Part III

Being

One of the ongoing attractions of anarchism is that it constantly raises questions about the nature of being in ways often sidelined or suppressed by other political perspectives. Why do people rebel against authority? Why do they also feel compelled to offer alternative solutions to collective problems through co-operation? How interrelated or separate are humans from nature, as well as from very different human cultures? To what extent are technological systems creating new forms of identity which are not necessarily liberatory? How can one develop more ‘spiritual’ aspects of oneself without succumbing to forms of oppression such as organised religion or personality cults? Such questions have led anarchists into many different directions, embracing existentialism, Taoism, paganism to extreme forms of isolationism and even hedonism. Yet, for most, the process of being in the world is inextricably linked to that of becoming and linked to questions of strategy developed in the previous section of the book. Moreover, the question of being must be part of a holistic and integrated critique.

The contributions in this section each address notions of being and becoming within different areas of anarchist theory and practice. Indeed, it is the ontological dimension of contemporary anarchism – especially the placing of Self within a wider ecology of global relations, human and non-human – which distinguishes anarchism from radical perspectives that retain too much focus on materialism and political economy. The fact that anarchism has largely premised its critique on a psychological dimension to power relations, not just a material one, has been an advantage in this respect. Ecological anarchism, which has been the driving force behind much contemporary anarchist theory and practice, has been committed to thinking about the relationships between people and ‘nature’ in new ways and this is evident in the chapters by Karen Goaman (chapter 9) and Bronislaw Szerszynski and Emma Tomalin (chapter 11).

In recent years, the political perspective of anarcho-primitivism has gained considerable appeal and notoriety for taking anarchist theory into areas of anthropology and trying to ask challenging questions about the nature of ‘civilisation’ by examining the ‘deep past’ and the roots of humanity. In this respect,
Goaman’s contribution here complements arguments made by Steve Millett earlier (chapter 4) in his treatment of the anti-technological critique offered by the *Fifth Estate* collective. Goaman’s focus in chapter 9 is a practical application of many of those ideas, examining contemporary protests against globalisation and suggesting that we can learn more than just lessons in solidarity from the ongoing alliances with the rural and land movements of the global South. We can, she suggests, use this as an opportunity to rethink our relationship with nature.

At the heart of this argument, and indeed at the heart of much of ecological anarchist thinking, is the problem of alienation. As the global ecological crisis has deepened, so commentators have tried to address the psychological as well as the practical impact that intensifying forms of global consumption are having. Whilst Goaman offers some practical suggestions to address these forms of alienation, Szerszynski and Tomalin in chapter 11 discuss some of the psychological strategies taken by political activists to cope with the burdens which contemporary Western societies bestow upon the individual. Their discussion of how activists involved in direct action protest utilise discourses of nature and spirituality as ‘resources’ to try to forge a more ‘holistic’ sense of Self is important in a number of respects. Firstly, it shows the complex nature of social movement culture, particularly the kind of affective dimensions that theorists frequently ignore. Secondly and relatedly, it counters the charge sometimes made by more ‘traditional’ anarchists that anarchism has ‘regressed’ into solipsism and hedonism. Clearly one cannot ‘read’ these forms of spiritual anarchism as evidence of this; rather they act as forms of empowerment, or as these authors call it, ‘enchantment’. As Szerszynski and Tomalin themselves point out, anarchism has always entertained something of this spiritual dimension, as evidenced by the history of millenarianism, with which it shares a lot of common ground.

Chapters 9 and 11 also include material on the importance of the symbolic in contemporary anarchist practice. Given the global audience in front of whom the actions described by Goaman and Szerszynski and Tomalin are taking place, the symbolic economy is becoming increasingly crucial. This applies in terms of contesting particular spaces, subverting dominant imagery and, crucially, it is a significant aspect in the process of personal transformation. Here the symbolic terrain also is concerned with the global Other, the collective manifestation of those groups crushed by the processes of globalisation and with whom many of the Western activists discussed in this book try to identify. Being able to embrace difference is an important part of contemporary anarchist identity, in that there are numerous grounds for unity of purpose, but the diversity of the struggles and their respective contexts require considerable sensitivity.

The old ecological anarchist maxim of unity through diversity is also pertinent to David Gribble’s examination (in chapter 10) of the endurance of anarchist ideals in education throughout the world. He takes up many of the points developed in Joanna Gore’s chapter earlier in the book (chapter 8), demonstrating how libertarian education requires a different ontology, one that moves away
from instrumental views on learning and how it is formalised. All of the institutional boundaries between art and life, child and adult, expert and novice, work and play that conventional education is predicated upon are challenged, sometimes even dissolved, within the bounds of libertarian education. Gribble’s work (see also 1998) is also an important refutation of the charge that the ideals of libertarian education are somehow the preserve of privileged Westerners. Clearly the fact that different permutations of the ideals of pioneers like Ferrer have occurred in such diverse contexts raises important questions about the anarchist psyche as well as ongoing debates about the ecological basis of ethics (Light, 1998).