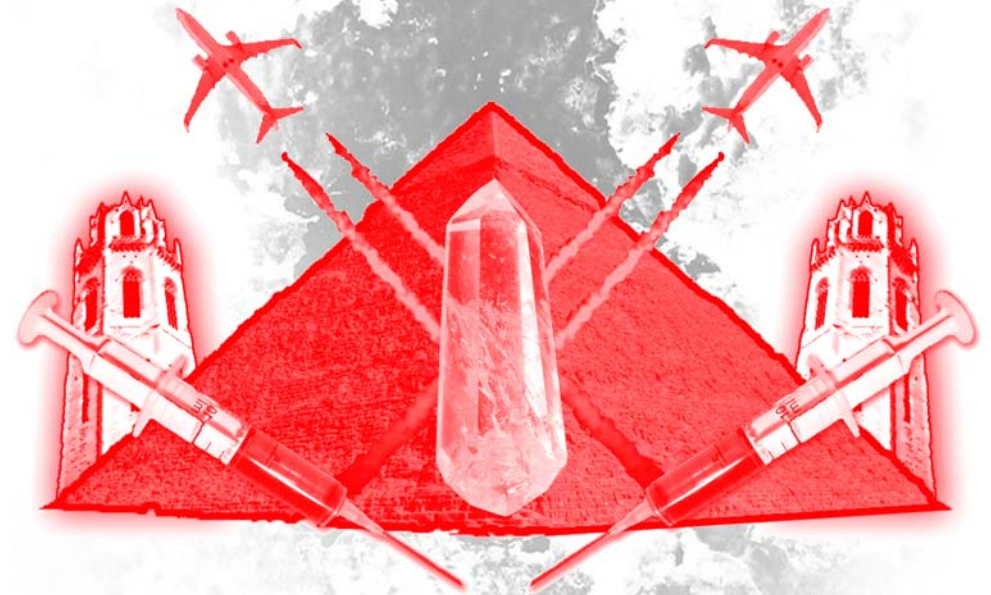


Bourgeois Influence on Anarchism

- *Redux*



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Bourgeois Influence on Anarchism

- *Redux*

by 1 Hamilton member,
1 Toronto member,
1 former Toronto member



This text is from Volume 2 of *Mortar: Revolutionary Journal of Common Cause Anarchist Organization*. Common Cause is an anarchist-communist organization based in Ontario, Canada, with active branches in Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto.

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workplaces tomorrow. As revolutionaries, we need to take stock of what those struggles are and how those lessons are learned.

It is no assistance to our class' struggle to have our radicals apprentice in an environment that teaches them that the struggles of others are primary, solutions to most problems are abstract, and that language should obscure thought directly and will amount to action eventually. If in fact the university can be termed a factory, then the struggles within it need to be direct, democratic, and mass in form while material and enlightening in content. This is what some student organizers strove for in Quebec, to great success. It's what countless other student organizers across the country do not—to a correlative degree of failure. A struggle that organizes in the actual interests of students through truly democratic structures is necessary for both a productive student movement, and a truly politicizing and positively formative experience for those that participate in it.

Further to this, enlisting in a revolutionary organization should be a continually enlightening experience. We should find ourselves challenged intellectually to come to an understanding of the conditions we are in, and ways to move forward. Our organizations should be places in which we educate ourselves and each other. Our organizations also need to learn how best to communicate and implement those conclusions. A reasoned and actionable revolutionary politics that peddles in neither abstract idealism nor conservatising pragmatism is what we should strive for intellectually. "Political development" within our organizations should be an invigorating process for both members and the organization as a whole. With revolutionary theory being collective in its discussion and production—to as much a degree as possible. We need to refuse to emulate the academic obscurantist, but not resort to a reductive anti-intellectualism—and we need to do this together. This is one of the many tasks Common Cause hopes to accomplish. It's why we do this journal at all, but also why we do it the way that we do. Not perfectly, but collectively, responsively, and we hope—productively.



Reading Luigi Fabbri today, an anarchist of the revolutionary communist bent in Canada may feel a sense of smug satisfaction coupled with a dash of arrogant resentment. The way he set his sights on the debasement of our political tradition might have us thinking we're reading the words of a kindred spirit. How very accurate and tragically humorous his polemic feels to us. All the more because it was penned nearly a century ago. However, have we really earned the self-satisfied head nodding and chuckles that accompany our reading of *Bourgeois Influence on Anarchism*? Fabbri took to task the growing sentiment within the anarchist tradition that glorified the outlaws, bombers, and assassins of his day. We read on with our own anarcho-rogues gallery of anti-organizationalists, black bloc puritans, and deep green resisters playing in our head. But are these really the contemporary correlatives of bougiefied anarchism?

Luigi Fabbri is among the ranks of dead anarchist communists of years passed. With his comrade Errico Malatesta, Fabbri not only shared Italian birth and revolutionary zeal, but also a remarkable talent for political analysis and the turnings of phrase. The following passage from his above-mentioned 1917 essay should suffice as testament to his ability and a brief explanation of its content.

The minds of men, especially of the young, thirsting for the mysterious and extraordinary, allow themselves to be easily dragged by the passion for the new toward that which, when coolly examined in the calm which follows initial enthusiasm, is absolutely and definitively repudiated. This fever for new things, this audacious spirit, this zeal for the extraordinary has brought to the anarchist ranks the most exaggeratedly impressionable types, and at the same time, the most empty headed and frivolous types, persons who are not repelled by the absurd, but who, on the contrary, engage in it. They are attracted to projects and ideas precisely because

they are absurd, and so anarchism comes to be known precisely for the illogical character and ridiculousness which ignorance and bourgeois calumny have attributed to anarchist doctrines.

Never a truer word translated.

Though, unlike that of Fabbri's early twentieth century Europe, our anarchism's ranks in the twenty-first century are not swelled by wild-eyed assassin-poets or clandestine bombers alienating the proletariat with their audacity and violence. Today, anarchism drags in its wake all manner of snake oil peddlers and Chicken Littles that to our neighbours and co-workers are more irritating than they are frightening. We might even, in our more sentimental moments, wistfully imagine ourselves being associated with some bygone invisible conspiracy of revolution because it beats the harsh realization that we are entangled now with an irritatingly visible brood of idiots.

Today, the wild-eyed terror and rage of the conspiracy theorists, the health and welfare prescriptions of the pseudo-scientific or anti-scientific mystics, and the abstract theoretical innovations of the academic obscurantists leave their respective mark on many of the movements we organize for and struggle within as revolutionaries. Our intention with this article is that these marks not be permitted to become indelible, but instead be erased.

Anecdotally, we can say that members of the Toronto branch of Common Cause were witness to the hot mess produced when the above-mentioned three tendencies pooled together in St. James Park to Occupy Toronto. Herein was a space in which 9/11 truthers and those employing meditation as resistance were free to bang on buckets as they discussed their mutual hatred for, and fear of, fluoride and vaccination for weeks on end, with graduate students observing, more than participating as they crafted their commentary on the promise and failings of Occupy as it related to their academic work. All this was laid bare for the average Torontonian to interpret as what resistance to economic inequality and corruption looks like, leaving them little more than confused upon entering the camp.

Anarchists involved in Occupy Toronto didn't fare much better. Our orientation was typical of how we often engage when confronted by these particular conditions. We oscillate between disgust and mockery, and a vague idea of promise. Somewhat convinced of a radical trajectory, we chose to view the camp as an opportunity and felt a responsibility to engage. Nevertheless, ambivalence was the order of the day, due to the difficulty in identifying the underlying ideas in a camp we found to produce troubling conduct and arguments. As is often the case, it becomes difficult to draw clear lines between which ideas are

for the chakra, humours, or subconscious but for the blood, bone, and organs of the body. The working class has collectively lined up, time and again, in struggle against Capital, the State, medical establishments, and the Church in service of our health. Struggles have been, and continue to be, waged against the profiteering of pharmaceutical companies, environmental racism, mental health institutionalization, and misogynistic, racist, and heteronormative medical regimes. Struggles for publicly available treatment. Struggles for access to scientifically verified treatments. Struggles for access to reproductive control. These and others are the struggles that our class have fought for our health. We forget them to our physical peril.

HIV and AIDS militants have occupied the New York Stock Exchange and taken over live national news broadcasts to combat corporate profiteering on death. The Black Panthers organized free breakfast and sickle cell screening programs. Feminists across the United States and Canada educated women on contraceptive and reproductive health. Feminists that followed after established underground abortion services. The struggles of the working class as it relates to our health are storied, heroic, and collective. That today a substantial section of the Left's conception of struggles over health have been debased to those of establishing acupuncture storefronts, refusing vaccination, and eating organic is almost too pathetic for words. That we and they might claim our pedigree from those historic struggles while not contributing to them is repugnant.

Hepatitis, cervical cancer, diabetes, and HIV — to name but a few examples — are real and present dangers to our class. Access to abortion and contraception, local medical resources, health services for the undocumented, harm reduction in prisons and on the street are all under attack. All are being resisted by those most affected. The absence of a broad class-based and explicitly anti-capitalist contribution to this organizing is not a missed opportunity, but a betrayal of what our politics and history prescribe for us. Our task as revolutionaries in this regard should be primarily that of investing ourselves in the actual health struggles of our class—not the abstract and fanciful interests of the progressive healthcare boutiques.

For many in the Left, post-secondary education is a politicizing experience. Students come into their own as adults, adjusting their view of themselves and their position in the world. As they are drawn into their studies and the struggles waged around them, they begin to draw conclusions about what it is they will do with these new understandings and skills. This can be a politically upending period, but also a conditioning one. The politics and methods learned on their campuses today will be similar to those employed in their streets and

the media distorts reality and conceals the truth to the benefit of the ruling class, the collusion of political, religious, and corporate institutions rendered them irredeemably corrupt long ago, wars fought on a lie lead to the slaughter of countless innocents to the enrichment of the few, and on, and on. All of which is true. It's the truth of those accounts that garner conspiracy theories what purchase they do have. But those truths haven't been uncovered by the conspiracists. Their so-called conspiracy — with its blood ties, sadistic plots, and inescapable reach — obscures not only the cause of those horrific truths, but their remedy as well. So well, in fact, that one might believe it to be a conspiracy itself—though it's best to avoid that sort of rabbit hole.

Conspiracy theories are not defined by the threats and attacks they point to, but what they claim to be their cause. That the multinational agribusiness giant Monsanto poisons water tables, displaces entire populations, destroys local crops, and forces unsafe foodstuffs on to our plates are facts—not a conspiracy theory. That this is carried out with depopulation, genetic manipulation, and/or thought control of humanity as its design, or due simply to generalized sadism—this is the conspiracy theory. The above facts were exposed by the struggles of Indigenous people, farmers, Monsanto workers, and scientists. Chicken Little bloggers, conspiracist authors, unaccredited “experts”, and locavore organic diet advocates then devised the conspiracy for their own ends. Struggles mounted against Monsanto can point to a communism that is scientifically ecological as their solution. The conspiracy theories about Monsanto cannot.

If we misidentify conspiracy theories as emerging from the struggles of those under attack by such forces within capitalism as agribusiness, the pharmaceutical industry, the prison industrial complex, and the arms industry, we enable that parasitic backwardness of thought. If we enable those conspiracy theories, we risk the deforming of collective struggles that offer so much promise to our class into an isolated and amorphous fear of, or anger with, “the system”. It isn't that conspiracy theories are narratives that compete with “ours” regarding the threats to humanity. Nor is it the case that conspiracy theories are a good starting point of departure from capitalistic thought. Conspiracy theories are landmines laying in front of already existing struggles' path. Any remedy we might be capable of as revolutionaries requires us to be in the midst of those struggles, while identifying the dangers of missteps while we move forward.

Capitalism destroys the health and well-being of the working class. It brutalizes and poisons us, individually and collectively. It commodifies our health and limits what healthcare is available. Health is a fundamental site of class struggle. Our health has been the site of principled struggle by those that we should characterize as no less than class heroes. Their struggles have not been

irredeemable and which might be worth engaging with. Conspiracy theories often address real issues of economic exploitation, war, and environmental issues; health mysticism is right to criticize and question the collusion between the State and Capital that controls much of the world's “mainstream” health science; and the supposed intellectual complexity and rigour that leftist academics ascribe to themselves is important for all revolutionaries to actually strive for. Despite their deceiving promise, we posit that the above three tendencies offer only dead ends.

As disconcerting as our experiences within Occupy were, it is even more disconcerting that we generally have ourselves to blame. Whereas Fabbri's polemic was aimed at what he saw to be the intellectual and strategic depredations of bourgeois thought visited upon his beloved proletarian anarchism, today what troubles us are internal conditions. In many respects, we court these troublesome notions directly. In other respects, the problem at hand is less directly evident. We could make a blood oath — swearing off tinfoil hats, obnoxious verbiage, and magic — only to remain in the midst of a political gyre that continues to slowly drag bourgeois flotsam toward us. That is to say our task is not to identify symptoms of our ailment (of which conspiracies, obscurantism, and mysticism are three), but to identify the pathogen. We don't only find ourselves in the middle of the outcome of an historical disagreement on the definition of anarchism. Nor are we just being pressed upon and diluted by external forces. We've furnished an environment with our own proclivities that is suited to those that give us pause. We find ourselves surrounded by those we may object to, but share attributes with. Our incredulity on this matter will prevent us from being able to extricate ourselves from it.

So, let's speak plainly: how the fuck do we keep ending up here?

I. Of Which We Speak

In order to shed ourselves of ineffectual ambivalence, we need to first give form to our concerns. We've identified conspiratorial, obscurantist, and mystical thought as those that concern us here. But using these as catch-all characterizations does us no productive service. If our approach can lead to understanding, we need to take the matter seriously, thus, we have based our assessments less on appearance and more on content. With academic obscurantism as a single example, we do not mean higher education or intellectualism. Obscurantist works can be authored by those who've not stepped foot in a post-secondary institution. Accomplished academics like Noam Chomsky and Ian Hacking have

made strong points on this exact topic. Our assessments of arguments should have less to do with who is making them and more with what is being argued and what thought is behind it. Some of the key features we feel the trio of proper conspiracists, obscurantists, and mystics share are: the rejection of rationality, belief that their ideas are of primary importance and that spreading them is the most important action they can take, beliefs that are both all-encompassing and endlessly flexible, viewing those who don't share their views as stupid or conformist "sheep," and a veneer of intellectualism that quickly falls back on emotional and moral manipulation. If an idea, and the way it is expressed, carries these characteristics we include in the camp—regardless of its source.

Intelligent Design

Conspiracy theories seek to offer all-encompassing explanations of specific world events and the general social order. Refusing the existence of coincidence or even dynamic historical conditions, every event or significant development has its origin in an intentional strategy of those in power. While common features in conspiracy theorists' wildly different interpretations of historical events often rely on pseudo-scientific data that supports supernatural or alien elements, an element that is equally common and more troubling — for its often racist implications — is data that corroborates bloodline and national or religious pedigree as the conspiracy's root. The conspiracy theory is both all-encompassing and endlessly flexible. By definition, it can grow larger and more complex to explain virtually any natural, economic, or cultural event the conspiracist puts their mind to.

Conspiracy theories flourish in a world in which working class people are confronted with rampant exploitation, war, sexual violence, brutality within the legal system, environmental destruction, displacement, and corruption. The vast scope of the supposed conspiracy taps in to the equally broad fear and hatred much of the working class feels toward the order they live under. However, even those conspiracy theories that seem to oppose the State and capitalism do so in ways that we should see to be fundamentally different from, and even opposed to, anarchism. Conspiracy theorists tend to focus on individuals as actors, rather than on broader social structures. So, for example, rather than all bosses benefiting from capitalism and all workers losing out, the nefarious secret agreements between specific family lineages are the culprit and of primary importance.

The totality of conspiracy theories, and their tendency toward personification, is not a trivial matter. Conspiracy theories, at their very beginnings can

action organization's membership swelled, as it unleashed waves of militant mobilizations, occupations, media stunts, and educational campaigns. Amidst a culture of hatred, fear, and ignorance directed squarely against them, while also reeling from the ravages of HIV and AIDS, people with AIDS (PWAs) and allies (primarily from the LGBT community) responded collectively with a struggle directed against a phalanx of governmental bodies, financial powerhouses, and religious institutions. A struggle for medical treatment, prevention resources, and housing and against the heterosexist, misogynistic, and white supremacist underpinnings of a capitalist society more than willing to stand by, or profit from the spectacular mass death of queers, people of colour, the poor, and incarcerated.

As well as political action, PWAs across the continent organized networks of mutual aid to directly ameliorate the devastating health and economic impacts of the AIDS pandemic. Food shares, housing and squat assistance, and home health assistance collectives were quietly at work in many neighbourhoods across the United States and Canada. The recently popularized "Buyers Clubs" of the time were precisely these sorts of networks. While the Hollywood depiction in *The Dallas Buyers Club* is one of a straight man initially enriching himself through the sale of AIDS treatments that were out of the reach of most PWAs, only to bloom into a not-so-bad ally, the reality was, unsurprisingly, very different. In major urban centres, PWAs formed institutions of mutual aid and solidarity in which they exchanged prescriptions, shared and investigated new treatment methods, pooled financial resources to acquire ludicrously expensive medication in bulk, and volunteered medical and health expertise. These are the "Buyers Clubs" IRL.

Faced with societal hatred, capitalist profiteering, medical ignorance, and the spectre of extermination, PWAs responded with militant direct action, mutual aid, and a bottomless reservoir of courage and solidarity. Their struggle demanded and forced through scientifically sound treatment regimes, education to protect against sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission, housing assistance for PWAs, a huge reduction in cost for AIDS treatments, and the understanding that HIV and AIDS are not merely a "gay plague", but a viral threat to all of us. This is what struggles around health look like.

III. For Lack of a Better Word: Conclusion

The world of the conspiracist is a terrifying one. Planes drop death from the sky, food rots away our health, the police state listens to our every word while tracking our every movement, sprawling prison camps loom on the horizon,

irrelevant to the experiences of working class adults who graduate and leave that space. The Quebec student strike of 2012 was a great example of how people can be radicalized through struggles that affect them directly—that have an actual material impact on their lives. We do not believe in the notion that you can convince people to be revolutionaries purely through discourse. The Quebec student strike was launched in response to a tuition increase that the Liberal provincial government wanted to impose on them. Students in universities and in Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEPs, General and Vocational Colleges) voted to go on strike through directly democratic structures, and remained on strike for eight months—until the same Liberal government was forced to call an election, which they then lost. Electoral politics aside, students learned more about direct democracy, empowerment, solidarity, and revolutionary ideas through this struggle than they could ever learn from a textbook. While many academics made ambiguous and abstract arguments when criticizing the Quebec student movement for supposedly not addressing white supremacy and patriarchy within their strike, they lacked specific examples or suggestions on how to better address those issues. The Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSÉ, Association for a Syndicalist Student Solidarity) deliberately formed Coalition large de l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE, broad coalition of ASSÉ) in anticipation of future tuition increases, having been structured to contend primarily with a broad economic imposition that would materially impact all current and future students in Quebec. The course of that struggle would see CLASSE become the standard bearer for not only a democratic student movement engaged in direct struggle but also struggles against violent repression of all movements more generally. CLASSE wasn’t structured to engage in a discursive struggle with privilege. If it had been, it would likely amount to something more akin to the student organizations we’re familiar within Ontario today—groups that bandy around vague principles, rather than an intention to struggle in earnest. Arguably, participants in either formation would be radicalized by going through those struggles, it would radicalize their political notions of what’s appropriate in future struggles as well. The former, we would argue, is an approach that educates participants in struggles of radical impact. The latter is one that educates participants in radical pretence.

Class Heroes Club

At a time in which fear of a “gay plague” was at a fever pitch in the United States, a three hundred person meeting in New York city responded with the founding of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). In the years that followed the direct

corrupt any further action regarding those very conspiracies. Converts to the conspiracist flock tend to believe this newly acquired secret knowledge is of primary importance. Thereafter, the spreading of it is the most important action they can take. With the inescapability of the elite’s reach, coupled with their direct control of all previously existing struggle (especially communism), the only recourse for the conspiracist is to awaken the “sheeple” by promoting the truth of the conspiracy. This fixation on conspiracy is not only often factually incorrect, but destroys potential for real organizing and leaves only proselytizing. It shifts the focus from material and social conditions — such as poverty, the prison industrial complex, etc — to an entirely ideological struggle in which proving the conspiracy itself is far more important than any of its effects. The conspiracy theorists may start off with questioning real conditions, but rather than setting off a trajectory of struggle, they become trapped, endlessly promoting the increasingly complex conspiracy theory.

The True Believers

The focus on alternative health choices as a form of activism has gained much popularity among the anti-authoritarian Left. Our healthcare system is far from perfect. Doctors at times have, and continue to, harm more than heal—sometimes from lack of resources, sometimes from lack of knowledge, and sometimes from arrogance. The pressure and control exerted on the healthcare system by its economic and political structuring is frequently the crucial component of that harm. The poisoning and disfiguring of newborn children caused by the prescribing of Thalidomide for the treatment of morning sickness that began in the 1950s and the infection of blood transfusion recipients by Blood Services Canada are just two of many examples. Challenging medical science’s relationship to the State and Capital is of great importance to our class. But like conspiracy theories, the conclusions health mysticism draws are dangerous. The methods they use to reach their conclusions are deeply flawed, and the ways in which they propagate them can be incredibly damaging.

Health and care mysticism involves three distinct, though often overlapping, modes of thought. The first is a sort of a pure mysticism, that these crystals, stones or stars work in ways that are unrelated to science. Often, this is sort of a fringe religious belief. The second is pseudo-scientific: ideas that present themselves as scientific, but offer limited and shaky proof. The last is anti-scientific, which rejects science totally on philosophical, religious or political grounds. Clearly there is overlap —someone who supports anti-scientific ideas is more likely to invest themselves in alternative health practices as well — but they are separate, and believing one does not imply belief in the other. As

individual choices, these may be unsound, but when they are pushed on people in a mass way, they can be dangerous.

Among the more unsettling, but effective tactics employed by these “true believers” is the emotional and moral manipulation they engage in when attempting to bring others to their side. Conspiracy theorists tend to speak of those who don’t know about or believe in the conspiracy as sheep, sheeple, stupid, etc. Health and care mystics follow much of the same rhetoric, but their focus on personal and socially-pressured choices makes it all the worse. Their orientation towards motherhood and children is fraught with examples of this, as many of the choices mothers make are viewed as inherently imbued with positive or negative politics. This puts incredible and unnecessary pressure on working class mothers, who while exploited in their reproductive labour and socially marginalized in their role, now have their very worth as caregivers called into question. When developmentally debatable acts such as breastfeeding and “natural” child birth become moral imperatives, the morality of those mothers unable to engage in those acts become suspect. Guilt and shame become coercions employed by mystics to expand their influence, and choices become laden with moral meanings mothers have no need to carry.

Anti-vaccination campaigns provide a strong example of the devastating effect that this can have on working class communities. According to a 2007 UK study, radical anti-vaccination groups tend to be composed of and led by people already involved or interested in activism around issues such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), big pharma, and alternative health. This is in contrast to more reform-focused groups, which tend to be composed of parents who believe their children have been adversely affected by vaccinations. Radical anti-vaccine groups tend to construct choosing to vaccinate as unquestioningly following doctors and the government—trusting blindly, not taking responsibility for one’s children, being “sheep.” Refusing vaccination is constructed as a form of empowerment, and of resisting and questioning authority. This dichotomy between the “sheep” and the “free thinkers” echoes that of conspiracy theorists closely and, though they might say it differently, that of academics with regards to the uneducated regular people who can’t possibly comprehend their supposedly high-level thoughts. Radical anti-vaccine groups view germ theory negatively, and opt instead for a “holistic” view of health.

The effect of this has, of course, been holistically unhealthy. Vaccination rates have dropped in many parts of Europe and North America, leading to outbreaks of deadly diseases such as whooping cough and measles. Even more terrifying, the fact that these diseases are now once again active poses a risk that vaccine-resistant strands will mutate, putting the entire population at risk. The damage

Furthermore, they correctly identify that there is a relationship between these issues and how they play out over time and across the globe. The problem is often not necessarily with the scope or with the issues identified, but with the nature of the relationships they identify. Conspiracy theorists tend to focus on individual, personalized connections that make the conspiracy theory that much more tantalizing. They also tend to ascribe evil intent to those individuals. A structural analysis, by comparison, looks more at the systemic factors that cause things to affect each other and play out as they do. It looks for the logic in it, not the malicious intent.

We often ignore examples of struggles waged by our class that directly contested the conditions conspiracy theorists claim to address—among them environmental racism, reproductive justice, and the prison industrial complex. In all three examples, there is a complex set of state and corporate actors involved. In all three the social construction of race, gender, sexuality, and disability are crucial factors. These organizing successes have always been achieved by those directly affected – with an understanding of the complexities of their situation, but also its materiality – and organized directly against their target.

The 2012 Quebec student movement – which organized university students around their material conditions – offers an example of how to engage in organizing in academic spaces. HIV/AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s shows how, despite being beset by conspiracy theories, health mysticism, collaboration between drug companies and governments, stigma, and an actual devastating disease, some activists were able to cut through with strong analysis and strategy, and win important gains.

The Classroom of Class Struggle

People’s experience with university is formative in terms of their political conceptions and analysis of their reality, as well as their future activism. We should therefore concern ourselves with the impact it is having on the Left, especially now that 34% of working class youth go to university, according to a 2009 study from Queen’s University. It is formative in many ways, both in terms of its role in shaping ideas and the overall experience itself—which often includes part-time jobs, mountains of debt, and poor job prospects upon graduation. Academic obscurantists often play a particular role here; students in Humanities and Social Sciences are taught political concepts that question capitalism and oppression, but in the abstract. The version of radicalism taught by obscurantists focuses on making the best argument, not on real life politics. The obscurantist version of radicalization is appropriate only to education, and

manipulation as politics, and sanctimonious shaming as struggle to join in. That, comrades, is not a team that will field well.

Needlessly Reductive. Endlessly Adaptive

Can it not also be said that we hold to a purified form of our anarchism as necessarily sufficient for all manner of our classes concerns? As “class struggle anarchists” we can often be guilty of holding a posture meant only to defend those unassailable virtues of, and all-encompassing applications for, our “class struggle”. A politics that is often accurately charged with persistent reductive qualities. Colonialism? Class Struggle. Unemployment? Class Struggle. Gendered violence? Class Struggle. Not sufficient an answer? You’re talking to a lifestyleist—move on.

Our rigidity only then gives way to innovation in a most surface way and generally only necessitated by the argument at hand. We may espouse intersectionality as the sophistication of our class politics, but in effect it can act for us (though we aren’t alone in this) as window dressing for the continuation of simplicity in class analysis. This is not an easy balance to strike and not reveal itself as fraud. It requires skill sets that incorporate *ad hominem*s, the occasional rhetorical flourish, sentimental appeal, strawmen, and a lot of slippery slopes in order to conceal its shallowness. These skills are neither sophisticated nor intellectual. They’re parlour tricks. They’ll earn us an inapplicable conversation that troubles the complexity of *The Wire* over pints with a Cultural Studies student. But little else. When we accustom ourselves to the wares of the academic carpetbagger, we lay the groundwork for a movement that amounts to little more than a concern of hucksters.

Real sophistication and intelligence produces conclusions. Perhaps complicated conclusions—but conclusions nonetheless. Our analysis should be actionable. Much of what passes for revolutionary theory today aspires not to what we can put our hand to but what can be intellectually dissected, endlessly in service to winning the point through confusion—a pointless orientation that we should rightly see as backward and deliberately shed ourselves of.

II. Of Whom We Should Speak

These forms of thought do not come out of a vacuum. And their traction is that they identify real concerns, such as war, economic inequality, political corruption, environmental crises, policing and prisons, culture, and health.

that anti-vaccination movements do is very real and very material, while their cause is entirely immaterial and entirely moral. The same is true for many alternative health practices, which have killed people either directly, or indirectly—as they were chosen over proven conventional treatments.

Poverty and class are the most significant determinants of health. It would stand to reason, then, that anti-authoritarian Left activists would focus our efforts there. To increase access for refugees, migrant workers, and undocumented workers, to promote access to evidence-based healthcare, such as trained midwives who can improve women’s safety, and experiences of birth and motherhood, and to make dental care and physiotherapy free. Instead, we see anarchists interested in health taking a starkly different, and somewhat frightening turn, into practising acupuncture and midwifery in small collectives that avoid regulation. Into replicating the judgmental and paternalistic attitudes that pass judgement on those whose personal healthcare is not natural, not alternative, and as it has somehow come to indicate, not revolutionary.

The Loquacious Types

Obscurantism refers to deliberately preventing the facts of a matter from becoming known, either by restricting knowledge or presenting things in a way that is deliberately vague. This conduct is common in Left academia, and it is against this that we are arguing. To be clear, when we critique academia, we do not mean to argue against the pursuit of higher knowledge. We do not mean intellectually rigorous attempts to understand the conditions of the working class. Our argument is not even against the use of complex, often inaccessible language found in academia—technical language is needed in many fields, and if it’s what it takes to express an idea, so be it. To paraphrase Chomsky, we are not against theory, but against posturing. Our opposition is to theories that present themselves as having revolutionary content, but which often have very little content at all.

Many aspects of academic obscurantism have been debated in different academic fields themselves. Postmodernism, in its promotion of the relativism of all ideas, has a strong role in this. Academic obscurantism essentially promotes the idea that the discourse, the expression of ideas, is of such greater importance than the material reality these ideas relate to that the ideas need not relate to anything at all. This is the significance of the word obscurantism—that these ideas are expressed in ways that make their content almost unintelligible. Science too has had debates — known at times as “the science wars” — around the relativism of scientific theories. In his book *The*

Social Construction of What, Ian Hacking explores how the idea of a social construct, which has potential value in helping oppressed people realize that their conditions of oppression are not natural, has been applied so broadly in both humanities and sciences that it has lost much of its use and meaning. Rather than being a conceptual framework used to broaden our politics, “x is a social construct” is now a phrase used to shut down debate, and the meaning of “x being a social construct” is rarely challenged.

Academic obscurantists rely so heavily on their specialized language and ideas that they are often unable to explain them to those that don't share their academic background. Advancement and notoriety in particular academic streams through the use of bizarre or inflammatory arguments has become a tried and true method of satisfying the competitive impulse encultured within academia. Often this is presented as rigour, but that claim is shaky. Academics claim to have high standards in their work, and approach things from a more intellectual framework in their writing and presentations, but tend to quickly resort to emotional manipulation when their ideas are challenged outside formal institutional spaces.

Put simply, the scaffolding their ideas are built on is unsound. When their ideas are challenged, they have nothing to fall back on. And their ideas are challenged often. A good example is when Left academics enter organizing spaces. For all the complexity of their ideas, they simply don't resonate with people. They are unable to explain their ideas to someone who doesn't share their background, not because the other is stupid, but because without being fully indoctrinated into academia, the ideas make no sense. So, quickly, they call others racist or sexist, try to manipulate them into thinking they are incapable of understanding, or retreat back to purely academic spaces.

The First Step...

Is admitting we have a problem. Not just that there is a problem but that we have a problem. We may not see kindred spirits in those that cower from “chemtrails”, parents that organize measles, mumps and rubella “infection parties” for their children as alternatives to vaccination, or the authors of Marxian examinations of the reproduction of labour power on *Jersey Shore*—but they certainly see co-travellers in us. Neither coincidence or conspiracy can explain this concerning phenomena. Our conduct and orientations need to be brought into question if they are apparently engendering familiarity in those that repulse us.

In Extremis

Can we honestly say that our organizing isn't at times compelled toward the most severe or “radical” posturing? Our historically correct rejection of class struggle that collaborates with Capital and the State seems to have bred in us a suspicion of any action that doesn't feel as though we are going far enough. This concern can even become primary. Irrespective of the task at hand or the plausibility of success we can resort to tactical assessment through a “radical-enough” litmus test or prefigurative-over-contemporary quotient. Forms of extremism not only animate our actions, but our arguments as well. When faced with denunciation or verbal attack by any number of torpid socialist hacks, we can be guilty of resorting to an ultra-left position if only to make certain no one misunderstands the irreconcilable differences at play between their “Left” and ours. Thereby giving credibility to “ultra-left” as a pejorative describing some manner of adolescent reactionary orientation. Our politics become radical for radicalism's sake and fail to present radical arguments in service to appropriate conclusions. Our slogans take on the posture of the very farthest one could possibly take an idea in word. With our tactics then, in kind, attempting that in act. When our independence from labour bureaucracies or the use of physical force, for example, are compulsions and not conclusions, we tread into the intellectually backward realm of the fanatic. And, true to form: like attracts like.

Virtue & Villainy

Aren't we so very virtuous, as well? With our adherence to sets of actions being indicative of valour, our class position, identity, and revolutionary tradition then become demarcations of virtue. The ways in which we scrape friend from foe are rarely as subtle as we might think, and arguably not as political as we might assert. Often, feeling torn between having to make a choice between too radical and not radical enough, we fail to consider what is reasoned. What is honest. What is correct. We then lose sight of anarchism as a conclusion we have come to and treat it as a virtue we need adhere to. The void between the sophist and the zealot is where an anarchist revolutionary should plant their flag. This requires respect, deep thought, unerring honesty, and principled collaboration on our part—within our organizations, the Left and, perhaps most important of all, our class generally.

That's difficult conduct to maintain, at times even exhausting. When matters feel urgent or severe, a moralistic zero-sum game is a tempting one to play. Playing that game, though, is an open invitation for all those who trade in moral