and activists who refuse to think critically do nothing worth doing. Radical theory is thinking becoming sensually integrated into an insurgent life and learning, however slowly, to express itself with precision and fluidity. When developed it cuts like a well-honed knife.

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